

INSTRUCTOR TEXT & TEACHING GUIDE

TELLING GOD'S STORY

YEAR 4:
THE STORY OF
GOD'S PEOPLE
CONTINUES



BY RACHEL MARIE STONE

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*For my children—
and for all of God's children.*

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Introduction

My first class in graduate school was Medieval English Drama. We studied the mystery plays—mostly those known to us today as the York Mystery Plays, which you can still see performed in some places throughout the world. For ordinary medieval people, many if not most of whom were largely illiterate, the mystery plays depicted the drama of humanity's life with God from Creation to the Last Judgment, and they depicted it with humor, reverence, and, sometimes, with astonishing insight. I was surprised by the unusual emphases and interpretations the plays offered.

It was astonishing, for example, to see that when God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, he sent them to “middle-earth.” What could that mean? Perhaps, some suggested, middle-earth is simply where medieval English people imagined themselves living: not below in hell, nor above in heaven, but in the middle, on the earth—middle-earth.

But perhaps, as well, Adam and Eve's expulsion to middle-earth signified something else in the imaginations of these medieval theater folk. For Adam and Eve, like us, live between the times—between the paradise of Eden and the joy of the New Jerusalem. Perhaps even the play depicting the banishment from the garden suggested a kind of mercy: the mercy of the creation of time where there had once been eternity. Rather than being eternally damned, Adam and Eve were given the mercy of time, in which God's redemption would be revealed.

This volume of *Telling God's Story* takes place in a similar sort of middle-earth. Jesus departs, but rather than signifying tragedy and the end of the story of God's life with God's people, it opens up another merciful window of time—time for the Gospel to spread throughout the earth, time for more people to be gathered into the family of God. And in this middle-earth setting, Jesus' followers are given the job of

extending Jesus' work—his teaching, his healing, the hope of his resurrection—throughout the earth, in anticipation of the time that is to come, when every tear is wiped away, and sorrow, tears, and death itself will be no more. The lessons in this book explore the mystery of living as Christians in the meantime—the in-between times.

A 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 *Year Four* are centered on understanding the in-between times—what happens when Jesus leaves? How is his story continued? What does it mean to live in the way of Jesus? The lessons are organized into ten units, each covering an important aspect of the New Testament:

UNIT 1: Jesus Departs—and God is Faithful

UNIT 2: The Holy Spirit

UNIT 3: The Cost of Following Jesus

UNIT 4: Being a New Creation in Christ

UNIT 5: Who is Paul?

UNIT 6: The Good News is For Everyone!

UNIT 7: The Life of the Church

UNIT 8: After Death

UNIT 9: Last Things

UNIT 10: These Three Remain: Faith, Hope, and Love

Aim to complete one lesson per week. This book is designed to be used along with *Telling God's Story, Year Four Activity Book: Student Guide and Activity Pages*, (available for download at welltrainedmind.com) which contains pictures, projects, and other activities. You may wish to read the scripted lesson to the child on the first day as he or she colors the picture, and then 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 or games especially designed for group use. You may find it helpful to both open *and* close your work with the scripted lessons, or to invite children to retell the story after they've heard it, perhaps using small figures or other manipulatives.

Each of these units comprises several lessons, which means that you will spend several weeks on each unit. The order is not unalterable, but neither is it random. We start with the story of Jesus' departure and end with his Second Coming; and the middle is all about how Jesus' followers did (and should) live in light of these two great events.

The first three units ("Jesus Departs—and God is Faithful," "The Holy Spirit," and "The Cost of Following Jesus") seek to form a link with *Telling God's Story, Year Three: The Unexpected Way*, even as the book of Acts is really part of a two-volume set—Luke-Acts. As Jesus departs, God's presence abides in the coming of the Holy Spirit, who begins to dwell in Jesus' followers, who continue his work—and face persecution because of their faithfulness.

The fourth unit, "Being a New Creation in Christ," along with the fifth and sixth, ("Who is Paul?" and "The Good News is for Everyone!") delve into the question of what it means to "be born again." Because Paul is the theologian of the early church who wrote extensively on this question, several lessons focus on the range of his teachings, including the important questions of "For whom is the Gospel?" and "What must one do to be saved?" The seventh unit addresses the related issues of the common life of the church: how Jesus' followers learned to share responsibilities and resources, and how to deal with conflict.

The next two units, "After Death" and "Last Things," explore, first, the centrality of Jesus' resurrection to the Christian faith and its relationship to Christian hope: What has the Christian to fear if Jesus has conquered death? "Last Things" introduces children to the often confounding book of Revelation, but instead of the Hollywood-inflected sci-fi version found in some interpretations, these lessons interpret Revelation as a return to the Garden of Eden, which is transformed into the City of God that fills the whole Earth, where, at last, God dwells among people and death and sin are conquered once and for all.

The final unit, "These Three Remain," concludes the course by helping students understand and cultivate the three essential virtues praised by Paul in I Corinthians 13 as "the things that remain forever": Faith, Hope, and Love. The three lessons in this unit explore these often-misunderstood virtues and encourage children toward a lifelong journey of practicing them.

Even though the order of the lessons is intentional, you should feel free to alter the order to suit your own purposes, particularly if you are seeking to link your lessons with the lectionary readings or the Church

Year more generally. “Lesson 5: Tongues of Flame—Babel Undone,” for example, could stand alone on Pentecost.

Each lesson opens with a brief word of explanation to the parent or teaching adult. These are more detailed and complex than the scripted lessons to be read aloud; think of them as mini-commentaries. I’ve tried to include the major theological and critical questions that arise in each passage—not that these will necessarily be questions that the children will ask, but because they are things that I’ve found good to know; things that have deepened my reading of Scripture and my understanding of Jesus.

All scriptural excerpts are drawn from the New International Version.

Unit 1

Jesus Departs—and God is Faithful

Jesus' followers were devastated when he died: it seemed impossible to them that he could actually have been the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, and yet suffer a shameful, criminal's death.

But he rose from the dead, and he is alive. And that God's Messiah would suffer was not, from the point of view of the Hebrew Bible, at all unexpected.

Still, his followers were surprised, and then even more astonished when, just as they were hoping and expecting that Jesus would restore the kingdom to Israel and end their exile, Jesus didn't quite answer the question, instead charging them with being his witnesses in all the region—and all the world.

And then Jesus departed, leaving his very surprised followers to continue his work.

The lessons in this unit are a bridge from the work of Jesus in the Gospels to the continuation of his work by his apostles, through the help of the Holy Spirit.

Continuing Jesus' Story

What the Parent Should Know: In our Bible, the Gospel of John separates the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, but in fact, Luke and Acts form a literary unity; a single book traditionally understood to have been penned by a single author. Scholars often speak of them as such: "Luke-Acts." That they are two halves of one whole—"Volume One" and "Volume Two"—is clear from Acts' prologue:

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. (1:1-2)

Why, then, are Luke and Acts separate? Perhaps they are separate because in the present canonical order, Acts forms a good introduction to Paul's letters, or perhaps because Acts is simply unique among New Testament books. Either way, it is clear from the superscription and from the character of the books themselves that Acts continues the story of Luke.

In the book of Acts, Luke is concerned to show how Jesus' story is rooted in Israel's story, and to show that God was not only faithful to his promises to Israel, but has also extended those promises and blessings to all people, including Gentiles (non-Jews). The apostolic teaching within the book draws deeply on the Old Testament, stressing that God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3,

I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you . . .

is now being fulfilled as the good news of Jesus is offered not only to Israel but also to all nations.

Commentators often note that the book of Acts follows a structure based on geography. As New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson notes, Jesus' final appearance in Luke (24:47-49) sketches the outline of Acts: "Repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Many readers observe that Jesus' words to his disciples at the beginning of Acts outline the book as well: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (1:8)

Indeed, Acts follows this very structure. The first part of the book takes place in Jerusalem (Acts 1-7), followed by Judea and Samaria (Acts 8-12), and then Asia Minor and Europe (Acts 13-28). However, Jerusalem remains central in the story, with events in Jerusalem narrated all throughout the book. This is because Jerusalem is central to God's promises to Israel and, as the place of Jesus' crucifixion, to the birth of the church.

The book of Acts is often labeled "The Acts of The Apostles" and has also been called the Book of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is active within the book of Acts, guiding and driving the apostles' ministries; there are five separate accounts of the "outpouring" of the Holy Spirit within the book (2:1-4; 4:28-31; 8:15-17; 10:44; and 19:6), including the famous "tongues of fire" at Pentecost. The ministers of the Gospel in Acts are described as being "filled with the Holy Spirit" (4:8; 5:32; 6:3; 7:55; 11:24; and 13:9), and, as scholars such as Luke Timothy Johnson note, are portrayed as prophets among the people of Israel. They perform miraculous signs and wonders, as prophets do, and they preach and reveal a message from God that is met with significant opposition, as prophets do—Jesus and John the Baptist included.

Acts is also significant in that it narrates the continuing story of Jesus' work as carried on by the Holy Spirit in the church that is forming. The term "Christian" is coined in Acts, and it is in this book that Christians are first called "Christians" (11:26), and, emerging as a distinct group, become the targets of persecution. But, paradoxically, that persecution only seems to strengthen the movement, as if to affirm, as Jesus' death and resurrection affirmed, that suffering, even suffering unto death, can be redeemed for God's good purposes.

Begin by reading aloud:

Have you ever read a story or seen a movie that had more than one part? Many popular books, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, are broken into several parts. *The Lord of the Rings* has three parts, and is sometimes sold as three separate books, or *volumes*. But *The Lord of the Rings* is also sold as a single, very thick book, because it is really one single story. If you were to read them out of order, or to read one of them without the others, you would not be getting the whole story, but only part of it.

The book of Acts—which probably has the title *The Acts of the Apostles* in your Bible—is something like that. We can think of Acts as “Volume Two” of a single book called “Luke-Acts,” because it continues the story begun in the Gospel according to Luke. (Acts doesn’t actually come after Luke in your Bible for all sorts of reasons we won’t get into here.) But the same person wrote both volumes, and Acts continues the same story that Luke’s first book began. Here is how Luke introduces the book of Acts:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. (1:1-2)

So the book of Acts is “Volume Two” of the story about Jesus begun in the Gospel according to Luke. But what is interesting and even a little strange about Acts is that Jesus himself is only there for the very first part of the very first chapter, and then leaves. How can Acts be a continuation of the story about Jesus if Jesus isn’t even there for most of it?

At the end of Luke’s Gospel (which, you’ll remember, is “Volume One” of a single book, Luke-Acts), Jesus tells his disciples to take his teaching “to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” Jesus’ story is “to be continued . . .” by *Jesus’ followers*. As Jesus is leaving, at the very beginning of Acts “Volume Two,” he says:

. . . you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (1:8)

Do you know what a “witness” is? A witness is a person who sees something take place, and can testify—that is, tell other people—that it really happened. Jesus is asking his disciples to continue his work by *witnessing* what they have seen and what they have learned from Jesus.

And what have they seen? What have they learned? They have seen that Jesus is God’s son, and that in Jesus God has kept all of his promises