

TELLING GOD'S STORY
YEAR THREE:
THE UNEXPECTED WAY
INSTRUCTOR TEXT AND TEACHING GUIDE

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THE UNEXPECTED WAY
INSTRUCTOR TEXT AND TEACHING GUIDE

RACHEL MARIE STONE



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Introduction

The Bible is primarily a God-centered story. It is not designed to be a “Book of Virtues” but a book that tells us who God is and what he has done. The Bible, in other words, is a story that begins with the dysfunction of the early chapters of Genesis, moves to God’s dealings with a particular group of people—his chosen people, the Israelites—and then culminates in what God did through Jesus of Nazareth.

Who Jesus is and what he did is central to the Christian faith. That is why this curriculum begins with teaching children about Jesus. Of course, much of who Jesus is and what he did is rooted in the Old Testament, and we will certainly get to that—but in due time. It is good to remember that the first followers of Jesus were likely far less familiar with the Old Testament than we might think. There were no printed books back then. Peter and the others, when they were called by Jesus to follow him, did not have their Bibles open and may not even have been all that familiar with the Scripture’s content.

When Jesus came on the scene he did not say, “OK, before I begin talking, please open up your Bibles and let me show you how all of this fits together.” Rather, he came on the scene and just started being Jesus. And the point was made well enough.

So we will follow this pattern: beginning this curriculum by acquainting children with Jesus first and then letting the rest of the Bible fall into place. We are intentionally avoiding the “Bible story” approach, which starts with creation, Adam and Eve, the flood, etc., as the basis of moral lessons. We are beginning at the culmination of the story, to see how all of this ends up—acquainting children with the most central truths of the Scripture before we go back to fill in the many interesting details.

A much fuller explanation of the methods behind this program is found in the core text for this series, *Telling God's Story: A Parents' Guide to Teaching the Bible*.

Organization

The lessons for Years One through Three are centered on understanding Jesus: who he was, what he did, and what he taught. The lessons in this book, Year Three, organize the Gospel story into nine categories:

- Stories Jesus Told
- Miracles Jesus Did
- Who Jesus Is
- Teachings of Jesus
- Jesus' Early Life
- Followers of Jesus
- Kingdom Values
- Jesus' Opponents
- End of Jesus' Life

Aim to complete one lesson per week. You may wish to read the scripted lesson to the child on the first day as he or she colors the picture, and then to complete projects on the second and third days. Alternately, you may read the scripted lesson on the first day, complete the coloring picture on the second, and complete a chosen project on the third. In a group setting that meets once a week, plan to read the scripted lesson as the students color and then to conclude the day's study with one of the projects especially designed for group use.

Each of these categories has three to five lessons, which means that you will spend three to five weeks on each category. The order is not unalterable, but neither is it random. We start with the stories Jesus told (parables) because this is one way that Jesus introduced himself to the people of his day. He also introduced himself through miracles, which are second on the list. These are the ways the people of Jesus' world got to know him, and it is a good way to introduce Jesus to your children, too. Several of his core teachings are covered as well.

Units Five through Nine are more biographical. Here the lessons will focus more on Jesus' life, beginning with his birth, then moving to his relationship with his followers, the opposition he faced toward the end of his earthly ministry, and culminating in his death and resurrection. These categories are also important for children to get to know Jesus. Young students are often not taught the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life

in a way that shows just how interesting and challenging the Biblical message is. These last categories will question some preconceptions, and therefore deepen our understanding of who Jesus is.

Even though the order of the lessons is very intentional, parents should feel free to alter the order to suit their own purposes. For example, you might decide to work through “Jesus’ Early Life” during the Christmas season and “End of Jesus’ Life” during Easter. The only strong suggestion we make is that each category be completed before moving onto another so that the lessons have a stronger sense of continuity (“Next we are going to look at the miracles for Jesus for four weeks”).

The purpose of this curriculum is to get to know Jesus better. In fact, it is very likely that as parents or teachers, you may find yourself re-introduced to Jesus in a fresh way. This is why each lesson opens with a short reading that explains the passage to the instructor; this will help you in helping your children process the content of the lessons.

Toward that end, you should spend a few moments reading the parent section (“What the Parent Should Know”) the night before the lesson so you can ponder a bit, or if you prefer, read it right before the lesson so it is fresh in your mind—whatever works for you. The important thing is that you spend some time becoming familiar with the information so you can be of more help to your children. The purpose of these parent sections is to orient you to the biblical passage for that day. The parent sections are more detailed and complex than the scripted lessons; this will give you a broader handle on the issues surrounding each passage. It will also give you a greater vantage point from which to look at the lesson itself, and, perhaps, to address questions that might come up.

All Scriptural excerpts are drawn from the New International Version except where otherwise noted.

Scope

Jesus is the primary subject of this curriculum, especially in the early years. We want to encourage parents and teachers not to feel as if the child’s biblical education is being truncated by focusing on Jesus. Rather, *Telling God’s Story* allows young students to get to know the central figure of the Christian faith in a way that conventional curricula do not do.

But this curriculum can’t possibly cover all of the parables of Jesus, or all the events of his life, or even all of the events of Passion Week, in a single year. We assume that this curriculum is not your child’s only exposure to the Bible. Your local church should provide your child’s

foundational education in the Gospel and Scripture. We are partnering with parents, teachers, and local churches to teach the Gospel message; this gives us the freedom to approach the curriculum the way we do.

Peter Enns, creator of the *Telling God's Story* series

Unit 1

Stories Jesus Told

For the Parent: Jesus was a master storyteller and preferred to use stories to introduce himself to his listeners. But this does not mean that the stories were easy to understand or that their meanings were self-evident. In fact, at times, Jesus seemed determined to obscure his message to those not prepared to hear it (Mark 4:11–12). Jesus revealed his message only to those who responded to him and followed him—to “insiders,” so to speak. So, the parables are sometimes difficult to interpret. But they are also concrete and show up everywhere in the Gospels. Jesus liked talking in parables, and this is why we begin with them as we continue to introduce our children to his life and teachings.

Lesson

1

Luke 8:1–15

Bearing Good Fruit— The Parable of the Sower

What The Parent Should Know: This parable, which is about responding rightly to God’s word, is connected in some ways to the story that precedes it. In that story, an unnamed woman pours her precious perfume over Jesus’ feet in the house of the Pharisees. The Pharisees, as the religious elite, might have been expected to be the first to understand Jesus’ message, but contrary to expectations, they do not understand at all. Instead, outcasts, like the

woman “cured of evil spirits and infirmities” (v. 2), accompany Jesus and the disciples in ministry. By emphasizing the role of the women in verses 1–3, Luke foreshadows the even greater role that women will have later on in the Gospel story. Women were regarded as second- or third-class citizens in first-century Palestine; that they would have a different role in Jesus’ ministry shows clearly that God’s kingdom will not be like anyone expects.

The Jewish people expected the kingdom of God to arrive as something big, obvious, and cataclysmic: a violent overthrow of the Gentile rulers, an elevation of the Messiah to a place of power and prestige. In this parable, Jesus is saying that the arrival of the kingdom is not going to be anything like that. Instead, the kingdom of God will start as seeds do: small. But just as tiny seeds lead to great results at harvest time, so the kingdom of God will grow, over time, into something enormous—yielding a return a hundred times larger than its beginning. Some people (“seeds that fall on the rocks and among the thorns”) appear to hear the word of God but do not remain in the faith, either because of hard times or because of being distracted by the “cares and riches and pleasures of life.” To come to full fruition, one must not only hear the Word, but also continue to follow Jesus as the women did: by giving their lives and their “resources” to Christ’s service.

In explaining the purpose of the parables, Jesus shows that his ministry runs parallel to those of the Old Testament prophets: parables hide meaning from people who are already hardened to his message, while revealing “the secrets of the kingdom of God” to those who are already receptive to the Word; in the immediate context, this means the disciples and others with Jesus. Jesus quotes from Isaiah 6, which refers to “hearing, but not understanding” and also hints at the idea of a tiny “holy seed”—a fraction of people receptive to God’s word—that remains after God’s judgment.

One lesson of this parable is that small, unlikely-looking beginnings—such as people who don’t seem to be powerful, influential, or important—can lead to enormous results with faith and patience. Another lesson: faith that comes from hearing the word of God is more than a momentary decision; faith is distinguished by persistent faithfulness to Jesus amid the cares of the world and the temptations of wealth.

Begin by reading aloud:

Jesus told this story to help us understand what God’s kingdom is like.

“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered

because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.”

When he said this, he called out, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

Do you know the story of the tortoise and the hare? A hare is a very fast sort of jackrabbit. A tortoise, on the other hand, is a very slow sort of turtle. When the two of them decided to have a running race, the hare, thinking that he had nothing at all to worry about, went off to take a nap—he could wait until the end and then sprint to the finish. But the tortoise went slowly and steadily along the course, and the hare woke up from his nap just in time to see the tortoise crossing the finish line. This isn’t quite what we expect. The hare expected to win because of who he was. The tortoise won because he continued patiently and steadily until the end of the race.

Jesus had a way of doing things that surprised people. People thought that Jesus would want to spend his time with rich and important people, but that is not what he did. He spent time with poor people and sick people, with fishermen and with women, who, in those days and in that place, did not get much respect. Yet it was these people—not the religious people and the people in charge—who listened to Jesus’ message and understood it. The story tells us that the disciples, three women, “and many others” followed Jesus through the cities and villages, using their own money and time to take care of his needs. They were the ones that the religious leaders thought wouldn’t make it far in the race, but they—not the religious leaders—really understood Jesus’ teaching.

When Jesus explains what the story of the seeds means, he also says that he is speaking in stories so that people who want to understand will be able to understand, and those who don’t want to understand won’t understand. His teaching is like the seeds that get scattered on different kinds of ground. Some seeds might spring up on rocky ground and look OK at first, but they will wither away because they can’t get enough moisture. Other seeds will grow, but, over time, be choked out by weeds. Jesus says these seeds are like people who respond to his Word with joy at first, but whose faith does not last long enough to bear fruit, which is, of course, the whole point of planting a seed. The people who bear fruit, Jesus says, are the people who listen to his Word, and hold onto it even when life is hard. Jesus is telling us what faith is like: faith is more than just saying, “I believe.” Faith is following Jesus even when the following is hard.

Lesson
2

Luke 11:1–4 and Luke 11:5–13
God Loves to Give Good Gifts—
The Lord’s Prayer and The Parable
of the Persistent Friend

What the Parent Should Know: The parable of the persistent (or “importunate,” as the old commentaries put it) friend amplifies the Lord’s Prayer that immediately precedes it. By calling God “Father” in this prayer, Jesus invokes the God of Exodus: the liberating God who heard his people Israel’s cry for deliverance and who fed them their daily bread in the wilderness (just as Jesus has fed the 5,000 in “a desolate place” in Luke 9; see also Lesson 8). This same God hears our prayers and delights to answer them.

The parable involves two friends, one roughly corresponding to God, the other, to a person who is praying. When a visitor arrives during the night and the host has no bread to offer him, the host goes to his friend’s house to ask for some bread. Several points about the ancient context are relevant: first, food was not readily available in those days; the only possible source of bread in the middle of the night would be someone else’s house (not a bakery or a shop). Second, hospitality was a serious and important obligation. To refuse to give a traveler bread was an enormous offense. Finally, the members of most families would have slept in the same room with each other, so when the host knocks on his friend’s door, he is potentially waking the whole family. Indeed, the friend gets up and says “The door is shut; my children are in bed.” But the persistent host continues boldly (we might even be tempted to say rudely) until, because of his boldness, his friend gets up to “give him whatever he needs.”

Jesus is not saying that God is reluctant to get up and give us what we ask for. On the contrary, he is saying that we may be confident in asking, for if a sleepy friend is swayed by persistence, how much more will God be moved by our prayers? Similarly, Jesus’ mini-parable—“What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will . . . give him a serpent?”—emphasizes that if mere human beings are moved by bold requests and know how to be generous, God certainly will hear our prayers as a friend and parent.

At the end of this parable, Jesus says that what God will give to those who ask is not just bread, but “the Holy Spirit,” or the gift of God’s comfort and presence within us. One lesson in these stories is that we can and even should pray with confidence that God hears and answers.

Begin by reading aloud:

Jesus told this story to help us understand what praying is like.

“Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.’ And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’

“I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Imagine you woke up one morning and there was nothing in the house to eat, but when you went to ask your parents (or grandma or grandpa, or aunt or uncle) for something to eat, they said, “Not now. I’m busy!” Let’s say you kept on asking, saying, “But I’m hungry! Please give me something to eat right now!” Finally, your mom or dad or whomever is there to help you says, “Here! You’re hungry? Have this tennis ball!”

That doesn’t make any sense, does it? It is probably hard for you even to imagine that the adults in your life wouldn’t give you food if you were hungry and asking for food again and again, especially if there was no way for you to get food for yourself.

In this story, Jesus shows us what it is like when we pray to God. Just before telling this story, Jesus’ disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. When you pray, Jesus told them, you can call God “Father,” because just as a good parent loves to give good things (like food!) to his or her children when they ask, God loves to give good things to his people when they pray.

When Jesus told this story, it was in a time and place where sharing food with people who were traveling was extremely important. It would

be rude not to offer something to someone when they came to your house. There were no restaurants or grocery stores, so when people traveled, they had to get their food from other people.

The other thing that is important to know is that most people of the time lived in one-room houses. That means that the whole family would share one bedroom. So when the friend wakes up his other friend to ask for bread, he is waking up the man's whole family, which, ordinarily, would be rather rude, but this time it does not matter. What he is asking for is important. Jesus is inviting us to pray to God boldly, just as the man boldly asked his friend for bread.

Jesus tells us we can ask God to give us the food we need each day, but he also tells us something more: God can give us more than just food. God can give us the Holy Spirit of God to be with us. The Holy Spirit is God, just as Jesus is God. Jesus calls the Holy Spirit a "helper" who stays with people who love Jesus to comfort them, help them, and remind them of the things that Jesus has taught them.

Lesson

3

Luke 16:19–31

Listen to God's Word While You Can: The Rich Man and Lazarus

What the Parent Should Know: This parable, which appears only in Luke's Gospel, can be understood as a narrative outworking of the first beatitude and woe that Jesus pronounces in Luke 6:20–24: "Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied" and "Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort," as well as a second illustration of Luke 16:13: "You cannot serve both God and money." Scholars generally agree that this story is addressed to the Pharisees and that it is an adaptation of a popular ancient Near Eastern folk tale, with an important appendix. It's a story that fits well within the overall reversal of fortunes theme of Luke.

While the rich man is given no name in Jesus' story, he has traditionally been called "Dives" (say DYE-vees) which simply means "rich man" in Latin. It may be significant that while the rich man has only a generic name in the story, Lazarus's name means "God has helped"—God helped Lazarus when no person, least of all the rich man outside whose gates he lay, had. It's worth noting that in virtually no Greco-Roman literature outside

the New Testament is any impoverished person given the dignity of a proper name, yet Lazarus is, and this hints at the countercultural reordering of Gospel values.

The parable is a remarkably economical piece of storytelling; each detail helps to advance the plot and the point. It's noted that the rich man is dressed in "purple and linen," which were extremely expensive clothes and probably something like the garments of a high priest. Perhaps this is a hint that Jesus wanted his listeners, the Pharisees, to see themselves in this man. It's also important to note that the phrase "lived in luxury every day" (v. 19) is a phrase usually reserved for special occasions, and indicates lavish feasting (see Luke 12:19). Meanwhile, Lazarus, sick and lying outside the rich man's gates, longs to eat what is thrown away after the feasting, but doesn't even get that much.

After both men die, Lazarus is carried by angels to Abraham's "side" (or "lap," as some scholars put it, indicating comfort and tenderness), while the rich man is carried to a place of torment. This might be a scary concept to discuss with children, and families will differ in how they wish to address the concept of hell and punishment, if at all. The story emphasizes that Dives has been taken in the afterlife to a place of discomfort and loneliness akin to the discomfort and loneliness Lazarus suffered in life; the point of the passage is not so much punishment in the afterlife but the fact that Dives has his reward during his life, and Lazarus has his afterward: that God comforts those without earthly comfort.

Dives calls, "Father Abraham . . . send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue." But having Abraham as his father (see Luke 3:8) is not enough: Dives made his choice in life—to be surrounded with good things—and it is too late to change now. It's striking that the rich man's error was that he simply didn't notice Lazarus as he was living for his own pleasure. As Proverbs 29:7 says, "The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern."

Indeed, the Old Testament ("Moses and the Prophets," v. 29) is clear about the obligation that those who are wealthy have toward the poor. The rich man thinks that a great sign—like Lazarus sent back from the dead—will serve as a convincing warning to his five brothers. But Abraham is clear: if a person doesn't know the right thing to do with the Bible in one hand and a dying man on his doorstep, a sign of someone returning from the dead won't help. (Here, Jesus is hinting at his own death and Resurrection, and at the fact that even people who knew the Scriptures very well—the Pharisees—didn't understand what his ministry was all about.) Moreover, there is now a "great chasm" between Lazarus and the rich man, which neatly illustrates

the lesson in this story: the time to listen to God's call for obedience and to care for "the least of these" is always now.

Begin by reading aloud:

Jesus told a story about a rich man (let's call him Dives [DYE-vees], because that means "rich man" in Latin) and a very poor man, named Lazarus, which means, "God has helped," and you'll understand why in a moment.

Dives was a very wealthy man, so wealthy that he could wear fancy clothes and eat as much expensive, delicious food as he wanted every single day—he lived each day like it was a birthday party or a Christmas celebration. In those days, people usually ate with their hands, and, if they were very rich, they would wipe their dirty hands on pieces of bread and then just throw the bread away; that became food for the dogs. Lazarus, on the other hand, was so poor and sick that he lay outside Dives' gates just hoping to get some of that throwaway bread. But Dives never helped him or even noticed him.

But, as Lazarus's name reminds us, God knows, and God helps. When both men died (because, after all, whether we are rich or poor, all of us eventually die), Lazarus was carried away by angels to be with "Abraham," where he was comforted and helped. Now he had enough to eat, and a place to rest. Meanwhile, Dives went to a place where he was uncomfortable and lonely, just as Lazarus had been during his life. God had helped Lazarus, but Dives, who had already enjoyed all kinds of nice things in his life, now had no one to help him. So Dives asked Abraham to send Lazarus to give him a drink of water, and then to go and tell his five brothers (who were probably as rich—and as forgetful of people who are poor—as Dives was) to change their ways so they won't go to this terrible place after they die. Abraham told him "no" on both requests: once you make your choice, Abraham said, you have to stick with that choice. Dives enjoyed good things while he was alive, and Lazarus had nothing during life. Now the reverse was true.

Abraham also told Dives that anyone who has the Bible (he calls the Bible of that time "Moses and the Prophets") should already understand it is their job to listen to God's word and to help people who, like Lazarus, are poor. "You cannot serve both God and money," Jesus once said. But Dives only cared about being comfortable and well fed, and never even seemed to notice that Lazarus was suffering. After they both died, it was too late for Dives to change his ways.

In this story, Jesus is giving a warning to people like the Pharisees, who are comfortable and wealthy and have everything they need, and who never worry about people like Lazarus, who have nothing. All of God's word, which we have in the Bible, teaches us that we are supposed to share what we have with other people, especially people who do not have enough. In this story, Jesus is telling us that after we die, it is too late to change our ways. Jesus is telling us that the time for listening to God's word, and changing our ways, is always right now.

Lesson

4

Matthew 22:1–14

Following Jesus into the Kingdom— Parable of the Wedding Feast

What The Parent Should Know: This kingdom parable continues some of the themes in the parable of the wicked tenants that precedes it (Matthew 21:33–45). The people first invited to the banquet, who represent religious Jews, refuse to come, so the invitation is extended to unlikely people—Gentiles, good and bad people, outcasts—whoever happens to be out on the street.

The story focuses on a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son, and sent his servants out to tell the people who had previously been invited that it was time to come. When they refused, the king sent more servants, who pointed out that everything was ready—"oxen and fattened cattle"—food that, in Jesus' time, was suitable for a great celebration. Still the guests didn't come; some of them went off to their own businesses, but others reacted violently and "seized," "mistreated," and even "killed" the king's servants. Finally, the king sent his servants to "go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find," and they did so, filling the banquet hall with guests.

In some ways, this parable puts John 1:11–12 in story form: "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." The king is usually understood to be God; the son, Jesus; and the banquet, the marriage supper of the lamb (Revelation 19:7–9). The people to whom the invitation was first extended are the godly, upright Jews of Jesus' day, and the people in the streets are the Gentiles and sinners

one fulfilled by kings: they were all anointed with oil to rule the people for God. So performing miracles was a part of Jesus' messianic role—he was representing God to the people. We see this, for example, in Jesus' response to John the Baptist's question in Luke 7:22 and in Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 35:3–6. The miracles are loud exclamations that the kingdom of God, hinted at in various portions of the Old Testament, had indeed arrived in the person of Jesus.

Lesson

5

John 9:1–12

Making Wrong Things Right— Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind

What the Parent Should Know: Blindness from birth was probably not uncommon in Jesus' day, but even more common was the tendency to interpret disability and illness as evidence that the suffering person was being punished for something. An ancient rabbi wrote, "There is no suffering without iniquity," which sums up the contemporary attitude well. And so when the disciples asked Jesus "Who sinned, this man or his parents, so that he was born blind?" they were asking a theological question—one that C.S. Lewis called the "problem of pain." The disciples struggled to make sense of God's justice in an unfortunate situation—why would a loving God allow a baby to be born blind? Surely, they thought, there must be someone to blame, otherwise, it seems that God is unfair, and how could God be unfair?

As he often does, Jesus answers the disciples' question by pointing out that they're looking at things all wrong. They were trying to place the blame somewhere (or, perhaps, to take up another rabbinic question, having to do with whether it was possible for babies to sin in the womb). But, Jesus says, this is not how God works. The man's blindness is not retribution for someone's sin, but an opportunity to do God's work, which is what Jesus does.

In part, this miracle illustrates what Jesus has announced earlier, in John 8:12—"I am the light of the world." Giving sight—and, for that matter, turning darkness into light—is, throughout Scripture, God's work. In Genesis, at the start of creation, everything is dark, and God makes light, and from there, everything else. The Messiah, in Isaiah, is expected to open the "eyes of the blind" (29:18; 35:5, and 42:7). So in giving sight to this blind man, Jesus is not only showing that he is God; he is also continuing God's creation

work by making one man's darkness into light. He is beginning the work of new creation—taking unfair, wrong things like a baby born blind, and putting them right.

To heal the man, Jesus spits on the ground and makes some mud—an action some have understood as parallel to God's creation work in Genesis 2:7, where God makes humankind from dust. When the man returns with his sight, the people who had been used to seeing him blind and begging cannot agree that it is really him, indicating, perhaps, the difficulty that people sometimes have in seeing the reality of God's new-creation work in Jesus.

For us, this story means that when unfortunate events occur—tsunamis, hurricanes, illnesses—we should not assume that they are evidence of God's judgment for sin. Instead, Jesus tells us, even tragic happenings are an opportunity to see how God is working in the world to put it to rights.

Begin by reading aloud:

As Jesus went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "But this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "sent.") So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" Some claimed that he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." But he himself insisted, "I am the man."

"How then were your eyes opened?" they asked.

He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see."

Sometimes bad things happen that are easy to understand. If you try to ride your bike over a big log, but end up crashing and scraping your elbow, you know exactly why the bad thing (the elbow scrape) happened—it happened because you crashed into a log!

Other bad things are not so easy to explain. But people like to have explanations for things that happen. We want to know why. We would like the world to work like a gumball machine: you put in a coin, turn the knob, and a gumball comes out every time. But in the world as it actually is, sometimes you put in a coin, turn the knob, and no gumball comes out at all.

In this story, Jesus' friends want to know why the man they passed as they were walking along was blind. They believed that either the man or his parents must have done something wrong, and that his blindness was God's punishment for some kind of wrongdoing. This was a very common thing to think in Jesus' day. People believed that if someone was sick, hurt, or disabled, it was because they had done something wrong. Since the man had been blind ever since he was born, the disciples wondered whether his blindness was punishment for something the man's parents had done.

But Jesus tells us that this is not how God's world works. The man is not blind because anyone did anything wrong. His blindness is not punishment for anything. Instead, Jesus says, his blindness is an opportunity to see what God is doing in the world. It is a chance to look and see what God can do. Jesus heals the man, so that where the man once only saw darkness, he now could see light.

When God made the world, everything was dark, and God said, "Let there be light"—and that was better. It was good. Here, Jesus is doing something similar. He is taking the things that are wrong in the world, the things that just don't seem fair, and making them right.

The people who knew the man found it hard to believe that Jesus had really made him see, even though they were used to seeing the man begging for money. (In those days, people with a disability like blindness usually could not work for a living.) Sometimes God's new work in Jesus is hard for people to believe, even if they see it with their own eyes.

In this miracle, Jesus shows us that bad things happening are not punishment for bad things that we do, but instead, that they are chances for God to show us how he will make all the wrong things right.

humanity and divinity simultaneously. He is, like God, a Good Shepherd. He is what God made Israel to be: a fruitful vine, and he invites us to share in that fruitfulness.

Lesson

9

Matthew 1:1–17

Jesus is the King of All People

What the Parent Should Know: While it is often tempting to skip over genealogies, they were carefully composed to render particular ideas, and the beginning of Matthew's Gospel is no exception. Its opening, "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" could be rendered as "the book of the genesis of Jesus," in a deliberate echo of the opening chapters of Genesis: a new creation is taking place, but it is a new creation inextricably bound to the old. God had promised Abraham that through his descendants, all families on earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3); and God had promised David that one of his descendants would be established as a king forever. Here, Matthew is showing that God is faithful to his promises, taking pains to demonstrate that Jesus comes from the nation and family out of which the Messiah was long expected to arise.

The genealogy is necessarily a selective one, as are all Biblical genealogies, and is composed in three sets of fourteen names—six sevens, which means that Jesus is the seventh seven. In the Bible, the number seven is the number of perfection or completion, and Matthew is probably indicating to us that the coming of Jesus is the climax of the story of God's people. He is the "Messiah" (which is unfortunately rendered "Christ" in many translations and misunderstood as a surname—"Jesus Christ" is really "Jesus the Messiah," the hoped-for, long-expected deliverer).

While it's not unheard of to include mothers in a Biblical genealogy, Matthew's inclusion of four Gentile foremothers of Jesus is significant. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba are, as commentators note, an unconventional group to find within the genealogy of Israel's Messiah, as they are all non-Israelites. In fact, they are all from groups that were, at various times, enemies of Israel: Tamar and Rahab are Canaanites (descendants of Noah's "cursed" son, Ham), Ruth is a Moabite, and Bathsheba is the wife of (and probably

herself) a Hittite. Matthew's genealogy probably includes this as a hint that non-Israelites will come to follow Israel's Messiah. But of course, the kernel of this idea was present even in God's promise to Abraham: that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Matthew's genealogy establishes that Jesus is the king, not only of Israel, but also of all people.

Begin by reading aloud:

Do you know your mother's name? How about your grandmother's name, or your great-grandmother's? Maybe you know these names, but do you know the name of your great-great-grandmother, or your great-great-great grandmother? These names make up your genealogy. A genealogy is a list that traces a family line from person to person. The Bible is full of genealogies, and some of them are very, very long. The Gospel according to Matthew—one of the four books in the Bible that tells about Jesus' life, teaching, death, and resurrection—begins with a genealogy, a list of the people, both men and women in Jesus' family line. In Matthew's Gospel, the genealogy is written in such a way as to tell us about who Jesus is.

From long, long ago—from the days of Abraham—God had promised that Abraham's descendants would be a blessing to all people on earth. Many years later, God had promised David, the king of Israel and descendant of Abraham, that one of his own descendants would someday become a king who would rule forever. By telling us that Abraham is the great, great, great, great, great (and so on) grandfather of David, and that David is the great, great, great, great, great (and so on) grandfather of Jesus, Matthew shows that God is fulfilling his promise to send the Messiah—the anointed one that God had promised would bring God's peace and blessing, and rule as king. The Israelites had waited for a long time for the Messiah, and Matthew is showing us, through the genealogy, that Jesus is that Messiah and king.

Most of the names in Matthew's genealogy are men's names—they are the names of the great, great, great, great, great (and so on) grandfathers of Jesus. But there are four women in this genealogy, too. They are Jesus' great, great, great, great, great (and so on) grandmothers, and their names are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (or "Uriah's wife.") Interestingly, none of these women was an Israelite. They were not from Abraham's family, or David's family. They were not from the "right" nation. In fact, all of these women came from nations that were sometimes at war with Israel. So how is it that these women are in the family line of Jesus, the Messiah and king? Usually, in a royal genealogy, it is important to

show that the line is “pure”—that no one is part of the family that doesn’t belong. And Matthew didn’t have to mention these women; he could have followed the line of men only. So why did he include these women that don’t seem to belong?

It is because even at the beginning of his Gospel, in the genealogy, Matthew is hinting that Israel’s Messiah and king will not be the Messiah and king only of Israel. He is hinting that even people who were enemies of Israel will come to follow Israel’s king and Messiah, Jesus. God’s promise to Abraham—that his descendants would be a blessing to all nations—is fulfilled in Jesus, who is the king, not only of Israel, but of all people on earth.

Lesson 10

Luke 4:14–30

Jesus is a Prophet

What the Parent Should Know: In this story, Jesus declares his “mission statement” from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah:

*“To proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

While a similar version of this story appears in the other Gospels, Luke puts it at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in order to emphasize its importance and influence on the rest of the story. Having already become well-known and well-liked, Jesus has returned to his hometown, Nazareth. Reading the Scripture, and declaring that “Today [it] is fulfilled in your hearing,” Jesus asserts himself in a prophetic role, which brings some confusion. (“Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”)

The people’s amazement “at the gracious words that came from his lips” has to do with the fact that, in reading this passage and declaring Jubilee, Jesus is proclaiming God’s grace, freedom, and healing for everyone—not only for Jewish people in particular. While God’s blessing to all of the nations is an

important theme in Old Testament literature, it is, perhaps, not what the people in the synagogue want to hear. They want to hear a proclamation of political liberation from Roman rule, but that is not what they are going to hear.

This desire is what Jesus senses when he says, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’” He then refers to two Old Testament prophets, Elijah and Elisha, who, despite ministering in the midst of famine and leprosy, gave relief only to one person each, both of whom were Gentiles. In likening himself to these prophets, Jesus is saying that his ministry is going to be a different kind of good news from what those listening were expecting. And this makes them angry—angry enough to attempt to throw him off a cliff, which is, interestingly enough, exactly what the devil urged him to do earlier in Chapter 4. Because his mission is neither exclusively for them nor precisely what they wanted to hear, they want to destroy him.

Note that “poor” in the context of the Gospels means more than simply “working poor,” which would have been the economic status of most people in first-century Palestine. In the Gospels “poverty” refers to utter destitution—the condition of a homeless person who has no possessions, no food, and no money—and is linked with disabilities that, in nearly every case, rendered a person unable to do anything except beg for a living. It is also important to note that Jesus’ reading here offers an implicit ethical challenge to his listeners (who were almost certainly not poor): if you have resources, then you must share. This was a great theme of the Old Testament prophets, who were persecuted and rejected just as Jesus is.

Begin by reading aloud:

Imagine that you were waiting for a long time for a surprise. You knew that the surprise would be coming, but you didn’t know exactly what it would be. Because you had waited such a long time, you had begun to imagine just what kind of a surprise you would get: you became sure that the surprise would be a big party, just for you. But when the day finally came for the surprise to happen, it was very different from what you had expected. Instead of a party just for you, someone was asking you to give a party for a bunch of other people—children you didn’t know very well or even like very much, children who didn’t seem well-behaved or kind or deserving of a party. How would you feel? Would you feel angry with the person who brought you this message—the person who you thought would be giving you the party, but who turned out instead to be asking you to throw a party for other people?

In this story, Jesus showed that he was a prophet—a messenger from God—by reading from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. The part he

read announces some good news, but it is not the kind of good news that the people listening in the synagogue wanted to hear. They were hoping to hear good news that would tell them they no longer had to live under the rule of the Romans. They were hoping that Jesus' work would be to get rid of the Romans. Instead, Jesus announced a very different sort of thing: he announced that God has sent him to

“Proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

The people listening to Jesus thought they were the ones who were oppressed and who needed to be set free from the Romans who ruled over them. But Jesus was telling them something different. Jesus was saying that God's good news was for everyone—not just for them in particular. But more than that, Jesus was saying that God's good news was for people they didn't particularly like: people who were of a different religion and culture (Gentiles); people who were poor; and people who were disabled. The people listening to Jesus were hoping that he would perform miracles and do great things for them—and he answered them by reminding them of two prophets (messengers of God) from long ago, who ministered in the middle of great diseases and famines and yet who gave healing and food only to a few people, none of whom seemed to “deserve” help. By comparing himself to these prophets, Jesus told his listeners that his ministry was going to be a different kind of surprise from what everyone expected. They were probably also angry because by saying that God's good news was “good news for the poor,” Jesus was asking them, indirectly, to share what they had. If they were expecting God's good surprise to be all for them, hearing that it was also for other people—people they didn't like—and that they would have to share, was a very hard thing to hear. Because of all this, they were angry and wanted to hurt Jesus.

The good news for us is that we don't have to be good or special or deserving for Jesus to welcome us into God's kingdom—the place where God's rule is complete, where hurts are healed, where we receive comfort and forgiveness. We only have to believe what Jesus said when he shared God's good surprise—God's welcome to all people. When we believe that Jesus welcomes us to God, we begin to enter God's kingdom.

Unit 4

Teachings of Jesus

Jesus' teachings were mainly about the kingdom of heaven, also referred to as the kingdom of God. This kingdom was not far off in the future, nor was Jesus typically referring to the afterlife. This kingdom is here and now. Jesus is the king who has come to set up a kingdom made up of people who follow Jesus' teachings—who live their lives loving God and loving others more than themselves. The lessons below examine the character of those who are part of this kingdom as well as the character of King Jesus.

Lesson

13

Luke 6:17–35

**God's Generosity is More
than Anyone Deserves**

What the Parent Should Know: Often called the "Sermon on the Plain" and regarded as a parallel passage to Matthew 5–7 ("The Sermon on the Mount"), this passage continues the theme of reversal that is present throughout Jesus' teachings and is especially apparent in the Gospel of Luke. It begins with the Beatitudes ("blessed are") and the "woes," which, though often misunderstood as curses or threats, in fact are expressions of sadness and compassion. Throughout this sermon, Jesus' exhortations should be understood

not as a new set of rules, but as illustrating the generosity and lightness of heart that should characterize children of God. God is “kind to the ungrateful and wicked”; God is “merciful” even to the undeserving.

This passage also contains what is perhaps one of the most famous teachings of Jesus: the Golden Rule. While something like the Golden Rule exists in many world religions and in the writings of many religious thinkers—Philo of Alexandria, Rabbi Hillel, and Confucius, to name just a few—Jesus’ innovation is striking. Whereas other versions state the rule in the negative: “Don’t do to others what you don’t want them to do to you,” Jesus states it in the positive: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Christian behavior, then, is more than just a question of avoidance—it means actively doing good to others, even and maybe especially to those who do not deserve it.

The overall point of Jesus’ sermon might be summed up in the idea of a God who is generous and kind. God is generous and kind to those who do not deserve it, and, as children of God, we can participate in the reality of this God by showing kindness and generosity in the world. This is the ultimate justification for loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, and lending without expecting to be repaid: we are to do this because this is what God does.

This kind and generous God is also in view in both the Beatitudes and the woes. Those who are poor, hungry, sad, excluded, or marginalized are, in Jesus’ way of explaining the world, blessed, because in the absence of all other earthly comforts, they have God to comfort them, satisfy them, and bless them. Their reward is their unique and deep understanding of the deep kindness, richness, and generosity of God. By contrast, those who are already rich, who are already well fed, who are accepted and liked, have “already received” their comforts from these things, and therefore do not need to seek and find them at the hand of God. This is why, as Jesus says elsewhere, it is hard for rich people to enter the kingdom of God.

But the good news of this sermon is for all of us, for the point is not that we must behave a certain way or be a certain kind of person—the point is that God is a generous, loving God, and that by understanding God, we might learn to extend that generosity and love even to people who don’t seem to deserve it.

Begin by reading aloud:

Jesus gave a talk to help us understand what God is like. It’s often called “The Sermon on the Mount” or “The Sermon on the Plain” (which just means a flat piece of land or level place.) Many people were following

Jesus at that time, hoping to be healed of their illnesses and to hear his teaching.

Jesus said:

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Have you ever been told “If you behave badly, I will take away your toy” or “Because you screamed, you can’t have ice cream”? Have you ever hit your brother or sister because he or she hit you first? Have you ever accidentally broken something that belonged to someone else, only to have him or her break something of yours to “get even”? This is the kind of thing that people do. Entire wars have been fought and kingdoms destroyed because one person, or group of people, wanted to “get back at” another person, or group of people, for something that was done to them. People also like to give rewards—an ice-cream cone, a toy, a gold medal—to people who have earned them. “You deserve it!” we might say to a person who has done well. “You don’t deserve it,” we say to someone who has behaved poorly.

In this story, Jesus is asking the people who are listening (and that includes us, because we are listening to his words, too) to do something very strange. Jesus is asking us to be kind and generous even when people do not deserve it. He goes as far as to say that we should treat even our enemies as we ourselves would want to be treated!

This is a difficult thing to think about doing. It is not what most of us think of as “fair.” But there is a very good reason Jesus asks this of us: Jesus is teaching us what God is like. God is generous and kind even

when people do not deserve God's kindness and generosity. So God is kind and generous to us when we do not deserve it.

Another important part of Jesus' talk comes earlier, when he says that people who are poor and lonely and sad are blessed, while people who are rich, comfortable, and well-liked are worse off than the poor and lonely. Why is that? It is because people who are poor may only have God to comfort them, and because of that, they can understand more of God's kindness and generosity.

Much of Jesus' teaching is a bit confusing. It goes against what we expect. But it is what we need to hear. God is generous and kind to us even when we don't deserve it, and we can be kind and generous even to people who don't deserve it.

Lesson

14

Luke 11:1–4

You Can Ask God for What You Need

What the Parent Should Know: This short section contains what many scholars regard as the earlier version of the Lord's Prayer (as it is traditionally called) which appears in longer form in Matthew 6:9–13. Rather than a loosely connected string of requests, the Lord's Prayer is deeply unified and might be best understood in its entirety as an elaboration on the central petition—"Your kingdom come." The kingdom of God is the sphere of God's rule wherein what God desires exists in its perfection. This reality is not yet fully present on earth, but throughout his ministry and his teachings, Jesus invites his listeners to participate in God's kingdom by faith and trust in God and by showing that same generosity to others. In Luke's Gospel particularly, this often means forgiveness.

It is important to note that the Lord's Prayer seems intended as a prayer for community life, as all the pronouns are plural: "our Father," "give us," "forgive us," and so forth. This is not to say that the Lord's Prayer is not fit for individual prayer, only that it speaks to the communal life of the followers of Jesus, who partake of daily bread together, forgive one another their sins (debts), and, together, honor God's name and anticipate the coming of God's kingdom.

it to be, and so they even went so far as to claim that Caesar, not Jesus, was their king. Caesar's law was going to give them what they wanted: the crucifixion of Jesus.

Jesus was the Messiah and the king, but not the king or Messiah that they wanted. They rejected him, and condemned him to death.

Lesson

33

Luke 23:1–56

Jesus is Tried, Killed, and Buried

What the Parent Should Know: Both Hellenistic (Greek) readers and Jewish readers would have been familiar with the story of a philosopher-teacher conflicting with authorities: that's what happened to Socrates as well as to Moses, who, despite his claims to being "slow of speech," came into dramatic and eloquent conflict with Pharaoh. But when Jesus comes before the authorities in Luke 23, the story breaks with any expectations readers might have had. Jesus does not say much at all; his silence evoking Isaiah 53:7: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." Before Pilate, Jesus is accused of claiming to be king. "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asks. "You say so," Jesus says simply. Likewise, when questioned before Herod, Jesus gives no answer. It appears that none of the accusations brought against Jesus had any validity. For example, he did not, as is claimed, forbid people to pay their taxes; on the contrary, he urged people to pay to Caesar "what is Caesar's."

Indeed, Pilate and Herod can find no reason to condemn Jesus—"He has done nothing to deserve death," says Pilate (v. 15). But the crowd, comprising the "chief priests, the leaders, and the people," continue to insist that the authorities put Jesus to death, and "their voices prevailed." So Pilate releases Barabbas—a convicted murderer and a truly violent man; he was probably something like a terrorist—and condemns Jesus to death, "as they wished." Jesus is put to death alongside two criminals—one of whom mocks him just as the crowd does: "If you are the Messiah save yourself!" But the other criminal makes note of the injustice: while they, the criminals, are receiving the penalty for their crimes under the law, Jesus is not. Equally significant is the fact that this man recognizes that Jesus is king, even despite Jesus' disgraced

circumstances: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom,” he says. Jesus tells him that he would be with him that very day in Paradise.

When Jesus breathes his last, after crying out to God, darkness falls over the land, though it was only three in the afternoon. Unnatural darkness, in the Old Testament, is a sign of judgment; more relevant, perhaps, is the idea that darkness in Genesis is what covered the “surface of the deep” before the dawn of creation. As Jesus, the firstborn of creation, dies, the world briefly returns to darkness, and those watching “beat their breasts”; those who knew Jesus waited and watched.

Crucified criminals, in that time and place, would not have been buried but instead were left exposed to the elements and to the appetites of scavenging animals. But a few people who loved Jesus were not willing to have that happen. Notably, Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Council who had disagreed with the course of action pursued against Jesus, along with the faithful women who had followed Jesus from Galilee, gave Jesus a proper burial complete with the spices and ointments traditionally used by Jews (who did not and do not embalm) to cover the odor of decomposition. These people clearly were not expecting the resurrection, a point that is sometimes easy for us, from our vantage point, to forget.

The story of Jesus’ crucifixion, as told in Luke, is, once again, a story of confounded expectations. As in Ecclesiastes 3:16, “In the place of justice—wickedness was there.” There is no justice in these courts: a murderer is released as an innocent is murdered. The powerful Messiah does not protest the false charges against him, the one who could save others and, certainly, who could save himself, does not. A sinner is promised Paradise with the king. Even Creation itself turns from light to dark in mourning of the death of its firstborn. Is there hope at this point? From their perspective, there is no hope. But God’s ways are surprising . . . and the story isn’t over yet.

Begin by reading aloud:

Have you ever been in trouble for something that you didn’t do? What did you say? Did you say, “I didn’t do it”? Imagine that a window was broken in the house across the street, and everyone was saying that you did it, and that you had to pay for it. That would be horribly unfair, wouldn’t it? Probably you would feel angry that you had been accused even though you were innocent. Probably you would tell the story over and over of where you were when it happened, how it wasn’t you and couldn’t possibly have been you who broke the window!

The normal thing for a person to do if she is falsely accused is to defend herself. But we have been learning from Jesus long enough to

know that Jesus does not always do what is expected. Often, Jesus does the opposite of what we might expect. The religious leaders finally have had enough of Jesus, and have come up with all kinds of accusations against him. It is their hope to get him in enough trouble that the government authorities would put him to death. So they claim that he told people not to pay their taxes. This is not true, but Jesus does not say anything. He does not say, "I didn't say that!" He doesn't defend himself at all. At the same time, Pilate and Herod—who are the government leaders—can find no reason to condemn Jesus. "He has done nothing to deserve death," says Pilate.

But that is not what the religious leaders want to hear. They want Jesus to be put to death, and they carry on demanding it until Pilate relents. He releases Barabbas, a convicted murderer, and condemns Jesus, an innocent man, to death. This is as upside-down as things can get: when someone who has done a terrible thing goes free even as someone who has done nothing wrong is killed.

As Jesus hangs from the cross between two men who have been convicted as criminals, people shout and make fun of him, saying that if he is truly the Messiah, God's rescuer, than he should "save himself." One of the criminals joins them in mocking Jesus and tells Jesus, again, that he should save himself. But the other criminal sees that what is happening to Jesus is wrong. He understands that Jesus has done nothing wrong, and he also understands that Jesus is the king, for he says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!" This is enough. Even though the man has done terrible things, he knows that he has done terrible things, unlike the people putting Jesus to death, who "do not know what they are doing." And even more, the man knows that Jesus is the King. Jesus promises him that the man would be with him that very day in "Paradise."

Just before Jesus dies, he cries out to God, and the sky turns dark. It is as if the world itself is grieving because the Son of God—an innocent man—has been killed. One of the Roman soldiers, seeing this, suddenly realizes that Jesus was innocent. Jesus' friends, meanwhile, stand watching and waiting. They do not know that Jesus will rise from the dead. They only know that their hope for the coming of God's kingdom—Jesus the Messiah—is dead.

In that time and place, criminals would not have been buried but instead, were left outside, exposed to the rain and wind and to whatever animals might come along to eat at them. This is a disgraceful thing to do to a person, and shows no respect for their life. A few people who loved

Jesus were not going to let that happen. A man named Joseph, who was a member of the Council but who had not agreed with the Council's plan to kill Jesus, went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body so that he could give it a proper burial in a tomb. The women who had come with Jesus all the way from Galilee helped to prepare Jesus' body for burial in the traditional Jewish way, which meant using spices and ointments. They must have been extremely sad.

This is a story that surprises us at every turn. A prisoner goes free, and an innocent man is killed. Jesus, who is the Messiah and has saved other people—and who could save himself—does not. A criminal is promised Paradise with the King. And the King of creation dies as the world itself turns dark. It does not seem that there is any hope at all. But God's ways are surprising . . . and the story isn't over yet.

Lesson
34

John 20:1–18
The First Day of
God's New Creation

What the Parent Should Know: John's account of the resurrection begins with the words "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark," in a subtle echo of the opening chapters of Genesis, where the earth was formless, void, and dark, and where, of course, God began the work of creation on the "first day." John is hinting that what is about to happen is the start of a radically new kind of work.

Mary Magdalene is the first to arrive at the tomb and the first actually to see the risen Lord; she is the one to go and tell the disciples so; she is the "apostle to the apostles," as some have put it, an apostle being a person who has seen the risen Christ and bears witness to his resurrection. It is important to note that women in the first century were not regarded as capable of giving evidence, whether in court or elsewhere. So to have women be the first witnesses to the resurrection is surprising and shocking, and, as many scholars and apologists note, certainly not what someone in the first century would do if they were trying to create a convincing fabrication.

Mary summoned Simon Peter and the beloved disciple (traditionally understood to be John) when she saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance; because Jesus had been buried so recently, she could only

suspect nefarious reasons for its removal. Tombs such as the one Jesus was laid in would be exhumed so that the bones could be re-buried in an ossuary (a bone-box) but this would happen only after a sufficient period of time had passed so that decomposition could be completed. At this stage of the burial, the suspicion would be some kind of foul play.

Yet when the beloved disciple reaches the opening of the tomb, he sees something strange: the strips of linen—Jesus' burial clothes—are there. Simon Peter arrives as well, and charges in, noticing the presence of all the grave clothes. This was very strange: if the grave had been robbed, why would the robbers have unwrapped the body? It made no sense at all. John tells us that when the beloved disciple goes inside and sees this, he believes. Although there had been clues all along—in the Old Testament, and in things that Jesus said regarding his own death and resurrection—it was upon seeing the grave clothes that the people began to believe. Some scholars note that while Lazarus emerged from the grave in his grave clothes, Jesus has left his completely behind; unlike Lazarus, Jesus has conquered death completely and will never again die.

But Mary, meanwhile, is still suffering, believing that someone has taken Jesus away. The risen Jesus himself comes to her and asks, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" But she does not recognize him. She thinks that he is the gardener, which, as Bible scholar N.T. Wright says, is the "right mistake to make." They are in the garden—as the old hymn has it—and, just like Eden, it is the beginning of God's new work. Still not recognizing Jesus, she asks him to tell her where Jesus' body has been placed, so that she can go and get it.

It's at this moment that Jesus says her name, and she immediately recognizes him, calling out "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). But Jesus tells her not to hold onto him. This isn't an insult—and Mary doesn't take it as such. He's simply telling her that the sort of relationship that they had is about to change. They won't be walking and talking together in the same way that they once did, just as we cannot do that. Nonetheless, she (and we) can still be close to Jesus; he has opened the way for this: "Go . . . to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" This has always been Israel's calling: to be a child of God, and Jesus has opened the door to this family life with God for all people. And he chooses an unlikely messenger—a woman, Mary Magdalene—to bring this message: "I have seen the Lord!" she says. Thanks to the testimony of these eyewitnesses, so have we.

Begin by reading aloud:

At the very beginning of the Bible, in the book of Genesis, it tells about when God first began to create the world. The Bible speaks of the world at this time as being very dark; it also speaks of the first day of creation as the first day of the week. When John begins to tell the story of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, he tells us that it was happening "early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark." In this way, John is trying to tell us that what God is doing here is the start of something very big and very new, almost like the beginning of God's creation itself. What is it? It is that Jesus has risen from the dead.

Jesus' friends could have expected that this would happen—Jesus had given them enough clues that he would rise from the dead, and their Bible, the Old Testament, had many such clues as well—but they didn't. So when Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb and finds the large, heavy stone that had been blocking its entrance has rolled away, she is frightened and shocked. Probably she thinks that grave robbers had come to steal Jesus' body away. But when John and Simon Peter reach the tomb, they quickly realize that something even stranger has happened. Jesus' burial clothes—the clothes that his dead body had been wrapped up in—are sitting there in the tomb. If someone had come to steal his body away, they would never have gone to the trouble of unwrapping the body and leaving the clothes there. That would not make any sense. When Simon Peter and John see the grave clothes in the empty grave, they begin to believe.

Still, they are not the first ones to actually see Jesus risen from the dead. Mary Magdalene is, which is surprising, because in that time, women were thought to be less intelligent and less capable than men. If you had important news to share with people, you wouldn't tell a woman. If you needed someone to tell you what had really happened during an accident or an argument, you wouldn't ask a woman. People thought that women were unreliable; that they wouldn't be able to keep the story straight. So there is no way that the most important news ever—that Jesus has risen from the dead—would be shared by a woman! But that is exactly what happens. Mary is the first to see Jesus, and she is the one to go and tell the rest of the disciples that he has risen from the dead. If John were only making up this story, he wouldn't make it up this way, with a woman being the first to get the news. This is just one of the ways we know that John is telling the truth about what happened.

But even though Mary is the first to see Jesus, she does not recognize him at first. Is this because Jesus has changed in appearance? Most

people think that is probably so, although no one knows for sure. Mary is crying because she still thinks that someone has taken Jesus away. When Jesus comes to her and asks why she is crying, she thinks that he is someone else—the gardener, perhaps—and asks if he knows where they have taken Jesus.

Then Jesus says her name, and she immediately knows that it is he. You can't hold on to me, he says. Everything is going to be different now. They won't be walking and talking together as they once did, any more than we today can walk and talk with Jesus. At the same time, she (and we) can still be close to Jesus. By rising from the dead, Jesus has changed everything. We can be the brothers and sisters of Jesus and the children of God, our Father. This is how the world was always supposed to be: people were always supposed to be a part of God's family. The messengers who tell us this are sometimes unlikely ones—like Mary Magdalene—but the words that they bring to us can be trusted.

Jesus has risen from the dead, and because of that, we can be his brothers and sisters, with God as our father, and we can be a part of God's new Creation.

Lesson 35

Luke 24:13–35 And Their Eyes Were Opened—Emmaus Road

What the Parent Should Know: Jesus' encounter with Cleopas and his unnamed companion on the road to Emmaus on Easter morning is a deservedly famous episode in the post-resurrection Gospel story: the two people are busy discussing what the shocking events that have just transpired in Jerusalem when Jesus himself comes alongside them. Like the others, they don't initially recognize him. He asks what they have been talking about, which seems to them a strange question: "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

The two are clearly distressed (Luke says they were "downcast") but they tell him what has transpired: Jesus, the prophet powerful in word and deed, has been killed. They had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel, but he has been killed—and with him, the hope of redemption. Yet a strange story is circulating: early this morning, some of the women went to the tomb and

found it empty, seeing also a vision of angels who told them that Jesus was alive. They seem not to believe this strange story.

Jesus rebukes them (“How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!”) explaining that all of the Scriptures—what we now call the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible—spoke of the necessity of the Messiah’s suffering and then entering into glory. As they reach their village, they urge Jesus to stay with them, which he does.

It is typical of Luke’s Gospel that their transformation in understanding should take place over a meal. There are strong overtones of the first meal in the Bible: when Eve and Adam eat the fruit, their “eyes are opened”; when these two take the bread that Jesus has broken (the language here sounds a lot like the Lord’s Supper), their eyes are opened and they recognize him, and the truth and power of his teaching: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?” Immediately they return to Jerusalem to bear witness to what has happened, telling people that Jesus has indeed risen, and that they have recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

Begin by reading aloud:

Imagine two friends walking along the road, speaking quietly to one another. They are feeling hopeless and sad. They had so much hope when Jesus was alive; they were so sure that he would be the one to redeem their nation. But now Jesus is dead, and all their hopes are dead, too. It is hard to think of something sadder, or more hopeless, than this.

If you were stranded along the side of the road in the middle of a great, wide wilderness—a place where there were no phones and no other people—but you had heard that sometime during the day, a bus would stop there and rescue you, you would be waiting and waiting. But if the bus had arrived, only to immediately break down once you’d climbed in and sat down, you would feel very frustrated, sad and hopeless. It is like this for the friends, except much, much more hopeless and sad.

Suddenly, a stranger appears. “What have you two been talking about?” he asks. The two friends look at each other, and then at him. Where has this person come from? For three days, the only thing that anyone has been able to talk about is the fact that Jesus—the one that was hoped to be the Messiah, the one to redeem Israel—is now dead.

Imagine that a large fair, or a huge sports event, had come to your small town, and during that event, something incredible had happened, like a small person lifting up an entire car, or the smallest child winning an important running race that a much bigger and stronger child had

expected to win. Everyone would be talking about the events. It would be the thing on everyone's minds. If there had been a tragic event—someone being hurt on one of the rides at the fair, for example—that might be something that everyone would talk about. Either way, when something very exciting or sad or strange happens, it's normal that it's the thing that everyone is talking about.

"Do you really not know what has been going on around here recently?" they ask, surprised that he could not know about the thing that everyone has been talking about.

"Tell me," says the stranger.

They tell him. Jesus—the prophet who was so powerful, who healed the sick, gave sight to people who were blind, fed thousands of people with just five small loaves and two fish, and who taught everyone about the kingdom of God—is dead. "We had hoped that he would be the one to redeem us," they say, "but now he has been dead for three days. Even worse, now there are odd stories about his tomb being empty, and women seeing visions of angels telling them that Jesus is alive again."

"Well," said the stranger, "Don't you realize that all of your Scriptures (what we now call the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible) say that the Messiah, the one to redeem Israel, would have to suffer and then enter into glory?" The fact that Jesus died wasn't unexpected. The Bible that they'd had all along, for thousands of years, told them that this would happen. Far from proving that Jesus wasn't the Messiah, the hoped-for rescuer, Jesus' death showed that he really was the Messiah. The Messiah—Jesus—had to suffer and die, the Bible said.

Perhaps they want to hear more from this stranger, because they invite him to stay with them. And when the stranger takes bread, gives thanks for it, and breaks it, they suddenly realize: the stranger is Jesus! Jesus, who taught them about the kingdom of God, who healed the sick, who gave sight to the blind, and who fed thousands of people with just five loaves and two fish; this Jesus is now breaking bread and giving it to them. Their eyes are opened in the breaking of the bread. Just talking about Jesus doesn't seem to calm their fears and their worries, but when they sit to eat with Jesus, they suddenly understand everything that he had told them. They were blind to who he was, but now they could see. It is like a miracle. And then, suddenly, Jesus is gone.

But he is not really gone. Once they come to understand that he is not dead at all, they realize that he still is the one to redeem all people. They cannot stay where they are. Though they've been traveling for much of the day, they immediately return to Jerusalem to tell everyone what has

happened: Jesus has risen. Jesus is alive again. We recognized him when he shared bread with us.

This story shows us one of the reasons Christians—people who believe in and love Jesus—celebrate something that’s called communion, or sometimes, the Lord’s Supper or the Eucharist. We eat and drink with other Christians in a special sort of meal where we celebrate that Jesus is alive. And this story also shows us why Christians are hopeful even when very bad things happen: because the Bible tells us that bad things will happen, just as the Bible said that Jesus had to die. But that was not the end of the story: Jesus also rose from the dead. Jesus is alive again, and this—Christians call it the ‘resurrection’—shows us that even the worst bad thing, death, is not the end of the story. The resurrection is also the reason that, thousands of years later, Christians are still telling the story of Jesus, just as the two friends rushed back to tell everyone what they had learned. Jesus lives: this is incredible news; news that Christians want to share.

Lesson
36

John 21:1–19

A Meal of Bread and Fish

What the Parent Should Know: The final chapter of John functions as an epilogue that picks up and develops themes previously explored in the book. Having just met the risen Jesus at the end of the previous chapter, and having been sent by him just as he was sent by the Father (20:22), the disciples are now back to fishing—right where they started when Jesus called them (see Luke 5 and Lesson 19). It seems they’ve gone right back to what they were doing before they were called by Jesus to a new kind of life.

When Jesus appears on the scene, the disciples have already been fishing during the best hours for fishing (the hours just before sunrise) but have caught nothing. The disciples do not recognize this stranger, who calls to them to throw their net on the right side “and you will find some.” Why did they do this seemingly random throw? Perhaps they thought that the stranger saw a shoal of fish that they couldn’t. Perhaps they recognized some authority in the stranger’s voice. Whatever the reason, they do it, and then are “unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish”; later, it’s noted that