

SECTION 11

Participant Pages

Readings for Huddle Participants



SouthBrook
CHRISTIAN CHURCH

SECTION 11:

THE STORY OF GOD

(NUMBERS 35-37 IN “52 WEEKS OF HUDDLES”)

Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.¹

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times...²

In a hole in the ground, there lived a hobbit.³

Stories. They engross us, captivate us, bore us, disgust us, move us. Whether fact or fiction, every story proposes some form of truth, a take on reality that begs we see things in a new light.

Characters, real and imagined, find their identities in the stories in which they believe themselves to be. Harry Potter's view of reality is transformed when his eyes are opened to a world of magic beyond his mundane life at number four Privet Drive to discover he is a key player in the prevention of Voldemort's evil rise to power. Luke Skywalker, the nephew of a moisture farmer on the planet Tatooine, is caught up in the cause of the rebel alliance fighting to save the galaxy from the oppressive Empire and its new super weapon, the Death Star. For Charles Darnay, the French Revolution provides a backdrop of extremes, of hope and despair, beauty and horror. And for Bilbo Baggins, his quaint life is interrupted when thirteen dwarves and a powerful wizard coax him to embrace the role of “burglar” to steal back a sacred dwarven artifact from the malevolent dragon, Smaug.

Of course, those are all fictional accounts; but real life narratives abound too, vying for the influence of our views of what's real, what's true. Each of us has been given the freedom to choose how these stories will impact our view of life.

The God of Biblical Scripture, too, has a story, according to the Scripture writers, who insist its truth is confirmed by the resurrection of Jesus.⁴ It is a story God does not force us to believe, but if we can agree that Jesus rose from the dead, we can agree that this story has real merit. We might even agree that if it is *God's* story, the one He is eternally penning and of which He has the starring role, then it is the highest, truest, most real story. The God of Scripture invites us to embrace His story as our *metanarrative*—the overarching story of all of life, by which we understand everything else.

Four distinct movements can be identified in God's story. Here is the much-abbreviated story of God in those four movements, represented by our graphic “Story of God” tool for the S of Scripture:

CREATION: *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”⁵ God is the uncaused cause, of everything else. God is CreaTOR. Everything else is CreaTION. He made light and life; gravity and gamma rays; space and stars; black holes and bunnies. He made it all for His glory and good pleasure. God made us too, in His image, to enjoy an unbroken relationship with Himself and others under His rule. He made us with an*

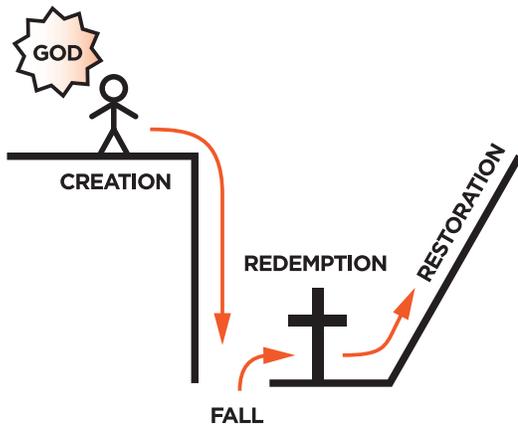
¹ Opening line of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, by J.K. Rowling.

² Opening phrase from *A Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens

³ Opening line of *The Hobbit*, by J.R.R. Tolkien.

⁴ Christianity hinges on the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. If Jesus did not rise, Christianity is a farce, but if it is true and if it is believed, we have life in His name! 1 Cor. 15:19

⁵ Genesis 1:1



amazing purpose: To be fruitful and multiply, using our God-given talents and resources to partner with Him in ruling over and caring for creation, displaying His image throughout the earth. ⁶ God pronounced His creation GOOD. There was harmony between God and people.

FALL: *At Satan's solicitation, the first people used one of the greatest gifts God gave humans, free choice, to rebel against God, turning from His rule in their lives. Thus, our relationship with God was broken as sin entered the scene. Sin separated us from God*

and all that He is for us. Humanity's enslavement to sin opened the door to Disease, Decay, Destruction and Death. As humans filled the earth, so did these, ravaging God's creation. This was NOT good. Humanity's rebellion incurred the penalty of death and forever-separation from God. Furthermore, all attempts made by humans to remedy this brokenness fall short. There is simply nothing we can do on our own to repair our relationship with God or earn our way back into His favor.

REDEMPTION: *However, because of His great love, God promised to rescue humankind from our sin and its effects. He chose a family, Israel, from whom He would bring forth the Great Rescuer. He revealed Himself to Israel for the sake of the world by giving them His law, His promises, the sacrificial system, the prophets, the kings, and by doing many miraculous works, which all pointed to the One He would send. Finally came Jesus Christ, His Son, the Great Rescuer, who entered our brokenness, becoming one of us. He lived in perfect, unbroken relationship with God, calling people back to life under God's rule. Jesus, who was Himself God, offered His perfect life in place of ours as payment for our mistakes, taking the punishment humanity deserved by dying painfully on a cross. God accepted Jesus' perfect sacrifice in place of our own. Jesus rose from the dead, conquering sin and death, and ascended into Heaven as King. A relationship with God and His Kingdom are available to everyone now, not through works, but through faith in Jesus and His work on our behalf.*

RESTORATION: *Through faith in Jesus as our King and Savior, we have access again to God as His dearly loved children. We are part of His family, the church, a community of believers all over the world who are free again to enjoy a relationship with God and life under His rule. He gives us His Holy Spirit to restore us to wholeness in Jesus. He empowers us to once again partner with Him to rescue and renew all creation through Jesus' work. And one day, Jesus promises to return and bring an end to all evil, sin, and rebellion. His kingdom will come in fullness, and everyone and everything will live under His rule. Until then, we get to live life His way, giving people a foretaste of what life is like in His kingdom. ⁷*

Now, of course, there is much more to the story, and we get to spend the rest of our lives unpacking the mysteries of God found in all of Scripture. But understanding these four movements as illustrated by this tool—creation, fall, redemption, and restoration—can help us in a number of ways. They give us:

A **map** for understanding Scripture.

A **lens** for life's episodes.

A **story** to share.

A **sonar** device for navigating culture.

⁶ See the Participant Pages on the covenant and service triangles for more on these themes

⁷ Much of the wording here is taken from the Gospel Primer by Caesar Kalinowski, page 31

1. A MAP FOR UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE.

Some friends and I decided last summer to read through the whole Bible in a year, and for the most part, it has been great. Building into our lives a rhythm of regularly taking in Scripture is essential if we want God's story to be our story.

Some parts of Scripture though are tough to get through, like chewing unripe celery. Have you ever felt confused, bored, or overwhelmed by Scripture? I have. This morning, I spent ten minutes reading the same verse because I kept spacing out. Sometimes when I'm slogging through verse after verse on the genealogy of the tribe of Gad or laws about defiling skin diseases, my mind drifts. Currently, we're in

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "When anyone has a swelling or a rash or a shiny spot on their skin that may be a defiling skin disease,[a] they must be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons[b] who is a priest. The priest is to examine the sore on the skin, and if the hair in the sore has turned white and the sore appears to be more than skin deep, it is a defiling skin disease. When the priest examines that person, he shall pronounce them ceremonially unclean. If the shiny spot on the skin is white but does not appear to be more than skin deep and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest is to isolate the affected person for seven days. On the seventh day the priest is to examine them, and if he sees that the sore is unchanged and has not spread in the skin, he is to isolate them..." — Leviticus 13

the middle of the book of Jeremiah, which is filled with pages of the prophet Jeremiah's words describing Israel's and the surrounding nations' impending, horrific doom. In weaker moments, I'd like to hit the fast forward button.

On the other hand, I have been amazed at how God can speak through even difficult passages of Scripture when we zoom out and ask God to help us understand what we're reading as we consider where we are on the whole map of Scripture.

What's going on in Jeremiah, for example? Well, Israel was choosing the **FALL** reality over God's world **RESTORATION** plan. Rather than living from the identity their **CREATOR** had given them and being a

light to the other nations; they were instead acting just like all of them, turning their backs on God and His laws, sacrificing their children on the altars of fake gods, and oppressing the needy.

Repentance, obedience to the law and the temple sacrifices were the means God had given them at the time to demonstrate their faith in His plan for **REDEMPTION**, so His just wrath would be delayed until He poured it out on Jesus. But they would have none of it, so God's wrath was building like water behind a dam. Soon, Jeremiah said, that dam would break.⁸

Now, if we read Jeremiah without understanding the big story of Scripture, we might be put off by God's anger. Richard Dawkins, a biologist and prominent atheist, points at passages like the ones in Jeremiah and says, "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak."

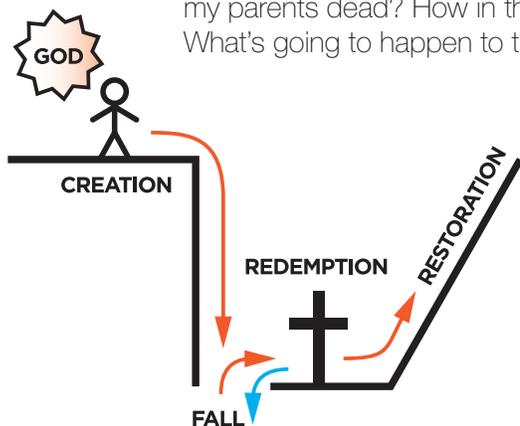
But when we understand the big picture, we can see God's love. Jeremiah's words were God's gift to warn Israel to step back under His umbrella of grace and love before the

⁸ 2 Chronicles 36:15-16 NLT: The Lord, the God of their ancestors, repeatedly sent his prophets to warn them, for he had compassion on his people and his Temple. But the people mocked these messengers of God and despised their words. They scoffed at the prophets until the LORD'S anger could no longer be restrained and nothing could be done.

hail came and it was too late. Abundant, eternal life is only found in Him. The most loving thing God can offer us is Himself. God loved His creation so much that He was willing to remove every obstacle that was keeping it from redeemed life in Him, even if it meant allowing calamity for a time.

2. A LENS FOR LIFE'S EPISODES.

Earlier this week, I was scrolling through Facebook and happened to see an article about a child in town who had awakened that morning to find BOTH of his parents dead from an opioid overdose. The next day, my son told me that same boy goes to his school and is on his football team. My son saw the boy show up at school that morning, but he never made it inside. He looked completely lost standing on the sidewalk outside the school, and suddenly he started weeping. A bunch of the guys from his team had surrounded him and given him a big hug, having no idea what else to do. Then the boy left. My three sons and I processed through this together, as we each wrestled with our own questions: "What would I do if I came out and found both my parents dead? How in the world does a boy ever recover from such a tragedy? What's going to happen to the boy now?"



We don't have to dig too deeply to discover that we and everyone around us are experiencing the effects of the Fall. Some of them are happening to or in us; some are happening because of us. Sin lands us in some deep, dark pits.

Jesus meets us in our pits.

The gospel, the good news, says that no matter where we are in life, no matter how deep we have sunk or how much pain we have experienced, God and His grace are available now, there, through Jesus. He

suffers with us. He is working to bring us to Him. He is waiting for access.

His plan is to **redeem** and **restore**.

To **redeem** is "to buy back." A marred painting at a garage sale that looks worthless and destined for the dump is suddenly given value and a new future when a painter with a keen eye walks in and buys it.

To **restore** is to renovate. That same painting is transformed when the painter removes its blemishes, adds beautiful color, and gives it a new frame.

The value of the painting was settled at its time of purchase—a few bucks. But the artist still saw enough value in it to restore it to something beautiful. Our value and worth were settled at the cross. Now, if the worth of an item at the time of purchase is determined by the price paid for it...then how can we dare not believe God will work to restore us, even in our worst sin and pain?⁹

I can't possibly imagine what the boy who lost his parents is experiencing right now. But my Jesus can. He can salvage what looks hopeless. Always. Every time. That's the lens through which God sees the world. It's the "Story of God" lens for life.

⁹ Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (emphasis mine)

The cross and empty tomb are the final words on what God wants to do with our sin and pain. We see how God took the very worst thing that has ever happened—the torture and death of Jesus at the hands of His creation—and turned it into the best thing that has ever happened: The way to salvation for all humankind, all of creation. If God can redeem the worst thing, the most hopeless thing, He can redeem our thing too. In fact, He promises it.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. —Romans 8:28-29

No one alive, no matter what they've experienced or chosen, is beyond His concern or reach. For the woman who just left the abortion clinic; for the man caught in an affair; for the patient in hospice with stage 4 lung cancer; for the couple in an ugly divorce; for the gambler who just lost all his kids' tuition in a card game; for the boy who just lost both parents to an overdose—there is good news.

Someday, God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Until then, we will continue to experience the effects of the FALL. It's important to remember that EVERY time we find ourselves in a pit—when we mess up or feel tempted or get hurt or feel ugly inside—there is good news. Jesus is here. He died to take our sin and pain. By His wounds we are healed. He beckons us to come. He is at work NOW to redeem and restore. That's the Story of God lens for life.

3. A STORY TO SHARE.

The summary of the four movements of God's story above is a powerful bit of truth. We would do well to memorize it. It's the good news! In fact, if I was stranded on a deserted island knowing nothing of God, and a paper washed up on shore in my language that contained those words, I would have enough to find my way to salvation through Jesus.

Peter wrote, *“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”*¹⁰ Our sharing the four movements of God's story with someone may be the means by which God works to bring that person to salvation.

There is one particular sub-plot of that story that is particularly powerful when it comes to first introducing people to God's larger story.

Our own.

The gospel has great power. Colossians 1 says *“the gospel is bearing fruit all over the world.”* Its power is witnessed when it touches and transforms a life. The story of how the gospel has transformed *my* life is my testimony. When I share it, I'm testifying to what I've seen God do.

Our testimony is a powerful tool for evangelism, especially in America. Dwight L. Moody said, “Out of 100 men, one **will read the Bible**, the other 99 **will read** the Christian.” People here in the west have become leery of words that sound like sales pitches. Our testimony isn't a sales pitch. It's *evidence*. The truth of the big story is demonstrated in *our* stories.

Our testimony is powerful because it is *ours*. We have first-hand experience of how God is at work in the world because He is at work in *us*. Our sharing becomes an invitation for others to consider: "This person's life is different. Could *my* life be different?"

So, how do we go about getting "prepared to give an answer," as Peter told us to do? Well, I think a great way to go about this is to tell our personal stories using those same four movements applied to our lives. We can pattern our own story after His. And thus, we have a story to share.

Notice how Jesus' life reflects the big story of God:

- Creation > Incarnation:** God, the Creator, became one of us, entering our world as a man.
- Fall > Crucifixion:** Jesus experienced the horrific effects of sin as He took our punishment.
- Redemption > Resurrection:** God raised Jesus from the dead. Sin's power was broken.
- Restoration > Ascension:** God restored Jesus to the highest place of authority in heaven.

We can look for the same pattern in *our* lives by asking, "What is my Creation/Fall/Redemption/Restoration story?"

- Creation:** Where did I come from? What was life like before surrendering to Christ? What was my belief system? In what did I find my identity?
- Fall:** How did I experience the struggle and pain of a fallen world? How did I recognize my need for God?
- Redemption:** When was I introduced to Jesus? How and when did I decide to surrender to Jesus as my Lord and Savior?
- Restoration:** How has God transformed me since meeting Christ? How has my life been different since then?

Taking time to think through and answer these questions helps us remember how God's truth intersects with ours and gives us a powerful story to share with others. The Apostle Paul himself shared his creation/fall/redemption/restoration story, on multiple occasions, two of which can be read in Acts 22, and 26. Our conversion stories are often what we think of when we hear the term "testimony." Many people I know have carefully thought through and written out theirs, both as a reminder of God's work in their lives, and also to have ready in their minds if someone asks, "What happened to you? Why are you different?"

In fact, every bit of the work we see God do in our relationships, trials and triumphs becomes a part of our testimony we can share with others, as we continue to experience the gospel at work in our lives. As we grow in our skills of listening to where people are, we can learn to share the pieces of our story most relevant to people at the time, whether it be 15 seconds or 15 minutes worth.

In an earlier section of the Participant Pages, I shared about a dinner Jody, and I had with a friend-couple, Brian and Claire, at Champps restaurant. During our time at Champps, they asked us to tell them the story of how we got married. I was so glad they asked because it's a part of our testimony that's fun to share.

Since I know you are just dying to hear it, here's a summation:

Creation (where things began): *Jody and I met at Miami University at Campus Crusade for Christ's first meeting of the school year. As a sophomore, I felt some responsibility to help first year students feel welcome, so I walked up to this girl (happened to be Jody) and her friend, and said, "Hi!" They just sort of giggled a lot, which I later found out was because they had just been talking about how Jody had seen me earlier and thought I was hot. Yes, I'm serious. She shared with her friend later that she was pretty sure I was the guy she would marry. Jody and I became great friends. For the next two years, we spent a lot of time together. We started to have feelings for each other—which made me nervous. I didn't want to have feelings for Jody! Her Air Force ROTC involvement meant she was committed to traveling the globe for six years following graduation, and I felt like God had called me to Youth Ministry. I didn't see how it would work. Unfortunately, I was smitten. In spite of my reservations, we started dating in February of my junior year. We were both Christ-followers, we had been friends for years, and we liked each other. How bad could it be?*

Fall (when things went south): *Since being married, whenever someone has asked what our 2-½ year dating experience was like, we've described it in one way: It—excuse my language—SUCKED. The Air Force/Youth Ministry disparity loomed. We didn't want to be in a relationship that wasn't headed for marriage; Jody thought it could, but I didn't see it. I wasn't ready to give up, but I didn't want to give her false hope, so whenever we did talk about marriage, I would strongly qualify it. "Not that we're **going** to get married, but if we get married..." This drove Jody crazy. "Why can't you just live in the moment!" She sensed that I wouldn't give my heart fully to her, which made her insecure, causing her to snap at me, which made me pull away. It was like that for months. She wanted to make me love her; I wanted her to see that I was right about our relationship being impossible. We tried meeting with my pastor and his wife for some relationship mentoring; they said, "Sorry, we just don't see how this relationship is going to work." I accepted a job as a youth pastor, which solidified the fact I was sticking around. Spending time together was no fun anymore. Why were we even dating? I could see no earthly reason. We were distressed, frustrated and sad.*

Redemption (turning to Jesus): *Soon after meeting with our pastor, I figured it was time we break things off. We both saw it coming. We sat on the couch in her off-campus house one night, and I started sharing with her why I felt it was time to break up—or at least I tried. As I started talking, emotion hit me like nausea on a spinny ride. I was crying. And every time I tried to say my break-up speech I would cry more. Usually my emotions are delayed, but that night I couldn't hold them back. What was going on? As my failed attempts multiplied, I sensed that Jesus impressed something on my heart: "I know you can't see any earthly reason to stay together—but did you ask me?" I hadn't, not really. I wasn't open to the possibility that God could make this work. It had just felt too risky to believe. Plus, I wanted to prove I was right. Right there, out loud*

with her, I prayed something like this: “God, I don’t know what you want to do with this relationship, but I sense you might not be done with it. I surrender this relationship to you. Please forgive me for not trusting you. Jody is leaving for the Air Force in just five months or so; even though I can’t see why, I will continue to pursue her and love her, because I trust you. If it has to end in five months, so be it, but I will trust you with it until then.” And then, I prayed the scariest, most vulnerable part. “God, I really care about this girl. Will you please let me marry her?”

Restoration (new experience through Jesus): After that night our relationship improved enormously. Since surrendering the outcome to God, I had an incredible peace about the relationship, come what may. Our bickering all but stopped. We were enjoying each other’s company again. All the while, her departure date inched closer. Jody went to a pre-marriage conference to give our relationship a good hard look, and rather than being discouraged, she walked away feeling like we were moving in a great direction. A month before Jody’s departure, she invited me to Jay Alexander’s, explaining she had something to tell me. “What’s the occasion?” I asked over dinner. “Well, she said, I just wanted to tell you that I’m ready to marry you.” She was giving me the green light; if I asked, she would say yes. My response was profound and romantic: “Whoa, no one has ever said that to me before.” I prayed like crazy. “Okay God,” I said, “I’m in too. Show me the way.” There was no anxiety; no worry about the fact Jody was leaving. And then, a scant three weeks before she was to ship off, Jody went in for a routine medical exam and was medically discharged from the Air Force because of an infraction in her minor windpipe that **could** one day lead to asthma. Three years of Jody’s college bills had been paid in full by the Air Force. She was released with no strings attached. We got married four months later.

Fun, huh? And it was extremely impactful, especially to Claire. It was after sharing this piece of our story that she *invited herself* to come with us to SouthBrook.

4. A SONAR DEVICE FOR NAVIGATING CULTURE.

Did you know virtually everyone has a gospel story they believe? Everyone believes some version of Creation/Fall/Redemption/Restoration, even if it’s not God’s version.

Tim Chester and Steve Timmis write:

Everyone has a gospel story. Everyone. Everyone has their version of salvation. They are gospel stories in that they purport to offer good news. In other words, there are secular gospels as well as religious gospels.

We can use the framework of creation, fall, redemption, and [restoration]¹¹ as four points of intersection—four points at which people’s stories intersect with the gospel story. Obviously, people do not use the categories of creation, fall, redemption and [restoration]. But they will talk about who they are and what they are meant to be (creation). They will talk about what is wrong with them or what is wrong with the world—somebody or something will be blamed (fall). They will also have a sense of what needs to happen for things to be put right (redemption) and some sense of the state of affairs that they are hoping will give meaning or satisfaction ([restoration]).¹²

¹¹ Tim and Steve use “Consummation” or “New Creation” in place of “Restoration.” Same idea, different word.

¹² Chester, Tim, and Timmis, Steve, *Everyday Church*, p. 115-116, Copyright 2012, Published by Crossway, Wheaton IL

- Creation:** My *identity*, my belief system. What do I assume about how the world should be?
- Fall:** My *problem*. What do I think is wrong the world? With me?
- Redemption:** My *solution*. What do I think will make things better? What helps me “escape”?
- Restoration:** My *hope*. What do I dream about? What could occur if the solution is achieved?

Sonar is short for “Sound Navigation and Ranging”. A sonar device listens for objects ahead, so a ship knows how to navigate through the water. The four movements of God’s story can act as a sort of sonar device to help us put on “Gospel ears.” It helps us identify and navigate the fallen cultural gospels we, and others around us, may believe.

So what are some of these other gospels people believe? Well, one that’s very common in America is the *American Dream* gospel. The American dream, according to the manifold wisdom of Google, is “the ideal that every US citizen should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative.” The four movements of the American dream gospel might go something like this:

- Creation:** I deserve a shot at the good life and can achieve my dreams.
- Fall:** A lack of skills, motivation, and the right opportunities are blocking my dreams.
- Redemption:** Through hard work, determination, and initiative I can overcome the obstacles to my dreams.
- Restoration:** If I work hard and keep at it, I will experience comfort, ease, and fulfillment of my dreams—The Good Life.

Or how about the “Political gospel”? Every time an election happens, we see evidence of this gospel show up all over the place, especially on social media, as people spew forth their thoughts. That gospel might go something like this:

- Creation:** Peace and prosperity are achieved when the right government is in place in our nation.
- Fall:** Our country is experiencing turmoil because of bad leadership.
- Redemption:** If the right people are elected, and the wrong people are opposed, things will turn around.
- Restoration:** With a long enough run of the right people leading, we will live in harmony, fortune, and peace.

Steve Timmis and Tim Chester share what a man in their church, Jonny, calls the “slimmer’s gospel”, the belief system of many of the people he met in a weight loss program:

- Creation:** I’m meant to be happy and valued.
- Fall:** I’m not physically attractive enough because I’m overweight.
- Redemption:** I can change through willpower, weight loss, and exercise.
- Restoration:** I hope that my body will be transformed because then I’ll be appreciated.

Why is it important to identify these different gospels we see in the culture?

Because it helps us see how to live and share the *true* gospel among those around us.

Notice that each of these above gospels misses the mark. They each fall short of achieving “the good life” for the person who believes them. God has designed us so that only through Jesus do we have His eternal, abundant life. Identifying the fallen gospels people believe helps us better know how to share the real one.

Notice how the slimmer’s gospel assumes that a person’s value and worth are attached to their appearance and food. Jesus has a different story for the one finding their identity in their waist size. Jonny says it might go something like this:

- Creation:** I’m meant to enjoy God and enjoy His good gifts.
- Fall:** I use God’s gift of food to replace God and find myself enslaved by food and filled with shame.
- Redemption:** Jesus restores me by offering His body in my place, and He invited me to a meal with Him.
- Restoration:** I can find lasting satisfaction in Jesus the bread of life, so I’m liberated from my need for refuge in food.

Do you see how this is good news to the “slimmer”? Knowing the gospel for this context helps me know how to combat the slavery that comes with believing my worth is determined by food and waist size. It helps me remember that food is a gift, not an enemy and that in Christ I have the power to walk in freedom as I lean on Him. Knowing this truth helps me know how to speak to and treat those around me.

Our PLAY Group recently changed its mission. Because of our phase of life, many in our group spend lots of time on the sidelines of our kids’ activities like soccer and wrestling and orchestra. Thus, we’ve decided to make our mission, “Sidelines.” We are driven by the question, “How would Jesus live if He were a kid or an adult, on and off the field?”

Anyone who has kids in sports will tell you there is dysfunction in our kids’ sports cultures! That dysfunction comes because of fallen beliefs, fallen gospels. We have begun to identify at least one fallen gospel some people believe on the sidelines. It goes something like this:

THE SIDELINE PARENT'S GOSPEL:

- Creation:** My children were born with amazing talents. When they succeed in them, my kids and I are happy.
- Fall:** Imperfect coaches and instructors, and my children's lack of motivation are keeping them from meeting my expectations of success.
- Redemption:** Applying motivational pressure to my kids and the other adults in their lives will help my kids achieve the success they were born for.
- Restoration:** My input and their effort will get them the playing time, praise, awards, and even scholarships they deserve as they succeed in their activities. When they do, we are fulfilled and at peace.

Notice that not everything about this gospel is necessarily false. Maybe one's child was born with amazing talents. But it is a fallen gospel because it is based on performance, pressure, and circumstance. Imagine the burden a child may feel knowing her parents' happiness is based on her success. And for the parents, joy is tied to their version of their child's success. It might even pit them against the other kids' parents on the sidelines, as their kids vie for top spots.

Fallen versions of the gospel are rampant in the wide world of kids sports and activities. We parents and kids have to be careful not to start believing them ourselves. Just like Frodo, Harry, and Luke, we find our identities in the stories in which we believe ourselves to be. If we believe that story, we'll act like everyone else.

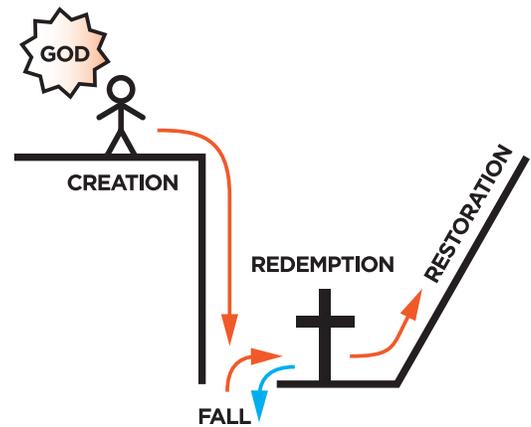
So we've begun to ask Jesus, "Hey, what's *Your* version of the Sidelines gospel—the one with *You* at the center? What is the good news to this crowd?" Perhaps it goes something like this:

- Creation:** God, has created us to know Him, glorify Him, and serve others through the unique gifts and talents He has given each of us.
- Fall:** We have become slaves to the belief that our worth is tied to our performance with our gifts and talents.
- Redemption:** Jesus settled our value and worth at the cross. We find our identity in Him, regardless of how we perform.
- Restoration:** We are now free to grow in our gifts and talents for God's glory, our joy, and others' benefit.

This is the gospel of grace. Pressure to grow becomes *freedom* to grow. Sure, we have God-bestowed gifts, but our value is not tied to them. And the other parents' and kids' value is not tied to them either. It's according to that gospel—the true gospel—that we will treat and speak to others. Our lives become invitations to the truth that sets people free.

How might we share this gospel with others, especially those who don't believe yet? It might mean:

- Buying hot chocolate for the other sideline parents on a cold day.
- Encouraging the heck out of our and others' kids on the field, even when they make mistakes.
- Asking other parents to tell us about their kids (parents love talking about their kids!).
- Saying hello to the opposing team's fans, and telling them "good game".
- Talking to a coach with grace and truth when we feel something has gone wrong.
- Inviting the other families to dinner.
- Praying for the team parents and kids when they're sick, anxious or hurting.
- Sharing our testimonies of how Jesus has met us in our lives when the opportunity arises.



These are all ways we bring the gospel of Jesus to life with others on and inside the Sidelines.

What fallen versions of the gospel do you hear at work, where your PLAY Group serves, where you hang out? What genuine needs and desires are people trying to meet through pursuing them?

As we put on gospel ears, we will hear the stories born of a fallen world. And we will better know how to invite others to join us in taking a supporting role in the greater story, the gospel of Jesus, the story of God.