

# Blockbuster Storytelling

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By Robb Hawks

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## Forward

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The effectiveness of your communication determines the effectiveness of your life. Leaders who people respect and follow are those who are able to communicate effectively. They have a dynamic presence. If you desire to make a difference, learn to communicate with a powerful presence. You must be able to communicate what you want to get done in the church, in the ministry, and in life.

The pulpit is no greater than the person who fills it on a weekly basis. If the preacher is boring to the congregation, the people will think God is boring. Some ministers have style without substance while others have substance without style. Preachers need to be able to combine substance with style in their communication. The Christian and non-Christian alike are searching for truth in a generation preoccupied with self, avarice, and greed.

In *Blockbuster Storytelling*, Robb Hawks has combined his global knowledge of the Church with his professional experience of decades of ministry. Over the years, I have heard ministers say, "I sure wish I could preach or teach like Jesus!" Yet, they very seldom apply the adjustments necessary to achieve this communication goal. Missionary Hawks gives to us an understanding of the substance needed and the style required for listeners to truly "hear" the minister's message.

Substance is "what" is said and style is "how" it is said. There is a certain amount of style in the packaging of a message. In John 12:49, Jesus said, "For I did not speak

on my own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent me has given me commandment, what to say, and what to speak.” In other words, Jesus was led by the Father in all aspects of His speaking engagements.

When you read, *Blockbuster Storytelling*, you will come face-to-face with a renown communicator who has impacted more than 100 million people through his dynamic stories; each developed and delivered in a life-saving manner. You will learn how to combine substance and style in order to more effectively preach/teach like Jesus.

The communicator is to deliver into the possession of the person for whom it was intended. Delivery refers to the methods by which you communicate “what” you have to say to the “who.” Many souls are not saved because the sermon was never delivered to the lost. It is possible for the preacher to speak the message, use up a portion of time, give an invitation, and still not accomplish the intended purpose of the sermon.

I am grateful that Robb has chosen to bring *Blockbuster Storytelling* to the center stage of lives to persuade us to learn how to tell stories for the salvation of untold millions in the years ahead.

Dr. James O. Davis  
Founder/Cutting Edge International  
Cofounder/Billion Soul  
January, 2013

## Also by Robb Hawks

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The Prime Directive

Winds of Adventure

The Prince of Babylon

Understanding Why

Dynamics of Church Growth

The Notebook: The Children's Worker Handbook

The Adventures of Billy Adams

The Captain's Logbook

Dive Log

*For my son, Robby.*

*He loves telling stories as much as I do.*

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*Psalms 78: 2-4 (NIV)*

*I will open my mouth with a parable;  
I will utter hidden things, things from of old—  
things we have heard and known,  
things our ancestors have told us.  
We will not hide them from their descendants;  
we will tell the next generation  
the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,  
his power, and the wonders he has done.*

A **parable** is a succinct story, in prose or verse, which illustrates one or more instructive principles, or lessons. . .

[wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org)

## Story

The shortest distance between two people is a story. Everyone loves a good story. We read them, watch them, listen to them, and sometimes are a part of them. Stories happen all around us every day. We tell them to each other, share them on line, and offer our opinions as armchair quarterbacks. The human being is prewired, that is, genetically programmed for story. This is how we process information. This is how we remember things.

**2002 World Memory Champion Andy Bell** uses an interesting method to allow him to remember the order of 10 decks of playing cards in only 20 minutes. Think about that, he can memorize the order of 520 cards! How is this possible? Is he a super genius? He does not attribute his amazing skill to some supernatural talent. Andy says that he has trained his memory using a technique that I recognize as leveraging the human mind's innate power to story. His technique is rather simple. First Andy memorizes a simple route through town. Most of us do this all the time. Some of us create a map in our mind where we picture the roads and how they fit together. Others memorize landmarks along a route. I draw maps in my mind where my wife memorizes the landmarks. Andy creates his route using landmarks.

Next, he associates a character or object with each playing card. For example, a jack of clubs might be a bear, a nine of diamonds a saw, and a two of spades a pineapple. The route and the characters have been memorized long ago so he does not need to concentrate

on them. When it comes time to memorized decks of cards, Andy looks at the first three cards in the deck and begins to *create a story* that will allow him to remember the cards. He will remember the jack of clubs, the nine of diamonds, and the two of spades by creating a story of a bear (jack of clubs) using a saw (nine of diamonds) to cut in half with a pineapple (two of spades) at the first landmark on his route. He will continue this process drawing together 3 cards at a time into mini stories that happen in succession as he walks along the landmarks of his route. He has created an adventure with a cast of characters in a setting!

**Humankind stored its wisdom and history in spoken stories for many millennium.** We call these people groups Oral Societies. They have a oral history and oral culture. Storytellers play a significant role within oral societies. Grandparents and the elderly are widely respected as they remember the truths, history, and values of the culture passing them down to future generations in their stories.

**Each story has a truth, proverb, or teaching associated with it.** Over time the truth and the story become synonymous. The young hearing the story for the first time learn the associated truth. For those who know the story, they immediately think of the truth. This works in the reverse direction as well. Mention the truth and immediately everyone remembers the story.

"Slow and steady wins the race." Immediately brings to mind Aesop's fable about the tortoise and the hare. But again, it works in reverse, mention The Tortoise and the

Hare and what comes to your mind? Slow and steady wins the race! **Story telling has the power to create powerful mental images that eternalizes truth.**

Relationships are crucial among Oral Societies. Tribes, families, close and distant relatives are simultaneously the focus and method of communication. Small towns still maintain some of the roots of oral societies where everyone knows everyone's business and news travels faster than the speed of light! Much of the world still would be considered oral. Although there may be a baseline of literacy, the society still operates as a traditional oral society would. In parts of Africa knowledge has value and thus is prized and leveraged to advantage. Perhaps a friend says that he is looking for three men to work in his business. This knowledge has value. There is money to be made. Rather than just share this information with anyone, the recipient of the information would carefully repeat it only to family so that the employment and the profit therein is "kept in the family."

While working with a translator in Africa we were surprised at how little information he would give us. We would ask questions in regard to schedule, route, equipment, or contacts and we consistently were given very little information. This puzzled us until we began to understand the culture. The information was being held close. As long as the translator knew these things he was valuable to us and his continued employment was guaranteed.

Does all of this sound somewhat familiar? Most of civilization falls into an oral society culture in one form or another. It is instinctive. We have to be trained to think differently and even then, we will relapse into orality at a moment's notice.

**Modern western society has worked feverishly to change culture from oral to written.** A by-product of this is that we have codified knowledge into structured outlines and formal arguments. But given a chance to choose, even highly educated and literate western society will plop down in front of their TV and watch a story. This is how we were created. **Humankind is first and foremost, story tellers.** Whether it is a half dozen Maasai women of Kenya standing around the well or six office workers in New York standing around the water cooler; you know that they will be gossiping and telling stories. You won't find much conversation based upon formal higher critical thinking around the 'watering hole.'

Let's face it, ***we all are instinctive story tellers.*** Ask any parent who has confronted their child about some less than desirable conduct. Children have an amazing capacity to make up a story. Adults are no different. When called on the carpet by their supervisor the subordinate's mind rushes into story mode. Isn't that what Adam did when confronted by God in the Garden of Eden? Adam told God a story blaming it all on the woman. We are all innate story tellers. We have to be trained to think in linear arguments.

**Powerful stories expressed eloquently have the ability to evoke strong emotions and motivate us to action.**

Madison Avenue marketing companies have leveraged this truth into a multi-billion dollar industry. Television ads tend to fall into a few categories. The first is the simplest and I think least effective. These are the ads where a product or service is explained and the options and benefits are touted. People who are in the market to purchase the product are merely informed but rarely inspired to action. Then there are the ads that tell a story. These 30 second miracles are designed to evoke emotion and motivate the viewer to want to purchase the advertised item. Superbowl commercials are state-of-the-art. They have to be when the advertisers are spending upwards to a 3.5 million dollars for a single 30 second commercial. *That's \$167,667 per second!*

The 2012 top 10 Superbowl commercials were all stories. Not a single one concentrated on ticking off the many benefits of their product but rather created humorous stories with a punch line designed to evoke emotions and create long term visual images. After all, the advertisers want the audience to remember their ad and product. It is difficult to remember a list of facts but easy to remember a story.

**Television and motion pictures are the ultimate form of storytelling in media literate societies around the world.** Billions of dollars are spent each year creating programming to earn huge profits and simultaneously project a liberal Godless theology that has made the behavior of the immoral Hollywood sub-culture the norm. Just like advertisers understand the power of

changing the individual's product preference through advertisements, Hollywood has embedded its liberal agenda premise into the fabric of the programming it has produced.

The percentage of babies conceived out of marriage in 1980 was double that of 1950. This statistic exploded between 1970 and 1988 where never-married mothers were the head of 248,000 households in 1970 and by 1988 never-married mothers were the head of 2,700,000 households; a ten-fold increase! By 2010 we find an unbelievable condition in American society: 29% of white children, 53% of Latinos, and 73% of black children are born to unmarried women. How could such a radical change in society take place in such a short span? Part of the explanation is found within the stories told and consumed by society.

So, humankind is preprogrammed to stories, advertisers sell using stories, TV and film makers make billions telling stories, ***and preachers stand up in front of their congregations and spout three point sermons and expect to change the world.***

It is somewhat tragic that the church has the greatest "product" the world has ever known and yet has somehow bought into the less-than-ideal delivery method of the structured sermon. This is understandable when we consider who teaches our pastors to preach. Our young pastors go to seminary where they are trained by academics who teach "higher

critical" thinking. Within this group traditional sermon structure is a refined and understood art. But our pastors don't preach to academia, but rather to John Q. Public who couldn't care less about critical thinking but does love a good story. As Solomon said, "there is nothing new under the sun." During Jesus' time the Pharisees, (the lawyers of the day), spouted argument, legal theory, and written opinion. Jesus on the other hand, told stories.

I grew up in church. Some of my earliest memories were falling asleep under my mother's pew as the pastor preached his heart out. These were the days when you attended Sunday morning and evening, and again on Wednesday night. No one-hour service would satisfy in those days. Church was an experience that typically lasted a minimum of two hours. The only preaching I remember from my childhood was when the evangelist came to town and told incredible stories.

Years later I would face the challenge of standing in the pulpit myself and preach many a message in hope of moving the congregation. Sermon after sermon was structured correctly according to what I had been taught in Bible College. But it didn't take long for me to begin to read my audience and discover that I wasn't keeping their attention from beginning to end. They perked up and became engaged in my message as I told stories to illustrate principles, and then their eyes would glass over as I hammered away at my outline and arguments. Albert Einstein said that the definition of insanity was to

continue to do something the same way and expect a different result. I decided that I wanted different results when I preached and that I would have to do something different than what I was doing to get those results.

Pastor Paul Graban was my pastor in Burlington, New Jersey when I was a child. One day I asked him for advice as a young man just starting out in life. "Find someone successful, and do what they do!" He replied. Great advice that on occasion has come to the forefront of my mind to challenge me to do better. I began to analyze the preaching styles of some of the churches great. They all had one thing in common; they could all tell a story. When this truth suddenly burst into the proverbial "a hah!" moment it became obvious to me that I would have to learn to tell stories and incorporate them into my preaching style.

Then God threw me a curveball. I was hired at a large church to be a children's pastor! For the next 11 years I told story after story after story. Don't be fooled by thinking children are easy to minister to. They are brutally honest with short attention spans. If you lose them in your story telling they don't sit there quietly and respectfully. First you see it in their eyes as they check out and then begin to fidget in their chairs. Soon you have lost control. Not a pleasant situation. But a great way to hone your story telling skills.

Then one day I was asked to evaluate a kid's TV show. This led to being asked to write and produce the story/scripts for a series. These programs were produced and translated into numerous languages and

have been broadcast to over 100 million viewers worldwide. No one wanted to broadcast my 3-point sermons, but my stories, my Gospel has been preached to an incredible number of people. The power of story!

**There are many types of stories.** Most jokes are short stories giving a lot of bang and emotional effect for just a few minutes of investment. Every pastor has relied upon jokes or humorous short stories at one time or another in his sermon.

**The documentary is another form of story.**

Documentaries can be short "news" stories up to feature length films. Typically documentaries are told from an event perspective linking together a series of events that have some type of impact that the viewer might find interesting. Although they can be intellectually stimulating, they typically never achieve broad viewership or acclaim. Unfortunately, most pastors use the documentary style to tell stories from the Bible. They tackle the content with a series of statements explaining events in which the Bible characters are added. This might be a great method to deliver factual information but it typically falls short of capturing the listeners imagination and thus does not usually evoke strong emotions. Think of a witness in a trial relating a series of factual events to describe an accident or crime. At first it is interesting, but soon you are snoozing.

**Hollywood has refined the art of storytelling and along the way a number of unofficial rules have been developed governing scriptwriting.** Follow the rules and

you have a chance at a profitable film. Break the rules and you will probably lose your shirt. Follow the rules, add some creativity, and hire a great team and you might have a blockbuster!

I have taught Hollywood scriptwriting at a number of colleges around the world. We have analyzed blockbuster films and discovered that they all follow certain rules. We can adapt these rules when preparing our stories. After all, a blockbuster movie is nothing more than a story told really well.

## **What is a story?**

**A story is about people, not places or events.** Our listeners are drawn to the human element. Great stories have great characters we can relate to and aspire to be like.

Imagine a massive thunder storm dumping inches of rain upon a dry desert. The rain falls faster than the earth can absorb thus forming streams that flow into a river that is soon a raging torrent. The river cuts through the desert forming a valley with steep cliffs on either side. The fast moving water erodes the underside of the cliffs and soon an entire side of the towering wall of the valley collapses. Dramatic. But nothing to get you on the edge of your seat.

Now consider John and Ruth, a handsome young couple obviously in love, each sitting in a kayak working their way down the raging river together. John knows that Ruth loves the adventure of kayaking. There is a beautiful secluded spot with a spectacular waterfall just a few miles down the river. He plans on a romantic marriage proposal when they stop there for lunch.

They paddle hard as the powerful currents try to spin them around. John is leading carefully picking a path that will take them safely down the river avoiding the underlying rocks. Unknown to him, the entire side of the cliff has become unstable. Cracks are beginning to form along its face. Faster and faster John and Ruth race down the muddy river. Neither of them aware that their lives are about to change forever. Suddenly, without

warning, the cliff face gives way dumping tens of thousands of tons of rock and red clay into the river.

We now have two versions of this story. Both stories ended at the same place with the cliff falling into the river. Which story leaves the reader wanting more?

## **1. A story is about a Hero.**

**Good stories will revolve around a single hero.** This is an important concept as it keeps the story focused and on track. This does not mean that the story shouldn't have secondary characters. Most good stories do. But there needs to be a hero; a person that the audience will bond with, relate to, and desire to see succeed.

We could tell the story of the Israelites having a war with the Philistines. We could talk about all the various characters. This is what is called an "ensemble" cast. A little of King Saul's story, a little of Samuel's story; we could even mix in a little of Goliath the giant's story. But the audience would have a difficult time getting personally involved. Who are listeners supposed to care about? Why is one character's wants and needs more important than another's? But if we rewrite the story from David's perspective, suddenly there is a compelling hero to root for.

There were two movies released in 1998 that were incredibly similar in theme but were produced differently. Both movies focused on a large asteroid striking the earth and causing death and destruction.

"Deep Impact" had an ensemble cast of many characters who each had their own stories. "Armageddon" had a hero, Bruce Willis, who drove the story. While both movies had great casts, amazing visual effects, and a huge budget, one had almost twice as many viewers and thus made twice as much money. Ensemble cast "Deep Impact" grossed \$350 million worldwide while hero driven "Armageddon" grossed \$554 million.

## **2. A story is about a Hero and what he wants.**

**A great story is always about a hero and what he wants. His want drives the story.** Having a worthy "want" is important. This is where the audience typically connects with the hero. One must believe that his want is worthy of the efforts that he will soon have to go through to achieve his "want." In "Deep Impact" the asteroid is heading towards the earth and it is apparent that there will be massive destruction. All the characters want to survive. There are a number of sub stories dealing with coming of age and relationships, but there is not a single driving storyline that grips the audience. The movie "Armageddon" is not really about an asteroid impact. It is about a father, Bruce Willis, and what he wants; his daughter to be happy. This relationship drives the entire human side of the film. There is actually a scene at the beginning of the movie where Bruce Willis comes right out and tells the audience that this is what he wants; his daughter to be happy. When the government approaches him to lead the mission to fly to the asteroid and destroy it, he doesn't want to go. He would rather someone else do it. But, the happiness and safety of his daughter drives him to do what he doesn't

want to do. The audience buys into his reasoning. We want him to get what he wants. We want him to destroy the asteroid and save his daughter.

Returning to our story of David and Goliath, how could we frame this story so that it is about a hero and what he wants? Perhaps we begin the story with David standing alongside his father as his brothers gather up their weapons to go to war against the Philistines. David wants to know why he can't go with them. His brothers tease him about being a runt. He needs to go take care of his sheep. As they exit to war, David tells his father that one day he will go to war and become a great hero. Dad and brothers laugh, and David embarrassed, turns and walks away towards his sheep.

### **3. A story is about a hero who has a want and what he has to go through and overcome, to get what he wants.**

This is the true essence of a great story. The hero having a worthwhile desire, and overcoming incredible odds and difficulties to accomplish and gain what he desires. Isn't this what every human desires; to get what they want, to be a winner, to get the girl, to find the treasure, to defeat the enemy? Tell a story like this and you will capture the imagination of all your listeners.

"Deep Impact" totally missed this crucial element. "Armageddon" nailed it right on the head. Bruce Willis will have to overcome incredible difficulties to rescue his daughter and assure her happiness.

Now we know things are not going well for Saul's army. Goliath comes out each afternoon and taunts them challenging someone to come and fight him in single combat. Meanwhile, David is frustrated and angry. He is out watching his flocks slinging rocks at trees and shrubs as targets. David is not getting what he wants. He feels that he has been left behind. Have you ever had that feeling before? Of course, everyone can relate to the world passing them by. But then David's father calls him and gives him the task to carry food to his brothers at the battlefield. Suddenly David might just get the opportunity he so desires. But you and I both know, that he has a long way to go and numerous things to overcome before he will have his fateful appointment before Goliath on the battlefield.

#### **4. Great heroes are human.**

They have weaknesses, flaws, and what some call, a wound. These things must be overcome in order for the hero to get what he wants. He must grow and change and increase in order to face his challenge and get what he wants. In "Armageddon" Bruce Willis has a wound and a flaw. His failed marriage haunts him and he wants his daughter to have better than he did. Thus when he finds that his daughter has fallen in love with one of his young and irresponsible oil derrick rough necks, he becomes angry. This conflict constantly drives what he does and how he relates to his daughter. Willis believes that the boy is bad for her. But as the story unfolds slowly the father grows past his prejudice to see that his daughter truly loves the young man and that she will not

be happy without him. The hero grows and the audience cheers him on.

Our hero David has arrived at the battlefield. He is the youngest and smallest of the brothers. No one takes him seriously. He hears the taunts of Goliath and then begins to ask what he would earn if he were to kill the giant. Most laugh and mock him, but word gets to King Saul and eventually, to everyone's surprise, David is brought before the king. What was going through David's mind? Is he really so full of faith that he thinks it will be no big deal to face the giant? We do know that he tried on King Saul's armor. But he was too small for it to properly fit him. Will David be able to face his fear of being the baby and actually go out to face the giant?

***A story is about a Hero, what he wants, what he has to do to get what he wants, and how he has to grow past his weaknesses, flaws and wound to finally achieve his desires.***

## The Villain

If every great story must have a hero, then every great story must have a villain! The proper term for the hero is the protagonist and the correct term for the villain is the antagonist. But down here in the trenches it's all about heroes and villains.

**Great heroes require great villains.** If the villain is too weak and too easily defeated, then the hero doesn't have to be a very good hero to get what he wants. Imagine the story of David and Goliath. Why are we all so enamored with this story? David, a wonderful hero with a great "want" faces an adversary that is twice as tall as him and who weighs four times as much! To create an even more imposing villain we discover that Goliath has been trained in warfare from childhood. But even that is not enough! Goliath is covered in Philistine armor. His spear is more like a fence post and the sound of his deep voice causes tremors of terror to overcome the army of the Israelites. Now that is a villain! And our hero? Just a shepherd boy wearing sheep skins and carrying a sling.

### 1. Villains have a want.

All villains have a want that in one way or another is in conflict with what the Hero wants. Perhaps they both want the same thing and only one of them can have it. This is the theme of 90% of all chick flicks. Two guys want the same girl. One is the hero, the other the villain.

Sometimes what the hero and villain want are diametrically opposed. For instance, Goliath wants to force all the Israelites to become Philistine slaves. David

wants his people to remain free. It is impossible for both of them to get what they want.

## **2. Villains are bad.**

Villains must be bad and described in such a way that the audience does not end up connecting to them and cheering them on to defeat the story's hero. This is not good for your story when everyone is rooting for the villain. Yet, on occasion, great actors playing villains "steal" the show. Thus, it is very important to quickly establish that the villain is offensive and that the audience would prefer the villain be dead, in jail, or at the least, utterly defeated. This is usually accomplished by something being revealed about the villain to the audience.

In the opening scene of the Academy Award winning Hollywood Blockbuster "The Gladiator" starring Russell Crowe, a war is about to take place. The Roman Legion led by Russell Crowe is about to defeat the Germanic people in a very bloody battle scene. This type of gore and violence usually turns off the ladies in the theater. But the writers have done their job. A kind, white haired ambassador has been sent by Russell Crowe over to try to make peace with the Germans. Instead of peace, the leader of the Germanic tribes cuts the ambassador's head off and stands on the hillside taunting the Roman's while holding high the head. The audience instantly despises this leader. He has killed an innocent man! He deserves to die! So, when Russell Crowe and his Roman army attacks and kills all the Germanic tribesmen, everyone cheers! It's just a scene later when we meet the real villain of the movie; the emperor's son. The writers did a wonderful job portraying him as an arrogant, condescending, spoiled

child. I don't know of anyone who liked him from his first appearance on screen!

Similarly, even in "chick flicks", the villain is always exposed as being unfaithful, or a liar, or a cheat, or all of the above. A villain must be a villain. And a worthy opponent to boot. Think of all the things that women hate in a man and then put them into the villain of a chick flick.

### **3. Villains have a complete arsenal of weapons to defeat the hero.**

Have you ever noticed that the bad guys always seem to know the hero's weakness? How is that Superman, who is impossible to defeat, always ends up fighting an enemy that somehow or another has managed to get a piece of Kryptonite? The villains always seem to know how to get to the hero. But this is an important part of storytelling. The audience often connects or identifies with the hero's weakness or wound. In the words of Bill Clinton, the audience "feels" the hero's pain. Thus we crave to see the hero overcome his weakness. We desperately want him to grow. Why? Because deep down inside we all would like to grow through our own weakness and flaws. We overcome our own wounds vicariously through the hero. Thus, it is paramount that the villain challenge the hero in his point of weakness forcing him to grow and become the better man.

Did you notice that the audience has a want? We want the hero to grow. We want the hero to succeed. We want the villain to lose. Just like the hero has a want, great story telling evokes the audience to want.

Blockbuster storytelling creates the want and then gives the audience what they want resulting in a happy audience who comes back for more!

#### **4. Villains often have an Achilles' heel weakness.**

The Greek hero Achilles had been held by his heel and dipped into the River Styx which made him invincible. But his heel had never gone under water and thus was his only point of vulnerability. Achilles great fall was the result of a single arrow that struck his heel.

In the case of Goliath, he was arrogant. We know this because of his taunts hurled at the Israelites. We also know this because he apparently was not wearing his helmet when he faced David on the battlefield. Almost all villains have a weakness or flaw that they do not grow through. This weakness often results in their destruction.

Pride, anger, jealousy, deception, betrayal, greed; basically everything that is negative, can be the villain's weakness. Great stories always have a moral embedded in the sub-text of the story. When the villain is defeated because of his pride, the adage "Pride goes before a fall" is the embedded moral.

## The Foundation

To build a great story you have to have a strong foundation for it to stand upon. The genre, premise and setting are each foundation stones.

### The Premise:

**The premise is the one clear cogent thought or principle that is the underlying truth of the story.** The premise should be able to be stated in a single sentence. Its purpose is to keep the story writer or teller on track. Without a clear understanding of the premise it is easy to get distracted and the story to become muddled and without purpose.

The premise of J. R. R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings might be stated this way: friends can accomplish what the individual cannot. The premise of the Bible story of Saul & Samuel can be stated: to obey is better than sacrifice. The premise of the Bible story of Peter and the house of Cornelius: God is not a respecter of people.

One must be careful with the premise. It is not meant to be a club to beat your listeners with, nor is it meant to be a chain to restrict the storyteller, but rather it is the spinal cord that the entire nervous system of the story connects to.

The premise is not typically stated within the story but a well crafted story will leave the audience discovering the premise.

## The Genre:

Action adventure, romance, comedy, crime, thriller, documentary, fantasy, historical, mystery, sci-fi, morality, and religious are just a few of the genres available for today's story tellers. Each genre has general rules and descriptors that help define the story.

Some of these are obvious. **Action-adventure is the number one genre** of motion picture stories produced and is typically about a hero on some sort of quest or adventure where he has to overcome incredible odds to get what he wants. Frodo Baggins becomes the reluctant hero of the Lord of the Rings trilogy. This epic is non-stop action with the hero in constant threat of death, or worse.

**Romance** has become so formulaic that only the setting and the names of the characters seem to change. The love triangle is set within cultural context molded by historic time period, international location, and socio-economic conflicts. But, it always comes down to a woman, a man, and the pursuit of love and happiness.

Most romance stories involve three primary characters, typically two men and a woman (the heroine). One man is her perfect soul-mate and the other is not. Romance stories are heavy on relationships and light on action typically. This is the number one genre among women.

**Documentaries** are heavy on reporting the facts and sequence of events or situations. These are not hero driven stories typically. Ensemble casts which characters that come and go as the events unfold leave the audience caught up in the events rather than the

characters. Documentaries typically are not blockbusters.

**Morality and Religious stories are some of the most difficult to craft** as the author has a message they want to convey to the audience. Often the message is not one that the audience would prefer to hear and thus the story can come across as a sermon which can turn off the very people it is targeting. Morality stories typically end with a twist and the moral is presented at the end. Religious or message stories are best approached as a straight up story that has the message embedded not in the text of the story but rather in the sub-text.

The gay rights movement has been able to leverage this concept to promote their agenda in the USA. Very few people would choose to watch an openly gay movie. Thus a homosexual propaganda movie is not going to accomplish much. But Hollywood writers have written many stories and scripts where the gay agenda is in the sub-text of their stories. Have you ever noticed that on some sit-coms most of the lead characters, although loveable, are extremely dysfunctional? Yet, there is often a secondary character who is the most normal person on the entire show. This is the gay guy who lives in the next apartment who shows up to borrow a cup of flour. He is, or rather his sexual orientation, is not crucial to the storyline. But, because he is normal and accepted by the other characters as being just the guy next door, the message embedded in the subtext of the story is that gays are normal and should be accepted. The writers did not have to preach to get their message out. Thirty years ago homosexual behavior was considered abnormal and deviant. Society has reached a critical moment where after decades of messaging it has

become politically correct to say that homosexuality is normal.

Actor Steven Seagal is considered one of the top 30 action-adventure stars of all time. But he is a passionate ecologist. While his early films were just plain fun, his later films became eco-warrior films with some of them having him lecture the audience! For me this is a total turn off.

This should be a lesson well learned. Tell a great story. Do not preach or lecture. Embed your message in the subtext of your story and it will be widely heard and your message will have impact.

## Story Types

Within all of the genres there are a subset of categories. These are story types. **The coming-of-age story is classic and can be found in every genre.** Think about our story of David and Goliath. Genre would be action-adventure. Story type; coming-of-age. Understanding the story type within the context of the genre is crucial to crafting the story to effectively lead the audience on a satisfying experience. Remember, a story is about a hero, what he wants, and what he has to overcome to achieve what he wants. What was it that David wanted? He wanted to become a man and not be treated like a child anymore. This was his underlying motivation. Delivering Israel from the Philistines was the epic challenge he had to overcome to get what he wanted.

In the story of Esther we find another coming-of-age story where a young Jewish girl finds herself the queen of an empire and must use her influence to save her

people. We follow her from young teen to daring queen. This story could be told as a Romance story where the young girl eventually falls in love with the king, but wicked Haman is set on destroying her and her people.

The story of young King Josiah, Solomon, and even Rehoboam can all be told as coming-of-age stories. The important thing to remember in the coming-of-age story is that the hero must make the transition from child or teen into adult.

Another story type is **the apprentice** which is a variation of the coming-of-age story. In the apprentice we find a master and a student. The student must learn and overcome many challenges to go from apprentice to master. The original Star Wars trilogy was an action-adventure sci-fi coming-of-age story where Luke Skywalker was an apprentice and eventually became a Jedi Master. Elisha was apprentice to Elijah. Peter was apprentice to Jesus. In every apprentice story the hero is faced with decisions that will either make him or break him. These questions are universal ones that the audience can relate to. Luke Skywalker is challenged by his father, Darth Vader, to 'turn to the dark side'. This is the universal challenge that every man faces, whether to resist temptation or give into carnal desires.

**The "unlikely hero" is one of the most common and endearing story types.** David was an unlikely hero. How can a young inexperienced shepherd deliver the people of Israel? Jael, the young Bedouin wife of Heber delivers the Israelites from the oppression of the Canaanite general Sisera with a tent peg. In the blockbuster movie series "Transformers" Shia LaBeouf plays Sam Witwicky, a teenage boy who saves the world. In the famous J. R. R. Tolkien trilogy, The Lord of the Rings, Frodo Baggins is

the most unlikely hero. In all of these stories we watch as these ill equipped and normal individuals are suddenly cast into events that are way beyond their knowledge, abilities, and experience. The audience is drawn into the 'unlikely hero' stories as each of us would hope to someday become a hero in our own right.

## **The Setting**

A story's setting is usually crucial to the story. The setting encompasses the location, the culture and society, the moment in time, and a host of other small seemingly insignificant things like the weather, global events, and fashion.

The three keys to success in the Real Estate business are Location, Location, and Location. This is also true in storytelling. Consider the story of Jesus feeding the 5000. Everyone knows this story. It is a favorite among children's workers around the world. But the location of the story helps understand what drove the events to transpire. Jesus had set up a house in Capernaum as his base of operations for his ministry in Galilee. It was extremely busy with people coming and going constantly. Capernaum was a fishing village on the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee. Now the Sea is actually just a big lake about 7.5 miles wide and 13 miles long. There were a number of villages along its shores or in the hills overlooking it. Fisherman rowed or sailed boats about 8 feet wide and perhaps 30 feet long typically casting nets for schools of small fish that would be salted and sold at market. Down the coast from Capernaum was the city of Tiberius built by King Herod who had imprisoned Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. Now during Jesus' time most of the villages were on the north, west and south shores of the Sea of Galilee.

There are some other details about the setting we should know. It is the time of Jesus, 2000 years ago. People didn't have cars but rather walked. Kings with great arbitrary power ruled during this time. Powerful forces vied for the minds of men where religions clashed with national identity. So what really happen in the story of Jesus feeding the 5000?

Jesus and his disciples were in their base of operations in Capernaum. Peter and John's fishing boat was pulled up on the bank of the Sea. It was early in the morning when the disciples of John the Baptist showed up. They had not slept the night before. John the Baptist had been beheaded by King Herod in Tiberius during a party the previous night. His disciples had recovered his body and buried it. Then, with heavy hearts, had walked three hours up the coast to Capernaum to find Jesus.

The news of John's death deeply moved Jesus. John was his cousin, but perhaps of even greater significance, John was to be the very last prophet of the Old Covenant. Suddenly the busy chaos and commotion of his home became too much and Jesus decided he needed to get away and pray. Without making any significant preparations, he called to his disciples and they went to the shore, boarded Peter's fishing boat, and began to row the five miles to the opposite shore to a place in the wilderness to be alone to pray. It would take 2-3 hours to row this distance. But they had been noticed leaving.

People on the bank called out to each other and began to follow the progress of the boat by walking along the shore. As they walked the crowd grew as people came down out of the villages and joined the mob. While the disciples would row 5 miles, the villagers would have to walk 6-7. The boat would only be about 2 miles off

shore at its greatest distance so the crowd could easily follow it. Now no one had planned a day's walk or adventure. It was all impromptu. Thus when Jesus reached the other side the crowd was waiting for him and although he was in deep sorrow, he ministered to them and taught them. Of course, we now get to the crux of the story. They are in the wilderness, without food, with no villages nearby, and over 5000 people very hungry.

Jesus is about to perform a miracle. He will take a small boy's lunch and feed them all. What was in his lunch? Five loaves of bread? Well, sort of. Actually the loaves were not much more than large dinner rolls. And the two fish were probably the sort that was typical among the villages; small thin gutted and salted, head and fins included!

Setting in this story is crucial to understanding it. We could even back the story up a bit and include the beheading of John the Baptist. Including many of the time period and cultural issues helps the audience understand what took place at the dinner party that led to John's beheading.

Storytellers dance along a razor sharp cliff. Too little setting and the story evolves without a backdrop and the details of the events can be confusing. Too many details can bog the story down sapping its energy and boring the audience.

The first Star Trek movie opened with an excessively long sequence of shots showing the new Starship Enterprise. Trekkies loved it. But the regular audience quickly became bored for there was too much information without any context or story driven need.

## Hollywood Formula ONE: The Action Curve

Every great story follows a path that leads to success. Stories that meander tend to get lost and never meet their true potential. There are six definitive parts to a great story: The Hook, Introduction, Establishing the Conflict, Building the Plot, Climax, and Resolve.

### The Hook

Hollywood has discovered that it is really easy to lose an audience; sometimes before you even have them! Both TV and film have adopted a powerful tool to grip the audience and suck them in before they have a chance to tune out. This is called the Hook. **The idea is to "hook" your audience from the very first scene.** We find this used extensively in TV dramas. "Law and Order" has perfected the Hook. They show the first scene, typically the murder, before the title and opening credits are played. The assumption is that if you can capture your audience's attention during the commercial break before they have a chance to switch channels then they will stay tuned for the rest of the show. Many films also start with very dramatic scenes. The action sequences do not necessarily introduce the hero of the story. Sometimes they merely set up the situation or introduce the villain. One thing is for sure, the Hook is often mission critical for the story teller. It is like the first paragraph of a novel. Many authors labor for weeks trying to get the first line or paragraph perfect.

**The Hook is very dramatic and has high intensity or energy.** It is like a sample taste or a tease of what is to come. Walking into a restaurant and smelling an intense and wonderful aroma is a hook. You can barely wait to

sit down and eat. Even if you have to wait 15 minutes to get a seat you never consider leaving because the smell has whet your appetite and you know the best is yet to come. So it is with an intense, well written and delivered hook. It's a taste leaving the audience wanting more and they will sit on the edge of their seats waiting the big payoff.

## **The Introduction**

Every great story must have a thorough introduction. When did this story take place? Where is it taking place? Is the story supposed to be now, 20 years in the past, or during the days of the Roman Empire? Is our story taking place in the city? Or perhaps it is starting on a farm at the edge of the woods. Is it spring, summer, fall or during the freezing cold of winter? All of these aspects of setting help set the audience at ease. It allows them to fill in the blanks of the story with their own imagination. It eases the burden of the story teller and allows him to concentrate on the action of the story as opposed to describing the scenery.

**During the introduction we typically meet the hero and through a series of events come to like him and want him to succeed.** It is very important that the hero be introduced early. The audience is already on board, the hook has done its job, now it is time to figure out what this story is about and who are the main characters. Remember, unless the story is a sequel, this is often the very first time that the audience will meet your hero. There must be intentionality in every aspect of our first meeting with him. Who is he? What does he do? Is he liked or is he a jerk? Why should I care about this character? What is there about him that I can relate to?

**A good story teller will use empathetic devices to help connect the hero to the audience.** In film making these are often visual clues that go unspoken. The opening scene of the Academy Award winning film, "Gladiator", is a masterpiece. In this film the Hook is merged with the Introduction. The Roman legion lines the valley. There are forest to either side. The men are preparing for battle. Many look tired. Then the great general enters. Suddenly the men snap to and show him respect. He nods and pauses as he walks along recognizing his men. It is obvious from their reactions that they like him. Why is this important? If the common warrior likes him, then he should be an okay guy, even if he is a general! As he passes by one rather aristocratic officer he has to stop and put the man in his place. Again, the audience loves this. A hero who is a man of the people who will not give into pressure from his peers. Finally, a large German Shepherd dog runs up and follows him. It doesn't get any better than this, if he is loved by a dog then he HAS to be alright! It is crucial that the audience connect with this hero immediately as he is about to fight a battle with the Germanic tribes and hack and slash many people to their deaths. While the male part of the audience may love the gruesome gore, the female half of the audience will not be so generous. Hence, it is imperative that the audience connects with the hero before the blood begins to flow.

Just as empathetic devices have been used to connect the audience to the hero, negative-empathetic devices can be used to turn the audience against the Germanic tribal leader whom the hero is about to kill in an exciting, punishing, and gory opening scene, i.e. The Hook.

**In the Introduction we should be introduced to what it is the hero wants.** It is very important that you get to

the want early in your story. It helps the audience understand why the hero is doing what he is doing. In the opening scene of the Gladiator the hero, Maximus, is asked what is it he will do when this last battle is won? Maximus clearly states what he wants: to be with his wife and son. He will repeat this a number of times throughout the film keeping the audience in tune with what is driving him. His want never changes from the opening scene to resolve.

## **Establishing the Conflict**

Stories without a clear conflict tend to meander towards a climax that the audience is not so sure it should care about. Remember, a story is about a hero, what he wants, and what he has to overcome to achieve what he wants. If there is no conflict or resistance to the hero, then what is the point? If the hero wants to win the state basketball championship and his team wins every game virtually uncontested, then although the hero gets what he wants, it wasn't very exciting getting there. Villains add conflict and challenge the hero to grow and overcome insurmountable obstacles to get what he wants.

**Villains often make their first appearance towards the end of the introduction.** Sometimes there is a face to face confrontation. In other situations the hero and villain are in different locations but heading on a path to collision. In either case it is important to establish that there is a conflict. It will not be easy for the hero to get what he wants. In some cases his want will be virtually impossible and he will need help to achieve it.

The bottom line is that very quickly the audience must be Hooked, Introduced to the setting, the Hero and his

want, and then a Conflict must be established. All of this typically happens within the first 5-10 minutes of a film. For short stories this must happen within the first minute or two.

## **Developing the Plot**

It is now time to get down to business and develop or "tell" the story. From the Establishment of the Conflict the story begins to mount up a head of steam as the hero faces various challenges in his quest to get what he wants. Most spoken stories are limited to one or maybe two challenges that lead to the climax of the story.

The challenges that lie in the path of the hero take on many forms. The most common is from the villain which typically is the last and culminating challenge of the story. But many stories have sub challenges that can be resistance from family, friends, geography, or weather. In the story of David and Goliath, David faces numerous challenges before he faces the giant. First he is confined to the hillside to watch over the sheep while his brothers go off to war. This is overcome when his father sends him to the battle carrying food for his brothers. But once he makes it to the battle field how does he transition from messenger to warrior? His own brothers laugh and scoff at him. Finally he overcomes this by pressing on with his loud outlandish requests for information on what the person would earn as a reward for defeating the giant. Each of these must be overcome before he has his shot at taking out the giant. In the telling of a short story each of these challenges build upon the previous to build the energy of the story as it races forward to the climax. In longer format stories like movies and novels, each challenge will be more structured with its own Hook, Intro, Conflict

Establishment, Plot Building, Climax, and Resolve. The Resolve is where the audience will catch its breath as the story suddenly lurches forward into the next challenge.

The critical point in developing the plot is to build energy and tension as you push towards the Climax.

## **The Climax**

**The Climax is that magic moment when the hero gets what he wants and the audience jumps up out of their seats cheering!** Or at least that is what all story tellers hope for. It is very important that the hero gets what he wants. The audience first connected with the hero during the introduction and then discovered his want. Remember the hero's want drives the story. The audience has been rooting for the hero to get what he wants from almost the beginning of the story. If you make it all the way through the story and the hero ends up not getting what he wants then the audience will feel short changed and will unlikely come back to hear your next story.

Now there are a few exceptions to this rule. As the character grows and develops in the story his original want might be replaced with a more mature want. There was a lonely treasure hunter who lived only to find the next treasure. He discovers a map and sets out to find the treasure. Along the way he acquires a lovely assistant who falls in love with him, but he, being consumed with his treasure hunting, is oblivious. As the story develops his feelings for her grow. They finally make it to the cave where the final key to acquiring the treasure lies. With this key the hero will be able to finally get what he wants. But just as he is about to grasp the key there is an earthquake and the cave begins

to collapse. His assistant is trapped under a stone and he is faced with a decision: save the girl or get the key. Suddenly he realizes that he wants the girl much more than the key and turning his back on the key he rescues the girl. In this example the hero gets the very thing he needed yet didn't know at the beginning of the story that she was what he wanted. Of course the final scene of this story, the Resolve, ties up the loose ends as we find the hero with his new girl walking out of the library with a new treasure map in hand setting off on their next adventure. This story's premise: treasure is temporal, but relationships, true love, are eternal.

**Sometimes the hero must die in order to get what they want.** In the Gladiator Maximus' wife and son are murdered, yet this was his want, to be with them. Throughout the film he is driven by only one thing, returning Rome to the people so that he could fulfill his promise to the Emperor, and then be reunited with his wife and son. But there is no life or joy in his battle with the Emperor. Finally, he faces off with the evil Emperor in a battle to the death. Overcoming a crippling stab wound, and facing a determined foe, Maximus kills the villain and then collapses in the arena of the Coliseum. His childhood sweetheart rushes out to him, begging him not to die but to stay with her and together they will create a new Rome and new lives together. Suddenly she realizes that this is not what he wants and she tells him to go to them. And with that we find Maximus walking through wheat fields with an open gate before him and there, walking down the trail towards the gate, is his wife and son. Thus, in death, the hero finally gets what he wants. And the audience is crying and booing. The hero is dead and we are happy for him!

Likewise in the movie Armageddon, Bruce Willis and his daughter's boyfriend are on an asteroid racing towards the earth. They have drilled a tunnel into the core of the asteroid and sent a thermonuclear warhead into the tunnel. Its explosion will destroy the asteroid and save the earth. But there is a problem. The detonator is broken. Someone will have to remain behind to manually set off the nuke. They draw straws and the boyfriend draws the wrong straw. He will have to die so that the world will be saved. But Willis has grown through the film and has come to accept that his daughter loves the boy and that he is critical to her future happiness. So Willis sabotages the boy's spacesuit and then takes his place. He will stay behind to detonate the nuke to save the earth, and his daughter. The boyfriend and the team return to earth. Willis gets what he wants by assuring his daughter's happiness by seeing that her boyfriend makes it home. And the earth is saved, even at the cost of his own life.

**This concept of the hero getting what he wants by losing his own life is played out in the life of Jesus.** He wants to redeem man from his sin. This is only possible if he, God's sacrificial lamb, dies in mankind's place.

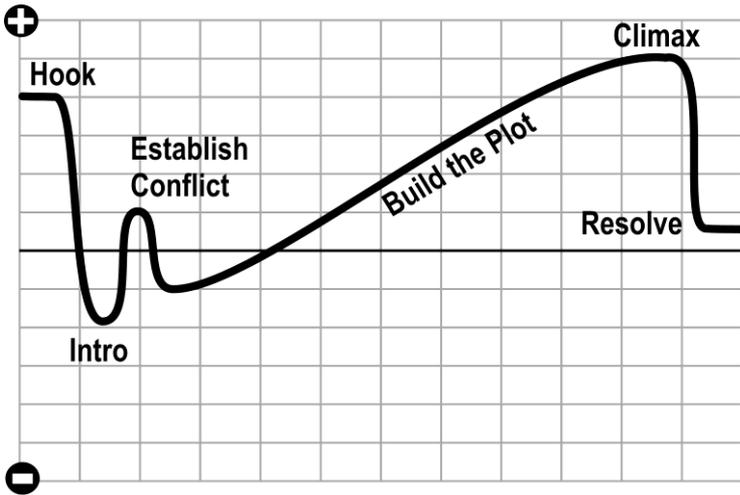
## **The Resolve**

**The Resolve is the shortest part of the story. It is where the loose ends are tied up leaving the audience satisfied.** It's like having a cup of coffee or desert after a wonderful meal. In the first Indiana Jones movie, Raiders of the Lost Ark, Indiana Jones gets what he wants. He finds the lost Ark of the Covenant and through an amazing journey recovers it from the villain. The last scene of the movie has Indy and Miriam leaving the Federal building complaining that they are not being

told what has happened to the Ark. The very last shot of the movie shows a crate being placed in a massive government warehouse. This is important since Indy Jones supposedly recovered the Ark during WWII, we the audience, would be left wondering where it was at today. But the storytellers had an answer that is revealed in the Resolve. The storyteller wants the audience leaving satisfied and fulfilled. Like a good meal, they will be back for more.

We also find this to be true in the resolve of the movie Armageddon. The hero is dead but the boyfriend has been reunited with the daughter. The last scene of the movie is their wedding. The daughter is happy, and Willis is there as a photograph, his want fulfilled, as his daughter's life becomes complete through her marriage. The audience has a good cry and is totally satisfied as they leave the theatre.

Just as the ocean releases its energy upon the shore in a rhythmic ebb and flow, a good story manages its energy to take the audience on a rollercoaster ride culminating in an exciting Climax. The chart below plots this energy through the 6 phases of a story.



The Hook should be high energy. This could be fast moving action or a dark and intense situation. Either way, it is crucial to have the energy dialed way up to slap the audience and get their attention.

During the Introduction the energy drops dramatically. There is a lot of ground to cover, people to meet and get to know, and often cultural or period principles that have to be slipped into the story so that it will make sense as the plot unfolds.

As the villain is introduced and the Conflict established the energy or intensity rises again. Imagine two teens hurling insults at each other with the final outcome a promise to meet after school and settle the matter. Although there is not a lot of action per se, the moment is wrought with energy and tension. Thus our energy curve has a noticeable and dramatic uptick as the conflict is set.

Now, it is time to Build the plot. Just as our two students walk away from each and, surrounded by their friends,

make their way towards the first class period of the day, the energy suddenly drops and the audience gives a quick sigh of relief. Building the plot is like building a brick wall. You stack the bricks one upon the next. Slowly but surely the wall becomes higher and higher, reaching a point we are all sure will collapse. Our teenagers go through the day with the after school fight looming overhead. Friends offer advice. Our hero is taught a secret fighting move that, if he can remember it, might just give him the advantage he needs. The lunchroom is fraught with danger. Our hero and the villain meet briefly and it looks like the fight will break out in the middle of the serving line. But cool heads prevail and friends pull the combatants away from each other. The villain sneers and threatens to kill our hero. The clock slowly makes its way from hour to hour punctuated by the class bell announcing that the fight is only minutes away. Along the way we discover things about our hero and the villain. We discover why the villain is such a bully and we also discover why our hero has been sucked into this conflict. We find that our hero is all heart but has little skill at fighting. An early childhood family conflict has scarred him and left him incapable of standing up to bullies. Now, as he struggles to confront his fears and overcome the demons from his childhood, the moment of truth has arrived.

The plot must build and continue to build in order for there to be sufficient energy for the climax to be satisfactory.

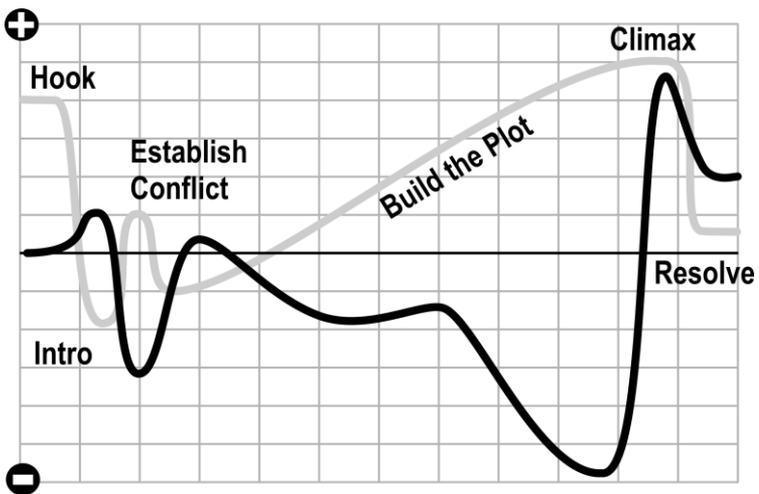
Upon the hero getting what he wants, the story has reached its climax, and as far as the audience is concerned, the sooner it is wrapped up the better. Thus the Resolve is very short and the energy levels typically very mild. Perhaps one of the longest resolves every

written or produced is the end of the Lord of the Rings movie trilogy. It just seems to go on and on and while it does a great job of tying up the loose ends and making all of its fans happy that there is still more movie even though we are way past the climax, the reality is that long resolves become anti-climatic and can leave the audience with an unpleasant aftertaste.

## Hollywood Formula TWO: The Emotion Curve

Just as the Energy Curve drives the story and keeps it moving forward to a satisfying and intense Climax, **the Emotion Curve is what determines a blockbuster.** You can craft your story and hit all the marks of the Energy Curve and have a good story. But our intent is not just a good story, but a Hollywood Blockbuster story.

The Emotion Curve is measured in either positive or negative feelings of well being that are experienced vicariously through the life and actions of the hero. Whereas the Action Curve is all about energy, action, and movement, the Emotion Curve is all about what you the audience is feeling inside.

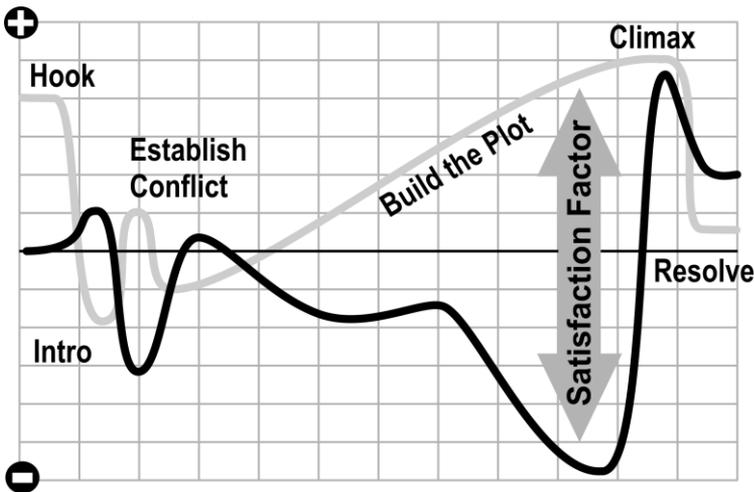


Remember the Emotion Curve is how we perceive the wellbeing of the hero. Thus, at the hook we typically don't know who the hero is therefore we can't feel one way or another about him. The Emotion Curve is thus neutral. But during the intro we meet the hero and if

the story teller does his job we fall in love with the hero; thus our Emotion Curve swings very positive. But things can't stay that way for long. As the conflict is established the audience senses danger and their Emotion Curve drops quickly. As the hero feels the negative vibe, so does the audience.

Now things slowly spiral out of control in a ever downward spin. There will be moments when the curve comes up to the surface to catch its breath, but down it must go if the story is going to be a success. Hollywood Script Doctor Bart Gavigan states it this way: **"You must take the hero to the end of the line."** We must drag him down to the depths of despair. The audience must sense his plight and realize disaster or death is but moments away. This leads us to the single greatest rule in telling blockbuster stories:

**The greater the distance between the Energy Curve and the Emotion curve at the Climax, the more rewarding and powerful the story.**



This is what we call the "satisfaction factor." Imagine our hero is a high school basketball player. He has a dream of his small country high school winning the state championship. His teammates are all undersized but they make up for size with heart. There will be a lot of growth and many challenges to overcome in order to reach the state finals. Now, it has come down to one final game. Will the hero get what he wants?

In version 1 his team is really psyched up and they go out and in the first quarter run up a 30 point lead. They never look back but go on to easily win the state championship and the hero gets what he wants.

In version 2 the first quarter is tightly contested. It is only because of our hero's leadership that the team is able to stay within 3 points. But then it happens. One of the opposing players, the villain, intentionally elbows our hero in the ribs sending him to the floor in extreme pain. He is examined by a courtside physician who declares that he has broken ribs and should sit out the rest of the game. His team fights valiantly, but without him on the court they are down by 12 at half-time. Things go from bad to worse in the third quarter, down by 23. He can't stand it anymore and has the doctor tape his ribs so he can play the fourth quarter. With the hero back on the court the team begins to play again and as the minutes tick by the hero's team begins a comeback. But it looks like it is going to be too little too late. With only a minute on the clock they are down by 7. The villain is constantly throwing elbows at the hero. His team manages to make up 4 of the points but there are only 3 seconds left on the clock as the opposing team throws the ball into play. Our hero steals the ball and dribbles towards his end of the court, only to be met by the villain. The hero stops short of the three point

and as he goes up to shoot the villain smashes him in the ribs with a vicious forearm. The end of game siren blares as the ref's whistle blows and our hero crumples to the floor. The ball bangs against the rim and then off of the back board finally hanging on the rim at the most critical point of balance. Finally, it gives into gravity and falls through the hoop tying the game. The score is tied. Our hero is helped to his feet but he can't stand erect. He has been fouled and will get one additional shot. The game is tied, but it is obvious that he is through and without him on the court his team will lose in overtime. Slowly he hobbles to the foul line where the ref bounces the ball over to him. This will be the last shot of regulation time. The villain is leering from one side of the court. He can taste the victory they will get in overtime. Our hero, unable to stand erect, bounces the ball a time or two and tries to pull the ball up into a shooting position, but the pain is too great. He looks at his teammates. There is such hope in their eyes but he is dizzy with pain. Then he has a flashback to his childhood and his dad teaching him in the backyard to shoot hoops. Closing his eyes, he bounces the ball three times and as the ball comes up to his hands on the third bounce, with one fluid motion he guides the ball upward with an underhand motion. The entire crowd follows the ball upward as it rises in a lazy arc and slowly begins its descent. And then, without touching the rim, it falls through the net and his team has won the state championship!

Which story is more dramatic? **Take your hero to the end of the line.** In our basket ball story the hero can barely stand up let alone shoot a basket. But he overcomes insurmountable obstacles and challenges to get what he wants. That is the Satisfaction Factor.

## **Empathetic Devices**

**Great story tellers leverage empathetic devices to quickly bond their audience to the hero and to create tension with the villain.**

How can we make the audience love our hero? What are some of the things that you love in other people? Loyalty, kindness, honesty, bravery, politeness, honor; well you get the idea. But we just can't come right out and say that our hero is a wonderful guy and wouldn't it be great to cheer for him the rest of the story? No, we have to reveal his personality to the audience in such a way that they draw their own conclusions based upon the events of the story. There are a number of classic empathetic devices that are used over and over and over. How many times have you heard of the weak nerd character trying to stop a bully from pounding someone weaker than them? In one form or another this always plays well to the audience. We eat this up. Why? Because most of us were bullied at one time or another in our childhood or we saw someone bullied and wished we had done something about it.

**Everyone loves an underdog.** Everyone roots for someone who has been wronged, to have it made right. People who have lost parents or siblings immediately get the benefit of the doubt. Batman; his parents murdered. Spiderman; an orphan who's uncle is murdered. Superman; orphaned and sent to earth. Indiana Jones; his mother dead and estranged from his father. Star Wars, Luke Skywalker an apparent orphan, Princess Leia becomes an orphan.

**People who are kind to animals are assumed to be good people.** Add to this people who animals are

naturally drawn to tell us that the guy must be okay because the dog likes him.

In one of the opening scenes of a Rambo movie we find a Vietnam war veteran living on the streets. In just a few scenes he will be savaging the town bringing vengeance down upon the bad guys so it is pretty important that the writer connects him to the audience real fast. Rambo sits down on the edge of the street with a sandwich in his hand. A old pitiful looking stray dog approaches him and begs. Rambo takes his own sandwich and feeds the dog. It is at that moment that the entire audience gives a collective sigh and accepts him as a good guy.

**All villains should be hated, despised, and deserving of everything they get in the end.** It is important that the audience is cheering for the hero and booing the villain. When the villain is too sympathetic you run the risk of the audience feeling sorry for him when he is defeated at the climax. The audience can actually turn on the hero and now you have a real mess on your hand. This is why Hollywood Blockbuster films usually have very bad villains.

**Villains often do something nefarious in their opening scene.** This nefarious act is an empathetic device designed to make the audience hate or despise the villain. What are some of things a villain might do that are so heinous that no one could identify with them? Murdering an innocent person is a favorite. Murder a child or a mother is even better, or worse, depending on how you look at it. Being rude, condescending, lying, or unfaithful are all good tools. In chick flicks the villain has almost always had sex with the heroine's best friend. There is no one perfect empathetic device for every

villain. Each story has its own needs and wants and the villain has to be treated in a realistic manner appropriate for the story. But, the story teller must keep in mind the principle of discovering some empathetic device to help the audience not connect with the villain.

## **Analyzing a Bible Story**

Our first step in understanding a Bible story is to read everything we can relating to the story. In the case of "Jesus' baptism" through "His wilderness temptation" we find the story told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke with additional insights in John. Each version is slightly different. Within the differences we find richness and detail.

### **1. Who is the Hero?**

Jesus.

### **2. What does he want?**

Jesus wants to be obedient to his Father, God. We read in Matthew 3:15 that Jesus went to the Jordan river to be baptized by John. Why did he do this? As John himself would say, "I have need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?" But Jesus is compelled to do the right thing. He answers that it is good to allow it, for the sake of doing all things right. This is what drives Jesus. To do that which is right, i.e. in obedience to his Father.

### **3. What is his wound?**

Jesus is driven by an underlying wound. John 1:1-3 and Colossians 1:16,17 tells us that He is architect and creator of the universe and all that is within it including mankind. Jesus carries the wound that his creation has rejected the Father and has pursued Satan. This will

weigh heavily upon his heart and color everything he does and says.

#### **4. What is Jesus' weakness?**

Is it even possible for Jesus to have a weakness? Does Jesus have a kryptonite? 2 Corinthians 13:4 alludes to his core weakness. Jesus is both 100% God, and 100% man (his weakness). Philippians 2:5-8 paints an interesting picture of Jesus' weakness.

*" Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."*

As a human Jesus is plagued by all the temptations common to mankind including needing to eat, drink, and sleep. Jesus would feel emotions like anger, joy, and sorrow. He would weary and finally would bleed and die. Jesus, the creator of the universe has chosen to become weak for the sake of the world.

#### **5. The Villain**

This is easy. Satan is the villain. Ok, we can all agree that he is the sum of all evil and that alone is reason

enough for why Satan is going to tempt Jesus. But that leaves us with a very shallow villain. What is his real motivation? Why does Satan so hate Jesus? Why is Satan trying to destroy him? It could go back to the most embarrassing day in Satan's life when according to Ezekiel 28:16 he was fired from his job in God's throne room as a cherubim who flew above the throne of God. Or more likely it can be traced back to a prophecy uttered by God himself in Genesis 3:15 where God said that one day a son of Eve's would crush his head. Perhaps this prophecy had grown into a Satanic paranoia.

From this we began to understand the villain. Additionally this understanding allows us to add scripturally accurate color to our story.

## **6. What is the premise?**

This is the interesting part of the story for every pastor as we try to dig out the underlying truth that can be used to guide our lives. Every story can hide multiple truths which can be drawn from it. This is one of the biggest risks that every story faces. Some are tempted to mix two or three truths together in the telling of the story and the end result is usually that the audience goes away confused with nothing.

Most Bible stories have a key verse or two that when you discover them the story and the premise suddenly come into context.

In Matthew 3:16 we find that Jesus first receives the Holy Spirit: "*After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him,*"

Then in Luke 4:1 we find that Jesus is full of the Spirit and being led by the Spirit: "*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness.*"

Finally, in Luke 4:14 we find Jesus in the power of the Spirit: "*And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit*"

What can be drawn from these verses? In verse 1 Jesus is full of the Spirit and being led by the Spirit and then suddenly in verse 14 Jesus is now full of the power of the Spirit! What happened between verse 1 and verse 14? The answer is obvious and simple. Jesus went through temptation and overcame Satan by the Word of God. What was it about this overcoming that made the difference in Jesus? The Bible says that Jesus was our example thus he too had to be proved before he could be empowered. It is like the old gunsmiths who would double load a rifle barrel and fire it to prove that it could withstand the pressure and power of gunpowder.

This leads us to our premise: ***Those whom God would use must first be tested and proved.***

## 7. The Setting

Our story begins at the Jordan river and then moves to the wilderness beyond Jordan. The Jordan river is fed all year round by the Sea of Galilee and a few rivers. Seasonal rain runoff from all the surrounding countryside adds much volume causing the river to rise rapidly. Although the Jordan valley is flat and green with foliage, to the east there are many barren hills with dry riverbeds. These dry river beds will play a crucial role in part of the story. The seasonal rains causing these dry river beds to suddenly become rushing torrents dragging sand and soil down to the Jordan causes it to run brown. But the rushing water and soil slowly wears down the heavier softball size rocks smoothing them into round rocks about the same size, shape, and color of a typical Jewish loaf of bread. This will be used in Satan's first temptation of Christ.

Part of the setting is understanding the cultural backdrop in which the story is told. Satan is going to take Jesus to the top of the Temple and challenge him to throw himself off in order to reveal him Messiah to the Jewish Scribes and Pharisees below. Understanding that the Pharisees were the lawyers of the day who studied the Old Testament and had analyzed it down to the smallest detail is critical. The Pharisees would have to be convinced in some spectacular manner if they were ever to be convinced at all. Satan's use of scripture was specifically designed to leverage this cultural dilemma that Jesus faced.

## **Assembling the Story**

Now that we have done a quick analysis of the story and its primary components it is necessary to assemble the story according to our Hollywood Blockbuster method.

### **1. The Hook**

The carpenter's work bench was clean. No sawdust or wood shavings lay about the floor as well. All the tools that had faithfully served him had been put away for the last time. The master carpenter and builder would never again return to his shop. Instead his footsteps led him from Nazareth in Galilee down to the Jordan River to a divine appointment with his cousin, John the Baptist.

We can only imagine what was going through Jesus' mind as he walked along the Jordan. Most of the first 30 years of his life had been spent in Nazareth consumed with studying God's Word, praying, and building things made of wood. In many ways he was no different than any other young man of Nazareth. He knew that he had a unique relationship and calling with God. But his life had been simple without miracles or supernatural powers.

But all of that was about to change.

### **2. The Introduction**

Turning 30 years old is significant in the lives of Jewish men. It is widely accepted as the age at which a man can become a leader. In Genesis 41:46 we find that Joseph

was 30 years old when he stood before Pharaoh and took over the responsibility of ruling Egypt. In the Code of Jewish Law we find that a man should be at least 30 years old to serve as the cantor to lead services during High Holidays. Jesus is now 30. He is no longer to be perceived as a young man, but now is acceptable among his fellow Jews as a leader.

In John 1:38 we find that John was baptizing near a village called Bethany which was on the east side of the Jordan. Bethany is found at the mouth of Wadi Kharrar, a dry riverbed that normally has water in it only during the rainy season. Wadi Kharrar is famous as the place where the Prophet Elijah was taken up into heaven. 400 years later the Prophet Malachi would prophecy that Elijah would return before the Messiah would come. Now to the very place that Elijah ascended into heaven, we find the prophet who Jesus would equate to Elijah, baptizing and calling people to repentance.

### **3. Establishing the Conflict**

The trip from Nazareth to Wadi Kharrar would take Jesus almost a week to walk. Each step of the 80 plus mile trip brought him one step closer to his ministry and destiny. Scripture reveals to us what drove him. He wanted to obey his Father and fulfill God's plan for his life. Jesus knew from prophecy what was laying before him and each step drew him closer.

Jesus was not the only one who knew that everything was about to change. Satan sensed that his time to

destroy his mortal enemy had come as well. A Naggging fear had plagued him since God had pronounced judgment upon Adam and Eve eons ago. For it had been promised that one of Eve's descendents would crush Satan's head. When Jesus had been born Satan had tried to kill him through the efforts of King Herod who had all the babies of Bethlehem murdered. But God had warned Joseph in a dream and they had escaped to Egypt. Satan would have to be more subtle this time. He had waited 30 years for this chance and had carefully been planning his attack.

#### **4. Develop the Plot**

When Jesus arrived at Wadi Kharrar John was down in a pool of water baptizing people. Jesus descended into the water and approached his cousin.

John looked up at Jesus and suddenly recognized him. But it wasn't his cousin Jesus that he saw, but something much greater. In that moment, into the mind of the prophet, was revealed who stood before him. Not a man. Not a relative. But the Christ. John had been preaching repentance for years. He had been proclaiming that one was coming whom was greater than he. And now, standing before him, waiting to be baptized, was that very man.

" I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" John said.

A more arrogant or self driven man might have agreed with John and baptized him. But Jesus was not pursuing his own will, but rather that of his Father. "Permit *it* at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus said. And with that, the greater was baptized by the lesser. John lowered Jesus into the water and as he came up suddenly the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and landing upon him. Then a voice called out of the heavens saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!"

Jesus ascended out of the pool of water and climbed the hillside of the Wadi. 22 miles to the west lay Jerusalem and his destiny. But Jesus was full of the Spirit of God and was compelled by the Spirit to turn east towards the wastelands. And so, as Luke 4:1 says: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness."

We can only imagine that this was not what Jesus had expected. Instead of beginning his ministry, the Spirit has led him out to the wilderness where for 40 days he has fasted. At the end of those days, Luke 4:2 says that he became hungry. Everyone who has ever fasted more than a few days knows that somewhere around the third day your hunger leaves you. You can continue going without food and not being in any danger of starvation for many days. But when your hunger returns it is a sign that you are beginning to starve to death. If you don't eat soon your body will begin to shut down and you will

die. Jesus has reached this point. He is at his physically weakest point.

Satan has been waiting for this moment. He had heard God's proclamation that Jesus was his Son. It was like a gauntlet thrown down at his feet. It was game on and Satan was ready. He would not be rash or foolish this time. Patience and precise attacks would achieve more than careless manipulation of his pawns.

Satan had watched Jesus ascend up into the wilderness. But he was no fool. He sensed that Jesus was strong and ready for a fight. Satan knew that there was a connection between a man's physical strength and their spiritual health. When one became weak it usually affected the other. For 40 days Satan dogged Jesus' path patiently waiting for the most opportune moment to attack. He watched men starve to death before and now he recognized the symptoms in Jesus. It was time to strike!

Jesus had been walking along the dry riverbed of a wadi. He was feeling very weak. When he sat down to rest for a moment he suddenly found that he was no longer alone. There standing before him was Satan. The two of them locked eyes for a moment. They both knew who the other was. Jesus was tempted to just rebuke him and be done with him. But the Spirit inside him restrained him and he would not lash out of his own will, but would be led by God and him only.

Satan squatted down in the dry riverbed and picked up a round river rock. The rock had been worn smooth by countless spring rains that had filled the wadi as the water had rushed down towards the Jordan. Subtle shades of brown speckled its surface. Satan looked into the eyes of Jesus and offered him the rock saying, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

Jesus glanced down at the smooth rock. It looked exactly like one of the fresh baked loaves of bread that could be purchased in any village of Israel. His stomach rumbled at the thought. He knew that he had the power of the Spirit to do such a thing. He also knew that he had the authority as the Son of God to turn the stone into bread. But he had chosen to submit himself to the authority of the Father. He would only be led by the Spirit, not by his human flesh.

Jesus looked from the stone up into the eyes of Satan and said, "It is written, 'man shall not live on bread alone.'"

A sudden look of disappointment crossed Satan's face as he stood and tossed the rock back onto the riverbed. Looking towards the top of the wadi he turned to Jesus and with a twist of his head invited the Christ to follow up the embankment.

Jesus sat for a moment not wanting to follow Satan anywhere, but the Spirit compelled him to follow and Jesus pulled his way up the rocky embankment to stand beside his enemy.

Satan stood looking off into the distance. He knew the Bible better than any Jewish Rabbi, Pharisee, or Scribe. It was clearly promised that the Messiah would one day rule over all the earth. But to get there would not be easy or pretty. Jesus topped the ridge and went over to stand beside him. Satan turned to Jesus and in one moment revealed to him all the kingdoms of the world.

"I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish." Satan said. "Therefore if You worship before me, it shall all be Yours."

Jesus also knew the Bible. The reality of the prophecies concerning the Messiah had been committed to memory. He knew that there were two sets of prophecies. One set spoke all of the glorious days when the Messiah would sit upon his throne and rule over all the earth. But there was another set of prophecies that were dark and painful. The Messiah would first be the suffering servant. The words of Isaiah the prophet, chapter 53;3-5 haunted him, saying;

" He was despised and forsaken of men,  
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;  
And like one from whom men hide their face  
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

<sup>4</sup> Surely our griefs He Himself bore,  
And our sorrows He carried;  
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,  
Smitten of God, and afflicted.

<sup>5</sup> But He was pierced through for our transgressions,  
He was crushed for our iniquities;

The chastening for our well-being *fell* upon Him,  
And by His scourging we are healed."

Jesus understood what Satan was offering him; a short cut. Skip the suffering servant and move right on to ruling over the earth. But it would come with a price. He would have to reject the Lordship of his Father and submit himself to Satan. Jesus turned and faced Satan as he said, "It is written, 'YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD AND SERVE HIM ONLY.'"

## 5. The Climax

Satan then led Jesus to Jerusalem and had him stand on the pinnacle of the Temple. This would be his most subtle attack. He would inspire Jesus to accomplish that which the prophets had prophesied, without any strings attached.

Jesus could see hundreds and hundreds of people in the Temple courtyards below. Pharisees and Sadducees were intermixed in the crowd. The High Priest himself was also present. All the people who needed to recognize him as God's Messiah were in the courtyard below him. Jesus knew that most of them would never accept him and it would be their rejection of him that would lead to such suffering. Satan knew this as well.

"If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here; for it is written, 'HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU TO GUARD YOU,' and, 'ON *their* HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.'" Satan said appealing to Jesus' pride.

Jesus knew what Satan was asking him to do. This temptation appealed to him on so many levels. It appealed to the universal human need for acceptance from one's peers. It appealed to his self preservation instincts. It also appealed to his pride. Do this one thing and he would immediately not have to deal with all the naysayers and critics. Him falling from the temple and the sudden appearance of angels would proclaim to everyone present that he was the Messiah. The leaders of Israel would fall in behind him and the entire nation would accept him. But to do such a thing would not be about the Father and his will, but all about Jesus. Satan was appealing to his human pride and offering him another short cut. But this would not be in submission to the Father or the Father's will. This was not what Jesus wanted and so he answered Satan, "It is said, 'YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.'"

## **6. The Resolve**

Suddenly Satan was gone and Jesus was back in the wilderness alone. Jesus knew that Satan would be back, but he also knew that he has resisted the three great temptations of life; the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life.

Jesus turned his gaze to the northwest; to Galilee. He would return there but things would be much different. For the man who went down to be baptized by John; the man upon whom the Holy Spirit had descended upon and then was led into the wilderness; the man Jesus Christ would return to the Galilee in the power of the Holy Spirit.

# Storytelling Techniques

A well crafted story following the Hollywood Blockbuster principles is only half of the battle. For a story is nothing but words on a page until it is told to an audience. Creating the story is a definite art form; telling it is the other side of the same coin.

Some people are natural storytellers. They instinctively feel the ebb and flow of the energy of the story why subconsciously reading their audience. The good news is that even if you are not a natural storyteller you can learn some techniques that will enable to you to 'deliver the goods.'

## Voice inflection

As every public speaker knows you can't stand up in front of an audience and talk in a monotone. But storytelling is much more dynamic than just giving a speech or preaching a sermon. The voice of the storyteller should follow the energy curve. The hook can be very intense with quick percussive sentences which segue into the more conversational tone of the introduction. Typically, as the energy rises sentences shorten and are spoken more quickly. This is especially important if there is a lot of action in your story. 'Spit it out, already.' No one wants to sit on their hands and wait to hear flowery descriptions of what is going on. The action is fast and furious so should the story telling.

Some stories are very suspenseful at the climax. Energy can be very high while the action is very slow and almost incremental. Sentences typically will still be short, but not necessarily spoken rapidly.

## **Voice dynamics**

As with inflection the voice should vary in loudness during the story. Hooks typically are louder and more demonstrative than the introduction. Sometimes the conflict is established loudly, other times soft and sinisterly. The key is to make the voice fit the story and the action that is occurring.

## **Humor**

Some stories are meant to be humorous. Some genres need a little humor to release tension. Action adventure movies often intersperse moments of comedy to allow the audience a moment to release the building tension. An audience member only has so much adrenaline. If the story has too much energy and intensity at the beginning the audience is exhausted before the climax. That momentary spark of humor releases the tension and allows the audience to build towards the climax.

Humor can also be used when telling a story that the audience probably already knows. Certain Bible stories like David and Goliath are known even outside of Christianity. Thus the audience might be tempted to tune out the story teller. Adding humor to a familiar

story will breathe life into it and keep the audience engage.

One of the easiest methods of adding humor is to add a modern juxtaposition to a story that took place in the past.

"Revelation tells us that Satan is the accuser of the brethren and that he stands before the throne of God day and night accusing us of our sins before God.

Now back on earth, Jesus was going about the countryside healing the sick and casting out demons. This was a real problem for Satan as it was impacting his evil work on earth. But Jesus was only one person in one place at one time. How much trouble could he possibly cause? He was nothing more than a nuisance brush fire.

But then Jesus gathered all of his disciples around him. He gave them authority over the demonic spirits and sent them out across Israel. Suddenly what started as a brush fire was roaring into a wild fire sweeping across the country.

Meanwhile, Satan was before the throne just beginning to start up a fresh batch of complaining when suddenly his cell phone rang. "Uh, excuse me God, I, uh, need to take this." Satan said as he turned away from God and put the phone up to his ear. "Slow down. What's that? You got cast out? You're where? Well stay away from the pigs." Satan hung up his phone and spun back around to face God. "Ah, sorry about that. Now where

was I?" Suddenly Satan's phone rang again. "Excuse me again. What is it? Healing? Where? One minute, let me put you on hold. Yeah? You got cast out too? Alright, alright. I guess this Jesus and his disciples are out of control! If you want something done right, then I'll have to do it myself!" And with that Satan stormed out of the throne room of God and then raced to the earth. He would deal with Jesus once and for all. And indeed he would set a plan into action. He would possess Judas, and then through Judas betray Jesus to the High Priest of the Jews."

Well, as you can see you can have a little fun with a story. There are some simple guidelines to remember if you are going to do this to a Bible story. First, make sure that the embellishment is so crazy that no one would believe that it actually happened that way. Secondly, make sure that the embellishment stays true to the principle of scripture. As a general rule I never puts words into Jesus' mouth. If I say that Jesus said something you will usually find those very words in the scripture.

## **Body Language**

Story telling can be real workout. I have told the story of the little boy giving his lunch to Jesus to feed the 5000. When it comes time for Andrew to bring the little boy to Christ I typically walk a few steps to one side and act like I am coaxing the child to go to Jesus. Then I play the role of the child holding the basket in his hands walking

hesitantly towards Jesus. When it comes time to give the basket to Christ I have a little exaggerated fun clutching the invisible basket tightly to my chest as I first look up to where Jesus would be, then back to where Andrew would be, shaking my head as if to say no, "my basket." Finally, I bow my head and lift the invisible basket up as a little child might do. Now all this acting is happening while I am telling the story. The physicality adds a layer of visual communication that when combined with the speaking is powerful. When the physicality is combined with humor, then you create a memorable mental image that can go with a person for their entire lives.

## **Audience engagement**

**Storytellers so often forget that the audience can become part of the story.** This can be accomplished as easily as merely asking the audience a question and encouraging them to answer. Back to our illustration above of Satan before the throne of God, we can make a subtle change to allow us to engage the audience.

"Satan slammed his cell phone shut and stormed out of the throne room of God. He was in a rage. His demons could not control Jesus or his disciple. Well, he thought, if you want something done right, then you . . . (allow the audience to verbally fill in the blank.)

Something as simple as the example above is extremely powerful in keeping your audience engaged. Plus it has the added benefit of burning the concept into their

minds. A person can see something and not remember it. He can hear something and not remember it. He can actually see and hear something and just maybe he might remember it. But when a person sees, hears, and then engages his mind to such a degree that he is actually reaching a conclusion, then suddenly the audience has internalized the concept or material.

## **Props**

I love props. **An object that I can hold in my hand that grabs the audience's attention is a powerful tool.** In my version of the story of Jael I hold a wooden tent peg loosely in my hand and then holding the peg vertically as I describe Jael placing the peg against the head of general Sisera. Then, taking the wooden mallet, I smack the top of the peg as I tell of Jael driving the peg through the general's head and into the sand. The loud bang of the mallet upon the peg and the peg sliding down into my hand is a powerful auditory and visual effect that often causes the audience to wince as they mentally complete the picture of the peg going through a skull.

## **Read Your Audience**

**Every story teller must learn to read your audience.** Sometimes your audience is eating out of your hand and you can embellish your story to great effect. Other times you might have an audience that is in a hurry for you to finish so that they can rush out the door and beat the other churches to the favorite local restaurants. To

continue or expand a story in such a situation would be a disaster.

There are some obvious visual clues that help in reading your audience.

### **1. Where are they looking?**

If your audience is looking directly at you then you pretty much have them engaged. But if they are looking at their watches, at each other, or the ultimate sign that you have lost them, if they are looking at their phones, then it is time to wrap things up and move on.

### **2. What is your audience doing?**

An audience that is leaning forward with their eyes on you tells you that you have them in the palms of your hands. If they are leaning back, fidgeting, and heaven help you, whispering; you might have completely lost them.

### **3. How are they reacting?**

For many people their faces are an open book to be read by all. What are the faces of your audience saying? Are they smiling and laughing at the humorous parts? Are they watching intensely when you are at an intense part? Or, do they have a blank look on their face? Are their faces telling you that they are not following or getting it?

## Hollywood Blockbuster Sermons

Introduction, three points, an illustration, and a closing; the things we learned in Bible college. Of course it's a lot more complex than that. It is a lot more complex than that. But, that really is the point. We often create sermons that only a small portion of the congregation is equipped to totally understand and take away with them. This chapter introduces a different method for looking at sermons and building effective memorable messages.

### **Understand your audience.**

- 6 out of 10 people in your audience are visual learners.
- 3 out of 10 people in your audience are oral learners.
- 1 out of 10 people in your audience are either kinesthetic /tactile learners or read/write learners.

Now most people are not exclusively one learning method or another but often are a combination of two or even three methods. But most people have one dominate method they subconsciously prefer.

- 2 out of 10 people in your audience will have a college degree.
- 2 out of 10 people in your audience attended some college but never earned a degree.

- 6 out 10 people in your audience never attended college.

From these statistics we can draw a simply profile of the average person sitting in your audience:

***A visual/oral learner with little or no college education.***

Why is this important? Almost all people are genetically predisposed to storying as a primary communication method. Western civilization and higher education places a layer of critical thinking and analysis over top of this genetic predisposition. Typically the less education one has the more likely one is to be more heavily wired toward story. Thus, a more complete profile of the typical person sitting in the audience would be:

***A visual/oral learner with little or no college education who prefers stories to logical arguments.***

This could potentially skew everything we do in the pulpit if we want to be effective to the greatest percentage of our audience. But we don't want to throw the "baby out with the bathwater." Although standing up in front of your congregation and telling 30 minutes of stories might make you popular with part of the congregation, it would leave 30-40% of the congregation wanting something more.

A hybrid approach relying heavily on storying and including powerful scriptural principles and insights will effectively communicate with the broadest audience.

Let's look at a sermon from the Hollywood Blockbuster perspective: Hook, Introduction, Establish the Conflict, Build the Principle, Climax, and Resolve (the Appeal).

Let's keep in mind our audience profile: Visual/Oral learner. We can't just stand up there and talk and talk and talk. Remember only 3 in 10 people are Oral Learners. We have to include occasional visuals to keep everyone engaged. Powerful visuals will burn your message into their minds for the rest of their lives.

Here are two examples of story driven sermons. The first is somewhat unique in that the entire sermon is stories. The second example is a hybrid sermon mixing traditional around the story of Jesus' baptism.

## **Example 1:**

### **What is in your hand?**

INTRODUCTION:

My wife and I are celebrating our thirtieth wedding anniversary this year. I have to admit, it almost didn't happen. Like most young men, I had fallen deeply in love and had decided that I desperately wanted Rhonda to be my wife. Now most women do not realize this, but when young men fall in love they can be incredibly romantic. Thus, I wanted to propose to Rhonda in a romantic way. Years earlier I had sold a van and had suddenly found myself with a few thousand dollars profit. It must have been the Spirit of the Lord that inspired me to take some of the money and purchase an

unset diamond. Now that I had decided upon the love of my life, it was time to get the diamond set. Although promised the completed ring on a certain date, the jeweler got behind schedule and the ring would not be ready until the morning of my big plans. Then to make matters worse, as I was walking out the door to go pick Rhonda up and take her to Disney World for the big proposal, my pastor called me and offered me a missions trip to Panama. Before it was all said and I done I was almost an hour late picking Rhonda up. You can imagine the icy reception I received. Now I had to find a way to pick up the ring without letting Rhonda know what I was up too. Being the incredibly sneaky and stupid male that I am, I parked Rhonda in an alley behind the jeweler, next to a dumpster. If she was icy when I picked up her, she was absolutely frozen when I got back into the car. We didn't talk much on the way to Disney as we were now almost 2 hours behind schedule.

What is the most romantic location in Disney World? Cinderella's castle? You've got it. And on the second floor of the castle is St. Stephens restaurant. So, since it was near lunch, I made reservations and soon we found ourselves sitting at a very small table in the middle of the restaurant. Carefully I slid the ring box out of my pocket and set it on my lap.

Then, looking into her beautiful eyes I said, "Rhonda, I love you."

"Really? How much?" she asked.

"Enough to ask you to marry me." I said with a silly grin.

"Are you serious?" She asked somewhat confused.

"This serious!" I answered as I pulled the ring box off of my lap and set it in front of her. It was a priceless moment as she looked first at the ring, then at me, then at the ring, then back at me unable to speak.



It was the first and only time in thirty years of marriage that she was speechless!

I came with a ring in hand and got the bride of my dreams.

About the same time thirty years ago another young woman was married. Since I can't pronounce her Maasai name we will call her Esther. She was born and raised in a mud hut with a thatch roof in northern Tanzania. The Maasai are a primitive people who herd

cattle and worship spirits in rocks and animals. She was just three years old when a Maasai Jr. Elder visited her father and gave him two cows. She didn't know it, but she had just become engaged. Each year for the next ten years the same man would visit her father with a war club in one hand and the halter ropes of two cows in the other.



Esther was just thirteen years old when the man arrived for the last time. Her father called her over and put her hand in the hand of the stranger. Then her mother snapped a flat disc of beads around her neck, and in that moment, she was married. Suddenly she was being dragged away from her mother, her home, and everything she had ever known. She was now married and if she did not do everything her husband demand of her, she would be beat.

Two true stories of marriage. Each suitor came with something in his hands; I came with a ring, the other came with a war club.

**1. The value of what we hold in our hands is irrelevant when given to God.**

In Exodus chapter 3 we read about a man named Moses and his encounter with God.

Now Moses was eighty years old and living in the desert shepherding a flock of sheep. He had once been the adopted grandson of the Pharaoh of Egypt. But in an angry rage he had murdered an Egyptian task master who was being cruel to his fellow Hebrews. When word got out about his crime he had fled Egypt into the wilderness. There, in the land of Midian, living among the Kenites, he had met a beautiful shepherd girl and started a new life.

That had been forty years ago. Now, eighty years old, Moses is looking forward to retirement. One day Moses is out with his sheep when he sees an incredible sight; a bush that burns but is not consumed. Suddenly, out of the bush comes a voice:

"Moses!"

Moses looks around in shock.

"Moses! Take off your sandals for you are standing on holy ground!" The voice said.

Moses kicked off his sandals and stood there clutching his shepherds staff.

"Moses, I want you to go to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to let my people go."

Now Moses was terrified. "Uh, God. Like, who is going to believe me? I'm a shepherd and I stink like sheep!"

"What is your hand, Moses." God said.

"Uh, this? Ummm. A stick?"

"Throw down your stick, Moses." God commanded.

Now Moses suddenly got real possessive of his stick as he clutched it tightly against his chest and murmured, "My stick."

"Moses! Throw your stick down!" God commanded again.

And then Moses threw down his shepherd's staff and it became a snake. "Snake!" He cried as he fled from it. But God was not through with Moses. "Pick up the snake, Moses. Not by that end, do you want to get bit? Grab it by the other end." So Moses grabbed the snake by the tail it became a staff again.

Thus Moses, with nothing more than a stick, a shepherd's staff, went to Egypt and delivered 3 million Jews from Egyptian bondage.

**As long as the stick was in Moses' hands, it was just a stick! But, when Moses gave his stick to God it became an instrument in the hand of God able to perform incredible miracles.**

## **2. God is not a respecter of people; Male or female.**

God is merely looking for people who are willing to give; to let go. Judges chapter 4 tells us this story.

400 years later one of Moses' distant relatives would follow in his footsteps. Heber the Kenite was a Bedouin. He decided to leave the lands of Midian and pitch his tent west of the Sea of Galilee near the town of Kedesh. It had been a long hard walk but the hillsides were filled with great places to graze his sheep. The Israelites were peaceful and the Canaanite King, Jabin, had made a peace treaty with him so he would be protected from the raids of Sisera the Canaanite general. Now, under the massive branches of an oak tree, he called his wife and children together to pitch their tent and to make camp.



His wife, Jael, along with her daughters, spread the tent out and began to hammer pegs into the ground to hold the tent's lines. Then, as Heber sang, the tent was lifted into the air on four stout poles. Jael and the girls worked their way around the tent pounding more pegs into the ground. All was good. This is what Jael wanted with all of her heart, a safe place to raise her children; a place with plenty of pasturing for their sheep and fresh water to drink.

Jabin, the King of the Canaanites had been oppressing the Israelites for years. His brilliant general, Sisera, would ride out of their castle fortress in Hazor with his 800 chariots of iron and steal the harvest from the Israelites.

Now the Israelites called out to God because the oppression was great. And God spoke through the prophetess Deborah who called Barack and gave him the word from God. "Barack, gather up an army of 10,000 and go to the river Kishon where God will deliver General Sisera into your hand."

Now Barack apparently did not like being told what to do by a woman. Especially when the woman was telling him to go to war. After all, he was risking his skin while she was staying home watching TV and eating bon-bons. "I'll go if you go!" Barack challenged her figuring that would be the end of this crazy talk about going to war. But Deborah called his bluff saying that she would go with him, but with one caveat. "The honor shall not be yours on the journey that you are about to take, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman."

So Deborah, Barack, and 10,000 of their closest friends armed with spears, swords, pruning hooks and other garden implements, set off to do battle with Sisera.

When Sisera heard the Jews had come out to do battle he gathered up his army along with his 800 iron chariots for what he felt would be a great and glorious day. He would rout the Jews, steal the gold and silver off of their

dead bodies, and then follow up with another romp through the northern tribes stealing everything that was not bolted down.

Things did not go well for Sisera. God was with the Israelites and they thoroughly thumped his army routing them. This had never happened to Sisera before. The last thing that he wanted was to be captured by a bunch of angry farmers so he leaped off of his chariot and made a bee-line back to the castle at Hazor. But he wasn't alone. The Jews had seen him flee and they were now in hot pursuit.

You might wonder what the big deal was about capturing this one man. In these times most armies were made up of farmers, villains, and thugs. But the generals were those that were trained in warfare. A good general could raise up an army from among the countryside and go on to win victories. Destroying Sisera's army put off the next attack. They would have to kill the head of the snake to truly be free from his oppression.

Sisera was running for his life. He could hear the Israelites in the distance pursuing him. He had to find a place to hide as it was still many miles back to Hazor. As he crossed over a small ridge there before him was the camp of Heber the Kenite; an ally! Surely they would hide him. Down into the camp he raced. But Heber and all the other men were gone. They were somewhere in the nearby hills watching their flocks of sheep.

Standing outside of the Bedouin's tent was a beautiful young woman, Heber's wife, Jael.

Jael knew at once who was in her encampment. She had seen the general before and there was no mistaking his ornate and expensive armor. Him, alone in their camp, risked destroying everything she wanted. She knew that none of the men were near and whatever was to be done would have to be done by her. "Don't run any further. You'll be okay here." She said.

Sisera was exhausted. This was just what he needed. Without asking, he walked into her tent and collapsed on the floor. "Give me something to drink." He gasped as the exhaustion overcame him. Jael gave him a skin of milk to drink and then covered him with one of her hand made carpets. "Stand in the doorway of the tent." He ordered. "And if anyone comes near tell them that the tent is empty." Jael immediately went and stood at the entrance to the tent. Within a few minutes Sisera had fallen into a deep sleep and was snoring.

Jael had a problem. What would happen in the next few minutes had the potential of destroying everything that she wanted. First, she had a man in her tent. That was equivalent to adultery among the Bedouin. Secondly, she heard the approaching Israelite search party. If they found Sisera hiding in her tent they would not only kill Sisera, but they might kill her and her entire family for sheltering him! But what could she do? She was just a

young woman. She had no sword or spear and even if she had, she did not know how to use them. She was not a warrior. She was just a Bedouin girl and Sisera a season warrior clad in armor. At most she could strike one blow. If she did not kill him, he would rise up and kill her, then her children. Out of the corner of her eye, laying along the edge of the tent, she spotted something she was very familiar with; a tent peg and a large wooden mallet. Leaning over she quietly picked up the hammer and peg. Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she quietly stepped into her tent and kneeled alongside the sleeping general. Very carefully she laid the tent peg against the general's head and then with one well practiced blow drove the tent peg through the general's head and into the ground.

That day God delivered all of Israel from the oppression of the Canaanites through the hands of a young Bedouin girl and a sharpened stick that she held in her hand.

**3. God does not care how old you are. He is looking for people who are willing to give to him that which is in their hands.**

Just down the road from where Jael won her great victory lies the Sea of Galilee. Now the Sea of Galilee is really just a good size lake about 7- 8 miles wide and 13 miles long. Sitting on its north west bank is the fishing village of Capernaum. It is in this village that Jesus had a home which had become his base of operation. The

house was in constant commotion with people coming and going and Jesus healing the sick and doing the work of the ministry.

About 8 miles down the coast was the city of Tiberius, built by King Herod to be his royal city. Now Herod had married the divorced wife of his brother which was against Jewish law. This of course could not go without comment from John the Baptist who found himself arrested and sitting in Herod's dungeon. So, while Jesus is ministering up the road in Capernaum, Herod is partying with his buds down in Tiberius. At the peak of the party, Herod's step daughter dances for everyone which leads him to offer her a reward. Now it was common for great people to offer up to half of their kingdom as a reward. This was really just a way to express how pleased they felt. No one ever took them up on it. But Herod's step daughter talked to her mother who hated John, and asked that Herod bring to her the head of John the Baptist on a plate. Not wanting to go back on an offer made in front of his guest, Herod sent to the dungeon and had John beheaded.

Now the disciples of John were informed and they came and claimed his body and gave it a proper burial. Then, in great sorrow, they plodded up the road to Capernaum to tell Jesus.

Into the commotion of Jesus' house came the mourning disciples of John. Jesus was shocked at the news. First because John was his own cousin, but also because Jesus understood that with his death, the last of the prophets

of the Old Covenant had died. Jesus was deeply moved and suddenly the chaos that was swirling around him was too much.

"Peter! Get the boat ready. I want to go to the other side of the sea to the wilderness where I can spend some quiet time with God." Jesus said.

Within a few minutes all the disciples and Jesus left the house and walked down to the water's edge, climbed into the boat and pushed off into the sea. The boat was not very large, perhaps 8 feet wide and 30 feet long. Four of the disciples manned the oars while Peter set the sail and John stood at the tiller. It would only be about a 7 mile journey across the northern end of the Sea of Galilee with the boat never more than a few miles off shore.

But Jesus and his disciples would not make a clean escape. People from the village saw them enter the boat and begin to row to the opposite shore. It didn't take long for a small mob to form as people began to walk along the shore of the Sea of Galilee following the progress of Jesus and the Disciples from the shore. As the crowd grew people from the surrounding villages came down and after discovering where the mob was going, they joined in. The crowd walked for a few hours and it became obvious where Jesus and the Disciples would come ashore.

Jesus could see the crowd growing larger and larger. His plans for a quick get-away had been spoiled and now

thousands of people awaited him in the wilderness on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. His 'alone time' with God would have to wait. He and his disciples came ashore and soon he was healing the sick and teaching the crowd. By now the sun had long past noon and it was beginning its descent.

"The people have been with us all day without food." He said to his disciples. "Give them something to eat."

The Disciples looked at each in shock. They had left out so quickly that none of them had thought to bring food. But that was the least of their worries. "Master, we have no food. And even if there was a place to purchase bread, it would take almost \$25,000 to buy enough so that everyone just had a small piece." One disciple said.

"Send them home to their villages." Another disciple added.

"No, I want you to feed them." Jesus insisted.

The Disciples just looked at one another in shock and disbelief. Then Andrew stepped forward pushing a little boy who was carrying a lunch basket. "Go ahead, give it to Jesus." Andrew encouraged. The little boy clutched tightly to his basket, after all, it was his lunch. You can almost hear what must have been going through the child's mind, 'Mine! My lunch!' But after looking first at Jesus, then to his lunch, then back to Jesus; a small smile brightened the boy's face as he gave his lunch to the Lord.

Jesus opened the basket. There were five small dinner rolls and two small salted fish, fins and all. After blessing the lunch, he gave it to the disciples and they fed 5,000 men plus women and children.

***As long as the lunch was in the hands of the child it was nothing more than lunch. But when given to the Lord it was multiplied beyond belief and thousands of people were fed.***

**4. God does care who you are, boy, girl, old, young, shepherd, or housewife.** God asks the same question of everyone of us, "What is in your hand?"

In each of our stories, the thing that was in their hands was commonplace. A shepherd and his staff. A Bedouin and her tent peg. A school age child and their lunch basket.

Everyone of us holds things in our hands daily that seem insignificant and unimportant. Yet, if we would but be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and the voice of God, we might hear him saying, "What do you have in your hand? Will you give it to me?"

## Example 2: A hybrid message

This message is a hybrid message using a strong visual coupled with a powerful story. This sermon is based upon the story of Jesus and his temptation in the wilderness.

### God's Formula for Spiritual Power

#### 1. The Hook

Have you ever wished you had the supernatural power that Peter or John displayed in the New Testament? Wouldn't it be awesome to heal the sick or perform other great miracles? Why do we see so little of God's miraculous power at work in our churches today?



I have something in this bag (*holding up the bag*) that will help us understand a very simple and basic principle of God and his supernatural power. (*Open bag and hold up handgun. There typically is a gasp from the audience!*)



This Colt Combat Commander is a powerful weapon. I need someone to hold it until later in the sermon when I need it. Who would like to keep this safe for me until it is needed? *(A few hands typically go up and the stress level with the audience goes up as well.)* There in the front row is a little boy. He looks like he would love to hold this for me. *(The audience suddenly becomes vocal saying no!)* Obviously we don't want this kind of power in the hands of a seven year old. Do we have a law enforcement officer in the room? *(Prearranged officer comes to the front, the gun is placed back in the bag, and then handed over to the officer.)* Does everyone feel better now? *(Obvious sighs of relief in the room.)*

## **2. The Introduction**

Why do we feel better? The answer is obvious. The police officer has been trained to handle weapons. He has been proven to be reliable and trustworthy. The child on the other hand is an unknown. He is probably immature. We don't

trust his wisdom or understanding of the potential harm he could inflict with such a powerful weapon.

What about the supernatural power of God? Is it something that should be in the hands of immature and unproven Christians?

### **3. Establish the Conflict**

This is the conflict that rages within everyone of us.

#### **John 14:12**

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the **works** that I do, he will do also; and **greater works** than these he will do; because I go to the Father.

But where are the works? Where are the miracles? Is it because we don't believe enough? Why?

God has a simply formula for the supernatural endowment of power within the life of the believer.

**Be filled + Be led + Be proven = Dunamis (Power)**

We find the perfect example of this in the life of Christ.

### **4. Build**

The carpenters work bench was clean. No sawdust or wood shavings lay about the floor as well. All the tools that had faithfully served him had been put away for the

last time. The master carpenter and builder would never again return to his shop. Instead his footsteps led him from Nazareth in Galilee down to the Jordan River to a divine appointment with his cousin, John the Baptist.

We can only imagine what was going through Jesus' mind as he walked along the Jordan. Most of the first 30 years of his life had been spent in Nazareth consumed with studying God's Word, praying, and building things made of wood. In many ways he was no different than any other young man of Nazareth. He knew that he had a unique relationship and calling with God. But his life had been simple without miracles or supernatural powers.

But all of that was about to change.

## **2. The Introduction**

Turning 30 years old is significant in the lives of Jewish men. It is widely accepted as the age at which a man can become a leader. In Genesis 41:46 we find that Joseph was 30 years old when he stood before Pharaoh and took over the responsibility of ruling Egypt. In the Code of Jewish Law we find that a man should be at least 30 years old to serve as the cantor to lead services during High Holidays. Jesus is now 30. He is no longer to be perceived as a young man, but now is acceptable among his fellow Jews as a leader.

In John 1:38 we find that John was baptizing near a village called Bethany which was on the east side of the

Jordan. Bethany is found at the mouth of Wadi Kharrar, a dry riverbed that normally has water in it only during the rainy season. Wadi Kharrar is famous as the place where the Prophet Elijah was taken up into heaven. 400 years later the Prophet Malachi would prophecy that Elijah would return before the Messiah would come. Now to the very place that Elijah ascended into heaven, we find the prophet who Jesus would equate to Elijah, baptizing and calling people to repentance.

### **3. Establishing the Conflict**

The trip from Nazareth to Wadi Kharrar would take Jesus almost a week to walk. Each step of the 80 plus mile trip brought him one step closer to his ministry and destiny. Scripture reveals to us what drove him. He wanted to obey his Father and fulfill God's plan for his life. Jesus knew from prophecy what was laying before him and each step drew him closer.

Jesus was not the only one who knew that everything was about to change. Satan sensed that his time to destroy his mortal enemy had come as well. A nagging fear had plagued him since God had pronounced judgment upon Adam and Eve eons ago. For it had been promised that one of Eve's descendents would crush Satan's head. When Jesus had been born Satan had tried to kill him through the efforts of King Herod who had all the babies of Bethlehem murdered. But God had warned Joseph in a dream and they had escaped to Egypt. Satan would have to be more subtle this time.

He had waited 30 years for this chance and had carefully been planning his attack.

#### **4. Develop the Plot**

When Jesus arrived at Wadi Kharrar John was down in a pool of water baptizing people. Jesus descended into the water and approached his cousin.

John looked up at Jesus and suddenly recognized him. But it wasn't his cousin Jesus that he saw, but something much greater. In that moment, into the mind of the prophet, was revealed who stood before him. Not a man. Not a relative. But the Christ. John had been preaching repentance for years. He had been proclaiming that one was coming whom was greater than he. And now, standing before him, waiting to be baptized, was that very man.

" I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" John said.

A more arrogant or self driven man might have agreed with John and baptized him. But Jesus was not pursuing his own will, but rather that of his Father. "Permit *it* at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus said. And with that, the greater was baptized by the lesser. John lowered Jesus into the water and as he came up suddenly the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and landing upon him. Then a voice called out of

the heavens saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!"

Jesus ascended out of the pool of water and climbed the hillside of the Wadi. 22 miles to the west lay Jerusalem and his destiny. But Jesus was full of the Spirit of God and was compelled by the Spirit to turn east towards the wastelands. And so, as Luke 4:1 says: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness."

We can only imagine that this was not what Jesus had expected. Instead of beginning his ministry, the Spirit has led him out to the wilderness where for 40 days he has fasted. At the end of those days, Luke 4:2 says that he became hungry. Everyone who has ever fasted more than a few days knows that somewhere around the third day your hunger leaves you. You can continue going without food and not being in any danger of starvation for many days. But when your hunger returns it is a sign that you are beginning to starve to death. If you don't eat soon your body will begin to shut down and you will die. Jesus has reached this point. He is at his physically weakest point.

Satan has been waiting for this moment. He had heard God's proclamation that Jesus was his Son. It was like a gauntlet thrown down at his feet. It was game on and Satan was ready. He would not be rash or foolish this time. Patience and precise attacks would achieve more than careless manipulation of his pawns.

Satan had watched Jesus ascend up into the wilderness. But he was no fool. He sensed that Jesus was strong and ready for a fight. Satan knew that there was a connection between a man's physical strength and their spiritual health. When one became weak it usually affected the other. For 40 days Satan dogged Jesus' path patiently waiting for the most opportune moment to attack. He watched men starve to death before and now he recognized the symptoms in Jesus. It was time to strike!

Jesus had been walking along the dry riverbed of a wadi. He was feeling very weak. When he sat down to rest for a moment he suddenly found that he was no longer alone. There standing before him was Satan. The two of them locked eyes for a moment. They both knew who the other was. Jesus was tempted to just rebuke him and be done with him. But the Spirit inside him restrained him and he would not lash out of his own will, but would be led by God and him only.

Satan squatted down in the dry riverbed and picked up a round river rock. The rock had been worn smooth by countless spring rains that had filled the wadi as the water had rushed down towards the Jordan. Subtle shades of brown speckled its surface. Satan looked into the eyes of Jesus and offered him the rock saying, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

Jesus glanced down at the smooth rock. It looked exactly like one of the fresh baked loaves of bread that could be purchased in any village of Israel. His stomach

rumbled at the thought. He knew that he had the power of the Spirit to do such a thing. He also knew that he had the authority as the Son of God to turn the stone into bread. But he had chosen to submit himself to the authority of the Father. He would only be led by the Spirit, not by his human flesh.

Jesus looked from the stone up into the eyes of Satan and said, "It is written, 'man shall not live on bread alone.'"

A sudden look of disappointment crossed Satan's face as he stood and tossed the rock back onto the riverbed. Looking towards the top of the wadi he turned to Jesus and with a twist of his head invited the Christ to follow up the embankment.

Jesus sat for a moment not wanting to follow Satan anywhere, but the Spirit compelled him to follow and Jesus pulled his way up the rocky embankment to stand beside his enemy.

Satan stood looking off into the distance. He knew the Bible better than any Jewish Rabbi, Pharisee, or Scribe. It was clearly promised that the Messiah would one day rule over all the earth. But to get there would not be easy or pretty. Jesus topped the ridge and went over to stand beside him. Satan turned to Jesus and in one moment revealed to him all the kingdoms of the world.

"I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I

wish." Satan said. "Therefore if You worship before me, it shall all be Yours."

Jesus also knew the Bible. The reality of the prophecies concerning the Messiah had been committed to memory. He knew that there were two sets of prophecies. One set spoke all of the glorious days when the Messiah would sit upon his throne and rule over all the earth. But there was another set of prophecies that were dark and painful. The Messiah would first be the suffering servant. The words of Isaiah the prophet, chapter 53:3-5 haunted him, saying;

" He was despised and forsaken of men,  
A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;  
And like one from whom men hide their face  
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

<sup>4</sup> Surely our griefs He Himself bore,  
And our sorrows He carried;  
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,  
Smitten of God, and afflicted.

<sup>5</sup> But He was pierced through for our transgressions,  
He was crushed for our iniquities;  
The chastening for our well-being *fell* upon Him,  
And by His scourging we are healed."

Jesus understood what Satan was offering him; a short cut. Skip the suffering servant and move right on to ruling over the earth. But it would come with a price. He would have to reject the Lordship of his Father and submit himself to Satan. Jesus turned and faced Satan as he said, "It is written, 'YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD AND SERVE HIM ONLY.'"

## 5. The Climax

Satan then led Jesus to Jerusalem and had him stand on the pinnacle of the Temple. This would be his most subtle attack. He would inspire Jesus to accomplish that which the prophets had prophesied, without any strings attached.

Jesus could see hundreds and hundreds of people in the Temple courtyards below. Pharisees and Sadducees were intermixed in the crowd. The High Priest himself was also present. All the people who needed to recognize him as God's Messiah were in the courtyard below him. Jesus knew that most of them would never accept him and it would be their rejection of him that would lead to such suffering. Satan knew this as well.

“If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here; for it is written, ‘HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU TO GUARD YOU,’ and, ‘ON *their* HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.’” Satan said appealing to Jesus' pride.

Jesus knew what Satan was asking him to do. This temptation appealed to him on so many levels. It appealed to the universal human need for acceptance from one's peers. It appealed to his self preservation instincts. It also appealed to his pride. Do this one thing and he would immediately not have to deal with all the naysayers and critics. Him falling from the temple and the sudden appearance of angels would proclaim to everyone present that he was the Messiah. The leaders of Israel would fall in behind him and the entire nation would accept him. But to do such a thing would not be about the Father and his will, but all about Jesus. Satan was appealing to his human pride and offering him

another short cut. But this would not be in submission to the Father or the Father's will. This was not what Jesus wanted and so he answered Satan, "It is said, 'YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.'"

## **6. The Resolve**

Suddenly Satan was gone and Jesus was back in the wilderness alone. Jesus knew that Satan would be back, but he also knew that he has resisted the three great temptations of life; the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life.

Jesus turned his gaze to the northwest; to Galilee. He would return there but things would be much different. For the man who went down to be baptized by John; the man upon whom the Holy Spirit had descended upon and then was led into the wilderness; the man Jesus Christ would return to the Galilee in the power of the Holy Spirit.

## **5. The Climax**

All of us at one time or another find ourselves in a time of supernatural trial and temptation. We have been led into the wilderness and can't understand why these things are happening to us. So often we fail to realize that these attacks are moments of supernatural testing, allowed by God to grow and mature us, to prove us, and prepare us for the supernatural release of God's power in our lives.

These times are like a surprise pop quiz in school. You either are prepared or you're not. You will either pass or

fail. Unfortunately, you can't go deeper into God until you pass the test.

How many times must we stumble and fall, failing the same test over and over, before we stop blaming Satan for his attacks and begin to realize that the trial is God's opportunity for us to grow and mature in Him.

## **6. Resolve (The Appeal)**

Have you been wasting your trials and temptations? Do you find yourself in the same place with God repeating the same tests over and over again? Have you lost hope and settled for mediocrity in your relationship with God?

God wants to empower everyone of us with his supernatural power to do greater works than Jesus Christ himself. This is His will for you and I. But there are no shortcuts. If Jesus had to overcome temptation before he was filled with power, how much more us?

Today, my heart is challenged to renew my walk with Christ, to be filled with his Spirit, to be led by his Spirit, and to overcome temptation through the power of his Word.

How about you? Do you feel the presence of God calling you this morning to follow him?

Would you raise your hand with mine, acknowledging the need to renew our relationship and commitment to go deeper into Christ?

Perhaps you are sitting here and realize that your relationship with God is broken and needs to be restored. I would like to lead you in a prayer to restore your relationship with God. Would you raise your hand so that I can pray with you today?

## Story Telling versus Teaching

What is the difference between preaching and teaching?

There are many opinions as to what differentiates the one from the other, so here is yet another.

- Preaching is designed to inspire the listener to do something.
- Teaching is designed to reveal truth, and communicate understanding and knowledge.

There is hardly ever an 'all one or the other' when a minister speaks. There is always a little teaching in the preaching and a little preaching in the teaching. But understanding the purpose of what we are trying to accomplish helps to select the best tools to accomplish our goals.

If it is our intent to provoke our audience to action it will take more than just information or argument.

Remember Madison Avenue ads. Info ads inform and teach about products and benefits. Story ads move the buyers emotions and inspire them to go out and purchase a particular brand. In the same way story based sermons have a greater potential to move an audience to a desired response.

The following story has been told with incredible effect as an evangelism tool with thousands of boys and girls coming to Christ after its telling.

## **Sample Story: Crusade Comes**

Here is an interesting story that I have told in numerous locations to various types of audiences over the past 20 years. The story originally was created for a scouting type event with 5,500 men and boys sitting on a hillside. Most recently it was told around a campfire at the 2012 International Orality Network Conference in Estes Park, Colorado. The original story was almost 30 minutes in length. This is the 10 minute pared down version created for the ION Conference.

### **Crusader Comes**

Lightning split the English countryside revealing the dark castle of the evil Duke Ravenhurst. A lone light burned in the east tower where Mercurial the Necromancer stood before his cauldron reciting incantations to speak with the dead. In the rafters above him, perched upon a massive oak timber, stood Ichbod the demon principality of the land. Once a creature of unsurpassed beauty, he now sprouted horns and bat like wings which had been grafted into his head and shoulders. His naked body was covered in tattoos, each a blasphemous curse aimed at his creator. Hundreds of other lesser demons surrounded him. Some perched upon rafters, other hanging upside down as if bats.

Suddenly a small messenger demon burst through the roof and hovered in the air before him. With a lightning fast move the demon prince grabbed the messenger by the throat. "Well, what is it, worm?" He hissed. The small demon's eyes bulged as he whispered to the demon prince. Ichbod's yellow eyes narrowed as he

heard the message. He shook the small demon until its eyes glazed over and then he tossed its limp body back through the very wall from which it had entered.

Then, unfurling his massive wings, Ichbod the demon prince of hell stepped off of the rafter and glided down to land upon the shoulders of the Mercurial the Necromancer. Spreading his talon like hand, he thrust it down into the head of the magician. Visions exploded in Mercurial's mind.

The door to his chamber burst open as Duke Ravenhurst entered. "Well Mercurial. What is your word? Shall we defeat the Earl of Westbrook on the morrow?"

"Yes my lord Ravenhurst, we will. But, be warned, there comes one who can defeat us. I have seen it in a vision. Beware, beware of the Crusader!"

Early the next morning, Robert carried his bow and quiver of arrows into the woods in search of game to place meat upon the table of his aging grandmother and younger brother, William. Although born noble, they all lived as peasants. Robert was 15 years of age but still battled nightmares. His sleep had once again been plagued by the horrific memories of parents murdered by a knight clad in Black and red. The loss of his parents weighed heavily upon him. He remembered them. He remembered what it was like to live in a great manor. The nightmares would not let him forget. Yet again,

another night of tortured sleep with another morning wishing he had died with his parents so many years ago. it was only for his brother William that he pasted a smile upon his face each day. His younger brother did not remember anything from their previous life and Robert had made a commitment that he would find a way to make things right for his young and innocent little brother.

The woods were silent. Not a single creature stirred. The morning pressed towards noon and Robert saw neither rabbit, partridge, or deer. Farther and farther from his grandmother's simple cottage he roamed in search of game. But the woods remained silent. Robert paused to listen. A strange distant sound made its way across the hillside and down to where he stood. Fascinated, Robert climbed to the top of the hill, the sound becoming louder and clearer with each step. Cresting the hill, Robert looked below to a most wondrous yet terrifying sight.

The valley spread out before him in low rolling pastures lined by thick woods. Two great armies stood ready to battle to the death. From his left came a massive army clad in black and red. On his right was the other in blue and yellow. Robert watched in fascination and horror as the two armies charged towards each other. They met in a sickening crash followed by cries of anger and pain mixed with the ringing of steel upon steel. Robert felt sorrow for the men in blue. They were obviously

outnumbered and soon would be dead leaving their wives as widows and their children fatherless.

Across the valley Ichbod the demon prince sat perched upon the shoulder of Mercurial. Duke Ravenhurst and Mercurial watched the battle from a hillside vantage point. Ravenhurst could taste victory. Mercurial was not so confident. Something in the spirit world was amiss and it left him uneasy.

Ichbod's demons circled in the sky above. Spirits of fear and despair sapped the Earl's army of their will to fight. Circling above them were the reapers. As the wicked and arrogant were struck a mortal blow, a reaper would dive out of the sky to land upon the chest of the dying. As the man breathed his last and closed his eyes to this mortal world, he would suddenly awake to the spirit world and be met by the clawed talons of the reaper who would then snatch the man's soul and drag it into the depths of hell. The cries of agony on the battlefield were but a whisper to the screams of utter terror from the dead facing their eternity.

As Robert watched from his hillside vantage a flash of white appeared at the edge of the distant forest. His body shook with excitement as he saw a knight in polished armor upon a white horse come racing out of the woods towards the battle. Without breaking stride he rode into the midst of the black army his sword cutting a path before him as a man might harvest

wheat. The battle suddenly shifted as the Earl's men rallied around the white knight. But Ravenhurst had not grown powerful being a fool. From the opposite side of the woods appeared another thousand soldiers clad in black and red rushing towards the flank of the Earl's battle line cutting it in two. Suddenly the white knight found himself with a small company of the Earl's men cut off from the battle and being pushed back into a small clearing at the base of a hill.

Robert stood upon that very hillside and watched in horror as the battle suddenly unfolded just below him. The brave knight was clearly in danger of being overwhelmed. It would take a miracle for the knight to survive. Without thinking Robert reached into his quiver and pulled an arrow. With one smooth movement he knocked the arrow to the string, drew it back to his cheek, and then released it. An attacker fell as it found its mark. Robert took a few steps down the hillside as he drew another arrow and let it fly. Within a minute Robert's quiver was empty and he found himself standing at the bottom of the hill with the battle just a few yards in front of him. Dropping his bow and quiver he ran towards the battle picking up a small shield and short sword from the body of a dead soldier. A moment later he found himself standing shoulder to shoulder with the white knight and fighting for his life. Robert had no idea what he was doing. He blocked spear thrusts and hacked at the men in black trying to protect both the knight and himself. Robert heard the distinct sound of an arrow zip by him. Scanning the clearing he saw the

archer drawing another arrow to his cheek. Without a thought of fear or doubt he leapt in front of the knight. The arrow sped across the clearing seeking its mark and then buried itself into Robert's chest.

The demons of hell cried out in glee as they tasted victory! But suddenly in the midst of their blackness exploded a brilliant flash of light and where there had been nothing a moment before appeared a hundred angels of the heavenly host, standing shoulder to shoulder with blazing swords drawn forming a circle around the knight and fallen boy. The demons shrieked in fear as they clawed their way back into the sky.

Without apparent explanation, a sudden overwhelming dread fell upon the black and red soldiers of Duke Ravenhurst. Spinning about they dropped their weapons and fled from the clearing trampling over the dead and dying. Then, there was silence. The white knight stood alone in the clearing, his surcoat slashed and splattered with blood. Sheathing his sword and then lifting his great helm from his head, he knelt beside Robert cradling him in his arms. "You have shown me a great kindness, lad." The knight said tenderly. "Is there no one in your family I can reward on your behalf?"

Robert looked into the rugged face of the knight. Coldness was already creeping into his arms and legs. "I have a brother . . . William." Robert gasped.

"Then I will find your brother William, and make him my squire." The knight said.

The demons recovered from the surprise appearance of the host. Ichbod himself had risen into the air gathering his demon army for a battle. The Host, outnumbered 1000 to 1, stood gallantly awaiting the black onslaught, their swords raised to the sky. Then, in unison, they all sank to their knees and bowed. A blast of searing white light, more brilliant than a hundred suns exploded in their midst, the blast blinding the demon hoard sending them shrieking in painful retreat. And then there, standing in the midst of the angels was the Captain of the Host, the creator of the Universe, Jesus Christ the Son of the living God. And as Robert breathed his last and closed his eyes to this world, he opened them into the spirit world to be greeted by his Lord and Savior.

"Robert. Are you ready to go home? Your parents are waiting for you." Jesus said with a smile.

"But, what of William?" Robert asked.

"Ah, your brother has his own destiny to fulfill. He must become the crusader to deliver this land from darkness. Come." And as Jesus wrapped his arms around Robert, together with the Host singing praise to God Almighty they shot upward in a beam of pure light, out of this world and into the presence of God.

