

TUTORIAL

1.4

Every story starts somewhere

Learners will begin to think about the benefits in presenting the Gospel within the context of God's historical actions.

Careful master-builders

Many evangelism methods and church planting models have developed out of the push to speed things up - to get quick results and ever larger numbers of converts in a shorter amount of time. This is an understandable response to the great needs in the world and the urgency of the task. Unfortunately however, over time the results of much of this effort do not last because they are built on poor foundations. Building in this way is not God's way: He does things carefully and builds things to last. He is in for the long haul - right to the Finish.

Hebrews 3:4 *For every house has a builder, but the one who built everything is God.*

Psalms 33:6,9 *The Lord merely spoke, and the heavens were created. He breathed the word, and all the stars were born. 9 For when he spoke, the world began! It appeared at his command.*

God is the master architect of His Work - His Church - and He has called us into partnership with Him in that work.

1 Cor 3:10 *Because of God's grace to me, I have laid the foundation like an expert builder. Now others are building on it. But whoever is building on this foundation must be very careful.*

We are responsible to, and would be wise to, follow the instruction the Architect gave for building his Church. But do we? Much mission work focuses only on evangelism. But what we are actually called to is to make disciples and to teach all that Christ entrusted to the apostles. God wants to see groups of His disciples raised up who will in turn reach out to teach, disciple and plant churches themselves.

Where will we start?

So with a desire to do things according to his plan, we must lay careful foundations. But how will we go about it? Where will we start? Which parts of God's Word will we choose? What will we focus on? What principles can guide us?

Preparing the ground

Jeremiah 4:3 ... *Plow up the hard ground of your hearts!
Do not waste your good seed among thorns.*

A principle we see throughout Scripture is that human hearts in their natural, fallen state are not good soil for God's Word. People have willingly told their own stories and found their own solutions to life's dilemmas. Man has believed the great lie that he can determine his own path (as gods), and it is the tendency of every human being to see things from their own perspective.

We are not naturally worshippers of God.

Rom 3:11,18 *No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God;... "They have no fear of God at all."*

Rom 8:7,8 *For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will. 8 That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God.*

Everything in the fallen nature of man wants to reject the idea of his need - he does not want his sin to be exposed - he wants to believe that he can DO something to get through and that he can make himself right in God's eyes.

Felt needs - an incorrect foundation

There has been a great emphasis in mission circles on culturally felt needs as a starting point for developing a plan for teaching. The Gospel is often presented as the answer to these felt needs - with the priority being to make the message seem relevant, and above all, acceptable, to the listeners. Cultural issues will have to be addressed at some point, but they should not be the starting point or shape the message.

When the focus of Bible teaching is on human beings' need for happiness, belonging and security, it puts man at the centre of the Story - it becomes all about us, not all about God. As we've said, man has chosen to tell his own stories, and those stories are based on felt needs; the things he assumes are important, solutions he has arrived at for the dilemmas he faces.

Not only are the solutions wrong, but the dilemmas are also not the most important ones.

Jesus did not come to meet felt needs

The Lord Jesus Christ Himself said that His prime purpose in coming into the world was not to make people happy, peaceful or secure. He came to settle the problem of sin - something that many of the people He spoke to were not even aware was a problem. Their aspirations were political, they wanted deliverance from oppression.

After feeding the 5000 He refused to feed them again, and the result was that many who'd been following him turned back. He refused because He knew that their real need was to understand that they could only find eternal salvation in Him.

God does care about what people are going through. We see the compassion of Jesus many times. But His primary response and the purpose for which He came was to give His life in payment for sin - to meet the real needs of the people He cared for so deeply.

Offering cures to those who don't know they're sick

Mat 9:10-13 *Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. 11 But when the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?" 12 When Jesus heard this, he said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor – sick people do." 13 Then he added, "Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.' For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners."*

Jesus did not invite the self-righteous Pharisees to come to Him. He said "Go and learn" because He knew that they could not offer anything to God which would satisfy His holy, righteous demands.

John 9:40,41 *Some Pharisees who were standing nearby heard him and asked, "Are you saying we're blind?" 41 "If you were blind, you wouldn't be guilty," Jesus replied. "But you remain guilty because you claim you can see."*

They were in great need, but they didn't know it. But what does He say to those who sense their heavy burden?

Mat 11:28 *Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*

A God who is too small

Not only have most people come up with their own solutions, they have also decided themselves what God is like, and therefore what He will be satisfied with.

It is a basic human mistake to 'shrink' God down until He is someone we can understand, someone we can please, someone manageable, and someone who can be manipulated and deceived. So how can people see who God really is and what their real need is?

A knowledge of God is the only starting point

In the beginning God existed, before time, before anything else. For people to truly get to know Him we must start by clearing the stage of everything else that might draw people's eyes away. His Story must focus on Him - the pre-existent One, from the very beginning.

Psalm 111:10 *Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true wisdom.*

The importance of knowing God's absolutes

People may recognise God as Creator, as Judge, as Provider - even as someone who needs to be feared - but for a correct understanding of the way things really are, people need to *really* know who He is...

If God is not absolutely holy and righteous - then man could still use his own standards to judge himself morally,

If God needs anything at all there may also be some way to manipulate God for man's own ends.

If God is not absolutely powerful then there may be someone else who needs allegiance or there may be ways of avoiding His judgement.

If God is not all knowing there may be some way of deceiving Him or there may be things we can do, say or think which He does not understand.

If God is not omnipresent there may be somewhere to hide from Him.

God's Enemy works very hard at taking away all absolutes, because it is the knowledge of who God really is that leads to an understanding of man's greatest need.

Apart from a true knowledge of God, a person will never truly repent, believe and be saved.

God is revealed in the Scriptural narrative

So where should we begin? Where God himself begins - in Genesis.

“In the beginning...”

God introduces Himself to people in his Word - as God in the beginning. Before the stars, before the sun and moon, before any spirits, before man, before trees or anything else...this is God, this is what He was and is like.

As we follow His Story through his Word, we are able to listen as He tells it, and as He tells us the things He has done. We can see His characteristics consistently shown as we see Him in action, as we hear what He has made, and as He acts in relationships. We see His righteousness in the way He reacts to anything that violates that righteousness.

The Old Testament Scripture provides the foundational revelation of God as man’s sovereign, omnipotent, omnipresent, holy, loving, righteous, merciful and immutable Creator, Lawgiver, Judge and Saviour. It makes sense to start a story at the beginning, following a logical sequence so that the whole story is understood. A journey begins at one point and goes to another. Buildings start from the foundations.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Every Story Starts Somewhere

1. What comes to mind when you consider the idea of God valuing things done carefully, with good foundations laid and then built on meticulously? How do you think He has already been equipping you to work in this way? What areas do you think represent the biggest challenges for you personally as you consider contributing with excellence to His Purposes?
2. What do you think about the idea that people are very ready to “shrink God down”, to make Him

someone/something they are comfortable with? Do you think that even as believers we try to make Him someone we can understand, please, manage and even manipulate? Give some examples.



ACTIVITIES

Every Story Starts Somewhere

1. In less than a page, describe a particular evangelism approach that you are familiar with. (If you have been personally involved in something choose that one to focus on. If you aren't familiar with any then do some research.) Include these points:
 - Is any attempt made to present the Gospel within the narrative of God's Word?
 - How much, and what *kind* of, effort is made to prepare people's hearts before the Gospel is presented?
 - Where does the primary focus seem to be? On:
 - (a) felt needs and possible benefits of becoming a Christian OR their real state before God as righteous Creator and Judge.
 - (b) *their* response and what they have to *do* to be saved OR God's response to their need and what He *did* for them through the Cross?
 - Is there any plan for taking someone on beyond salvation to understanding more of God's Word?