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The Beginning: A Perfect Home

from *Genesis 1 – 2*

The Jesus Storybook Bible

In the beginning, there was nothing. Nothing to hear. Nothing to feel. Nothing to see. Only emptiness. And darkness. And ...nothing but nothing.

But God was there. And God had a wonderful Plan. "I'll take this emptiness," God said, "and I'll fill it up! Out of the darkness, I'm going to make light! And out of the nothing, I'm going to make ... EVERYTHING!"

Like a momma bird flutters her wings over her eggs to help her babies hatch, God hovered over the deep, silent darkness. He was making life happen.

God spoke. That's all. And whatever he said, it happened.

God said, "Hello, light!" and light shone into the darkness. God called the light, "Day" and the darkness, "Night." "You're good," God said. And they were. Then God said, "Hello, sea! Hello, sky!" and a great space opened up, wide and deep and high. "You're good," God said. And they were.

Then God said, "Hello, land!" and there – splashing up through the oceans – came cliffs, mountains, sandy beaches. "You're good," God said. And they were.

"Hello, trees!" God said. "Hello grass and flowers!" And everything everywhere burst into life. He made buds bud; shoots shoot; flowers flower. "You're good," God said. And they were.

"Hello, stars!" God said. "Hello, sun! Hello, moon!" And whizzing into the darkness came fiery globes, spinning around and around – whirling orange and purple and golden planets. "You're good." God said. And they were.

"Hello, birds!" God said. And with a fluttering and flapping and chirping and singing, birds filled the skies. "Hello, fish!" God said. And with a darting and dashing and wriggling and splashing, fish filled the seas! "You're good," God said. And they were.

Then God said, "Hello, animals!" And everyone came out to play. The earth was filled with noisy noises – growling and gobbling and snapping and snorting and happy skerfuffling. "You're good," God said. And they were.

God saw all that he had made and he loved them. And they were lovely because he loved them.

But God saved the best for last. From the beginning, God had a shining dream in his heart. He would make people to share his Forever Happiness. They would be his children, and the world would be their perfect home.

So God breathed life into Adam and Eve. When they opened their eyes, the first thing they ever saw was God's face.

And when God saw them he was like a new dad. "You look like me," he said. "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever made!"

God loved them with all of his heart. And they were lovely because he loved them.

And Adam and Eve joined in the song of the stars and the streams and the wind in the trees, the wonderful song of love to the One who made them. Their hearts were filled with happiness. And nothing ever made them sad or lonely or sick or afraid. God looked at everything he had made. "Perfect!" he said. And it was.

But all the stars and the mountains and oceans and galaxies and everything were nothing compared to how much God loved his children. He would move heaven and earth to be near them. Always. Whatever happened, whatever it cost him, he would always love them.

And so it was that the most wonderful love story began †

Daniel's Testimony of Faith

from *Daniel 6:1–28*

As a young boy, Daniel had been taken captive from Jerusalem and groomed to serve the king of Babylon. He was a faithful servant to the king, but never did he compromise his faith and devotion to God. Daniel prayed openly and daily to the God of Israel.

Daniel found favor in the eyes of the king and was promoted to a high position within the kingdom. However, several other men of high position became jealous of Daniel and used the new king Darius to set a trap that would sentence Daniel to death.

These men came before the king and asked for a decree stating that whoever presented a petition to any god or man for thirty days, except to the king, should be thrown into the den of lions. The unsuspecting king was flattered and signed the decree, which was designed to destroy Daniel.

When Daniel heard of the decree, he went to his window, knelt down, and prayed to God as he had always done. This time however the jealous men were watching and ran to the king to remind him of the decree, and the punishment. Then they told the king, "That Daniel, who is one of the captives from Judah, has no regard for you or for the decree that you signed." The king was upset with himself and looked for a way to deliver Daniel from the punishment. But at sundown the men came to the king and reminded him that the decree could not be changed, and the king commanded that Daniel be thrown into the den of lions.

The king spoke to Daniel, saying, "Your God whom you serve continually, He will deliver you." Then a stone was placed at the opening of the den, sealing Daniel in the den with the lions. The king went to his palace and fasted all night on Daniel's behalf.

First thing in the morning, the king went to the den and cried out, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God whom you serve continually been able to deliver you from the lions?"

Daniel responded, "O king, live forever. My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they have not hurt me because I was innocent before Him; and also, O king, I have done you no wrong."

The king excitedly commanded that Daniel be taken out of the den, and then he commanded that those men who had accused Daniel be cast into the den of lions. Then the king wrote to all people, nations, and languages that lived within his kingdom, a new decree:

"I make a decree that in every dominion of my kingdom men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for He is the living God and steadfast forever; His kingdom shall not be destroyed, and his dominion shall endure to the end."

Because of his faith in God, and because God was faithful to protect him, the name of the Lord was exalted throughout the kingdom. And Daniel prospered under the reign of Darius, king of Persia. †

Dorcas Comes to Life

from *Acts 9:36–43*

In the city of Joppa there lived a woman named Dorcas. She was a Christian—a follower of Jesus Christ. Dorcas spent her days helping people. The poor people and the widows especially loved her because she was so good and kind to them.

One day Dorcas became very, very sick. Soon she died.

Now it happened that Peter, a disciple of Jesus, was preaching in a town nearby. The friends of Dorcas had heard that Peter had done many wonderful things in the name of Jesus. Her friends said to one another, “Perhaps Peter could help Dorcas even though she has already died.”

So two men were sent to ask Peter to come to Joppa.

When Peter arrived, he was taken upstairs to the room where Dorcas lay. Many of Dorcas’ friends were already there. The poor people of Joppa were there, too, crying and showing each other the warm coats Dorcas had made for them.

“I want everyone to leave the room,” Peter said.

When everyone had gone, Peter knelt down and prayed. He asked God to bring Dorcas back to life. Then he turned to the dead woman and said, “Dorcas, get up.”

She opened her eyes, looked at Peter for a minute, and then sat up. Peter took Dorcas by the hand and led her to the door of the room. “Come on in,” Peter called to the people who were waiting downstairs. “Here is your friend Dorcas. She has been raised from the dead in the name of Jesus.”

Jesus had gone back to Heaven, but He had not forgotten the disciples; He had sent the Holy Spirit just as He promised He would. The Holy Spirit gave power to the disciples and many people turned to Jesus as their Lord. †

First Things First

from *Luke 10:38–42*

Mary called, “Martha! Martha! Look who is coming!”

Martha was excited, too, as she looked down the road. Jesus was coming! Mary and Martha were always happy to see Him come for a visit.

Mary and Martha were sisters. They and their brother, Lazarus, lived in the little village of Bethany, just east of Jerusalem, over the Mount of Olives. Often, when Jesus came to Jerusalem, He stopped to see them. They were His good friends.

But before Jesus reached the door, Martha began to worry about lunch. “What will we feed Jesus?” she wondered. “And look at the house! I must straighten things up before He gets here.” Martha was so busy cleaning and fixing and doing fussy things that she hardly had time to say hello. But as soon as she did, she quickly ran to the kitchen.

Mary didn’t care at all about lunch. She didn’t even care if she ate lunch. To her the most important thing in the world right now was to talk with Jesus. She wanted to ask Him questions and listen while He told about His home in heaven and His Father who lived there.

Martha rushed to and fro in the kitchen. She filled this pot with water and stirred things in that one. She clattered and banged things around without hearing a word that Jesus said.

Suddenly Martha realized that she was doing all the work while Mary was doing nothing. The more she fussed with things, the more this bothered her. At last she came into the room where Mary sat by Jesus’ feet. “Lord, doesn’t it bother You that my sister is letting me do all the work?” she asked. It was a bit rude to ask this important guest such a question, but she did it anyway.

One might think at this point Jesus would smile and tell Mary to go help her sister prepare lunch. But Jesus really didn’t care if He ate lunch either. He thought it was much more important to tell Mary the things she wanted to know. “Martha, Martha,” Jesus answered. “You’re so busy and bothered doing all those things. Don’t you see that Mary has chosen what is most important? I will not take that away from her.”

Nobody knows whether Martha went back to the kitchen or sat down with Mary to listen to Jesus. But she certainly learned that it is much more important to listen to Jesus than to eat lunch. That is putting first things first. †

The Forgiving Prince

from *Genesis 37 – 46*

The Jesus Storybook Bible

Jacob had twelve sons but of all his sons, Joseph was his favorite.

One day, Jacob gave Joseph a splendid new robe. It was beautiful and rich with all the colors of the rainbow, but it made Joseph's brothers jealous – they wanted rich rainbow robes, too.

Then to make matters worse, Joseph kept on having these special dreams: "I dreamed I was the greatest! I was king!" Joseph told his brothers. "And you all bowed down to me!"

Now I'm sure you know (even if Joseph didn't) that telling your brothers things like that isn't a very good idea. Joseph's brothers hated him even more. They wanted to kill Joseph and his dreams.

And one day that's exactly what they tried to do.

They tore Joseph's rainbow robe off him and sold him to slave traders – for 20 pieces of silver.

The traders took Joseph to Egypt and made him into a slave. The brothers went home and lied to their father, telling him that Joseph was dead.

That's the end of that dreamer! they thought. But they were wrong. God had a magnificent plan for Joseph's life and even when it looked like everything had gone wrong, God would use it all to help make the plan a reality. God would use everything that was happening to Joseph to do something good.

Meanwhile though, things were not looking good for Joseph in Egypt. He was far from home and from his dad. Then he got blamed for something he didn't do, and even though he had done nothing wrong, he was punished and thrown in jail. But God was with Joseph.

One night, Pharaoh (king of Egypt) had a scary dream about thin cows gobbling up fat cows. What on earth did it mean? He didn't know. But Joseph was a dream expert so Pharaoh sent for him. "It means a famine is coming," Joseph explained. "There won't be enough food."

Pharaoh was so pleased by Joseph's skill that he immediately took Joseph out of jail and made him a prince.

Now back home, Joseph's brothers had run out of food and everyone was hungry. God's special family was in danger – if they didn't get food soon they would starve to death. So Joseph's brothers traveled to Egypt to buy food.

They came and knelt before the new prince. His brothers didn't know that the prince was Joseph. But Joseph knew who they were. Joseph's dream, the one about his brothers bowing down to him, was coming true.

"It's me!" Joseph cried.

When they saw it was Joseph, his brothers were afraid. They had wronged Joseph. They had sinned and they knew it. Now Joseph would certainly punish them.

But Joseph looked at his brothers and his eyes filled with tears. Even though his brothers had hurt him and hated him and wanted him dead – in spite of everything – he couldn't stop loving them.

His heart, which they had broken, filled up with love, and Joseph forgave them.

Joseph threw his arms around them. "Don't be afraid," he said. "Behind everything that you were doing, and underneath everything that was happening, God was doing something good. God was making everything right again."

Joseph didn't punish them, he rescued them – he brought God's special family to live safely with him in Egypt.

One day, God would send another Prince, a young Prince whose heart would break. Like Joseph, he would leave his home and his Father. His brothers would hate him and want him dead. He would be sold for pieces of silver. He would be punished even though he had done nothing wrong.

But God would use everything that happened to this young Prince – even the bad things – to do something good: to forgive the sins of the whole world. †

George Washington and the Cherry Tree

Adapted from J. Berg Esenwein and Marietta Stockard

This story is the most famous truth-telling tale in America.

When George Washington was a little boy, he lived on a farm in Virginia. His father taught him to ride, and would take young George about the farm with him so that his son might learn how to take care of the fields and horses and cattle when he grew older.

Mr. Washington had planted an orchard of fine fruit trees. There were trees of apple, peach, pear, plum, and cherry. Once, a particularly fine cherry tree was sent to him from across the ocean. Mr. Washington planted it on the edge of the orchard. Everyone on the farm was to watch it carefully to see that it was not hurt in any way.

It grew well, and one spring it was covered with white blossoms. Mr. Washington was pleased to think he would soon have cherries from the little tree.

Just about this time, George was given a shiny new hatchet. He took it and went about chopping sticks, hacking into the rails of fences, and cutting whatever else he passed. At last he came to the edge of the orchard, and thinking only how well his hatchet could cut, he chopped into the little cherry tree. The bark was soft, and it cut so easily that George chopped the tree right down, and then went on with his play.

That evening after Mr. Washington came in from inspecting the farm, he decided to walk down to the orchard to look at his cherry tree. He stood in amazement when he saw it. "Who would have dared do such a thing?" he asked everyone, but no one could tell him anything about it.

Just then George passed by.

"George," his father called in an angry voice, "do you know who killed my cherry tree?" This was a tough question, and George staggered under it for a moment, but quickly recovered.

"I cannot tell a lie, father," he said. "I did it with my hatchet."

Mr. Washington looked at George whose face was white, but who looked straight into his father's eyes.

"Go into the house, son," said Mr. Washington sternly—

George went into the library and waited for his father. He had been so foolish and now he felt ashamed. His father was right to be displeased.

Soon, Mr. Washington came into the room. "Come here, my boy," he said.

George went over to his father. Mr. Washington looked at him long and steadily. "Tell me, son, why did you cut the tree?"

"I was playing, and I did not think ..." he stammered.

"And now the tree is dead. We shall never have any cherries from it. But worse than that, you have failed to take care of the tree when I asked you to do so."

George's head was bent, and his cheeks were red from shame. "I am sorry, father," he said.

Mr. Washington put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Look at me," he said. "I am sorry to have lost the cherry tree, but I am glad that you were brave enough to tell me the truth."

And to the end of his life, George Washington was just as brave and honorable as when he was young.
†

A Giant Staircase to Heaven

from *Genesis 11*

The Jesus Storybook Bible

After the flood, Noah and his family lived in the land and his children had children, and those children had more children, and then those children had even more – until there were many people on the earth once more.

At that time, everyone spoke exactly the same language so you didn't need to learn Swahili or Japanese or anything because you could say, "Hello!" to anyone and they knew what you meant.

One day, everyone was talking and they came up with an idea: "Let's build ourselves a beautiful city to live in! It can be our home. We'll be safe forever and ever." Then they had another idea: "And let's build a really tall tower to reach up to heaven!"

"Yes!" they said. "We'll say, 'Look at us up here!' And everyone will look up at us. And we'll look down on them. And then we'll know we are something. We'll be like God. We'll be famous and safe and happy and everything will be all right."

So they got to work. Brick by brick, the tower grew, higher and higher, until it soared above the city, touching the sky. They built stairs in the tower to climb to the top. It was like a giant staircase to heaven.

"Look!" They cheered. "We're the ones! See what we can do with our very own hands!" They were quite pleased with themselves.

But God wasn't pleased with them. God could see what they were doing. They were trying to live without him, but God knew that wouldn't make them happy or safe or anything. If they kept on like this, they would only destroy themselves, and God loved them too much to let that happen. So he stopped their plans.

One morning, they went to work as usual but everything was different – their words were all new and funny. You see, God had given each person a completely different language! Suddenly, no one understood what anyone else was saying. Someone would say, "How do you do?" and the other person thought they said, "How ugly are you!" It wasn't funny. You could be saying something nice like, "Such a lovely morning!" and get a punch in the nose because they thought you said, "Hush up, you're boring!" (You couldn't even say, "Pardon?" to check if you'd heard right because no one understood that word either.)

It wasn't easy to work together after that, as you can only imagine. People were always quarreling and fighting and getting in a dreadful muddle and becoming grumpier and grumpier, until at last they were all too cross to keep on building, and just had to stop.

After that, people scattered all over the world (which is how we ended up with so many different languages to this day).

You see, God knew, however high they reached, however hard they tried, people could never get back to heaven by themselves. People didn't need a staircase; they needed a Rescuer. Because the way back to heaven wasn't a staircase; it was a Person, a Person who would have to come down to them from Heaven. †

He Cares for You

from *I Kings 17*

For quite some time there had been a drought in Israel. There was no rain or dew, the fields could not yield a harvest, and all the brooks had dried up. Even the brook Cherith, beside which the prophet Elijah had been dwelling, went dry. Elijah heard the word of the Lord telling him what to do.

“Arise, go to Zarephath,” God said, “and live there. See, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you.”

So Elijah went to the city. Approaching it, he saw a woman gathering sticks. He called and asked her to bring him a drink of water. As she went to get it, he called to her again and asked her to bring him a piece of bread. She turned to him, wondering who this man was that did not seem to know there was famine in the land.

“As the Lord your God lives,” she said, “I do not have any bread, just a handful of flour in a bin and a little oil in a jar. I am gathering a couple of sticks so that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.”

“Do not fear,” Elijah said to her. “Go and do as you have said. But make me a little bread from it first, and bring it to me, and afterward make some for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord God of Israel, ‘The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.’”

Marveling at Elijah’s words, but willing to believe them, the woman went home and did what was asked of her. She also prepared a room for Elijah in her house, and all the time he remained in Zarephath, Elijah stayed there. And all of them had plenty to eat, for neither the bin nor the jar became empty.

Then one day the woman’s son became sick, so sick that he could not breathe. In her sorrow she chided Elijah, for she thought she must have done some great wrong to have such evil come to her as the death of her son.

“Give me your son,” Elijah said, and he gently took the child from the woman’s arms and carried him to his own room. Elijah laid the boy on the bed and prayed to God. Then he stretched himself upon the child, once, twice, three times, and never stopped praying.

O Lord my God, I pray thee, let this child’s soul come back into him,” Elijah said over and over. Then the child began to breathe. He opened his eyes and, seeing Elijah, smiled at him. Elijah carried the boy to his mother, who was weeping.

“See, your son is living,” Elijah said as he stood the boy on his feet beside her.

When she saw her son standing, strong and well, the widow woman looked up at Elijah and said, “Now, by this I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is the truth.” †

He's Here!

from *Luke 1 - 2*

The Jesus Storybook Bible

Everything was ready. The moment God had been waiting for was here at last! God was coming to help his people, just as he promised in the beginning.

But how would he come? What would he be like? What would he do?

Mountains would have bowed down. Seas would have roared. Trees would have clapped their hands. But the earth held its breath. As silent as snow falling, he came in. And when no one was looking, in the darkness, he came.

Mary was a young girl who was engaged to a man named Joseph. (Joseph was the great-great-great-great-great grandson of King David.)

One morning, this girl was minding her own business when, suddenly, a great warrior of light appeared – right there, in her bedroom. He was Gabriel and he was an angel, a special messenger from heaven.

When she saw the tall shining man standing there, Mary was frightened.

“Do not be frightened,” Gabriel said. “God is very happy with you!”

Mary looked around to see if perhaps he was talking to someone else.

“Mary,” Gabriel said, and he laughed with such gladness that Mary’s eyes filled with sudden tears.

“Mary, you’re going to have a baby. A little boy. You will call him Jesus. He is God’s own Son. He’s the One! He’s the Rescuer!”

The God who flung planets into space and kept them whirling around and around, the God who made the universe with just a word, the one who could do anything at all – was making himself small. And coming down . . . as a baby.

Wait. God was sending a baby to rescue the world?

“But it’s too wonderful!” Mary said and felt her heart beating hard. “How can it be true?”

“Is anything too wonderful for God?” Gabriel asked.

So Mary trusted God more than what her eyes could see. And she believed. “I am God’s servant,” she said. “Whatever God says, I will do.”

Sure enough, it was just as the angel had said. Nine months later, Mary was almost ready to have her baby.

Now, Mary and Joseph had to take a trip to Bethlehem, the town King David was from. But when they reached the little town, they found every room was full. Every bed was taken.

“Go away!” the innkeepers told them. “There isn’t any place for you.”

Where would they stay? Soon Mary's baby would come.

They couldn't find anywhere except an old, tumbledown stable. So they stayed where the cows and the donkeys and the horses stayed.

And there, in the stable, amongst the chickens and the donkeys and the cows, in the quiet of the night, God gave the world his wonderful gift. The baby that would change the world was born. His baby Son.

Mary and Joseph wrapped him up to keep him warm. They made a soft bed of straw and used the animals' feeding trough as his cradle. And they gazed in wonder at God's Great Gift, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger.

Mary and Joseph named him Jesus, "Emmanuel" – which means "God has come to live with us."

Because, of course, he had. †

The Honest Woodman

Adapted from Emilie Poulsson

This story is retold from a poem by Jean de La Fontaine, who, like Aesop, was a master of the fable.

Once upon a time, out in the green, silent woods near a rushing river that foamed and sparkled as it hurried along, there lived a poor woodcutter who worked hard to make a living for his family. Every day he would trudge into the forest with his strong, sharp ax over his shoulder. He always whistled happily as he went, because he was thinking that as long as he had his health and his ax, he could earn enough to buy all the bread his family needed.

One day he was cutting a large oak tree near the riverside. The chips flew fast at every stroke, and the sound of the ringing ax echoed through the forest so clearly you might have thought a dozen wood choppers were at work that day.

By and by the woodman thought he would rest awhile. He leaned his ax against the tree and turned to sit down, but he tripped over an old, gnarled root, and before he could catch it, his ax slid down the bank and into the river!

The poor woodman gazed into the stream, trying to see the bottom, but it was far too deep there. The river flowed over the lost treasure just as merrily as before.

“What will I do?” the woodman cried. “I’ve lost my ax! How will I feed my children now?”

Just as he finished speaking, up from the lake rose a beautiful lady. She was the water fairy of the river, and she came to the surface when she heard his sad voice.

“What is your sorrow?” she asked kindly. The woodman told her about his trouble, and at once she sank beneath the surface and reappeared in a moment with an ax made of silver.

“Is this the ax you lost?” she asked.

The woodman thought of all the fine things he could buy for his children with the silver! But the ax wasn’t his, so he shook his head and answered, “No, my ax was only made of steel.”

The water fairy laid the silver ax on the bank and sank again into the river. In a moment she rose and showed the woodman another ax, “Perhaps this one is yours?” she asked.

The woodman looked. “Oh, no! he replied. “This one is made of gold! It’s worth many times more than mine.”

The water fairy laid the golden ax on the bank. Once again she sank. Up she rose. This time she held the missing ax. “That is mine!” the woodman cried. “That is surely my old ax!”

“It is yours,” said the water fairy, “and so are these other two now. They are gifts from the river, because you have told the truth.”

And that evening the woodman trudged home with all three axes on his shoulder, whistling happily as he thought of all the good things they would bring for his family. †

How Jesus Saved Peter and Others in the Storm

from *Mark 4:35 – 41*

One evening Jesus was very tired. All day long He had talked to the fathers, mothers, and children. He had tried to help them in all their trouble and had made many sick people well. Now it was evening. One by one the stars came out and shone in the dark sky. Most of the people had gone away. Only Peter, John, and the other disciples stood and talked with Jesus beside the lake.

Peter's boat was pulled up on the shore where he had left it in the morning after he had come from fishing. "Come," said Jesus, "Let us get into the water." Jesus had a pillow. Perhaps some father, mother, or little child had seen how tired Jesus was and had brought it to Him. As the boat sailed quietly out across the lake, Jesus fell fast asleep with His head resting on the little pillow. Peter and the others talked together very softly so as not to wake Him.

But suddenly the wind began to blow. Harder and harder it blew. It tossed the boat up and down on the water. It splashed over, filling the boat, but Jesus, His head on the pillow, was fast asleep. Peter and the others began to work hard. They tried to empty the water out of the boat, but as they worked other big waves splashed over them, almost sending it down. They worked harder; they were tired and wet and cold, but Jesus was still fast asleep.

"We will drown!" cried Peter. "We cannot get the water out of the boat. We'll drown!" Frightened, they held to the side of the boat, and the wind blew the water higher and higher. "Master," cried one of the men, "Wake up; we're drowning! Don't you care that we are in such great trouble?" Jesus heard, and He woke up and came to them. He heard the angry wind and saw Peter and the others, cold, wet, tired, and afraid, holding fast to the boat filled with water.

Quietly, He reached His hands over the water and spoke to it. "Peace!" He said. "Be still!" And to the angry wind He said: "Be quiet; stop blowing. It is Jesus who speaks to you!"

As Jesus spoke, suddenly the wind stopped blowing. The lake was very still again, the storm was gone, and the little boat sailed quietly over the lake. Then Jesus turned to Peter and the others. "Why were you so afraid?" He asked. "I was right here with you. Didn't you know that I would take care of you? You don't ever need to be afraid when I am with you."

And the disciples said, "What an amazing person He is! Even the winds and the seas obey Him." †

In the Name of the Lord

from *I Samuel 17:22–51*

David, the son of Jesse, had been chosen by God to be the future king of Israel. But David was just a boy, and it was not his time to be king, so he continued at home, keeping charge of his father's sheep.

Some time later, when David's older brothers were serving in the king's army, David's father asked him to go see his brothers and take them food. While he was with his brothers, David heard the challenge that had come frequently to the Israelite army from Goliath, the giant of the Philistine army: "Choose a man for yourselves and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him and kill him, then you will be our servants."

No one in all the camp of Israel rose to answer Goliath, so the giant cried out again, "I defy the armies of Israel this day. Give me a man that we may fight together."

David was distressed that no one from the king's army answered the challenge, and he talked to his brothers and the soldiers about it. At first David angered the men, but then they realized this was someone ready to accept Goliath's challenge. They informed King Saul about David, and the king sent for him. David said to Saul, "Let no man's heart fail because of him. Your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."

Saul said to David, "You are not able to fight against this Philistine; for you are just a youth, and he is a man of war." David responded by telling Saul that he had killed a bear and a lion while keeping his father's sheep. He said, "The Lord that delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

Saul then said to David, "Go, and the Lord be with you." Saul gave David his own suit of armor, but it was too heavy for the boy to wear. Instead, he chose five smooth stones from the brook, and with his sling in his hand, went forth to meet Goliath.

Seeing a boy approach to answer the challenge angered Goliath, and he mocked David. David said to him, "You come to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied."

As the Philistine approached, David took a stone from his bag and, using his sling, struck the Philistine in the forehead. Goliath fell on his face to the earth. Then, using the giant's own sword, David killed him. When the Philistine army saw that their champion was dead, they fled.

That day David earned the respect of the Israelite army and of King Saul when he went out and defeated the enemy in the name of the Lord. †

Jesus Healing Two Blind Men

from *Matthew 20:29-34*

Retold by Dottie Chiles

Jesus had much to do during his three year ministry on earth. He had to teach his disciples and to help them prepare for their ministry. Jesus wanted to demonstrate his love for all people in many ways. One way was by healing many people who had various infirmities.

One day while Jesus and his disciples were leaving a town named Jericho, a large crowd followed them. The road was narrow so it was very crowded. Along the roadside sat two blind men. When they heard that Jesus was going by they began to shout, "Jesus...Son of David...have mercy on us."

The crowd told the blind men to be quiet and not to bother Jesus. The crowd did not seem to care about the blind men. But the men would not be quiet. They shouted even louder, "Jesus...please have mercy on us."

When Jesus heard the pleas of the blind men, he stopped walking and went to the men who sat by the roadside. As Jesus looked at them with great compassion, he asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus knew that the men were blind but he wanted them to ask him for healing.

The men who were so grateful that Jesus had stopped stated humbly, "Lord, Jesus...we want to see. We want our sight."

Jesus, who was full of love for the people was touched by the poor blind men. He had such compassion on them. Jesus did not mind the disruption as he was walking by but rather was overjoyed to grant them their sight. The Son of God, Jesus reached out to the two blind men, touched their eyes and immediately they received their sight.

The crowds that followed Jesus on the road that day were astounded at the power of God that Jesus displayed. They had witnessed a great miracle outside the town of Jericho. Two men who sat alone by the roadside calling out to Jesus were healed. They finally could see because they received a touch of the Master's hand, and they were given their sight. †

Jesus Walking on the Water

from *Matthew 9:27–31*

Do you remember the day that Jesus fed all the hungry people from the two fishes and five little loaves of bread? As it began to grow dark, little by little, the mothers and fathers gathered the children together and started around the lake toward home. What a beautiful day it had been! Many little children, whom the mothers had carried in their arms because some dreadful sickness had twisted the little legs or backs so that they could not walk, now ran happily beside their mothers. Fathers that had been blind could see now, and mothers who had felt dreadful pain found that at Jesus' touch the pain had gone away. Tomorrow they would go out again to find Him and to be near Him, the mothers thought as they walked along.

Peter and John and the others who had come in the boat with Jesus had already started back over the lake toward home, but Jesus was not with them. He was very tired from helping so many sick people all day long, and he wanted to be alone for a little while with His Father, to talk with Him about the work He still had to do. He climbed up a hill a little way and lay down to rest, looking up at the beautiful, shining stars in the dark sky.

But suddenly the wind began to blow fiercer and louder. It shook the trees and tossed the water in the lake into great waves. Had Peter and the others reached home yet? Jesus wondered. No, they were out in the storm. Far across the lake He could see a little boat tossed up and down in the water. Louder and louder blew the wind. They would be frightened. He would go to them and help them. Out He stepped on to the water and right across the lake through the fierce wind and the dreadful storm he walked to save them. He was nearer now. He could see the little boat almost covered with the big waves. He could see Peter and the others trying to keep the water out of the boat. Not far away little lights shone out from the houses along the shore where the mothers and babies were waiting for them.

Perhaps, as Peter and the others thought of their families, they worked the harder, but the wind blew the little boat around. The wind was stronger than the fathers' strong arms. But Jesus was coming. He was not far off now, and they saw Him coming, walking across the water to them: "It is I; it is Jesus. I am coming, Peter, John. Do not be afraid."

Could it be Jesus? They had left Him on the hillside. How could He have reached them through the storm without a boat? "Jesus," called Peter, "if it is you, call me, and I will come to you."

The wind blew loudly, and the boat rocked up and down, but Peter heard Jesus call through the storm, "Come," and he stepped over the side of the boat and out into the water and, with his eyes on Jesus' face, walked to meet Him.

But suddenly the water rose around his feet, the wind blew very hard, and Peter forgot to look at Jesus. He was only looking at the water, and he began to be afraid. "Jesus," he cried, "hold me; I am going down."

Jesus heard. He was beside Peter now. He reached out His hand and lifted him up. "Peter," He said sorrowfully, "why were you afraid? Didn't you know I was near you? Didn't you know I could take care of you?" Together they stepped into the boat, and suddenly the wind stopped blowing, and the water was very quiet, and the storm was over.

Early in the morning the little boat reached the shore, but Peter and the others knew that it was the Lord Jesus who had brought them safely back through the storm to the mothers and little children waiting for them at home. †

The Legend of the Dipper

Retold by J. Berg Esenwein & Marietta Stockard

A kind act is often its own reward

There had been no rain in the land for a very long time. It was so hot and dry that the land was parched and brown and even the big, strong trees were dying. The water dried up in the creeks and the fountains stopped bubbling. All the people and creatures were so thirsty! Everyone felt weak.

There was one little girl whose mother grew very ill. She said, "I must find some water for my mother."

So she took a tin cup and began her search for water. By and by she found a tiny little spring up on a mountainside. It was almost dry. The water dropped, dropped, ever so slowly from under the rock. The girl held her cup carefully and caught the drops. She waited a long time until the cup was full of water. Then she started down the mountain holding the cup carefully, for she didn't want to spill a single drop.

On the way she passed a poor little dog. He could hardly drag himself along. He was panting for breath and his tongue hung from his mouth because it was so parched.

"Oh, you poor little dog," said the little girl, "you are so thirsty. I can't pass you without giving you a few drops of water. If I give you just a little there will still be enough for my mother."

So the little girl poured some water into her hand and held it down for the little dog. He lapped it up quickly and then he felt so much better that he frisked and barked and seemed almost to say, "Thank you, little girl." And the little girl didn't notice—but her tin dipper had changed into a silver dipper and was just as full of water as it had been before.

She thought about her mother and hurried along as fast as she could go. When she reached home it was late in the afternoon, almost dark. The little girl pushed the door open and hurried up to her mother's room. When she came into the room the old servant who helped the little girl and her mother, came to the door. She was so tired and so thirsty that she couldn't even speak to the little girl.

"Give her some water," said the mother. "She has worked hard all day and needs it more than I do."

So the little girl held the cup to her lips and the old servant drank some of the water. She felt stronger and better right away and she went over to the mother and lifted her up. The little girl didn't notice that the cup had changed into a gold cup and was just as full of water as it was before!

Then she held the cup to her mother's lip and she drank and drank. Oh, she felt so much better! When she had finished there was still some water left in the cup. The little girl was just raising it to her own lips when there came a knock at the door. The servant opened it and there stood a stranger. He was very pale and all covered with dust from traveling. "I am thirsty," he said. "I need a little water."

The little girl said, "I am sure that you need it far more than I do. Drink it all."

The stranger smiled and took the dipper in his hand, and as he took it, it changed into a diamond dipper. He turned it upside down and all the water spilled out and sank into the ground. And where it spilled a fountain bubbled up. The cool water flowed and splashed—enough for the people and all the animals in the whole land to have all the water they wanted to drink.

As they watched the water they forgot the stranger, but presently when they looked he was gone. They thought they could see him just vanishing in the sky—and there, clear and high, shone the diamond dipper. Even now shining, reminding people of the little girl who was kind and unselfish. †

The Little Boy Who Gave His Lunch to Jesus

from *Mark 6:32–44*

One day the sky was so blue and the fields were so full of lovely flowers that a boy in the land where Jesus lived thought that it would be a beautiful day to take his lunch and walk way out into the fields and over the hills, picking flowers and listening to the birds. His mother wrapped two little fishes and five little loaves of bread in a rough cloth and, taking them with him, he ran off toward the lake. But, as he came near the lake, he saw a great crowd of people. Yes, Jesus must be there. Perhaps they were bringing the little sick children to Him, and He was making them well. Through the fields toward the lake the boy ran. Yes, there was Jesus, but He was getting into a boat with Peter and John. He was going away across the lake. The little boy thought that He looked very tired. The boy stood watching as the boat moved away. “Come,” said some of the mothers and fathers to one another, “let us follow Him. We can go through the field, around the lake. We cannot let Him go.” They started running, and the little boy followed them. Some of the fathers were lame and could not walk fast, and many sick mothers stumbled and fell by the way, but on they went to find Jesus.

When Jesus stepped out of the boat on the other shore, they were all waiting for Him. All day long He stayed with them, making sick fathers and mothers well, taking little children into His arms and helping all who came to Him. All day the little boy stayed close beside Him, watching Him as He took the little sick children tenderly in His arms and made them well. But now it was beginning to get dark. All day the people had been with Jesus, and they had had nothing to eat. “What shall we do?” Philip whispered to Jesus. “Shall we tell them to go away?”

Jesus looked at the great crowd of fathers, mothers, and little children, and He loved them. “No,” He said, “do not send them away. We’ll take care of them. We’ll give them something to eat.”

“But,” said Philip, “we have no lunch even for ourselves, and there are no vendors near where we can buy anything. How shall we get anything to eat?” The boy had been listening, and suddenly a glad thought came to him. He would give Jesus the little lunch that his mother had fixed for him. Quietly he whispered about it to Andrew, and Andrew took the little bundle from him and brought it to Jesus. Holding in His hands the two little fishes and five loaves, Jesus called to all the fathers, mothers, and little children to sit down in circles all over the grass. Then, as the people folded their hands and bowed their heads, out under the trees among the flowers, Jesus said “thank you” to His Father, just as we do at mealtime.

The little boy watching saw not just two fishes and five loaves, but baskets and baskets full—as much as the people could eat. Afterward, Jesus asked the people to pick up all the crusts of bread so as to keep the grass clean, or else that they might feed the scraps to the hungry birds and animals ... and there were twelve great baskets full of the crumbs.

The people did not understand the wonderful thing that had happened, but they knew that Jesus had fed them when they were hungry because He loved them. †

The Little Servant Girl and the Proud General

from *II Kings 5*

The Jesus Storybook Bible

Namaan was a very important man in a very important army of a very important country. So you see, he was very, very, very important.

But Namaan was sick. He had leprosy, which is a horrible disease that hinders your sense of touch. Bits of your flesh could fall off without your noticing. It might sound funny but it wasn't – and Namaan certainly wasn't laughing. There was no cure; it never went away, and in the end it killed you. Naaman needed help.

Now there was a little slave girl who worked for Namaan and she knew someone who could help him. But there was a problem; Namaan was her enemy.

Not long before, Naaman had led an army raid on her home in Israel. He had killed her whole family, carried her off to Syria, and made her into his slave. Every night she cried herself to sleep – she had lost everything.

Why would she, of all people, want to help Namaan? Didn't she hate him and want to hurt him back? Didn't she want to make him pay for the wrong he'd done?

That's what you would expect, but instead of hating him, she loved him. Instead of hurting him back, she forgave him.

"I want Naaman to get well," she said to her mistress. "There's a man in Israel named Elisha who can heal him."

"I'll go," said Naaman when he heard the news, and he loaded up his wagons and put on his flashing armor. "But I'll go to the palace because that's where someone important like me gets healed!"

So he hurried off to Israel and went straight to the king. "My healing, please!" he announced.

"I can do many things!" the king replied. "But only God can heal."

Just then a message from Elisha arrived. "Send Namaan to me," it read.

So Naaman hurried off to Elisha's house. But Elisha didn't even come out and greet him, he just sent a servant instead. *Doesn't Elisha realize who I am?* Naaman thought.

But what the servant said next made him even angrier, "Wash in there!" he said.

"Just wash?" Namaan laughed. "In that slimy, stinky river?" He looked around to see if this was some kind of joke. It wasn't. *Any person can wash in a river!* He thought. *I am Namaan. I am important. I should do something important so God will heal me!* And he rode off in a rage.

But God knew that Namaan was even sicker on the inside than he was on the outside. Namaan was proud. He thought he didn't need God. His heart didn't work properly – it couldn't feel anything. You see, Namaan had leprosy of his heart. God was not only going to heal Namaan's skin, he was going to heal his pride.

Namaan finally agreed to wash in the river, and instantly, his skin became smooth like a baby's.

Namaan wanted to pay Elisha .

“God healed you. You can't pay,” Elisha said. “It's free.”

And so it was that a very sick man was healed – all because of a little servant girl who forgave him.

God knew sin was like leprosy. It stopped his children's hearts from working properly, and in the end, it would kill them. Years later, God was going to send another Servant who would forgive all of God's children and heal the terrible sickness in their hearts. †

A Much Better Gift

from *Acts 3:1–11*

“Alms for the poor! Alms for the poor!”

The poor man sat by the gate that led into the Temple of Jerusalem. He was crippled, and at that time crippled people could not find a job. It was hard for even a strong, healthy man to find enough work to feed his family. So a crippled man, like a blind or deaf man, almost always had to become a beggar.

That was the way he did it: All day he sat by a gate or beside a road and asked people for “alms,” gifts of money for himself and his family.

“Alms for the poor!” he cried out when Peter and John entered the Temple. It was three o’clock in the afternoon, a time when people went to the Temple for prayer.

Most of the people passed by the beggar without giving him a thing. After all, this fellow had been sitting by the gate each day for many years. Some days they gave him a coin, and some days they didn’t.

Peter and John stopped. Peter stared at him, while the man kept on crying out for alms.

Suddenly the man realized that Peter was staring at him. He stopped his noisy cries. But he would not look into Peter’s eyes.

“Look at me!” Peter commanded.

Slowly the beggar looked up at Peter. His eyes looked into Peter’s eyes. Then he slowly held out his hand for the coin he thought Peter would give him.

“I have no silver or gold coins to give you,” Peter said quietly. The man’s eyes dropped again. He was ready to start crying out for alms.

“But I have a much better gift,” Peter went on. “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk!”

As he said this, Peter reached out his hand and lifted the man up to his feet. The man trembled as he stood, but suddenly he felt strength coming into his legs. He took one step forward, then two, then walked about, shouting with joy. Before long he was leaping about as though he had never been crippled.

“Praise God!” he shouted. “Praise God for healing me!”

Imagine how surprised the people in the Temple were when this man ran through the courtyards, shouting and leaping as he went.

“Praise God!” he kept on shouting.

He had expected a coin from Peter and John. But the gift he received was a much better gift! That’s the way God does things when we are willing to receive His better gifts. †

A New Way to See

from *Acts 9*

The Jesus Storybook Bible

Of all the people who kept the rules, Saul was the best.

“I’m good at being good!” he’d tell you.

He was very proud. And very good. But he wasn’t very nice.

Saul hated anyone who loved Jesus. He traveled around looking for them. He wanted to catch them and put them in prison. He wanted everyone to forget all about Jesus. He didn’t believe Jesus was the Rescuer. And he didn’t believe Jesus was alive, either.

You see, Saul had never met Jesus.

So one day, Jesus met Saul.

Saul was on his way to Damascus when suddenly a dazzling light flashed like lightning. It was brighter than the sun. It was too bright. Saul shielded his eyes and fell to the ground.

He heard a loud voice. It was too loud. It gave Saul a headache.

“Saul! Saul!” said the loud voice. “Why are you fighting me?”

“Lord?” Saul answered, “Who are you?”

“I am Jesus,” said the voice. “When you hurt my friends, you are hurting me, too.”

Saul’s whole body trembled.

“Go to the city,” Jesus said. “I’ll tell you what to do.”

When Saul opened his eyes, he couldn’t see. His helpers had to hold his hand and lead him like a little child. Saul was blind for three whole days – and yet it was as if he was seeing for the very first time.

Meanwhile, there was a man called Ananias who loved Jesus. Jesus came to him in a dream: “Go to Saul and pray for him, and I will make him see again.”

Ananias knew all about Saul and how he hated Jesus’ followers. “Lord, he has come to hurt us!”

But Jesus told Ananias, “Saul is the one I’ve chosen to tell the whole world who I am.”

So Ananias went to Saul. “Brother Saul,” Ananias said, “it was Jesus you met on the road.” And Ananias prayed for Saul.

Suddenly Saul could see again, but he saw everything differently. He wasn’t mean anymore. He even changed his name from Saul to Paul, which means “small” and “humble” – the very opposite of proud.

And do you know what Ananias' name means? "The Lord is full of Grace." (Grace is just another word for gift – which is funny, because that's just what Paul's message was all about from then on.)

"It's not about keeping rules!" Paul told people. "You don't have to be good at being good for God to love you. You just have to believe what Jesus has done and follow him. Because it's not about trying, it's about trusting. It's not about rules, it's about Grace: God's free gift – that cost him everything."

What had happened to Paul? He met Jesus.

Paul got a new job. He called himself a servant and traveled everywhere telling everyone about Jesus. He got shipwrecked – three times! He even ended up in prison.

"God loves us!" he wrote from prison. "Nothing can ever – no, not ever! – separate us from the Always and Forever Love of God he showed us in Jesus!"

And so it was, just as God promised Abraham that dark night all those years before, the family of God's children grew and grew.

Until one day, they would come to number more than even all the stars in the sky. †

The Present

from *Genesis 22*

The Jesus Storybook Bible

God had a Secret Rescue Plan for his people, and he knew it could work only if Abraham trusted him completely. God had to make sure Abraham would do whatever he asked. So, God asked Abraham to give him a present.

Abraham liked giving presents to God. He gave God his animals. They were called “sacrifices” and they were a way to say “I love you” to God.

But this time God didn’t want a lamb or a goat. God wanted Abraham to give him something more – much more. He wanted Abraham to give him his son, his only son, the son he loved – Isaac.

Put his boy on the altar and kill him as the sacrifice? How could God want him to do such a terrible thing? Abraham didn’t understand. But he knew that God was his father who loved him. And so Abraham trusted him.

Early the next morning, Abraham and Isaac set off. They climbed the steep, stony trail up the mountain. Isaac carried the wood on his back. His father carried the knife and the coals.

“Papa,” Isaac said, “we have everything except we forgot the lamb for the sacrifice.”

“God will give us the lamb, son,” Abraham said.

They built an altar and laid the wood on top. Abraham asked his son to climb on top of the wood. Isaac didn’t understand but he knew his father loved him. And so he trusted him. He climbed up onto the altar and Abraham tied his boy to the wood. Isaac didn’t struggle or try to run away, he just lay there quietly and didn’t make a sound.

Everything was ready. Abraham took the knife. Tears were filling up his eyes. Pain was filling up his heart. His hand was shaking. He lifted the knife high into the air.

“STOP!” God said. “Don’t hurt the boy. I want him to live and not die. I know now that you love me because you would have given me your only son.”

Abraham felt his heart leap with joy. He unbound Isaac and folded him in his arms. Great sobs shook the old man’s whole body. Scalding tears filled his eyes. And for a long time, they stayed there like that, in each other’s arms, the boy and his dad.

Suddenly, Abraham saw a ram caught in some brambles – the sacrifice! God had given them what they needed just in time. The ram would die so Isaac didn’t have to. And so Abraham sacrificed the ram, instead of his son.

And as they sat there on the mountaintop, watching the embers of the fire die in the cool night air, the stars above them sparkling in the velvet sky, God helped Abraham and Isaac understand something. God wanted his people to live, not die. God wanted to rescue his people, not punish them. But they must trust him.

“One day Someone will be born into your family,” God promised them. “And he will bring happiness to the whole world.”

God was getting ready to give the whole world a wonderful present. It would be God’s way to tell his people, “I love you.”

Many years later, another Son would climb another hill, carrying wood on his back. Like Isaac, he would trust his Father and do what his Father asked. He wouldn’t struggle or run away.

Who was he? God’s Son, his only Son – the Son he loved.

The Lamb of God. †

Samaritan on the Road

from *Luke 10:25–37*

One day a man tried to trick Jesus with some questions. He was an expert on religious law. He wanted Jesus to say the wrong thing about the law so that people would not follow Him.

“What must I do to live forever?” the man asked.

“You should know the answer to that,” Jesus replied. “What do you find in the law?”

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind. Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself,” the man replied.

“You have given the right answer to your own question,” Jesus told him. “If you do this, you will live forever.”

But the man still wanted to trick Jesus. So he asked another question.

“Who is my neighbor?” he asked.

Jesus then told this story to answer the man’s question:

“One of our own Jewish men was traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by robbers. They took his clothes and money, beat him up, and left him half dead by the road.

“Not long after that, one of our own priests came along the road. When he saw this injured man lying there, he passed by on the other side of the road. Then a Levite, who helps in our Jewish religious work, came by. He took one look at the poor man, then went on his way.

“After that, a Samaritan came down the road. As you know, you people all hate the Samaritans. But when he saw this poor man lying beside the road, he felt sorry for him. He knelt down, put some medicine on his wounds, and bandaged them. Then he laid the man carefully on his donkey and took him to an inn.

“The Samaritan stayed with this poor injured man until he was sure that he was all right. The next day he gave the innkeeper two coins, worth two days’ wages, and told him to take care of the man while he was gone.

“If you must spend more to get this fellow well, I will pay you when I return,” the Samaritan told the innkeeper.”

When Jesus had finished His story, He looked at the expert in Jewish law, who had tried to trick Him. “Which of these three men was a good neighbor to the injured man?”

“The one who was kind to him and helped him,” the man answered.

Jesus replied, “Then you must go and be that kind of neighbor too.” †

Samuel: Born to Serve

from *1 Samuel 1–3*

For years, Hannah had been praying for a son. Then one day she promised God that if He would give her a son, she would give him back to the Lord to serve Him all his life. Within a year Hannah gave birth to a son; she named him Samuel.

When Samuel was three years old, Hannah presented him to Eli, the priest, and said, “For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted my petition. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he shall be lent to the Lord.” So Samuel remained with Eli, who taught him to minister to the Lord in the temple, and every year his mother came to visit him.

It was several years later when, one night after Samuel had gone to bed, the Lord called to him. Thinking it was Eli calling, Samuel answered, “Here I am;” and ran to see Eli. But Eli said “I didn’t call; lie down again.” And so he did. Then the Lord called Samuel again, and he went in to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Again, Eli said he did not call and told Samuel to go lie down.

After Samuel went back to bed, the Lord called him a third time. Samuel rose and went to Eli and said “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli realized that it was the Lord who spoke, and he told Samuel, “Go, lie down; and if He calls you, say, ‘Speak Lord, for your servant hears.’”

Samuel did lie down again, and the Lord came and stood, and called as before, “Samuel, Samuel.” And Samuel answered, “Speak; for your servant hears.” And the Lord spoke to him and revealed the troubles that would come against the home of Eli because of Eli’s evil sons.

As Samuel awoke the next morning and fulfilled his duties, he was afraid to tell Eli about the vision that the Lord had given him because he didn’t want to hurt the old man. But soon Eli called Samuel, and asked, “What did the Lord say to you? Please don’t hide it from me.” And Samuel told him everything.

“It is the Lord,” said Eli; “Let Him do what seems good to Him.”

And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him, and all of Israel knew that Samuel was destined to be a prophet of the Lord. †

A Son Comes Home

from *Luke 15:11–24*

A certain father had two sons, and the youngest of them was not content with living at home. This young man was sure he could do better for himself out in the world, on his own, and he was eager to leave his family to begin a new life.

One day he said to his father, “Father, give me the part of your inheritance that belongs to me.” Fulfilling his son’s request, the father divided his belongings and gave the young man his share.

Several days later, the son had gathered all his belongings and left home to live as he wished. He traveled a long distance, into another country. There he became involved in a wild lifestyle that seemed pleasurable to him for the time.

But as time passed, the son’s money and supply of goods began to run low, and there was no one to give him any more. Still he continued in his sinful, reckless way of living until he had nothing left, and even his clothing was rags. Moreover, there was a terrible famine in the land, and it was difficult to find food. Neither did he have a place to live or a bed for rest.

He needed to work, but work was hard to find. Eventually a man gave him a job of feeding pigs. The son was so hungry, he willingly would have eaten the corn husks he was feeding to the pigs, but they were not offered to him. One day, in desolation, the young man realized that even his father’s servants had plenty to eat and some left over while he himself was starving. He decided to go back to his father and ask forgiveness for all he had done, and he left the faraway country and headed for home.

While he was still a distance from the house, the father saw his son and ran to him, hugging and kissing him and welcoming him home.

“I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son,” the young man said.

But the father called for his servants to bring clean clothes, the very best robe, and shoes for his son’s feet and a ring for his hand. Then the father planned a welcome celebration. “For my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found,” he said.

And just as the father rejoiced over the return of his lost son, our Heavenly Father rejoices over a lost soul that comes to Him. †

The Tax Collector

from *Mark 2:13–15*

People whispered when they saw Levi walking to work. They frowned as they watched him sit down at his booth by the Sea of Galilee.

Levi was a tax collector. He worked for the Romans, and the Romans ruled Levi's people, the Jews. Many hated him. He charged more than he should and kept much for himself, as most tax collectors did. Levi's only friends were the other tax collectors. None of his neighbors would invite him to dinner or go to his house to eat.

Levi had one other friend. His name was Jesus. Whenever Jesus walked by Levi's booth, He stopped to talk. He may often have told Levi how God loved him and why He had come to earth and how Levi could follow Him. Levi always listened carefully to Jesus. He wanted to follow Jesus. But he would have to give up his job, which brought him much money. He also wondered if his tax collector friends would stop being his friends. Levi always had some weak excuse for not following Jesus. Sometimes he would say, "Tomorrow," but by the next day it was even harder to leave his well-paying job and his friends.

One day Levi saw Jesus coming. He came straight up to Levi's tax booth. He smiled and greeted Levi and looked into his eyes.

"Follow Me!" Jesus said.

Levi's heart began to pound. What excuse could he give today? How could he leave this well-paying job? What would his friends say if he did? Would they stop being his friend? Suddenly he realized that it was much more important to follow Jesus and be *His* friend. Without a word, Levi put the money away. He closed up his tax booth. Someone else could work for the Romans now!

Then Levi looked at his tax collector friends, who by this time had gathered closer to see what he was doing. "I'm going to follow Jesus from now on," he told them. "I want you to keep on being my friends. And I want you to be Jesus' friends, too."

Levi invited all his friends to his house for dinner. He also invited Jesus. Perhaps He could talk with them and help them follow Him. Levi knew that he would follow Jesus even if his friends abandoned him.

The people in the crowd certainly looked surprised as they saw Levi and Jesus walking together toward Levi's house. They were even more surprised as they saw Levi's tax collector friends going in, too.

The tax booth looked strange and empty now. Levi had found something—Someone—far more important. †

Two Cousins Chosen by God

from *Luke 1:26–45*

One day God sent His angel Gabriel down to the home of an Israelite girl named Mary. “I have a very important message for you from God,” the angel said. “The Lord God has blessed you above all women.”

But when Mary saw the angel and heard him speak to her, she was frightened! So the angel said, “Do not be afraid, Mary. God has chosen you to be the mother of His Son. You shall give Him the name Jesus. He will be very great and will rule over Israel forever.”

“But I do not understand,” said Mary. “Joseph and I are not yet married.”

The angel announced, “With God nothing is impossible.”

When Mary heard this, she bowed her head. “I am very happy to be the servant of God,” she said, “Whatever He wants me to do, I will do it gladly.”

“There is also happy news for your cousin, Elizabeth,” said the angel. “Even though she is old, she too will have a baby son.” Then, just as suddenly as he had come, the angel disappeared.

Mary was happy and excited, but she was worried, too. If she told people what had happened, would anyone believe her? “I know what I’ll do,” Mary thought, “I’ll go and visit my cousin Elizabeth. She is very wise. And she will be as excited as I am, for she has given up all hope of ever having a baby of her own.”

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s voice outside the door, she ran to meet her. “Mary!” she cried. “I know all about your baby! Just think, my own cousin was chosen to be the mother of God’s Son!”

“How I thank God for choosing me!” Mary said. “Do you know, an angel came and brought me the good news. Did an angel come to you, too?”

“No,” said Elizabeth. “But an angel did come to see my husband, Zechariah. He told Zechariah that we would have a baby son. We are to name him John. He will tell people to get ready because God’s Son—for whom we have waited so long—is coming at last!”

“I’m sure Zechariah was very happy to hear this,” said Mary.

“Zechariah couldn’t believe it,” Elizabeth answered. “He asked the angel to give him a sign. The angel told him that he would not be able to speak until the day the baby is born. So Zechariah cannot talk, but now he does believe. And he is just as happy and excited as I am.”

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months. But finally the time came for her to go back home. “I am so happy for you, Elizabeth,” Mary said as she left. “You thought you were too old to be a mother. But now your greatest wish is coming true.”

“Yes,” said Elizabeth, “God has greatly blessed us both. But you, Mary, are the most blessed, for your baby is the Son of God!” †