

Natalie Ford
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Everybody has a Story
Ps 66, Luke 17:11-19

I can only imagine that when *CBS Evening News* producers told Steve Hartman about his new assignment, he was more than skeptical. You want me to throw darts at a map of the U.S., and then point to a random name in the phonebook to find the topic of my story? The idea may have sounded strange, but Steve Hartman's "*Everybody Has a Story*" segment is now a tried and true part of the evening news!

You would think that only a few people randomly selected by darts and phone book pointing would be interesting. Incredibly, every single person (even those who insist that they are too boring) has had an amazing story to tell, trials and tribulations, and blessings along the way.

One story that I remember so well is that of 71 year old widow Gloria Preuss, from Elkalala, Montana (November 2002). At first glance her life seems very ordinary. She makes pies, does crosswords, and answers the phone at the propane company. But this woman was transformed by God's grace. In the first year of her marriage, Gloria gave birth to a baby boy named Philip. One day she left him napping in his crib, and ran next door for just a minute. She didn't know that the stove had not been turned off. The fire took her home and her baby. But when she asked God for forgiveness, she says, she received God's grace. She tried unsuccessfully to have more children for the next 8 years, then finally another experience of grace. She adopted a beautiful baby girl. Lisa is her pride and joy and the mother of Gloria's three beloved grandchildren. Who knew this quiet unassuming woman had such a story of grace?

A few weeks ago there was a far more common story of father and son, from South America. A farming father disowned his rebellious teenaged son because he was determined to become a writer, not a farmer. The teenaged boy went to live on the streets, making his own way in the world, never to see his father again, but always longing for his approval. The father died a lonely death, never reconciling with his son. When Steve Hartman found him, the son had recently visited his father's grave, and tearfully hoped his dad would be proud because despite his struggles, he had not only made it through high school, but also through college, with a degree in writing.

Many years ago, ten men with Hansen’s disease, after suffering in a leper’s colony sequestered from their friends and family, approached Jesus—begging for healing. When Jesus told them to go show themselves to the priest, they knew they would be healed. As they ran toward the Temple, they saw their skin being made new. Overcome with gratitude, one of them, a Samaritan, ran back to Jesus to praise and thank him for his healing, and his new life.

Psalm 66 is about a bigger story of God’s mercy and grace. The story of the Exodus from Egypt, when the people escaped and God parted the Red Sea. It’s the story of their wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, but God provided them bread, or manna from heaven every day, quail, water from the rocks, a pillar of smoke and one of fire to guide them to the promised land, 10 commandments to give them instruction, blessings untold. These blessings in the wilderness were so meaningful they were told and retold for centuries to come.

The truth is that *everybody has a story*. A story of pain and suffering, and a story of gratitude. Everyone has been through a *wilderness*, just like the people of God. And it is in the wilderness times that we are given *extraordinary blessings*... like the parting of the seas, the manna from heaven, or water from the rock, like the 10 commandments.

Sometimes the *most tragic lives* are filled with the most evidence of God. Many famous hymn writers suffered enormous personal trials.

The famous hymn “Now Thank We All Our God” was written by a German Lutheran Pastor named **Martin Rinkart**, who was a pastor during the 30 years war, and the plague of 1637.

During the plague he had up to over 100 funerals a week, including one for his own wife. Yet he continued to lead in worship, he continued to see God’s hand at work, he continued to give thanks to God for blessings. When he city was taken over by Swedes and given an unjust tax, he protested with a prayer vigil, and the Swedish commander was so impressed they withdrew the tax. Even in the worst of life, Martin believed in the grace of God, and he always had praise and thanks for God.

If we don't go into the wilderness times,
 I believe we don't experience the same kind of blessings
 Because what need do you have for manna from heaven,
 if you are comfortably living in your own home?
 It is only when you are wandering in the wilderness, away from comfortable
 surroundings that you need God to provide your food morning after morning!

What need do you have for *water* from the rocks, if you have your own water?
 It is only when you are thirsty and you cannot find a way to quench it
 that you need this provision from the Lord.

In the same way, in our own lives, it is only when we are *poor and in need*
 that we realize how much we need God's provision!
 It is only when we are *wandering* around lost in our own lives
 that we realize how much we need God's direction!
 Only when we are *hurting* and hopeless
 that we realize how much we need God's help and hope!

We don't all need to know leprosy, or an escape from Egypt,
 We each have our **own story**....

If you ever *doubt that you have a story*,
 open up the middle of your Bible and read the Psalms.
 Read far enough and you'll find your own story.
 The Psalms are a universal, powerful little prayerbook of The Bible.
 They are the prayers of ordinary people who experience extraordinary tragedy,
 victory, and grace. They are the cries and praises of people like you and me.
 They are so inspiring because they are so real and down to earth.
 The sorrow is honest. The anger is without apology. The gratitude is without
 condition. They are songs of the heart, songs of faith, and hope against all odds.

We could each be *a psalmist*.
 God has done something amazing in your life.
 We may not consider it remarkable,
 we might not think it worthy of CBS evening news,
 but we each have an extraordinary story
 We each have something to share because God's grace has been shared with us.

The question is---*where is God parting the sea in our lives?*
 Where is God giving us **manna** from heaven? **Water** from a rock?
 Where and when is God giving us **guidance** from on high? **Hope** or healing?

While the world tells stories of fear and destruction, day after day,
 we have a life-saving story to tell, the good news
 of what Jesus has done in our lives.

While the world reports stories of despair, we report *stories of grace*.
 Some people can't believe that everyone Steve Hartman interviews has an
 incredible story to share, but we know that every single person has a story because
 no life is too simple or too ordinary for the love and grace of God.

Each one of us has a story—a story that can inspire and encourage others—
 because God is at work in our lives.

We might be walking through a valley, or tested in a fire, but God is good,
 and God still offers us grace.

We might need to cry out Psalm 42 before we can sing out Psalm 66,
 but we have evidence of God's power in the pages of our lives.

Gratitude is part of knowing and telling our story.

Because our story includes the story of God's love for us.

We have reason to celebrate and rejoice,
 even though we may also suffer and struggle.

We can be grateful because nothing can separate us from the love of God,
 because we have been saved by Jesus Christ.

We each have a special story to tell,
 and something to be grateful for!

The question is whether we will be like the nine who ran on to the Temple;
 lepers who just kept running after Jesus healed them.....

Or will we be like the *one Samaritan*,

And run back to Jesus, to give praise and thanks for being healed?

It's easy to say we'll run back, especially if healed from something so dramatic,
 But sometimes the blessings are small, a sunset here, a bit of laughter there,
 A smile from a friend, a hug from a neighbor, a good day of Sunday worship.

Will we show our gratitude to God then?

I hope so.

For when the Samaritan returned to Jesus, he said
'*your faith has made you well*'.

Interesting, because he had already healed him of the leprosy.

But the words for ***made you well*** don't have to do with physical healing,

They mean salvation. Gratitude is about living out our salvation.

Gratitude is about living out our new life as Christians.

Be grateful and you will have new life. You will ***really live***.

Who doesn't want that?

If ***Peter and Paul started throwing darts*** in heaven, and they randomly choose you to share a story from your life, what would you say? What is your story?

Where has God been at work in your life?

You don't need to wonder ***if you have a story to tell***, because you **do**.

God has been and will be at work in your life.

So ***what is your story?***

Is it something that you've missed before,

or that you just now realize is God's work?

Is it something you called luck or coincidence—

but now you realize it's the Holy Spirit?

Just think how much the world needs to hear your story.

It might just be the turning point

in the life of someone you know,

or in your ***very own heart***.

May God help us all to hear the stories of grace,

And live lives of gratitude. Amen.