

## Week Seven

### Conversations with God

# STORIES

## READ

Whether we watch it on the big screen, read it in a book, or hear it from a friend, everyone likes a good story. Why? What's the attraction? Why will we pay good money to watch a movie or invest hours in the reading of a book? Answers to these questions abound. For some, they like the adrenaline from thrillers. For others, they get swept away by romance. For others still, there's nothing quite like mystery and suspense.

With that said, there's another powerful draw to stories. Very simply it's this: We see ourselves through the lives of others. Sometimes, we see us as we are. We see our strengths and weaknesses, our good times and hard times. Other times, we see ourselves as who we wish to be. We see the romance and want it for ourselves. We see the adventure and want it for ourselves. We see the success and want it for ourselves. Stories speak to our lives.

It should be no surprise that Scripture's largest genre is the telling of stories (not teaching, not prayers, not wisdom, and not prophecy). Stories make up about 45 percent of Scripture. There's a message in this. God speaks through stories. The stories of Scripture have not been sterilized for easy reading, and at times we must wade through differences of culture and time. But the stories are both rich and real, and through them, we hear from God as he speaks to our lives through the lives of others—both well-lived lives and lives that were squandered.

This week's readings are selected stories from different areas of Scripture. You'll read them differently than you might read a psalm with worship or a letter with teaching. When reading a letter, like James, it's likely that individual words and phrases will catch your attention, and it will often matter if a verb is in the past tense or future tense. When reading a story, there are places where the precision of a word matters as well, but in large part, you're reading the broad brush strokes of another person's life. Yes, details still matter, but the story itself carries the weight of the reading.

As you read the stories, do your best to enter into them. How would it feel to be one of the characters? What would it be like to be challenged as they are challenged? Is there a parallel challenge in your own life? The selections are not long, so you may wish to keep reading. The greater context from the surrounding story will no doubt add color and depth of insight. Consider reading both before and after the selection. Who knows how God may wish to speak into your life through the life of someone who lived long ago?

## MEMORIZE

This week's passages address issues of worry and scurry, fear and anxiety. If there's a scene in your life that consistently triggers these emotions, consider reviewing these passages prior to that time. If, for example, a weekly meeting at work consistently rattles you, sneak away for a moment prior to the meeting and prayerfully review the passages.

This week's memory verses:

*Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth*  
(Psalm 46:10).

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*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand (Isaiah 41:10).*

## **MEDITATE**

It's not uncommon that in the reading of stories we feel either better or worse about our own stories. In truth, either extreme has its pitfalls. There's no benefit in reading stories if they swell our pride or push us toward despondency. There's a simple exercise that protects us from both extremes. It won't sound revolutionary, but by consistently practicing this discipline our self-centeredness is weakened and our God-centeredness gains strength.

Very simply, we practice gratitude. We are intentional about thanking God.

In describing people far from God, Scripture says this, *"Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened"* (Romans 1:21). That's sobering. It says that their thanklessness led to hearts that were darkened. What does life look like when the heart—the wellspring of life—is darkened? Gratitude protects us from this.

But maybe we don't feel grateful. Maybe we read the lives of others, and the only thing it reminds us of is how life has been so terribly stacked against us. Or maybe the opposite. Maybe we've been given a lot, and reading the lives of others reminds us of how we've wasted opportunities others have not had. These thoughts are normal, but they're no place to dwell. Rather than fester in these thoughts, what if we turned around and looked for ways to express gratitude to God? Might this loosen the grip of life's frustrations and liberate us toward freedom and worship? It's worth trying.

This week, as you talk with God, consider talking to him about gifts he has given you. If nothing comes to mind, then tell him this. There's no benefit in faking gratitude. If you don't feel grateful, then pour this out to him, and ask him for help to see blessings in your life. As thoughts come to mind, turn these thoughts into simple prayers of gratitude. Maybe write them down in a journal or meditate on them as you go for a run. If there is a swell of gratitude, let the time turn toward worship. For the artists, the thoughts may inspire a song, a dance, a painting, or a poem. As always, simply be you. Let the value of gratitude not be forced or ignored, but let it be a personalized expression of gratefulness to your God.

## **STORIES**