

How to Read the Bible and Experience God in It: Case Study in Matthew 8:23 – 27

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Introduction: Telling My Kids Their Family Story

This morning I'd like to lead us in a little exercise. We're going to look at a passage in the Bible as practice. We want to be able to go home and actually practice hearing from God. But I'm aware that it's not easy to do that. I'm curious how many of you have had really good experiences with the Bible as a way to hear from God? How many of you have been confused with the Bible? What I'm hoping to do is to give a basic framework that you can take with you. That framework is to see the Bible as a family story.

When my kids were little, they loved asking, 'Daddy, can you tell us our family story?' So sometimes I started with me being born in Los Angeles, CA and Ming being born in Schenectady, NY. Sometimes I start further back to get our ancestry from Japan and China. At different times, I'd tell different snapshots of our lives, but it would always end the same way: Mommy and Daddy were set up on a blind date in March of 1998. We met, we became friends, and we fell in love. Then we got married in May of 1999. We moved into our house in 2000. Then John was born in September of 2000. Zoe was born in October of 2002. That's when they came into the family story. And then, one day, John and Zoe asked, 'Daddy, can you tell us our family story?'

When my kids were little, they thought that was really entertaining. Even now, we sometimes look back on old pictures of Ming and me when we were growing up. There's something very important about knowing your family story and where you enter in.

Relevance: The Story is the Message

This paradigm helps us read the Bible. The Bible is a family story, not only of those of us who are believers, but of all humanity. At least, that is the claim. When we read the Bible, we never read it alone. God's Spirit is telling the story to us while we read. We may not be totally aware of his presence, but he is there. And even if you read only a little bit of the story at a time, he is there, and he is always drawing you to the point in the story where you enter in. And that point is when God made a turning point in the story. The story involves rebellion, unreconciliation, and family brokenness because of us. Not because of God, but because of us! But like the Romeo and Juliet story, where there were two camps that were opposed to each other, there was a wedding that united the camps. It wasn't a wedding of two people, but of two natures in one person. In Jesus, God perfected a marriage of His divine nature of love and our human nature which had become corrupt and fallen into selfishness. He did that in Jesus, when Jesus rose from the dead with a healed and cleansed human nature to give back to us by his Spirit. That is the marriage that allows us to become part of God's family.

Right away that explains why we enter the story at the point of the New Testament. The Old Testament is important and we have to understand it as part of our family story. But you do not Photoshop yourself into old family pictures. That's disrespectful. You enter in at the point of the New Testament.

Now if you're new to the Bible or to Christian faith, it might seem weird that God uses a story like this. In math in elementary school, we learned that 2 plus 2 equals 4. And that's important. But notice that the Bible is not like that. The Bible does not say, 'God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving. Believe that and you're set.' Actually, I think there are reasons why it's best not to talk about God that way – we don't actually know what those words mean, or how to just put them together. So the Bible does not give us a math problem. Nor does the Bible give you a bunch of experiments to run at home. It doesn't say, 'Pray, and then God will reveal Himself to you, and you'll know God personally and privately.' Prayer is important, too. But not in the sense that we just run prayer experiments at home to know who God is. Somehow God has connected Himself to this story. He reveals Himself in the context of this story. And He wants us to come live in this family story at the point of Jesus.

Why? Maybe it's because stories describe love, which is God's heart, and because stories describe relationships, and God is relational, especially with us as human beings, but with all things, even the sun, stars, and stones of the earth. And therefore, the Bible is a story because it is a drama of relationship between God and human beings. God

reveals Himself in the context of relationships, in the context of love. So we have this story, and a fairly rich and complex story at that.

The other challenge to reading the Bible is that we like to be the hero in our own stories. Let me ask you, 'What story do you live in?' All of us live in a story. We have a storyline running through our heads. And we play a major role in it. Let me give you some examples. You start off with some kind of hidden talent. You face obstacles, adversity, mountains and valleys of hard work, only to overcome in the end: the superhero who beats the villain, the scientist who finds the cure in time, the criminal investigator who uncovers the truth and protects the innocent, the trial lawyer who persuades the jury and brings justice, the teacher who inspires the inner city students to beat the test, or the parent who sticks with the child and rescues that child. But the Bible invites us to see God as the hero, not us. We are meant to enter the story *as minor characters*. We are loved, valued, and invited to play our part, but we are not the hero of this story. God is. That is part of the immediately humbling thing about the Bible, and we have to learn how to cheer for Someone Else.

Introduction: Bad Bible Study Techniques

So how do you read a family story, especially if the story starts before you? Well there are two main ways. One is the slideshow option. The other is the movie option.

The slideshow option is where you take a chapter in the Bible, read it, meditate on it, and remember it as if it were a nice photo in a slideshow. Sometimes you come to understand one of the human characters better and experience God through the experience of that person. Why does that work? Because God is also a character in the Bible, even though He is the one telling the story to you, because He helped the human author write the story down. This is a decent method, but you don't want to get much smaller than that. Like if you go to one verse here and one verse there, weird things can happen. It's possible that you could get: 'Judas went away and hanged himself' (Mt.27:5) and then, 'Go and do likewise' (Lk.10:37). That's silly and obviously ridiculous. You need the context of those verses. That's why you need 10 verses or a chapter of Scripture. Then you read it, and expect to hear God speak to us through that.

But what if your family story is like a movie? How many of you use Netflix? When you rent a DVD, do you pop it in, watch 5 minutes, and then ask yourself, 'What was that about?' And better yet, 'How does that relate to me?' No. No one does that. You watch the whole movie. Then you might go back and see how particular scenes fit into the larger story.

The Case Study

Main question: Is studying the Bible more like watching a slide show? Or like watching a whole movie? I'm going to take a passage out of Matthew's Gospel. We'll work through it together.

Mt.8:23 When he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. ²⁴ And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being covered with the waves; but Jesus himself was asleep. ²⁵ And they came to him and woke him, saying, 'Save us, Lord; we are perishing!' ²⁶ He said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm. ²⁷ The men were amazed, and said, 'What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?'

So let's first use *the slideshow option*. If we just took this scene, what would we conclude? Please turn to 1 or 2 other people and share what you think, or what you've heard about this passage. [gather feedback]

Essentially, this passage comes down to the question: Does the storm represent something? And many people have taken this passage to mean that Jesus calms the storms of your problems, or your bad circumstances. There's a problem with the view that the storm = your problems. What about all the times that Jesus does not make your problems go away? Did you know that one of the NYPD officers who were shot and killed was a Christian and was going to be ordained a chaplain later that day? Sometimes God does answer certain prayers like that, but sometimes our problems don't go away in the now. So that can't be what this passage fundamentally *means*.

So now let's use *the movie option*. What is the big story of Matthew's Gospel? Jesus training his disciples in his mission. It ends with the clearest Great Commission passage, where Jesus commissions his disciples to go into all

the world, teaching them all that he taught them. Now we're going to ask two questions as if we've watched the whole movie. How does this scene advance the whole story? What comes before and after the scene?

Before the scene comes this interaction: ^{8:18} Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to depart to the other side of the sea. ¹⁹ Then a scribe [someone who was highly educated in the Jewish system] came and said to him, 'Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.' ²⁰ Jesus said to him, 'The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' [In other words, I'm homeless, and you will be too, in a manner of speaking. But I'm taking you to places where your education won't matter. So the implication is that the scribe didn't really mean what he said, and didn't go.] ²¹ Another of the disciples said to him, 'Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.' [That is, let me fulfill a family obligation. My father died and there is a year while we wait for his body to decompose so that we can get his bones and properly bury his bones.] ²² But Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and allow the dead to bury their own dead.' [That is, the spiritually dead to bury their own physically dead, because on the other side of the sea there are people who haven't heard of me and I want to give them life. They're still physically alive.] (Matthew 8:18 – 22)

After the scene comes this: ^{8:28} When he came to the other side into the country of the Gadarenes, two men who were demon-possessed met him as they were coming out of the tombs. They were so extremely violent that no one could pass by that way. ²⁹ And they cried out, saying, 'What business do we have with each other, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?' ³⁰ Now there was a herd of many swine feeding at a distance from them. ³¹ The demons began to entreat him, saying, 'If you are going to cast us out, send us into the herd of swine.' ³² And he said to them, 'Go!' And they came out and went into the swine, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the waters. ³³ The herdsmen ran away, and went to the city and reported everything, including what had happened to the demoniacs. ³⁴ And behold, the whole city came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, they implored him to leave their region. (Matthew 8:28 – 34)

So, the scenes go like this:

- Jesus wants to go across the sea to the Gentiles; two Jewish men refuse (8:18 – 22)
- Jesus and the disciples cross the stormy sea; Jesus calms the storm (8:23 – 27)
- Jesus and the disciples find two Gentile men with demons; Jesus casts them into pigs, they drown (8:28 – 34)

So what is the storm? What is the sea? Now that you can see the larger story, the storm = a representation of the barriers that are there when Jesus calls us to love more people! Jesus sends us into them by asking us to cross them with him!

Illus: Here's a great example of how to properly talk about these storms. *Musalaha* is a ministry bringing reconciliation between Israeli Messianic Jews (believers in Jesus, or Y'shua) and Palestinian Christians. This is an email that I received November 9, 2012.

Dear Friends,

This past month has been a blessing with travels and activities here at Musalaha. Just a few weeks ago, some of our Israeli and Palestinian young adults headed to north for camping on the Sea of Galilee.

"For the evening devotional, Ronit, our young adult's coordinator shared from Mark 4:35-41. In the passage, Jesus was looking out at the Sea of Galilee near Tiberius, the exact same place where we were gathered together. Jesus gathered his close disciples on a boat, and told them "Let's go to the other side." (Mark 4:35, NIV) She pointed out that although the lake is small (with this "other side" easily visible from the shore), at the time of Jesus it created and represented a cultural boundary. Jesus and his followers were on the Jewish side, but in crossing over, they would have come to Gadara, a Greek city. Thus, in calling the disciplines on a journey across the lake, Jesus in his Jewishness was moving into a territory outside his ethnic comfort zone. In the next chapter, we see why he was going – to bring an act of healing to a man possessed by demons. The disciples would have been deeply reluctant to leave what was familiar to them, and come to a cultural context they did not relate to, to a group of people they knew only as foreigners and enemies.

As their boat journeyed across this boundary, Jesus and his disciples encountered a storm. This was related to ways in which boundary crossing often creates storms. It is often uncomfortable and frightening. When we try to reach out to the "other," we will frequently encounter obstacles, potential for misunderstanding, as the process of reconciling with

someone gets out of our control. We began this lesson with a discussion of prejudicial thoughts the Israelis and Palestinians direct against each other, making us think concretely about all the “storms” that can arise when we try to engage in the simple act of forming a relationship with someone we have been conditioned to think of as an “enemy.”

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 By Michael Fox
 Musalaha Intern

Illus: Here’s how it’s played out in my life. Years ago, one house on my street was having a lot of drug activity. Teenage boys in our neighborhood were being drawn in by the shows of wealth, like flashy cars. Little kids couldn’t play safely on the street because those men would drive really fast. Now I had heard stories of pastors going into drug houses and telling them about Jesus and totally transforming the situation. So I tried to get to know my neighbor and the men who always loitered around the house, but since they didn’t primarily speak English, and I couldn’t speak their language, so we couldn’t have much of a conversation. I went over and stood there for a few minutes, and they would laugh at me. So the barriers there were like the sea and the storm to the disciples in Matthew 8. Also, a guy two doors down had been exposed to vodou. He said to me, ‘Mako, I don’t tell a lot of people this, but I can see dead people.’ I thought, ‘What?! You mean like Bruce Willis in the movie *The Sixth Sense*???’ So that was another barrier. I had seen what I thought was demonic deliverance, but it was always in the context of a church service, where we outnumbered them! Now I wondered if I go over to those houses, will I be overpowered? Anyway, my attempts at conversations never went anywhere. We did start calling the police all the time! Things died down a bit. Years later, my friend prayed for the owner of the house, and his son. He appreciated that, and invited us to hold a worship service in his house. So we did. During that time, we asked for prayer requests. The husband and wife had physical pains, so we prayed for them. They experienced physical healing miraculously, and it was a turning point in their lives and in our neighborhood. Jesus calls us to cross barriers that are like the sea and the storm that his disciples crossed. Sometimes just so people can hear about Jesus at least.

Application: For you, what is the barrier Jesus is calling you to cross? You may be surprised. Maybe it’s an educational barrier, where you feel at a disadvantage in terms of education with someone else who has more education. But Jesus can call you across the barrier anyway, for his sake, for their sake, for your sake. He can either help you learn, or make it so that the differences doesn’t matter so much. Maybe there is a side of your family that your side of the family hasn’t talked to in a long time. Maybe it just feels awkward. But Jesus can call you across the barrier anyway.

And what do you learn about Jesus? You learn in a deeper, more personal way, that Jesus really is lord of creation. The disciples had read their family story. They knew from Genesis 1 that God was the one who spoke the waters of creation into being, and his Spirit hovered over it. Now, the disciples see Jesus speak the waters into stillness. So they have to now wrestle with this question, ‘Who is this man?’ Is he God? Psalm 89:9 says, ‘*You rule the swelling of the sea; when its waves rise, You still them.*’ That refers to God. And I think there are reasons why the disciples would have thought about that Psalm. Now they have to ask, ‘Is he really God?’ The disciples see Jesus in a new way. Not just in the same way as Genesis 1, but now in the context of Jesus’ mission, to spread his love to other people on the other side of the sea and the storm. Jesus is lord of creation, not just their little piece of the world. He is reclaiming it ALL. WITH THEM.

They also learn that Jesus is the one who makes a road through the sea to claim his inheritance. What is that like? The Exodus story, when God made a road through the sea to claim the inheritance. But in this case, the inheritance is not the promised land, but people. Even this little detail of Jesus casting the unclean demons into the unclean pigs, who then drown in the sea. That’s like the Egyptians who drowned in the sea.

In fact, if you look at just a little more of the movie, and read two chapters, Matthew 8 – 9, this is what you’d see. Jesus does ten miracles by his word.

Text	Subject	Issue	Jesus’ spoken word
8:1 – 4	Miracle 1	Uncleanness, leprosy	Jesus...touched him, <i>saying</i>
8:5 – 13	Miracle 2	Illness, suffering	<i>Just say the word</i>
8:14 – 17	Miracle 3	Fever, demons	He cast out the spirits <i>with a word</i>
8:18 – 22	Teaching 1	Jesus requires everything	
8:23 – 27	Miracle 4	Stormy sea	He... <i>rebuked</i> the winds and the sea

8:28 – 34	Miracle 5	Demons	He <i>said</i> to them, ‘Go!’
9:1 – 8	Miracle 6	Paralysis	He <i>said</i> to the paralytic
9:9 – 17	Teaching 2	Jesus has come for sinners	
9:18 – 26	Miracles 7 & 8	Uncleanness, death	Jesus turning and seeing her <i>said</i> ... He <i>said</i> , ‘Leave...’
9:27 – 31	Miracle 9	Blindness	He touched their eyes, <i>saying</i>
9:32 – 34	Miracle 10	Mute, demons	The mute man <i>spoke</i>
9:35 – 38	Teaching 3	More workers for the harvest!	

What’s happening here? It’s like God’s Ten Words on Egypt. Except Jesus is liberating people from demons, disease, and death – deeper enemies of human beings. That goes deeper than the Egyptians being the enemies of God’s people. Ultimately, Jesus will go ever deeper to get the ultimate enemy – the corruption of sin within our human nature. But now in his ministry, Jesus is freeing people from demons, disease, and death.

I know this is old school, but when the west coast rapper Notorious B.I.G. was killed, his friend, producer and fellow rapper Puff Daddy wrote a song called *I’ll Be Missing You*. He took an older song by The Police called *Every Breath You Take* and put his own layer on it. He sampled from it. *Every Breath You Take* is about a guy whose girlfriend broke up with him, and he just can’t get over it. So he says every breath you take, I’ll be watching you. It’s so creepy!! But Puff Daddy took that song and all the emotion behind it and put his own layer on it and sent it in a different direction. Instead of a stalker stalking his prey, he made it about missing my friend. I’ll be missing you. Instead of saying, ‘You’re always on my mind, I’m always thinking about you,’ to an ex-girlfriend, he said, ‘You’re always on my mind, I’m always thinking about you,’ to a friend who died.

That kind of thing happens all the time in the Bible. The Bible samples from itself. Jesus (or really in this case, Matthew) is sampling from older parts of the family story. And why not? He’s the same character trying to do something deeper than he did before. These ten words are words that liberate human beings from our more powerful enemies. And Jesus calls us to be his partners in that mission. That is our place in this family story. I hope you experience the joy of reading the Bible as the story of our family, really of God’s family, and then experiencing God through it.