

# Scripture by Heart: Reconnecting Word and Heart

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In the fall of 2009, I was introduced to a new and exciting strategy for interpreting the Bible. At the time, I was a senior theology major at Texas Lutheran University (TLU) and a pupil of Dr. Phil Ruge-Jones. It was in his New Testament Theology course that I had my introduction to biblical storytelling or “Scripture by Heart.” That introduction renewed my passion for Scripture and for what God reveals to us through that Scripture.

I am now a student at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. I am on the path toward becoming a pastor in the ELCA, and I continue to hold Scripture by Heart as a close companion for interpreting Scripture. Before I continue, however, I want to describe in a bit more detail what Scripture by Heart is. For me, Scripture by Heart (biblical storytelling) is the memorizing, internalizing, and retelling of Scripture. I do this with the hope of reviving the form in which the gospel message was spread in the early church. It was a powerful tool then, and I believe it can be just as powerful (if not more so) in our modern age—especially when so much information now passes from machine to machine rather than person to person. Through storytelling, we encounter an old and often overlooked lens for biblical interpretation—*human interaction*.

## How Do I Perform Scripture by Heart?

The first stage of biblical storytelling is

memorizing the text. As a storyteller, I attempt to memorize a passage of Scripture word-for-word according to a particular translation—such as the NRSV. This, for many people, is the most intimidating part of biblical storytelling. As a seminary student, husband to a wonderful wife, and father to a very rambunctious two-year-old boy, I can tell you that distraction and lack of memory are hallmarks of my life right now! However, memorizing Scripture often comes surprisingly easily to me because I am already familiar with the biblical stories. So I encourage everyone who fears an inability to memorize a passage of Scripture to at least try it—they might be surprised what they can do!

After memorization, I attempt to move beyond my presuppositions of the story and work to understand variations of emotion based on literary content. The text is seeded with many hints about the reactions of the characters in the story that modern day Bible readers commonly overlook. The search for clues to the emotions involved in the text often leads to new questions and thus the opportunity for new insights. It is a great reminder that the Bible is not just a two-dimensional storybook, but that it is instead an image of the living word of God!

I like to use the centurion’s response to the death of Jesus (Mark 15:39) as a way to illustrate the impact of various possible emotions within Scripture. The centurion says, “Surely, this man was the

Son of God!” With what tone does the centurion speak this? Is this a response of simple acknowledgement that Jesus was the Son of God? Perhaps there is a sense of guilt or sadness in the centurion’s voice. Maybe the centurion is speaking with sarcasm or vindictiveness. What implications are there for us in each of these voices? Emotions are not found just in the voice and tone—one can also consider possible hand gestures and expressions that would be appropriate to the story. There is also the question of who the centurion’s audience

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is. Is the centurion muttering to himself? Is he proclaiming these words to his soldiers? Was it directed at the crowd in general? Every inflection, gesture, and expression carries emotion that brings something new to the story.

The third stage is retelling the story to others. I believe a necessary mind-frame for good storytelling is it that it is “*okay*” to make mistakes! One of the beautiful gifts we receive from the Holy Spirit is that even our mistakes can be used by God to give people what they need. When I stand before a group of people and tell a story

from the Bible, I remind myself that no matter how wonderfully or poorly I tell the story, I am incapable of inspiring the hearts and minds of others—that is the job of the Holy Spirit! It is important, however, that I genuinely care about the story and about God’s message to us through that story.

## “By Heart”

One of the often overlooked dangers we face in the academic world is the temptation to become disconnected from the Bible as a book of the heart. Instead, we often tend to observe the Bible as a book of the mind and see it more as abstract philosophy rather than something meaningful to our everyday lives. This past year, I started a group of biblical storytellers at Wartburg Theological Seminary. I was told by one of the participants that it was nice to be able to enjoy the Bible and not use it like “just another text book.”

From a seminary student’s perspective, where making the grade to get through seminary is seemingly all important, it is easy to fall into the trap of regarding the Bible as a philosophical reference book. This trap’s potency does not decrease once in the parish, as the temptation ensues to see the Bible as a text from which we have to “grind out yet another sermon.” Church life becomes a barren field sown with the landmines of burnout when we lose our connection to the life-giving heart of God’s word. Thankfully, God provides us with a variety of resources to help us reconnect with God’s healing and rejuvenating word.

In some sense, I had previously seen the Bible as a book of stories that took place over 2,000 years ago. Christ had an impact on me, but I still did not necessarily relate to what was happening within the stories. It was as though the Bible had become a religious version of Aesop’s Fables. I would look for the moral of the

story and move on to the next text. But as I became more involved in storytelling, I learned a secret: *Just because the context of the Bible's stories was over 2,000 years ago does not mean that we are unable to relate our lives—our “hearts”—to what is going on in the Scripture!*

After I learned this “secret,” I began to ask myself how I would have responded to the situations presented in Scripture. How would I have felt to have been one of Jesus’ disciples afraid for my life in a sinking boat only to find Jesus sleeping comfortably in the back? How would I have responded to Jesus, my friend and mentor, demolishing the trade area of the temple? In the words of Dr. Ruge-Jones, I began looking for the “wow moment” in each of the stories—and sometimes what the “wow moment” turned out to be would take me by surprise.

Performing Scripture *by Heart* has been a significant experience for me to reconnect continually with God’s word. What God reveals to us through Scripture has always been important to me—but I have not always experienced the Bible as the living text I knew it should be. In church, the Bible is often read using a certain rhythm and specific set of inflections—eventually one passage begins to sound much like the next. The miracle stories of the New Testament are read with almost the same passion as the extensive lineages in the Old Testament. We do a tremendous disservice to Scripture when we disfigure the life-giving history of God’s interaction with creation to a standard, hum-drum slog of monotonous readings.

There is a major problem in our faith communities when we feel forced to turn toward commentaries and devotionals for our inspirational needs because Scripture seems insufficient. These tools certainly have their place, but they should not be the focus for inspiration. We strive and

struggle to help people be inspired by God’s good news for us, but then we mute one of the most inspiring instruments we have—Scripture.

I have realized anew through storytelling that the Bible is filled from cover to cover with the most inspiring story in our history—a story inspired by God! We do not need to create special gimmicks to spread God’s word; we just need to show the passion that we have for what God has given us. A reading from Scripture deserves to end with an exclamation mark instead of a period! I am convinced that people can better relate to Scripture when they actually hear it presented, not as a reading from an ancient book but as *the living word*.

Hearing and speaking the living word is interacting with the living word. What wondrous joy and excitement fills our hearts and minds when we interact with God’s word! The Bible’s stories are more than 2,000 years old, but they are not stagnant, nor should they be treated as such. When we treat the Bible as a book that is alive, its message becomes prominent in our lives. Through biblical storytelling, the Bible has come alive for me in ways I could not have previously imagined.

One of my most vivid experiences of this was another course I took with Dr. Ruge-Jones at Texas Lutheran University in which our class retold the entire Gospel of Mark. It was a fascinating class, where we learned a great deal about the Gospel of Mark—but the beauty was what took place within the group. As we interacted with Scripture, God’s word interacted with our temporarily entwined lives. Through this living, pertinent Gospel experience, strong friendships were forged as classmates confided in each other about personal struggles that were weighing us down. We became a living, breathing Christian community that cared and loved one another.

## Learning through Story

One of my favorite stories in the Gospel of Mark to present by heart is Mark 10:17–31 (The Rich Young Man). Within this familiar story, a rich young man comes before Jesus to ask what he must do to inherit eternal life. After a little back and forth between Jesus and the young man, Jesus tells the man that he must sell everything that he has, give the proceeds to the poor, and then “Come, follow me.” The man goes away saddened; and Jesus proclaims the ever-famous line to his disciples: “Children, how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God...it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Many interpreters of this text tend to point out the sins of greed and idolatry as stumbling blocks toward following the law. Although this is certainly a valid observa-

10:24–25) which declare that the disciples were “*amazed*” by Jesus’ bold statement, followed by the disciples’ question, “Who then can be saved?”

The emotions that Mark observes in the disciples’ response are not uninterested or detached. Rather, the disciples’ response seems to have a hint of shaken expectations. They are amazed, perhaps surprised, fearful, or even self-righteous in reaction to what Jesus declares. These emotions point to a “wow moment” within the story; however, understanding what that moment is takes internalization. A question burns in my mind as I attempt to internalize the disciples’ emotions: “*Why?*” Why are the disciples so amazed by what Jesus says? Why do they ask, “Who then can be saved?” If the disciples do not expect Jesus to say it is hard for a person with wealth to enter the kingdom of God, then the logical conclusion is that the disciples expect the rich young man to be in God’s good graces.

As it turns out, there was a common understanding in the ancient world (that is still prevalent today, as well, in some circles) that people who had a “good life” were blessed by God and those who had a hard life were cursed by God. More often than not, these blessings and curses were dependent on how well a person followed the law. There are particularly strong examples of this understanding throughout much of the Old Testament—likely the best known example is Job. Throughout the book, Job’s friends become certain that he must have sinned against God in order to receive such terrible punishment. They question him as to whether or not he is truly innocent in the eyes of God and remind him that God punishes the wicked. This is a “bad things happen to bad people” concept. For if God is truly just, then the righteous should be rewarded and the sinners should be punished.

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tion, I do not believe it was Mark’s main point. Some go on to say that Jesus is stating that a person who is rich is automatically under God’s scrutinizing eye, because greed and idolatry are more likely to be prevalent. But I believe these observations stop the story short and miss what Mark tells us. There is a hint at something more deeply embedded within the rich young man’s story in the next two verses (Mark

In Mark's story, we see the positive end of this blessed-cursed spectrum through a man who is blessed with riches and has striven to live a righteous life. Because of this, the disciples might suspect this rich young man to be in God's "Top Ten Picks for Eternal Life." This would explain why the disciples are "amazed" at Jesus' response. Jesus is not declaring that the rich have a harder time to get into heaven than anyone else; rather he states that even the most blessed people cannot attain salvation by their own works, because, with "mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible" (Mark 10:27, NRSV).

## Changing Perceptions

The Gospel of Mark recognizes the importance of emotion within the story. This Gospel is made *alive* with images of fear, joy, excitement, amazement, sadness, and everything in-between. It is a Gospel

written for people to experience—not just read or have read to them. For me, the opportunity to experience the Gospel of Mark through storytelling has reshaped my understanding of Scripture. The Gospel can and should make an impact on the hearts of those who experience it.

There is risk when we attempt to help reveal Scripture as experience. There is risk that we will make fools of ourselves. There is risk that the passage will be miscommunicated or mis-interpreted. There is risk—yet, each day, we are asked again to take a risk and have faith in God's promises. Faith itself is a risk; but what a wonder it is to have the risks in life be centered in God. Those who take the risk of experiencing Scripture through storytelling, either through performance or attendance, take the risk of having the word of God revealed in a new way to their lives. I hope that we have the courageous trust to take a risk—to connect both our minds *and* our hearts to God's life-giving word.