



Week 8: Spiritual Storytelling and Framework for Life

*I will give thanks to you, Lord, with all my heart;
I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.*

–Psalm 9:1 NIV

Defining the practice

Spiritual storytelling is speaking or writing about a time when God was noticeably at work in our lives. The practice helps us discern God's presence and movement in the world and in the day-to-day activities of ourselves and others. When we proclaim what God has done for us, we affirm his active engagement in the world he created.

Storytelling involves both sharing our stories and listening to the stories of others. As we recount the details or hear others tell about their encounters with God, we sharpen our ability to recognize God in ordinary circumstances.

Foundations from scripture

One of the best examples of spiritual storytelling in the Bible is the Exodus itself. Not only is it the story of God's powerful and gracious deliverance of his people, but it is repeatedly retold throughout Israel's history in the Old Testament. Moses frequently exhorts the people to remember what God did for them. Even today, Jews celebrate the Passover to commemorate how God spared their firstborn before he liberated them from Egypt.

It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations...

–Deuteronomy 7:8-9 NRSV



The practice of setting up standing stones as a memorial is an ancient form of spiritual storytelling. People did this to leave behind evidence that God had done something powerful in a particular location. Those who came upon the stones later would be reminded of God's greatness. The patriarch Jacob followed this practice after he dreamed about God and the angelic ladder or stairway up to heaven.

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it.

–Genesis 28:16-18 NIV

Joshua commanded the Israelites to set up the stones they collected from the middle of the Jordan River to memorialize how God stopped the river, allowing them to cross and bring the ark into the promised land.

"Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever."

–Joshua 4:5b-7 NIV

The book of Psalms contains numerous proclamations of God's might, including examples of spiritual storytelling that span multiple generations.

Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom. One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts. They speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty and I will meditate on your wonderful works. They tell of the power of your awesome works and I will proclaim your great deeds.

–Psalm 145:3-6 NIV



The eleventh chapter of Hebrews features stories that showcase some of the greatest heroes of the faith. In the verses that follow, the author says the stories are for our encouragement, so we can persevere and keep following Jesus when things get difficult.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

—Hebrews 12:1-3 NIV

Themes of spiritual storytelling

From these texts, and others throughout scripture, several themes of spiritual storytelling emerge.

- The ancient Israelites told the stories of God’s mighty deeds over and over again. As a nation, they were to tell the world about God—a mission the church continues today.
Spiritual storytelling glorifies God by telling others about his greatness.
- The people of Israel told stories about God and created physical memorials to help their children understand what God had done for them.
Spiritual storytelling benefits not only us but also the generations after us.
- The stories of God’s faithful people, as recorded in Hebrews and through all of scripture, have been passed down to benefit us today.
Spiritual storytelling, both in telling our own stories and in hearing the stories of others, strengthens our faith and encourages us to keep going.



Methods of spiritual storytelling

Storytelling involves both storytellers and listeners. The storyteller shares about a personal encounter with the living God from his or her life. The listener receives the story and helps the storyteller discern its meaning based on the truth of God's story as told in scripture. The listener can be an individual, a small group, or even a large community or congregation.



For the storyteller

- Begin with prayer, asking God to help you remember a time when he was especially near to you.
- Think about the details of your story. What happened? Who was involved? When and where did the story take place? How did it end?
- Consider the meaning behind your story. Why is it significant to you? How does it fit into God's larger story of human redemption and restoration? What might your story mean for others?
- Write your story or practice speaking it. Learn how to tell it in a compelling way, focusing on the most pertinent details and plot points.
- Ask God for an opportunity to share your story. You might start with a trusted friend, a small group, or even your church. Let God lead you.

For the listener

- Create a supportive, distraction-free space where the storyteller can comfortably share his or her story.
- Encourage the storyteller with active listening that includes visual cues like good eye contact and nodding. In some communities, this could include limited verbal cues of affirmation as well.
- When the storyteller is finished, ask questions that help identify where God is present in the story. The listener's role is both to receive the story and to assist with exploring its meaning through the lens of scripture.



Preparing your story

Use the prompts below to guide you in preparing the details of your story. Begin by asking God to help you identify a time when he was particularly near to you.

1. Record the details of your story. What happened? Who was involved? When and where did the story take place? How did it end?
2. Consider the meaning behind your story. Why is it significant to you? How does it fit into God's larger story of human redemption and restoration? What might your story mean for others?
3. Refine your story. Does it have a clear beginning, middle, and end? Note the major plot points. Which details are important? Which details could be removed?
4. How and where might you share your story? Ask God for guidance and note any ideas he brings to mind. Let him show you how he might use your story to bless others.



Reflection and discussion

Answer the following questions if you prepared your story.

1. What was it like for you to prepare your story? What was it like to have your story shared with others? How was it received? How was God present with you during the sharing?
2. What is something you learned about yourself through your preparation? What was something you learned about yourself as your story was shared?

Answer the following questions after you've listened to the stories of others.

3. What was it like to hear others' stories? Where was God present in what you heard?
4. What did you learn about God through your listening? What did you learn about other people through your listening?

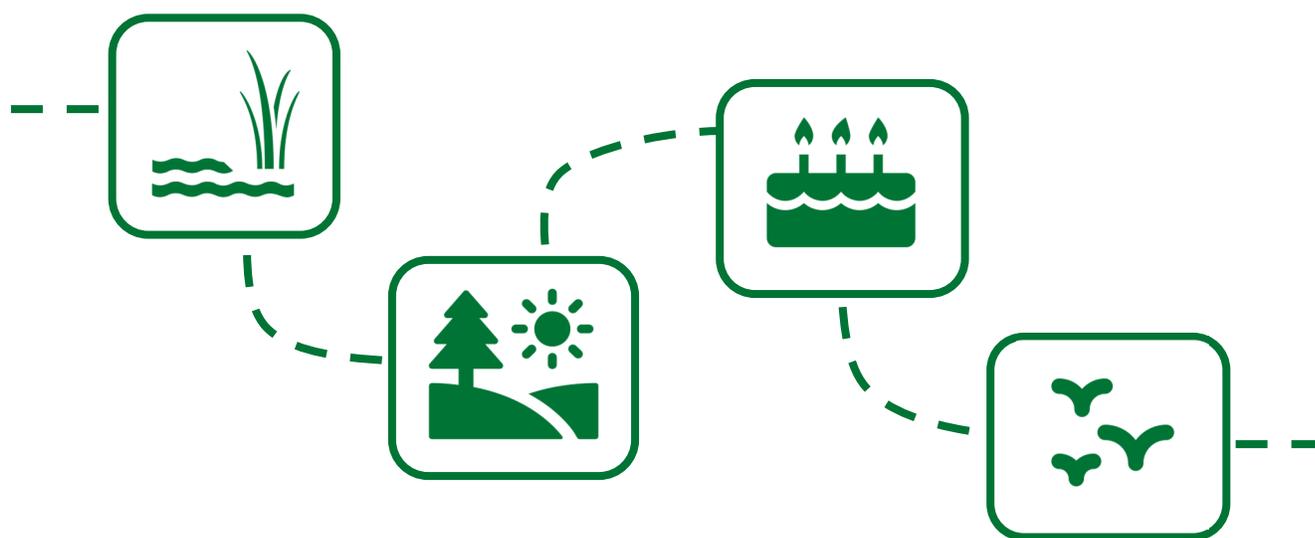


Artistic expression

Spiritually storytelling can involve more than just words. In the Old Testament, the ancient Israelites placed faith markers or standing stones in the spaces where God had done something remarkable. This concept can be translated into a simple modern practice that visually represents your spiritual story. These “icons” help you recall God’s activity in your life as you look at them.

Creating your icons

1. Ask God to help you remember times throughout your life when he was particularly near to you. These could be instances of great joy, sadness, deliverance, or peace. Write a list of your examples. If you have only one or two, that’s okay. You can add more as you grow.
2. Find images that connect to your experiences—that bring to mind what happened when you look at them. These can be royalty-free digital photos or actual pictures cut from magazines or other media. For example, if you sensed God’s nearness during a time spent sitting on the shoreline, you might find a picture of a lake. Your images will be highly personal. There’s no right or wrong way to do this.
3. Write a couple of words or a phrase to describe each photo and tie it to your experience with God. Arrange your images and words on a page. You can do this practice digitally or on paper. Create something you can return to as you have new encounters with God.





Role of the community

A church congregation can engage in the practice of spiritual storytelling together. To see a video series of stories from Valley Christian Church about God's faithfulness in times of suffering, go to the link below for the playlist.

<https://www.valleycc.org/spiritual-stories.html>

God is still at work

The God we see in scripture is still actively at work among us today. Some of the ways he engages with us have changed since biblical times—we no longer see God leading us in a pillar of cloud or fire, for example. But God is still bringing his plans to fruition much the same way he was a millennia ago. His miracles are still happening if we look carefully for them. Spiritual storytelling helps us be attuned to his activity all around us.

Breaking the barriers

Here are possible objections and hurdles you may face as you consider beginning the practice of spiritual storytelling. Reflecting on the responses below can help you overcome any false assumptions or beliefs you might hold about the practice, about yourself, or about God.

- **What if I don't have a story to tell? What if my story isn't interesting?**
We all have our own unique stories about God. Your testimony of how you came to know Jesus is one example. Your story does not need to be dramatic—God often shows up in the ordinary. Ask God to help you see where he has been at work in your life.
- **I'm not comfortable telling my story in front of other people.**
That's okay! The practice of spiritual storytelling can be done in writing, too. No matter how you choose to share, God is glorified when you make his work known.
- **How do I know if my story really involves an encounter with God?**
Does your story involve hope, peace, love, mercy, or grace? Does it include something wonderful happening to you or someone else? All good things come from God, so if any of this is true for your story, then God very likely has a hand in it. Part of the practice of spiritual storytelling is learning to be on the lookout for where God is at work in your life or in the lives of those around you.



Framework for life

Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always.

–1 Chronicles 16:11 NIV

Spiritual practices become transformative when they are part of our everyday rhythms and routines. A framework for life is one way to fit the practices together so they become regular habits for us. We each craft our own unique framework that outlines the practices we want to do and the frequency of how often we want to do them.

Gaining wisdom

Have we thought about who we are becoming? Growth is inevitable—we continue to develop and change throughout our lifetime. It is wise to pause and consider what we're moving toward. We want to make sure we're headed in the right direction.

Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

–Psalm 90:12 NIV

Our choices about how we spend our time determine which version of ourselves we allow to flourish. We can either grow in Christ-likeness, developing the fruits of love, patience, and wisdom, or we can go the opposite way. The framework for life guides us by keeping us engaged in the practices that continually place us in God's presence, allowing him to shape our character over time. We must be intentional about how we use our precious days.

Different seasons



As we grow and change, we may be drawn to different practices in different seasons of our lives. In times of grief, for example, we might find centering prayer to be particularly helpful as words fail us. When we are in a time of intense busyness, the practice of simplicity can encourage us to be wise about our commitments. What we're practicing may change as our needs, desires, and interests ebb and flow over time.

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens...

–Ecclesiastes 3:1 NIV



Creating your framework

We have the freedom to design our own framework according to how God has made us. Which practices we turn to regularly, and the frequency in which we do them, will look vastly different for each of us.

Some practices, like prayer and reading scripture, work best when we do them daily or weekly. Other practices, like retreats for silence and solitude, might be done yearly or a few times each year. Practices like fasting or lament could be engaged on an as-needed basis to address a particular circumstance or need.

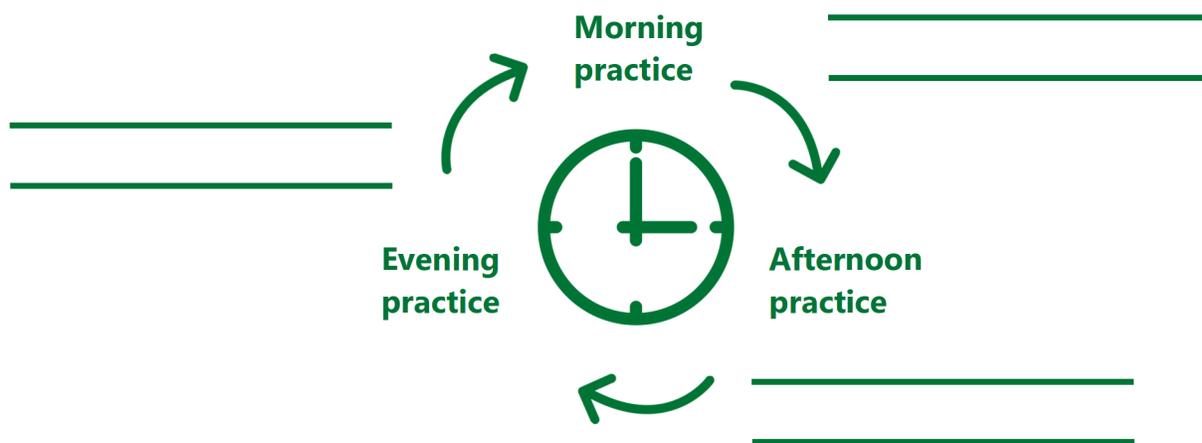
Consider your own spiritual goals in this season of your life. Where do you sense God calling you to grow? Where are you struggling? Where do you need rest? Use the chart below to sketch a possible framework for this season of your life.

Daily practice	
Weekly practice	
Monthly practice	
Yearly practice	
As-needed practice	



Thinking about your day

For daily practices, consider how you might remain aware of God’s presence throughout your waking hours. Brief prayer as you rise or fall asleep can keep your heart and mind focused on God. Reading scripture or doing another spiritual practice at a particular time in your day can help you establish a regular rhythm. You are encouraged to be creative in how you structure your time. Add your ideas for daily practice to the graphic below.



Trying something new

Establishing your framework is a lot like an experiment—you can try a practice or rhythm to see if it works for you. If what you’re doing brings you closer to God, keep doing it. If it doesn’t, stop and try something else. Your framework for life will evolve and change over time. For this reason, it is a good idea to revisit it periodically and make sure it is still working for you. Involve God in every stage, from helping you choose your practices to the overall rhythm for how you will incorporate them into your regular routine.



Role of the community

Spiritual practices, and the framework we follow, are about us and God *and* about us and our communities of faith. We need other people to keep us on the path of growing closer to God rather than further away from him. Christian friends and spiritual mentors offer us encouragement when things are hard, accountability when we lose our way, and affirmation when we're growing in Christ-likeness. You are meant to walk this road in the company of others. Ask God to help you find your companions for the journey.



Prayer practice

Loving Father, thank you for all you have revealed to me about yourself through these practices. As I look ahead to what's next on my journey with you, I ask that you would remain beside me, teaching me about yourself and transforming me as I draw near to you. Reveal to me the places in my life where you want me to grow and the practices that will deepen my connection with you. Show me other people on this same path who can accompany me and point me to you. I praise you for your faithfulness to complete this work within me, and I trust you will do it in your perfect timing. I pray these things through Jesus Christ, your powerful Son who removed every barrier to you. Amen.



Key things to remember

- Keep your framework simple. It should be something you can and will actually do, not something you aspire to. Spiritual practices are designed to be *practiced*.
- Start small. Pick one or two practices to focus on initially. You can build upon your successes and add—or drop—practices as you go.
- Be kind to yourself. If you get off track, start again. Confess your failings and fears to God. Ask him to help you keep going. Remember that you don't have to do the practices well in order for God to work through them.
- Be kind to others. The practices and frameworks of other people probably won't look like yours. Everyone has their own spiritual journey. Be curious and open-minded about the ways that other people connect with God.
- Remember that you are loved whether you do the practices or not. God desires that you seek him. The practices are your invitation to enter into his presence.
- Finally, keep spiritual practices in their proper place—they are tools that place you in God's presence so he can do transforming work within you. Loving God and loving our neighbors will always be more important than any practice we undertake.



Looking ahead >>

What you've learned in this course is just one stop on the pathway to spiritual maturity in Christ. Prayerfully consider what God has revealed to you through the practices and through your experiences over these past several weeks. Then consider the following questions.

1. What kind of person do you want to become? Are you getting closer to that goal or further away? Why or why not?
2. Which spiritual practices do you sense God inviting you to try on a regular basis? How will those practices fit into your framework?
3. What kind of growth feels possible for you at this stage of your life? What feels impossible, or at least beyond your own efforts? Ask God to help you with both through the power of the Holy Spirit.
4. Where is God inviting you on your journey with him? Write out a prayer below asking God to reveal the next step he wants you to take.



Readings for Further Study

Books

Beautiful Outlaw: Experiencing the Playful, Disruptive, Extravagant Personality of Jesus
John Eldredge (2011, Faith Words)

Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth
Richard J. Foster (2018, HarperOne)

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality
Peter Scazzero (2014, Zondervan)

Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God
Dallas Willard (2012, IVP Books)

Liturgy of the Ordinary: Spiritual Practices in Everyday Life
Tish Harrison Warren (2016, IVP Books)

Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation
Ruth Haley Barton (2006, IVP Books)

Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us
Adele Ahlberg Calhoun (2015, IVP Books)

Articles

"Spiritual Practices for An Audience of One: A Bible Study"
Tessa Pinkstaff (2022, enterthebible.org)
<https://enterthebible.org/bible-study-spiritual-practices-for-an-audience-of-one>

"Spiritual Practices for You and Me: Things Left Done and Undone"
Tessa Pinkstaff (2022, faithlead.luthersem.edu)
<https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/spiritual-practice-for-you-and-me>

