

UNIT ONE: MISSION BEFORE THE GOSPELS



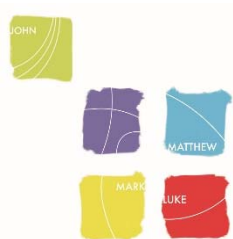
Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

Psalm 119:105

How do you usually start your journey-ventures? Some begin with a clearly charted route, a guidebook and a GPS! Others start their journey by venturing out and just seeing where the pathways lead. Then, there are those of us who like to have some idea where we're going before we start out; as we travel we like to make discoveries along the way and consult the guidebook for clarification and greater understanding before we travel on. Of course, if we are honest, we sometimes prefer to be "armchair" travelers who, in the comforts of home or familiar environs, read all about others' journeys without venturing out ourselves.

The life of faith and discipleship has often been likened to a journey. This study of **Mission from the Gospels** attempts to take into account each type of traveler on the missional journey. Yes, even the armchair traveler may find this study "interesting." But, of course, our hope is to encourage each of us to leave the comfort of the familiar and to actually venture out into the community on a missional faith-journey. May you find as you enter into this study a sense of Christ's presence. And, may you hear the call of Christ: "Come, follow me."

Every journey begins with one step. You are about to take your first step into your journey; in fact, in Unit One, **Mission before the Gospels**, you may discover that you have already begun.



Before Matthew, Mark, Luke or John wrote their Gospels, before the Apostles ventured on missionary journeys across Judea, Samaria, Europe, and beyond, before they wrote any letters to the early churches, in fact, before any accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus were put into writing, these stories, sayings and accounts were passed on from Jerusalem to Rome! It's amazing that in an age before telecommunications, without computer networks, phones or any of the writings that make up the New Testament text:

- Jews and Gentiles of many cultures became ardent followers of Jesus.
- Churches were started.
- Christian leaders were trained.
- Newly forming faith communities began embarking on a mission with God—a journey that brought them on a mission in their own communities and beyond!

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If not the written word, what was the source of inspiration and instruction that enabled the first Christians to share the message of Jesus with family, friends, strangers and even their enemies? What curriculum, programs or resources did they use to start new faith communities from Jerusalem to Rome? What body of materials served as their core message? What religious instruction helped educate and guide new followers of Jesus along the way? If not the written text, what?

Never Underestimate the Power of the Spoken Word!

Oral tradition played a major role in communications in all ancient societies. Even after the inventions of pictographs and written words, oral traditions were passed on from person to person, generation to generation, carrying the power and authority to maintain culture, community and common identity among the people with whom they were shared.

Enjoy learning about and from Mission *before* the Gospels this month.

Week One: The Power of Storytelling Investigate the power of storytelling by exploring the role storytelling plays and has played in your own lives.

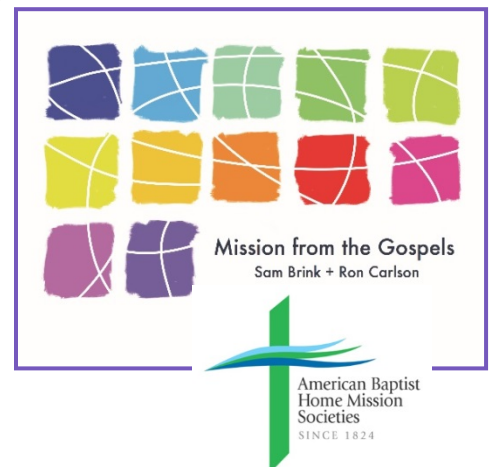
Week Two: A Story of a Down and Up Life Explore the Old Testament story of Joseph as a model of how a down and up life can be used by God for accomplishing a significant mission.

Week Three: Finding God in your Story Look for the presence of God in our personal life stories with all of their ups and downs.

Week Four: A Multifaceted Gem of a Story Investigate the rich variety of the gospel story. While there is one “gospel” its message of good-news has many facets, which the Gospel writers present in numerous ways.

Week Five: Discovering Multi-facets of the Gospel in *Your* Story

Explore how different life situations impact how you discover various facets of the gospel’s good news.



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Week One: The Power of Storytelling



Never Underestimate the Power of the Spoken Word!

Why is this night different from all other nights? Passed on from generation to generation for millenniums, this question is asked by the youngest Jewish child during the Seder Meal. What follows that question is a retelling of the Passover Story.

Stories have to be told or they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here. Said by Sue Monk Kidd in her book, The Secret Life of Bees

These quotes are just two reflections on the power of the spoken word. Oral tradition plays a major role in communications in all ancient societies. Through the spoken word, traditions have been passed on from person to person, generation to generation. Storytelling carries with it the power and authority to maintain culture, community and common identity among the people with whom the narratives are shared. Never underestimate the power of the spoken word! In this lesson we discover that oral tradition still plays a major role in communications.



Begin class with prayer

As your group begins this new study, **Mission from the Gospels**, take five minutes to go around your study group and share what might excite each of you about beginning in this class. You may also wish to share any questions or apprehensions that you bring to this study. After you have finished sharing, take time to pray about what your group members shared. Your prayer might simply be one sentence thoughts expressed to God acknowledging what was shared.



What role did oral tradition play in your life?

Read the following questions and write down some reminders of stories from your past that shaped your family-life and self-understanding. They may be good stories or bad; either way they are your family's stories. After you have answered the questions, share your answers with your study group. Allow time for everyone to share some of their personal reflections.

1. What role did oral communication play in your family of origin? Was there a family storyteller in your family?
2. What were some of your family stories? If you were to give each story a title, what would those titles be?
3. Share a story that taught you about your family history.

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4. Recall a story that helped shape your sense of family values (positive or negative). What value did your story reinforce?
5. Tell a story that helped shape your personal identity.



Thanking God for stories shared

After everyone has shared their answers to the five questions above, close this session by lifting up a prayer, thanking God for the power of story in each other's' lives. Ask God to help you to be open to hearing the stories of other peoples' lives as you go through this study.



During the week

If you can find some time this week, invite another group member to get together for coffee or for a meal. Spend time talking about family stories that you thought about during this class session. Or, if you do not want to share family stories, just spend time visiting and getting to know each other.

In preparation for next week

Find time to read the Joseph story found in Genesis 37-47. Look over the lesson for next week that will draw from the story of Joseph.

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Week Two: A Story of a Down and Up Life



Welcome back!

This week your study group will explore the Old Testament story of Joseph as a model of how a down and up life can be used by God to accomplish a significant mission. You will begin to investigate the downs and ups of your own life to see that God's uses our downs and ups in mission.



Begin class with prayer

Invite someone to read the following passage from Romans 8:28 aloud three times. As you hear the passage read three times, take notes of thoughts that enter your mind:

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose."

After the three-fold reading, allow each person an opportunity to share their thoughts..



Investigate a down and up life

Last week you were encouraged to read the Joseph story in Genesis 37-47. Invite a group member to share in his or her own words what they remember from the story of Joseph. After they have shared, invite others to add details that may have been left out. When you feel that the story has been adequately told, on newsprint or a smartboard create two columns – one labeled "Good Things" and the other "Bad Things." As a class, compile a list of the good and bad things that happened to Joseph. After compiling the two lists, create a Joseph-story timeline. Plot out the chronological order of the good and bad things that happened to Joseph.

Joseph Story Timeline	
Good +	→
Bad -	

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Once you have the Joseph story timeline charted, answer the following questions:

1. What stands out to you as you look at the ups and downs of Joseph's life?
2. Do you think Joseph's journey in life is a realistic picture of our human experiences?
3. Joseph seems to interpret his story in this way: "...*what they had meant for evil God had meant for good...*" Do you think the story of Joseph in Genesis and what Paul writes in Romans 8:28 are saying the same thing? What is similar? Do you find this comforting or troubling? Why?



Prayerful reflection

As you close today's lesson, take time to remember in prayer the presence of God in the ups and downs of life.



During the week

Spend time constructing your personal "Storyline" reflecting on your own life journey. Come prepared to share as much of your timeline as you feel comfortable sharing next week.

How to construct your "Storyline"

(The following exercise is based on one developed by Donald Miller and used by him in his Storyline Conference. For more information on Donald Miller and the Storyline process go to www.STORYLINEBLOG.COM)

You will need two sheets of paper. Label the first sheet of paper "Major Story Turns." Like Joseph our lives have many turns and twists. It has been suggested that a 30 year old person would likely have had 10 to 15 major story turns in their life. Younger people generally have less major story turns than older people. Here are a few questions to help stimulate your thinking:

- What three or four people have had the greatest impact on your life? Do you remember them saying or doing anything that had an impact?
- What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishment?
- What was the saddest day of your life? What happened?
- What were the educational milestones or disappointments in your life?
- What was your first "real" job?
- What are your greatest relationship memories – birthdays, holiday memories, first love, wedding, divorce?
- Have you had someone you love die?
- How would you finish the statements; "I thought I had it made when....? I knew my life was over when....?"

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After you have jotted down some thoughts on the above questions, go over your list and place a plus sign (+) next to those memories/stories that you think were positive and a negative sign (-) next to those memories/stories that you remember as being negative experiences in your life. After you have finished evaluating your memories/stories, take a second sheet of blank paper and create your timeline by drawing a line that divides the paper in half. On the left side of the line, write the date you were born. On the other end of the line, write the present date. Place a plus sign (+) above the line and a negative sign (-) below the line. As you did with the Joseph story exercise, plot your positive and negative story turns on your timeline in chronological order. You need only to jot down enough of the story events to serve as reminders for next week's class exercise.

When you finish your story line, reflect on what it is telling you:

- What did you learn about your life journey thus far?
- When did you feel closest to God?
- Where and when did you feel God was absent?
- As you look at your story timeline, can you conclude like Paul or Joseph that what happened is intended for good? Or is that conclusion something that might come with time?

During next week's class, you will be given the opportunity to share with the class as much or as little of your storyline as you feel comfortable sharing.

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Week Three: Finding God in Your Story



Welcome back!

This week you will work on understanding the power of story from your own life's journey. Hopefully, as you do so, you will see where and when God has been present in the positive and negative circumstances of your life and in the lives of others in your group. You may also sense how God uses both the highs and lows of our life's journey both to shape our lives and to touch the lives of others.



Begin class with prayer.

Share times from your week when and where you felt God was very present or times when you wondered where God was. Invite each person in your group to finish the following prayer sentences:

God, I felt your presence this week when....

God, I wondered where you were when....



Let's investigate our down and up lives

...Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you...

I Peter 3:15 (NRSV)

Your homework assignment for the week was to create a timeline of your life/faith journey. Some of us may still be wondering why we were asked to do this. The writer of I Peter captures the essence of this exercise when he writes— *"always be ready to make...an accounting for the hope that is in you"*. What is your reason for hope?

Take a few minutes to look at your timeline; the highs and lows that have helped shape your life to date. When your group is ready, share with each other what you are learning from your timeline. Remember to share only what you feel comfortable sharing. You do not need to share every high and low, but share the essence of your timeline. As we listen to each other's stories, attempt to be aware of the presence of God in the highs and lows of our journeys.

Be mindful: This is not meant to be a time where the group plays therapist. This is not a time to offer advice about a person's life. This is a time to listen to and reflect upon the story of the gift of life before you.

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After hearing each other's timeline story discuss the following:

- What reasons for hope did we hear in the stories that were shared?
- Is there a common theme in our stories? If so, what is it?
- Attempt to sum up the character of the stories that were shared in one or two words.



As an act of prayer

Stand and form a circle. Go around the circle, giving each person an opportunity to share their one or two word summations and reasons for hope.



During the week

Perhaps it's coffee time again. Sometime during the week, get together with someone from the class you want to know better. Revisit your life timelines and share with each other what you have learned from today's study.

In preparation for next week

During the week find time to look over next week's lesson, "**A Multi-faceted Gem of a Story.**" You will be introduced to the concept of the "multi-faceted gospel". It may help you to read the introduction to next week's lesson where this is discussed.

Take time to do the following two exercises found in the next lesson: "**Discovering Multi-facets of the Gospel in the Lives of People Who Encounter Jesus**" and "**Discovering the Multi-facets of the Gospel in *Your* Story**". Come ready to share what you discovered with the class.

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Week Four: “A Multi-faceted Gem of a Story”



Welcome back! Good News!!!! The word used to describe the Christian message is the term “gospel.” We sometimes hear that term as if it were a singularity, a concrete truth that cannot be denied without dire consequences (i.e. “That’s the gospel truth!”). As such, the word gospel is often associated with bad news rather than good news. But this understanding of the gospel message is far from the truth. The gospel is *not* a message of bad news! To the contrary, the term gospel is the translation of a Greek word *evangelion*, which is sometimes translated as *evangel* (like in the word evangelism), which means good news! This evangel is not a singular message; rather, the gospel contains multiple facets of good news, all of which provide a rich variety of good news to the hearers. In today’s study you will:

- Investigate some of the facets of this good news we call “the gospel.”
- See how the multi-faceted gospel has impacted our storylines and our life journeys thus far.
- Consider how the good news of gospel might impact your faith community and its neighboring community.



In the letter of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul takes special care to point out that the gospel message is not a singular proclamation of one primary and basic truth. This is particularly evident in the passage of Ephesians 3:7-11 where the gospel (*evangelion/evangel*) is described as having many facets.

Read Ephesians 3:7-11 and notice the following:

- Ephesians indicates the Christian message contains more than one single piece (facet) of good news. The author uses descriptive phrases like “boundless riches” and “rich variety” to describe this gem of a story.
- Paul shares a part of his story to demonstrate the positive impact this many-faceted gospel has had on his life. He tells how, even though he was the least of the disciples, this gem of a story enabled him to “become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace.” He goes on to say that “this grace was given” to him to bring the good news of Christ to others, including the Gentiles.
- The church has been given a world-changing role to play because of this gospel. Through the church the many facets of God’s wisdom are demonstrated. In what ways do you see your faith community currently communicating facets of good news in your neighboring community?

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Begin class with prayer

Share some “good news” you had this past week. Explain what makes it good news for you. Give thanks to God for each facet of good news you hear during this time of sharing.



Discovering multi-facets of the gospel in the lives of people who encounter Jesus

How and when do people perceive the gospel as good news? As the circumstances change in peoples’ lives, different facets of the good news become apparent to people in ways they may not have noticed before. A changing environment or a change in life circumstances often results in altering our perspectives of what is gospel (“good news”).

Listed on the next page are some often-told stories from the Gospels, each of which gives a perspective of the multi-faceted gospel. As you read each of the stories, note and record the life situation each character encounters. Write a brief description in the “Life Situation” box on the next page of this lesson. Also note what facet/s of the good news comes to each person in their life situations. Record a brief description of good news in the box labeled “Facets of Good News”. (See the example of Zacchaeus provided on the next page.)

1. Zacchaeus – Luke 19:1-10
2. Woman @ the Well – John 4:5-29
3. Woman Caught in Adultery – John 8:3-11
4. A Father Asking for Healing of His Son – Matthew 17:14-21
5. A Paralyzed Man Let Down Through the Ceiling – Mark 2:1-5

After individually completing this exercise, ask different people to read each passage. After each story is read ask the group to share and discuss their answers regarding the different life situations and the facets of good news apparent in each passage. Next ask group members to share the stories each person most identifies with?

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Life Situation

Zacchaeus: person of small stature, not well liked because of his occupation and unjust treatment of other town residents.

Woman @ the Well:

Woman Caught in Adultery:

A Father Asking for Son's Healing:

Paralyzed Man Let Down through the Ceiling:

Facets of Good News

Zacchaeus: Jesus accepts him, shares hospitality with him and liberates him to serve others and live in a new way.

Woman @ the Well:

Woman Caught in Adultery:

A Father Asking for Son's Healing:

Paralyzed Man Let Down through the Ceiling:

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DISCOVERING MULTI-FACETS OF THE GOSPEL IN *YOUR* STORY

Let's investigate



The many facets of good news also apply to our own lives. You are invited to look for facets of good news (gospel) that have impacted you by re-examining your life-journey timeline (see week two). Below are two boxes. In one box record some of the life situations that caused you to be receptive to the gospel message as good news for your life. In the other box, record the facet or facets that came across to you as good news in those situations.

Pick one person to share your answers with. As you visit, talk about your reasons for hope; talk about your experiences of gospel/good news in your life. Listen to each other.

My Life Situations	Facets of the Good News I Discovered

A prayerful reflection



As a closing prayer, come back together as a group. In one or two words, state a facet or word of the gospel/good news you have heard today. End your time of prayer with a group "Amen!"

During the Week



Make your own list of people in the Bible who encountered Jesus and note their life situations and facets of the good news that came to them through their encounters. Be aware of when and where you encounter good news in your own life situations this week.

In preparation for next week

Read the lesson "The Core Story of the Gospels."

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Week Five: The Core Story of the Gospels



Welcome back!

Before the Apostles began writing instructive letters (epistles) to the early churches and before the authors of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John wrote their accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus (the Gospels), the spoken word was the main source of teaching early Christians how to be engaged in God's mission. As with other ancient cultures, early Christian leaders communicated by passing on oral traditions. Take for example these three scripture passages: Luke 1:1-4, John 21:24-25 and I Corinthians 11:23. Notice that some of what the early Christian leaders shared came out of their own experiences and encounters with Jesus. Much of their oral content consisted of what they had heard and learned from others who served the living Lord. All four Gospel writers drew selectively from these oral traditions in their unique writings.

The oral tradition that preceded the New Testament writings consisted of two forms: **Storytelling** and the **Sayings or Instructions**. Our lesson this week looks at some of the core stories and sayings that guided the gospel writers.



Begin class with prayer

Continuing with our theme of encountering good news in our life situations, begin your class with words and statements of thanksgiving for good news experiences that occurred this past week.



The Power of Story Telling

Jesus knew the power of a story. By telling memorable stories, he taught what it means to be on mission with God. Parables, life situations, case studies were all used by Jesus; yet as far as we know, he never wrote any of them down!

List three stories told by Jesus that first come into your mind:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Take a minute to go around the class and share the stories you wrote down. Were there any duplicate stories shared by your group?

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Sayings and Teachings

Jesus didn't just tell stories, he also communicated through sayings and teachings – meaningful conversations, preaching sermons, giving instructions, and explanations of his stories. Yet, as far as we know, Jesus never authored a book!

List three sayings or instructions taught by Jesus that first come into your mind:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Take a minute to go around the class and share the three sayings or instructions people wrote down.

You just demonstrated the power of the oral tradition. Even today we remember many of the stories and sayings of Jesus.



You are the editor

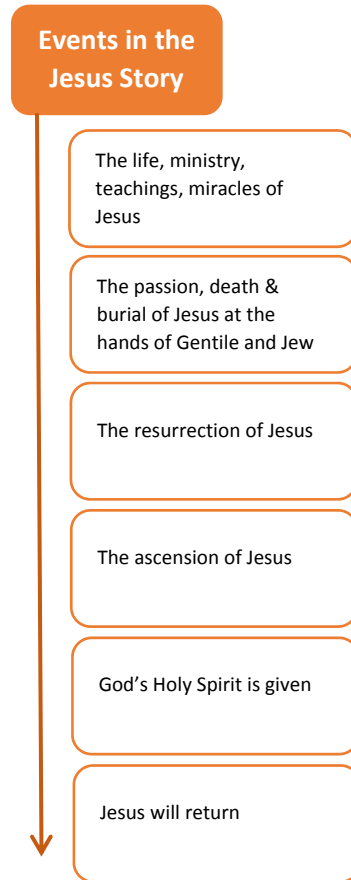
Your class has been selected to write the Jesus story for a new publication. Create a “bullet point” outline of the Jesus story that lists the parts you would want included in the story. Select a class secretary to record your list.

Once you have compiled your list, look at the chart below. The chart represents what New Testament scholars often refer to as “the outline of the Kerygma.” The Kerygma is the core storyline of the early oral traditions concerning the life and ministry of Jesus.

As you look at the chart:

- What themes on the chart are covered by your stories?
- Are there themes listed on the chart missing in your list of stories?

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It is from this core story outline that the Gospel writers created their Gospels' storylines. As we go through our study of **Mission from the Gospels**, notice how each Gospel author uses different stories from the core storyline. For example, from the category of "the life ministry, teachings and miracles of Jesus," Mathew and Luke include two different birth stories from the life of Jesus, but Mark has no birth story at all. As we study **Mission from the Gospels** you will notice that each Gospel writer selectively chooses stories from the Kerygma to teach their faith community what it means for them to be engaged in God's mission.

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Prayerful reflection

This session marks the end of Unit One: **Mission *before* the Gospels**. Close this unit by thanking God for the many ways the good news has come to your group during this unit.



During the week

Next week you begin Unit Two **Mission *from* the Gospel of Matthew**. During the week read the Gospel of Matthew in its entirety. If possible, attempt to read in one sitting. You will need approximately 45 minutes.

