

SESSION 3

THE GREAT STORY AND YOUR STORY

Supplies Needed

For the Cardboard Testimonials Exercise, provide each participant with a piece of blank cardstock (if you're in a pinch, regular letter paper will do) and a marker or thick pen.

Introduction

Welcome to Session 3 of *Embracing Evangelism*. In this third session, we will explore the Great Story and Your Story. First, let us open with prayer. *Offer your own prayer here, or use one of the following:*

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen.

Loving God, as we begin this session, may we remember the beauty of your story and our place in it. Help us to open our hearts and minds to what you would have us learn, as a group and as individuals. May we grow more brave as you lead us through your Spirit to proclaim with both word and example the Good News of God in your son Jesus Christ. Thank you for being present to us and through us, and for your love, which is greater than we can ask or imagine. Amen.

Begin the Video

Watch video from start to 16:32. Note these highlights for yourself:

Stories are the heart of evangelism, and everybody has one. You don't need a degree or a collar to share your story; you just need to notice the moments when you've experienced God's loving presence in your life and then to use your words – aloud – to share those stories.

Stories are also the heart of faith. Our faith wouldn't exist without stories. There's the story of God, which we discover when we look more deeply at our own lives and the lives of other people, and especially as we dive into scripture. That's where we find the Great Story.

The Old Testament is basically the long, complicated, beautiful, and sometimes disturbing saga of the Hebrew people's stories with God. That Great Story continues into the New Testament, when Jesus starts a new chapter in the story of God's life with us by coming to be among us in the flesh.

It's easy to see just how critical stories were to Jesus' ministry. He used them to teach profound and eternal truths, and he invited people to find a new life – and a new story – by following him.

Each of us knows and treasures parts of this Great Story as our own. Whether through parts of scripture, hymns, liturgy, or the lives of saints and faithful people, each of us has a special way we enter into the Great Story of God and God's people. That's the story we want to invite others into.

- *If your group is doing the Exploratory Exercise: Watch until 16:32, which is the end of the explanation of the Exploratory Exercise. Pause the video and lead your group in the exercise and the post-exercise discussion.*
- *If your group is not doing the Exploratory Exercise: Continue watching the video to witness the masterclass group as they try out the exercise.*

Exploratory Exercise: Cardboard Testimonials

For this exercise, each participant will need either a piece of blank cardstock and a marker to write in large, clear letters to share one's own testimony.

During a time of quiet meditation, ask participants:

- Take a minute to reflect on a moment of hardship, struggle, pain, or loss in your life (that you are willing to share with others).
- Where has God brought you, or at least, where do you see God in the struggle now?

After a minute or two, you may offer this explanation:

You might still be in the process of healing, and it is OK if that is the story you want to share. Simply follow your story's arc: 1) Here's where I was. 2) Here's where God has taken me or is taking me. In the simplest way, you're narrating the transformation that God has worked in your life. You're testifying to the truth of God's work in your life.

You'll eventually be sharing your story with others, so make sure the story is something you're comfortable with other people knowing – but don't let that stop you from being open and vulnerable. Remember: We carry this message in jars of clay. We're broken vessels. The cracks are OK – that's how the light comes through.

Give a moment of silence to allow for more reflection. Then, explain that the next step in this exercise is to name the transformation:

Take your piece of cardboard or paper, and using a marker, write the following in large print and as briefly – but clearly – as possible: On one side of the cardboard, capture part one of your journey – the source of the pain or heartache. On the other side of the cardboard, capture part two – where God has brought or is bringing healing.

You may show your own example, so people can see how much and how large they should write. Examples might include:

- *Paralyzed by fear and anxiety ... Receiving therapy and opening to God's loving presence*
- *Heartbroken at loss of child ... Sharing love as foster parent*
- *Painful divorce ... Restored relationships with old friends*

Once everyone has completed both sides, ask participants to stand up and walk around, pausing at each person to silently show both sides of their board. Ask participants to witness both sides of each other's cardboard. They should not tell their story or explain their card, but rather simply acknowledge the glory of what God has done in a way both people agree on. You might encourage a smile, a tear, a hug, a high five, a hand on the shoulder, or an "Amen!" or "Thank God!" Participants should celebrate with each other and then keep moving.

One-to-One StorySharing

After a few minutes and lots of milling around, ask everyone to stop where they are and break into pairs for One-to-One StorySharing. This is an opportunity to share the story behind the cards and celebrate God's healing, transformative presence in each other's lives. Invite participants to self-select who will be Partner A and who will be Partner B.

Explain Round 1:

- Partner A will share the story behind each side of their cardboard testimonial. Partner B will listen.
- After Partner A has shared for 90 seconds (*at which time you will give the group a signal*), Partner B should respond for a minute about where they saw God in what was shared, using the prompt, "Here's where I heard or saw God in what you shared...."

You then will signal for the pairs to pause so the other partner can share.

Explain Round 2:

- Now, Partner B will share the story of each side of their cardboard for 90 seconds (*at which time you will signal*). Partner A will listen.
- Partner A will then reflect back for one minute, using the prompt, "Here's where I heard or saw God in what you shared...."

Brief Discussion

Pose the following questions to the group:

- How does it feel to share and receive these testimonies?
- What did you learn about your own story?
- What did you learn about how God works and what God's presence looks like?

*Let's resume the video and see how the *Embracing Evangelism* participants did.*

Resume the Video

Watch from 20:25 to 32:30. At that point, pause the video for discussion.

Discussion & Reflection Questions

Use the following reflection questions to guide your discussion. Depending on time, you might choose one or two on which to focus. Encourage participants to reflect on the remaining questions later themselves.

Think back to when you heard the Great Story of God alive in the world – in scripture, worship, song, conversation, or stories of the lives of followers of Jesus through the ages and today.

- Which parts of the story do you treasure? Why?
- How would you capture the Great Story of God in relationship to the world?
- What's the Good News of God's loving presence?

Think of your own story of faith.

- At which moments did you sense God stirring? When did God move or change you?
- Who are your faith ancestors and mentors – the people whose faith and lives you admire?
- What were their lives like? What was the role of faith in their stories?

Finish the Video

Review the Try It Out section of the Participant Guide (see guide for more detailed instructions). Encourage participants to do the following before the next session:

- Consider the moments when you felt God show up in your life.
- Share the story of one of these moments with someone you know.
- If one of your faith ancestors or mentors is living, tell that person what his or her story and faith mean to you.

Close with Prayer

In your own words, thank God for being present in each person's life and in the stories shared, and especially for being present and helping us during the difficult and painful times in our lives. Thank God for the honesty and openness of the people in the room and for the holy time with each other. Pray for God's gifts of courage, kindness, care, and love as we open ourselves to others and as we receive what others have to share. Thank God for the Great Story of which we are all a part.