

Chapter 15: Seeing the Forest for the Trees

Lower Story

Upper Story

The raven feeds Elijah

Miraculous victory/overwhelming odds

Conquest in enemy territory

40 days in desert before commissioning

Passing baton of leadership

Ascension to heaven

Successor demonstrates mantle/miracles

Both stretched out over death

Resurrection of first-born son

Healing of Naaman

Wash in the Jordan as obedience

Grace replaces death to Arameans

Covenant signified by meal

Angels surrounded Elisha

Enemies blinded

Hosea marries prostitute

Hosea buys her back

Today's Equipping Point

It's time we stepped up and _____.

It's time we stepped up and _____.

It's time we stepped up and _____.

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.

1 Corinthians 2:9

Four Questions

1. _____?

2. _____?

3. _____?

4. _____?

Table Discussion (use the four questions above)

Teaching Script

I know it's overused and very familiar, but when it comes to parables about seeing the big picture, nothing comes close to the story of The Blind Men and the Elephant.

- Felt the leg, like a tree
- Felt the trunk, like a snake
- Felt the ear, like a fan
- Felt the side, like a wall
- Felt the tail, like a rope
- Felt the tusk, like a spear

You can draw many lessons from this, but the one we need to concentrate on this morning is understanding the broad view. Each blind man only examined part of the elephant, and drew conclusions based on limited data, when in fact the reality was more than the sum of all the parts.

As we come to Chapter 15 of *The Story*, Israel was much like these blind men. To use our imagery from last week, they were flying along, uninformed, untrained, and unaware that they were low on fuel. Somebody needed to wake everyone up. Somebody needed to break through this empty-headedness and help Israel see that they were steadily proceeding to the crash site.

But how to break through? How big of a 2x4 was going to be needed to get their attention? Israel needed to be sobered up, and fast. So in Chapter 15 of *The Story*, God sent messengers—prophets—to jolt them out of their stupor and kick them in their collective butt.

These prophets, from Elijah to Elisha to Amos to Hosea, all said and did startling things to get through to the people. But as we go through these events, I want you to watch them not just from ground level, but also from blimp level. Listen to these individual stories (don't fill in the chart just yet), but also see what happens as if you're watching a parade from a hot-air balloon. Because what we'll see isn't just the trees, but more importantly, the forest. Not just the Lower Story, but the all-encompassing Upper Story of God.

Elijah was first, and he warned Ahab that Israel would experience a 3-year drought because of their worship of the pagan god, Baal. Ahab had even built a temple for Baal in the capital city of Samaria. As the land shriveled up, it seemed a fitting picture of Israel's desiccated hearts and shrunken worship.

And then, the gauntlet was thrown down. Atop Mount Carmel, the supposed sacred dwelling place of Baal, Elijah challenged the idolaters to the ultimate Smackdown—YHWH vs. Baal. Of course, Baal failed to show up but the LORD made a dramatic statement when He consumed the water-logged sacrifice with fire. Elijah then put to death the 450 prophets of Baal. Ahab's wife Jezebel then threatened to kill him, so Elijah fled into the desert. God cared for him there, and encouraged him to get some sleep and eat a couple of good meals. After that, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Mount Horeb. God revealed Himself there to Elijah, much like He had done nearly 600 years

earlier to Moses at Sinai. He told Elijah that he had kings and prophets to anoint—one of whom was his successor, Elisha. Once again, as with Moses and Joshua, God was passing the baton to the next generation of leaders who would speak for Him.

While the two prophets were traveling together, Elijah parted the Jordan by striking the water with his cloak—another throwback to Moses. As they continued on, a whirlwind took Elijah up to heaven in a chariot of fire. The cloak fell to Elisha whose authority was confirmed when he too divided the Jordan. Similar to Elijah before him, Elisha performed many miraculous feats for the benefit of Israel. He promised a barren Shunammite woman a son. When the boy suddenly died years later, Elisha brought him back to life.

Later, when the Aramean king sent his troops to capture this man of God, Elisha prayed and asked God to open his servant's eyes so he could see the angels who were standing guard around them, and to blind the Arameans. Elisha then led his captives to Samaria where he asked the king of Israel to prepare a feast of friendship in lieu of execution. This unconventional act of grace established peace between Israel and Aram.

But even then—even with the powerful ministries of Elijah and Elisha, the idolaters remained numerous and unrepentant. So God sent Amos, a herdsman from the southern kingdom of Judah, to warn the northern kingdom of Israel that her prosperity, injustice and sinful ways would soon be judged. He promised them that if Israel did not repent, they would be taken captive. God also sent Hosea as a living object lesson of His faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness. He was told to marry Gomer, an unfaithful woman who, after bearing his children, hit as many night spots and gin joints as she could squeeze into an evening. But Israel still refused to hear the pleas of God to return to Him.

This is the Lower Story of Chapter 15—the retelling of the events as they happened. But now we want to see the forest, not just the trees. We want to see these events in light of the over-arching Upper Story of God. There are few chapters where each incident has so much meaning and each Lower Story episode carries so much symbolism as they herald God's great Upper Story. Consider Chapter 15 from the Goodyear blimp:

THE STORY

MEN'S BIBLE STUDY LESSON GUIDE

Lower Story

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Upper Story

God provides
The Cross: the victory of defeat
Jesus came to the world
40 days in desert before commissioning
“You shall be my witnesses...”
Ascension to heaven
Acts of the Apostles
Jesus stretched out over death
Resurrection of first-born son
Salvation for Gentiles also
Baptism a sign of obedience
Grace replaces death for all mankind
Lord's Supper
Legions of angels available to Jesus
“Seeing they do not see...”
Israel committed adultery against God
Jesus purchased us back

The Upper Story of God literally SHOUTS through this chapter! The day-to-day Lower Story of walking in the wilderness and preparing meals for your enemies and staying faithful in a marriage mean so much more than you'd think. God is always telling His Upper Story of redemption and compassion through His messengers. As we've said from the very beginning of this study, every story of the Old Testament whispers the name of Jesus—every story points to Him in some form or fashion.

God called these prophets at a critical time in Israel's history. Again, look at the big picture: The legacy of the monarchy was an undignified mess, and the good king to bad king ratio was awful. The sins of the leaders had literally split the kingdom, spawned fratricidal and incestuous warfare, and made the chosen people of God a spectacle to the rest of the world. Into this fray, this fracas, this melee, God sent the prophets. They certainly had their work cut out for them.

And now for the punch line, the application.

I submit that God has called you and I to the same mission. Are we not called to take up the mantle of “messenger” today in the riotous, corrupt culture of the 21st century? Today, whether it's in finance or politics, our good leader to bad leader ratio is awful. Our standing in the world even as Christians has been diminished considerably. Our churches have split, fought amongst themselves, and more than a few religious leaders have made Christianity a spectacle.

Isn't it time for some truth-telling? Contrary to popular belief, the word “prophet” does not mean “fortune-teller” but “truth teller.” Prophets speak the truth even when it's unpopular to do so. From Elijah and Elisha to Amos to John the Baptist, they told it the way it was, regardless of the cost.

And gentlemen, it's time we stepped up.

And there's your Equipping Point for today:

Step up to the plate.

Get in the batters' box and swing away. Or if you prefer a golf analogy, address the ball and trust your swing. [*Begin backswing and “Oops” at top.*]

But I want you to know I'm working on my swing. I'm working on being able to walk up and trust my swing and disregard my fear for the people on the adjacent fairway.

And in all seriousness, it's time we stepped up as God's Messengers.

Write these down:

It's time we stepped up and spoke up.

It's time we stepped up and *lived out our high calling*.

It's time we stepped up and *modeled some grace*.

But here's the key: if we get lost in the Lower Story of our lives, the daily grind of putting bread on the table and paying the bills, rather than the big picture—missing the forest for the trees—we cannot be the prophets, the truth-tellers, of our time.

This side-by-side comparison this morning from this extraordinary chapter is to help us see that God is doing much more in your life than you'd ever expect. Just as Elijah's 40 days in the wilderness, Elisha healing Naaman, and Hosea's troubled marriage pointed to something more, so your life means so much more than you think. Your life points to a reality and a purpose far beyond what you could possibly imagine, but that's not always easy to remember in the midst of the storm. God is working this one, timeless, Upper Story not just in Elijah and Hosea, but also in your life.

Remember how Paul encouraged some of the first Christians who were under immense persecution:

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him. 1 Corinthians 2:9

God is doing everything He can to get through to you in the circumstances of your life, to help you see the forest, get a bird's eye view, and realize the same Upper Story we have marveled at this morning is the Upper Story that permeates your life.

- Are you unemployed? Perhaps the Upper Story is for you to see God as the provider rather than yourself. If God is the provider of your salvation, and conquered death to do so, is daily bread for your family too hard for the one who feeds the sparrows?
- Are you underemployed? The Upper Story could be that God is teaching you submission, like Jesus, in preparation for a future role you couldn't imagine where humility will really be needed.
- Are you in bondage to pornography, despite your desire to quit? Perhaps the message of the Upper Story is that God will continue to love you and pursue you into the red-light district, just as he did Hosea's wife.
- Are you stuck in a difficult marriage? It could be the Upper Story for you is to remember that God pursued unloving, unappreciative Israel for centuries, and that your prayers for your spouse matter greatly.

And so, here are a few questions to ask yourself to see where God might be trying to break through to you with His Upper Story. I'm just going to ask these four questions and then pause. You can write them down if you'd like, but more than anything I just want you to think about them in light of God and His Upper Story in your life:

- 1. What is your "thorn in the flesh"—your intractable struggle? Why would God not have removed it by now?**
- 2. What area of your life most needs a peacemaker?**

3. **Remember Elisha and the Arameans? What long-term adversary would be completely blown away by an act of grace on your part?**
4. **How much of a relief would it be to lay aside just one grievance for good and be done with it? And which grievance would that be?**

It's so easy to get lost in the weeds—in the Lower Story of details, resentments, in the mess and chaos of daily life. But if we are to be the truth-tellers of our generation, let's resolve to see the big picture, and commit to praying for God to reveal the Upper Story in our lives. Let's resolve to step back and get some perspective. Let's resolve to make it our mission to display Christianity as a deliverance from a life of bondage, rather than a weapon to beat people up with. Let's resolve to speak the truth in love to a bewildered, dazed world that doesn't just need to be sobered up, but needs to hear a message of grace, hope, and freedom. A world that needs a Savior.

[Prayer]

Lord, release us from the prison of pride and bitterness, and open our eyes that we may see the host of angels surrounding us, your provision during drought, and fulfill our destiny as truth-tellers and peacemakers in a world sorely in need of both.

Show us the way out of the weeds, and help us see your timeless plan, the great Upper Story, in OUR lives.

By ourselves, we couldn't even lift the bat. But through Your power, help us step up as your messengers, that we might be your witnesses under our roofs, in our marketplace, and to the uttermost parts of the earth.