# Introduction to Stories of People Jesus Met

Jesus Christ’ primary purpose in coming to earth was to redeem people from sin through His atoning sacrifice on the cross and subsequent resurrection through which He defeated death itself.[[1]](#endnote-2) His death also reconciled us to God.[[2]](#endnote-3) Once He cried out from the cross, “It is finished,”[[3]](#endnote-4) and the temple curtain into the Most Holy Place was torn from top to bottom (ie. By God)[[4]](#endnote-5), the way was open for all who believe to enter into intimate relationship with God. This was not entirely new. For example, Enoch walked with God[[5]](#endnote-6), Abraham heard God audibly[[6]](#endnote-7), Moses would speak with God face to face as a man to his friend[[7]](#endnote-8) and so on. Now, the privilege of personal, intimate relationship with God is available to all who believe. Jesus, when having a personal conversation with His disciples, put it this way, “I am in My Father and you in Me and I in you… he who loves Me will be loved by My Father and I will love him and manifest Myself to him. ”[[8]](#endnote-9) He also said, “No longer do I call you servants for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. ”[[9]](#endnote-10) In Jesus’ physical absence He sent the Holy Spirit to us to guide us into the truth.[[10]](#endnote-11)

So, God makes the possibility of having a personal, intimate relationship with Himself available through the work of Jesus on earth, especially His death and resurrection and through the Holy Spirit who dwells within believers.

But, how does a person go about having this relationship? I have a personal conviction that God has given us insights into what such a relationship looks like in the gospel accounts. Jesus, the Son of God, became a man and had personal relationships with people of His day, from all walks of life. The gospel writers witnessed these interactions and recorded them for us.

Many years ago, I set myself the task of looking closely at the detailed accounts of the people Jesus met. However, I encountered some problems:

Problems

1. In looking up reference books and commentaries I could find very little about these stories. Most references to them were for substantiating some theological position but very little seemed to be written about these passages in their own right. Perhaps I didn’t know where to look.
2. These passages are all recorded in the genre of historical narrative. They are stories about real events, about two or more people in relationship. To use them as a back up for a proposition or line of argument written in the genre of abstract statements may be valid but misses, in my view, the essence of the passages.

To illustrate this point. Suppose, as a science teacher, I set out to study the bee. I could take a bee, pluck off a wing and examine it under a microscope, do the same with a leg and so on. This would give me some useful information, but, in the process of deconstructing the bee, I would kill it. But the very essence of a bee is that it is a living creature. It lives in a bee colony where it grows and carries out various functions contributing to the life of the colony. This colony exists in relationship within an ecosystem of many other living creatures. The essence of a bee is bee-life. It must be studied in context.

The point I want to make is that the genre of narrative is a literary picture of a real-life event. It is a record of relationships between people. To reduce the analysis of such narratives to propositions runs the risk of missing the essence of the narrative which is all about real lives in relationships.

When you consider that in these gospel narratives one of the persons in relationship is the Son of God himself in human form, and the other person(s) are real historical human beings just like you and I, with brokenness, scars, sins, hopes and aspirations, then when these two enter relationship there is likely to be a dynamism of feelings, a clash of attitudes and a volcano of pent-up emotions. Much of this dynamic will be lost in the cold world of cognitive analysis. So, I found myself largely on my own as I set out to study these passages.

1. A third problem I found is that these narrative passages tend to have low status in theological discussion. They are the go-to stories for Sunday School. They make a nice, even entertaining drama. The characters can be dressed up and acted out. They take a slight rise in status when used as an encouraging devotional. However, their popular use doesn’t go much beyond that. I have used them that way myself.

However, I was left with a conviction that the mission of the Son of God to earth was and is to reconcile lost men and women and restore them into relationship with God. That would put the accounts of actual reconciliations of real people through their meeting the Redeemer in person to a central place, a pivotal place, in the entire scripture. These events ought not be relegated to simple Sunday School stories although of course they are useful for that – but much more.

To illustrate this: As a science teacher I may set out to teach about a leaf. At one level I could make observations with the natural eye about size, colour, shape, texture and so on. I could note that it hangs off a tree, catches sunlight and moves in the wind. I could take a bird’s eye view and observe it in situ in a grove of trees or in a forest. All this would be like a Sunday School level lesson.

But I could go further and, under a microscope, observe vessels, xylem and phloem, transporting water and nutrients around. Then cells with pores between them for breathing. If I had a more powerful microscope, I could observe organelles within cells, chloroplasts with chlorophyll, a nucleus with DNA and more.

This leaf is the handiwork of God Himself. Its depths of complexity and order are beyond the understanding of the best of scientists. So too with scripture – it is inspired by God. Someone likened it to the ocean. It can be waded in, swum in but it is deep, very deep.

So, another conviction that I brought to this study is that all scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching. I take the plain, literal, interpretation of 2 Timothy 3:16. With this view I came to these passages with an expectation that there is more there than meets the eye. With the Spirit of God as their author I expect to find depths of meaning without limit. I was also aware that scripture says that teachers (of scripture) shall receive a more strict judgement.[[11]](#endnote-12) So, being rather alone without peer review, was not ideal. However, scripture also promises that the Lord gives understanding when we give consideration to the words of scripture.[[12]](#endnote-13)

TOOLS

In studying the 21 passages which I chose I had several tools to use.

1. The Holy Spirit

Teaching Scripture confidently requires a person to have the Holy Spirit. Although a teacher by profession (albeit a science teacher) this does not necessarily equate to the spiritual gift of teaching. I assumed and counted on having this gift.[[13]](#endnote-14) The job of the teacher is to make complex things easy to understand. That is what I set out to do.

1. I am a human being
I share with those who met Jesus a common humanity with its range of experiences, growing up, learning, relating to others, working and feeling a range of emotions. We may live 20 centuries apart but, being human together with them, many experiences of life are in common. Coming as I do from a rural, pastoral farming background may have given some limited insights into the peasant, first century middle eastern world. I am not sure.
2. Time
I had no time limits, no schedules, no deadlines. I could spend as much time as I liked and pick up where I left off. It was of great personal benefit to simply meditate on scripture, pen in hand, having no idea where it was going nor whether anyone else would benefit. I was benefitting. I was a fellow broken human being, experiencing pain, loss, broken dreams, betrayal, depression and woundedness and I was coming to my redeemer for whatever He had for me. That was always a blessing regardless of any other outcome. This process took I suppose 10 years. It was woven into my life as it was, as a middle-aged family working man, in ordinary circumstances.
3. Academic study
Sociology was my first degree. It gave a framework for making observations about human societies. It probably alerted me to various angles or perspectives by which to view the various social settings.
Theological study provided guides and perspectives for viewing the texts. But it also gave some confidence that what I was pursuing was not in isolation but potentially subject to critique and peer assessment.
4. The Process
5. The first steps in studying any passage of scripture is to make initial observations. Who? What? Where? When? How? Why? questions are useful here.
6. The next step was to go to reference books about word meanings, cultural practices, the social setting, commentaries, bible dictionaries.
7. Reflection with these points in mind and asking questions was the bulk of the study. (examples of such questions are listed at the end)
8. The final step was to select from the reflections and return them to narrative form and produce an extended narrative which hopefully is as close as possible to the intentions of the gospel writer while being palatable for a modern reader/listener.

Notes

I didn’t intentionally impose any grid or structure on the text but let the text itself drive the reflections. Nor did I have any particular theological point of view in mind but tried to be open to whatever conclusions came out of the process. My main aim was to be true to the text as much as I could.

Every teacher, of necessity, brings non-text inputs to support their teaching. There would have to be a trade-off between being true to the text and creating an interesting story. Some imaginative license was needed here – hopefully I got the balance to a reasonable level.

As the readers/listeners respond to a story they will make associations from their own situation. Those connections will vary with each person depending on their own circumstances. I did not have any particular application in mind. For instance, I found many of the texts paint religious leaders of that context in a bad light. I attempted to be true to what I saw in the text. I did not have any intention of implicating present-day leadership nor current religious systems. Any such associations are entirely up to each reader/listener to make their own application for their own circumstances.

Most of the central subjects of each story are found to be in great need. The text usually doesn’t describe their internal responses to their need. But, as fellow human beings who each experience need and loss, pain and shame, guilt and many other internal responses to need, we can surmise how the characters in the text may have been feeling, informed by our own life experiences.

It is my hope that those who come to these stories carrying pain may resonate with a character and find their story helpful for processing that pain. They have certainly helped me in this way. My greatest hope is that someone finds Jesus for themselves and find Him to be the answer to their need, as I have done.

Pain is usually sourced in dysfunctional relationships. Conversely, healing occurs best in the context of redemptive relationships. For this reason, I have attached to the script of each story a set of questions for discussion in small groups. I will discuss the use of these questions in a video.

Finally, as you read or listen to one or more of these stories my hope and prayer is that you will join the large family of people who met Jesus.

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The following are examples of questions which gleaned fruit.

They are in no particular order and are by no means exhaustive.

Textual

* What is the meaning of key words in Greek?
* What point of view is used by the writer eg. eye of God, bystander etc?
* How does the writer use time?
* What is the writer’s use of tense and how does it contribute?
* What is the use of metaphor?
* What is the use of dialogue?
* Does the overall structure of the text contribute to its meaning?
* How does the passage fit into its own immediate literary context?
* At what phase in Jesus’ public ministry is this story set?
* What differences are found in synoptic gospel parallel texts?

Theological

* What is said about Jesus’ relationship to God the Father and the Holy Spirit?
* What does the passage say about the kingdom of God?
* How does this passage contribute to Jesus’ mission as stated in Luke 4:18,19?
* What references or echoes are there to Old Testament themes?
* How does the passage contribute to the writer’s main themes?
* What progressions in understanding or maturing are found in the longer passages?
* What demands of discipleship are challenged?

Sociological

* What historical events affected relationships and attitudes?
* What religious practices were mandatory?
* What was the local politics? Who were the players?
* What was the significance of buildings in the context of the event?
* What norms were operative? What norms were breached?
* What sanctions were in use or available to reinforce the norms?
* What scriptures guided the thinking and behaviour of the people in the story?
* What power plays were operative? How were they enforced?
* What was the symbolic significance of clothing, titles, artifacts, food, sickness?
* What constraints overpowered the people Jesus met?
* What was their mindset towards those constraints?
* What were the roles of each character in that social context?
* What was the location and what was its geographical and political significance?
* What breaches of justice were occurring?
* What civil or moral or religious laws were at play?
* What was the social stratification? Who fitted where? On what basis were people ranked?

Jesus

* When Jesus entered the setting how was each of the above affected?
* What effect did His miracles have? What was their purpose?
* How did His presence fit with each characters’ expectations of Messiah?
* At what levels did redemption occur? Physical, emotional, spiritual, social, political etc.

Etc

1. Rom 6:8-10 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Rom 5:10 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. John 19:30 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Matt 27:21 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Gen 5:22 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Gen 12:1 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Ex 33:11 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. John 14:20,21 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. John 15:15 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. John 16:13 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. James 3:1 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. 2 Tim 2:7 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Eph 4:12 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)