

Together

A Story Church Publication | Issue 1

A New Story for Refugees

How we're helping our new
neighbors from across
the world

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TWO MEN. TWO MIRACLES.

How God changed the two most important men in Gail's life almost overnight



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Hello there, Story Fam -

God loves a good story. We know this because the book God inspired is a series of a thousand stories, all of which point to Jesus, who spent his life telling one good story after another.

God loves our story. Jesus said that the Heavens rejoice when even one sinner comes home (Luke 15:7). In February 2015, The Story was born. Since that day, we've come together to inspire non-religious people to follow Jesus. Hundreds of people have been baptized here, and hundreds more have given their lives to Jesus.

God also loves YOUR story. No matter the mistakes you've made or the burdens you carry, God loves you, and He will always welcome you home with open arms. As we love to say at The Story, "Everyone has a story, and every story matters to God."

The reason we can be sure that every story matters to God is Jesus, who insisted that

his mission on earth is "to seek out and save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Do you know what this means? Even on your worst day, the same Almighty God who set the whole universe in motion loves you, pursues you, forgives you, and cares for you. Coming to terms with this truth can fundamentally change your life!

Just imagine what would happen if, together, we devoted ourselves to becoming a community that relentlessly, unabashedly shares the life-altering love of Jesus with the world around us? What difference would so many hearts transformed by God's grace make in the city of Houston and beyond?

Let's find out.

Turn the page and keep reading to learn more about The Story Church, and to discover new ways to connect and share God's love with others. We're so proud to be your pastors, and we love the story that God is telling here!

Love,
Pastors Eric and Geovanna ■

THE STORY IS A COMMUNITY OF SKEPTICS AND BELIEVERS FOLLOWING JESUS TOGETHER.





A CHURCH FOR SKEPTICS

By Kale Kinchen, Timbergrove Campus Pastor

The Story Church launched in 2015 with a simple yet unique mission “to inspire non-religious Houstonians to follow Jesus.” Now, nearly seven years later, The Story has blossomed into a community of skeptics and believers in Houston and beyond, following Jesus together. Our community is made up of committed Christians who were raised in Sunday School, young and old skeptics who aren’t sure what they believe about God, and people anywhere in between. This is who we are, and this is what makes The Story so special.

Everything we do at The Story - from Sunday morning worship services to small groups and outreach teams - is all about bringing people from all walks of life together to learn more about the way of Jesus. Our hope is that with every day, our community looks more and more like Heaven and represents the diversity of Houston and the world around us.

Our first core practice at The Story is **challenging comfort**. Church shouldn’t just be a place you go to every week to feel good. It’s a 24/7 lifestyle. In order to become more like Jesus, that sometimes means losing the comfort we cling to because it’s what seems easiest or normal. We’re not perfect people and never will be, but we can do our best to make space for self-examination, honesty, and repentance.

Our second core practice is **inspiring deeper conversations**. We’re a community that doesn’t shy away from hard topics and difficult questions. We believe that discipleship involves vulnerability in wrestling with our

doubts together, learning to love people well no matter how different they are, and being at the forefront of issues that matter. We’re choosing to be in relationship with each other, not just become more religious.

Our final core practice is **pursuing truth**. The ultimate truth that lies in Jesus - not in the opinions and assumptions of the world around us. Jesus is the key to understanding the Bible and all of the questions we have about life, faith, relationships, suffering, and more. And our mission is to make sure you enter into a relationship with him as well.

So no matter where you’re at today in your faith journey, and no matter what assumptions you carry about church, The Story is a community where you can belong, ask your questions, and develop your faith in God.

To find out more about our beliefs, ways to get involved, or access resources to deepen your faith, visit our website: thestory.church



FAITH IN ACTION

A high school football coach serves his students and brings glory to God on and off the field

Interview by Julie Mirlicourtois
Producer of Maybe God Podcast

Brandon and his wife, Megan, have been attending The Story since 2017. Brandon was far from a skeptic when he first walked in our front doors, but over the last few years, he's stretched himself in brave new ways, learning how to be vulnerable, how to let go of past hurt, and how to allow God to work in every area of his life.

Q: Tell us about your Christian upbringing.

Brandon: I'm from Houston, Texas, born and raised. I grew up in a low-income area, in a house with three bedrooms and 11 people. My mother was the only one working and taking care of everybody. It was wonderful to grow up in an environment like that where, yes, sometimes things seemed tough, but there was still so much to be thankful for.

My mother showed me that even when she had a rough day, she could come home, prepare dinner, get us ready for bed, and after all of that, we'd sit down and go through scripture and pray and worship together. I thank my mom every chance I get for working her tail off and instilling that into me as a young man, and hopefully I can be the same father for my child one day.

Q: What's the most important lesson you learned from reading the Bible as a child?

Brandon: I remember being five years old and reciting the Beatitudes. I learned at a very young age that even when things aren't going my way, I'm still going to glorify God no matter what. You know, it's truly just the foundation of my thought process. If I'm going through

something bad, I realize that God is trying to help me address something. He's putting me through this right now so I can find out what that thing is. And I can't find out until I get in his presence through praise and worship so I can hear his voice. Even in those moments when I felt like everything was falling apart in my life and Satan was trying to get ahold of me, I never lost sight of that foundation.

Q: Can you give us an example of a moment you may have felt lost or under spiritual attack, and God led you to something better?

Brandon: I was a personal trainer for about six years when I got to a dark place. I felt like I had reached the end of that career. I wanted to help kids who don't have access to professional training. I wanted to do more to help more people. That's when the former president of Cristo Rey Jesuit College Preparatory School in Houston reached out to me unexpectedly.

I'd met him two years earlier coaching little league football. He gave me the opportunity to be a PE teacher at his school, and I started a football program too. A few years later, I was

promoted to Athletic Director.

I know God set the whole thing up. It still hasn't sunk in. It doesn't feel like work. I now serve the kids that I once was. It's exciting to give back to young people, to give them hope and opportunity. I can have those candid conversations and tell them: "There is a world outside of where you're living. Trust me. Just try. Apply yourself. Don't be afraid to get out of the nest."

I can also model faith the way my mom did for

"Even when things aren't going my way, I'm still going to glorify God no matter what."



Pictured above: Brandon in the weight room with students

me. The kids know they can come to me to talk about issues at home or school, and I'll listen to them, without judgment, the way God does for us. They know that I'm doing it from a place of love led by Jesus Christ.

Q: Your wife, Megan, attends The Story too, and you're actually expecting your first child! How did you and Megan end up at The Story?

Brandon: That's right, our daughter is due on December 28th!

When Megan and I started dating, I was attending a predominantly African American mega church, and Megan was already attending The Story. I'd gotten to the point where my faith wasn't being fed at my church, and the first time I brought Megan with me, people were looking at us like, "Whoa, what's this?" I was thinking, "Why does it matter if she's white

and I'm black?" It made me uncomfortable for her.

Then we tried The Story together, and the response was just: "Hey, how are you guys doing?" The first reaction was completely different. So that was one box I could check.

Then I heard Eric preach. The way he preached and how it was rooted in scripture, it was just mind blowing for me. It was exactly what I needed at that point in my life. On top of that, Eric mentioned that all of the offering that day was going to help the homeless. Man, that really touched my heart and made me love The Story. That's something I'd never heard at a church before.

Q: What does it mean to have a church you can both comfortably call home?

Brandon: Oh, it means everything. We're in a place where we're both growing spiritually. I'm really starting to understand my job as a husband and follower of Jesus Christ, through scripture and through groups like Leading Men and Re-Engage. What it means when you acknowledge Jesus Christ, not only as your savior, but as your Lord. I'm here to serve my wife and others and to bring glory to God. Now I'm working on: how can I do that through the many different roles that God has blessed me with in my life? That's something that I'm learning every day.

Q: You mentioned Re-Engage, our marriage ministry here at The Story. What did that change in your marriage?

Brandon: Re-Engage was HUGE. As a young man who grew up where I grew up, you were taught to keep your emotions inside. Don't share that stuff. You're weak if you do. And my first inclination toward Re-Engage was: "I'm a man. I don't need that stuff. We're fine. We're going to be OK." But Megan really pushed, and one day God was telling me to try it. It had to be him because I was finally at peace with the idea, and I decided to proceed wholeheartedly.

Re-Engage helped me understand that there were a lot of areas in my life where I was still broken and unhealed, and it was affecting our relationship in tiny ways. We all know that if you get enough tiny cuts, you can bleed out, and you don't know it until you're bleeding to death, and it may be too late.

At Re-Engage, we started noticing these little areas where we were bleeding. As a man, I was just broken and holding onto things that I needed to let go of. God was making it clear that if I held onto all this old junk, He couldn't bless me with something brand new because there was no room for me to receive it. ■



A PLACE WHERE DOUBTS ARE SAFE

We often think about Jesus as the quintessential answer-man, but in reality, he was enamored with questions.

By Pastor Eric Huffman

In the four New Testament biographies of his life, Jesus asked 307 questions, and he undoubtedly asked thousands more “off the record.”

If Jesus was so comfortable with questions, why do so many people today feel that their doubts are incompatible with Christianity? Why are the best conversations about comparative religions, injustice and inequality, science, and the meaning of life so often relegated to coffeshops and college classrooms instead of being inspired and encouraged by local congregations?

From Day 1, The Story has been a community where doubts are welcome. Why? Because we’re following Jesus, and Jesus was never threatened by honest questions. Far from being an enemy of faith, your doubts can become a catalyst for deeper faith in Jesus Christ. If you’ve got questions that have kept you from going all-in with God, consider these ideas:

1. Articulate your question(s) as precisely as possible. Precision is important here

because, when we allow our doubts to remain vague and imprecise, they can seem more formidable than they really are.

2. Share your doubt(s) with a trusted believer (or group of believers). Ask them how they’ve resolved their doubts on similar issues. Harvest their ideas about what resources (i.e. books, apps, sermons) might help you along in your search for the truth.

3. Be willing to doubt your doubts. It’s common for people to be suspicious of religious truth-claims without applying the same standard of skepticism toward our own assumptions. As you explore your questions and doubts, be open to the possibility that you could be wrong.

4. Ask God to give you a “heart of flesh and not of stone” (Ezekiel 36:26). It’s so easy to become jaded these days. As you pursue the truth about your questions and doubts, pray this simple prayer: “God, soften my heart and open my mind to wisdom and new understanding today.”



5. Read the Bible through the Jesus lens.

Most, if not all, of the problems skeptics have with the Bible can be resolved by interpreting the Bible through the lens of Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection. Old Testament violence, the oppression of minority groups, the wrath of God, and the subjugation of women, all of which can be found on the pages of Scripture, meet their match in Jesus, who came to show the world who God really is and how God really loves.

Jesus said, “The truth will set you free.” That’s why pursuing truth is one of The Story’s core practices. We believe that the more questions you ask about Christianity, God, the Bible, and Jesus, the more you will learn about them, and the more you learn, the more reasons you’ll have to put your faith in Christ.

So when you feel challenged by the next wave of doubt, don’t hesitate to voice your questions to God, your church leaders, and your trusted Christian friends. If you let Him, God can turn your doubts into more fuel for your faith. ■

If Jesus was so comfortable with questions, why do so many people today feel that their doubts are incompatible with Christianity?



FROM BURDEN TO BLESSING

By Eden Murray, Teams Coordinator

Pregnant, desperate, and alone. It's the story of countless women across the greater Houston area who are seeking solutions in moments of crisis, and it's the story of a 20-year-old young mother named Daesha, who recalls the moment everything changed for her in 2018.

"I really think it was God," Daesha says, about the day she discovered LifeHouse Houston — a Christ-centered ministry ensuring life for the unborn and support for mothers, that The Story Church is proud to support. "I had just got kicked out of my mom's house, with money for two days in a hotel and pregnant. And so, I just got on my laptop and started looking around and somehow found LifeHouse." After reaching out, Daesha was accepted as a program resident of LifeHouse Houston, and a few months later she gave birth to a son named



Images of women and children who have benefitted from the generosity of LifeHouse and The Story Church

Zion. "It's from the Bible," she says.

Located in South Houston, LifeHouse operates two residential homes for women — during pregnancy and immediately after they give birth. The ministry also provides non-residential services such as counseling, life skills, and postpartum support through its LifeLine and Getting Ahead aftercare programs.

Daesha is among the first to graduate from the Getting Ahead program. She is still learning to juggle the demands of work and returning to school in addition to being a mother, but the sacrifices to provide for almost 3-year-old Zion have been worth it. Daesha insists, "It never crossed my mind to have an abortion or giving him up."

During her time in the program and even after, Daesha has grown close with Lesley Lilly, an active volunteer at LifeHouse Houston and member of The Story Church.

Lesley and her husband, Kevin, brought the two

organizations together a few years ago — by asking The Story to host a Christmas event for current and former LifeHouse residents. Upon reflecting on that first collaboration, Lesley says

"It never crossed my mind to have an abortion or giving him up."

she saw a shared heart for the unborn and for life, between the two organizations. "It was an easy entry point for The Story to open its doors and say, 'sure we'll support a LifeHouse Christmas event,

it's a once-a-year commitment," Lesley says. "And from there the relationship has grown where individual Story members now reach out to volunteer on their own at LifeHouse."

Today The Story offers a variety of ways to get involved as a LifeHouse volunteer — from providing dinner for pregnant women to teaching life skills, or even serving as a mentor.

The need for volunteers and support of pregnancy programs like LifeHouse is great and will continue to grow in the near future. Supporting women in crisis pregnancies, according to Lesley, will be of critical importance as more pregnant women give birth in compliance with Texas Senate Bill 8 — the



Lesley and her husband, Kevin, at the 2019 LifeHouse gala

so-called “Heartbeat Bill.” The bill became law on September 1 of this year and has prohibited abortions in Texas beyond the sixth week of pregnancy.

Many women are seeking ways to end their pregnancies, even if it means traveling out of state, while others are searching for ways to keep their babies despite their dire circumstances. Ministries like LifeHouse Houston are ready to

help. “We do life with people that may not be in the best place to be a parent,” Lesley says. “They may not have the resources to live independently and keep their jobs. So, it’s a big challenge but it’s where we are supposed to be.”

As the incoming board chair for LifeHouse Houston, Lesley sees kingdom-sized opportunities to turn the burdens of pregnancy into blessings. “This ministry honors God as Creator, the One who calls life into being, and helps each mother see their life is just as valuable as their unborn child,” she says. “It

gives us an opportunity to minister to them. Maybe for the first time in their lives, these women will experience unconditional love and their life will change forever, along with the life of their child. It’s transformational.”

Situated just two miles from the largest Planned Parenthood facility in the western hemisphere, LifeHouse Houston hopes to grow its programs and support for the increasingly diverse population of women who find themselves pregnant. “There’s no longer a stigma that you got pregnant out of wedlock. We have women from all walks of life and we have women who’ve been trafficked,” says Lesley. “The fact that they’ve been trafficked - which is so horrific - and have chosen to have their baby - it’s huge. What was meant for evil, God will use for good. We realize this is a tremendous place for us to witness the love of God to these women. This opens the door for salvation!”

“Maybe for the first time in their lives, these women will experience unconditional love and their life will change forever.”

The story that LifeHouse is telling is a timeless one. A universal story of redemption from loss, light from darkness, life from death. A story that is not lost on Daesha, who now recognizes the relational, spiritual, and intellectual

growth she experienced during her time at LifeHouse Houston. They are experiences that she highly recommends for any pregnant woman currently looking for help: “Let it be a place where you can heal,” she says. “The person I was before is completely different from the person I am today. I understand now. This is for my son and for me to be healthy... There is a lot of love there.”

Sign up to serve expecting mothers with our outreach team: thestory.church/contact ■

VISIT THE STORY CHURCH



TIMBERGROVE
8200 Washington Ave
Sundays at 9:45 & 11am



MUSEUM DISTRICT
4910 Montrose Blvd
Sundays at 8:30, 9:45 & 11am

Scan for locations & service times:





THE VISION BEHIND MAYBE GOD PODCAST

By Eric Huffman, Host of Maybe God



The Maybe God team visiting country music legend Randy Travis' ranch in North Texas

In 2017, a few friends at The Story began a conversation that continued for several months. They all loved our church's mission to inspire non-religious people to follow Jesus, but they also perceived a huge gap in our methodology. They noticed that The Story's rather traditional lineup of ministries, which mostly revolved around Sunday worship services, didn't seem to align with our stated passion for skeptics and non-Christians. They wondered,

"How can we reach the people no other churches are reaching by doing all the same things other churches are doing?"

God prompted that group to dream of a new, creative venture that would inspire thousands of skeptics to stretch beyond their comfort zones by having deeper conversations in



Pastor Rudy Rasmus being interviewed by Eric in 2018

pursuit of the truth. Eventually, this group approached me with their idea:

"Non-religious people might not be excited to attend a Sunday church service, but chances are, they'll be willing to check out a new podcast - especially one that features great stories, compelling guests, and extraordinary production quality."

It took about five minutes to see that God was all over this idea, and we immediately got to work buying used media gear, planning episodes, and booking guests for our first season. In January of 2018, the Maybe God Podcast was born, and we've been telling great stories and tackling tough questions ever since.



Podcast guest Alisa Turner leading worship at The Story in 2018

With more than fifty full-length episodes featuring guests ranging from country music legend Randy Travis and The Bachelor star Ben Higgins to compelling authors, journalists, pastors, and storytellers, we've wrestled with topics such as immigration, racism, LGBTQ issues, sex and dating, marriage, near-death experiences, the afterlife, and more.

What began as nothing but a dream among friends has blossomed into a powerful, life-changing reality. Over five thousand people download each new Maybe God episode, and that number continues to grow with each new season. The Maybe God Productions team, led by Executive Producer Julie Mirlicourtois, continues to develop and expand the vision of Maybe God by producing exciting new episodes



Author and speaker Lee Strobel during a Maybe God Live recording in March 2020

while also pursuing new opportunities like Across, our new docuseries on the ongoing crisis at our southern border, scheduled for release in 2022.

With every new venture, our mission remains the same: to inspire skeptics to ask better questions and to have deeper conversations in search of the truth.

To be the first to learn about new episodes and the release of our docuseries, sign up for updates: maybegodpod.com ■



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TWO MEN. TWO MIRACLES.

How God changed the two most important men in Gail's life almost overnight

Interview by Julie Mirlicourtois
Producer of Maybe God Podcast



Ryan and Gail are those rare high school sweethearts you don't hear about very often. They met at 15 years old and have been doing almost everything together ever since. They learned to drive together; they graduated together, but the one thing Ryan would never do with Gail was pray, and talk about God. In 2018 when the couple was thinking about having their first child, Gail realized that had to change.

Q: Let's talk about Ryan's faith just 5 years ago. What was it like?

Gail: It was probably non-existent. There was no talk of God. We didn't go to church. If I ever told him I was praying for him, he would just say "OK" and was very closed off.

Ryan: Gail was quietly practicing her faith in the background for so long. It's probably my fault because I never brought it up. I think it was just an uncomfortable topic for me. I didn't want to look at myself and realize that I didn't have any faith. I felt like I had control of my life. I didn't really need faith. I never had a relationship with God in my childhood. My brother and sister and I were raised Catholic, but it was a checkbox activity. My dad would give me his watch in church because I'd constantly be asking when it's going to be over.

Q: Gail, did it bother you that Ryan didn't have a relationship with God?

Gail: I would just feel bad for him. I would feel bad that he didn't find any comfort in anything when life would get stressful. I couldn't comfort him. He couldn't comfort himself, and

I would always tell him that I find comfort in my relationship with God, but that also was uncomfortable sharing with him. It wasn't that hard being a believer without Ryan at first, it slowly became harder as we were transitioning to having a family. Once we started talking about having Olivia, that's when I realized we're not on the same page, and I want to raise her to know who Jesus is, and I can't do that without Ryan.

Q: Gail, why was it so important to you to raise Olivia to know Jesus?

Gail: Growing up, I didn't go to church when I was really young. I didn't know God. The day of my 11th birthday party, my dad was in a terrible car accident on his way to work. He was hit by a drunk driver sideways. Doctors told us he basically died twice and was brought back with CPR.

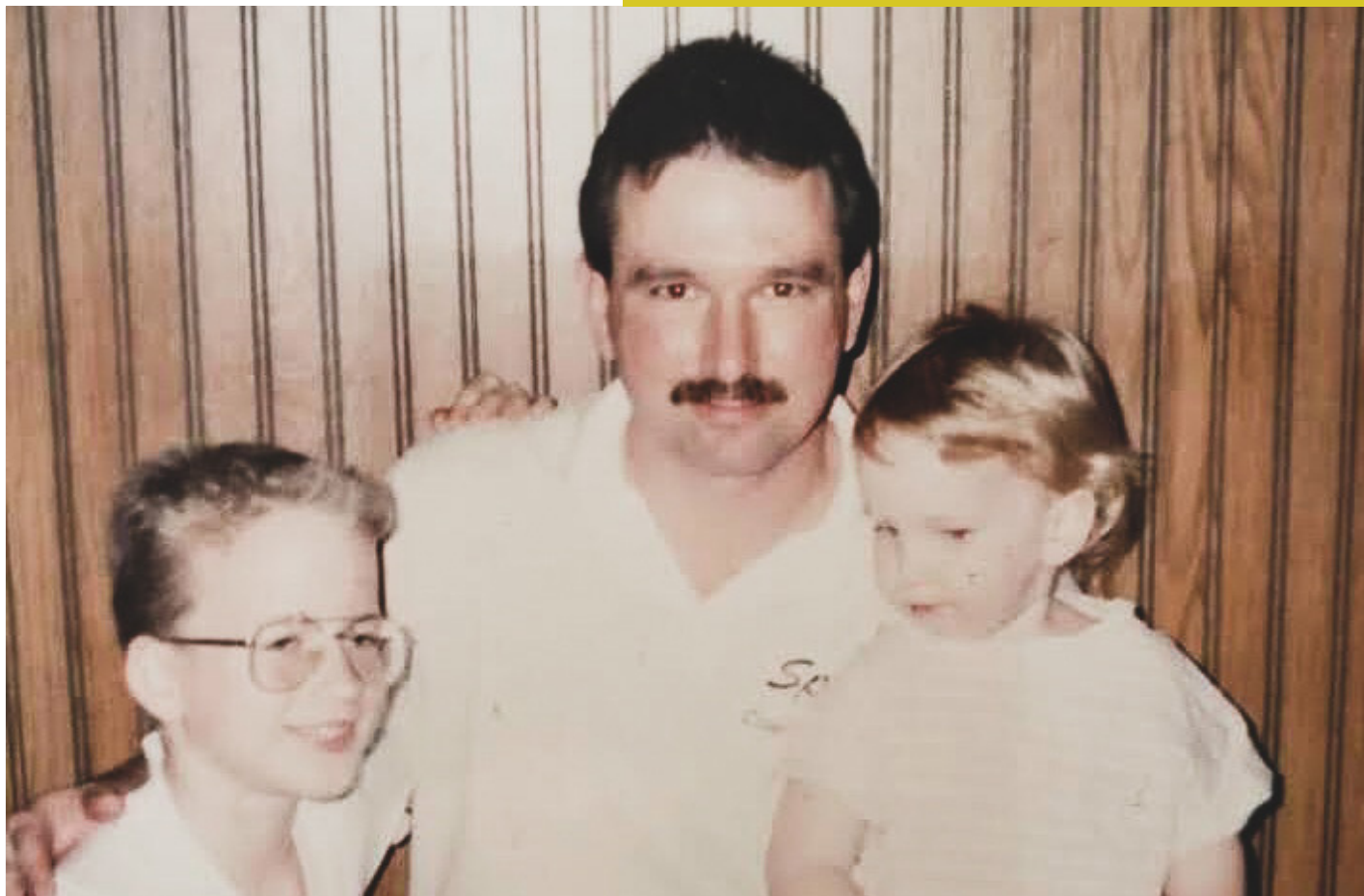
When we got to the hospital, the very first thing he told us when he was coherent was that he met Jesus. As he was being pulled out of his car by a machine, he was sitting on the curb

Jesus basically told him: "I'm going to give you some time to get things straightened out before you come home."

watching it all unfold, and Jesus was sitting next to him. He described him as a very caring and fatherly presence. That's when Jesus told my dad that he wasn't ready to die. Our family needed him for a while longer. Jesus

basically told him: "I'm going to give you some time to get things straightened out before you come home."

Everything changed after that. We started going to church. Our lives and conversations revolved around God. My dad was not a man of faith before. So watching his transformation



Gail's father with his children

was incredible to witness, and it changed us all. What my dad cared most about was nurturing our relationships with God every single day.

Dad always told us he was on borrowed time, but we all thought he'd survived and would be with us for a long time. Then a year and eight months after his accident, he passed away from a massive heart attack due to complications from the car accident. Luckily, Dad had set us up with life insurance after his accident, but I feel now like the one thing that God really wanted him to get straightened out with that borrowed time was our relationships with Him.

Q: So fast forward many years - you're thinking about having children and want to raise them to know Jesus the way you do. How did you warm Ryan up to exploring faith together?

Gail: I found a church for us to go to and it wasn't a good experience. He didn't want to go again. So then I found another church, and I told him, every church is different. That was just as bad. The whole idea was shelved for six months after that.

Q: What didn't you like about the experience?

Ryan: I didn't feel connected. Everybody was already very strong in their faith. They knew the Bible. I felt very behind. It made me really uncomfortable being there. It's almost like you had to be a believer to even walk in the door.

Gail: That's why when someone shared a video with me of Pastor Eric sharing his story of his deep skepticism, I was super intrigued. I knew I had to get Ryan to The Story. We went one Sunday and have been going ever since.

Ryan: Knowing Eric's story about how he was a pastor for so many years who didn't believe, and then hearing him break down the Bible in terms I could understand, I felt like I could get behind it. And the more and more I heard the facts behind the Bible, the more I felt my heart starting to change. I started getting goosebumps in worship. I started to look forward to church.

Gail: It's almost like you needed the facts first. Why should I believe any of this? And it was always, you know, talking about real things, real facts, proven things, things that you can't deny. And then from that, I feel like your faith started to grow versus just saying: you have to have blind faith to everything that we're telling you here.

Q: When did you start to see a real change in Ryan?

Gail: We joined a small group, and that was a really cool experience for us. Everyone in our group had lots of doubts and questions, but they were also so much more into their faith. So I feel like they were great teachers for us because we weren't ashamed to ask our questions or admit we hadn't had the same experiences as them. We both really grew in our faith at that point.

Ryan: I started writing in my prayer journal and reading the Bible every day. And it's so cool to go back and see what prayers have been answered. I feel a lot more gratitude today. When I'm stressed now by life, I know it's not all on my shoulders.

Gail: Times are still stressful with a young child in covid times, but he's a happier person. I've seen him giving things to God and trying to be more at peace with things that are out of his control. I feel like our marriage has grown



Ryan and Gail with their daughter

because we've talked a lot about how we're in this together forever. We're not gonna let anything break us down. And I feel like it's because of our relationship with God that I know that's possible. Watching God transform first my father, then Ryan, has just been the coolest thing. ■

DESTINATION: DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

By Dilan Braddock, Student Coordinator



The Story's mission team leads a Vacation Bible School (VBS) in the Dominican Republic

In a cloud of dust, a van carrying families from The Story rolls to a stop just outside the GO Ministries activity center in Santiago De Los Caballeros, Dominican Republic. The summer sun slips below a row of palm trees on the banks of a sewage-filled river at the center of town. A man picks through a garbage pile, hoping to find something he can sell. And the loud, joyful voices of children rise from inside a metal building nearby.

For the next week, Houstonians from The Story Church will play, work, and live alongside the residents of the Caribbean Island — sharing what they know about the love and teachings of Jesus, and fully expecting to see glimpses of him in the process.

“This isn’t about us coming here from Houston to tell them how to do things and show them the way. Jesus is The Way. So, this is us coming

alongside them; this is a partnership,” says Matt Meloy, a member of The Story and veteran outreach volunteer.

Together with his wife, Carrie, and their family, Matt has made multiple trips to serve alongside GO Ministries out of a desire to see the world just as God sees it. “I view ministries and going to the DR as an outlet for that new relationship that I have in Christ. It enables me to get outside my comfort zone in Houston. Pulling yourself out of that can really give you a more eternal perspective. It’s a perspective God wants us to have and that’s caring and loving for other people,” he says.

Relationships are at the heart of serving on overseas mission trips for Matt’s wife, Carrie. “I think the thing that moves me the most is — the kids. The kids are so happy and just willing to hang out with total strangers and let us, as



adults, just love on them and play with them. A close second is being with fellow Houstonians who maybe you met for the first time at the airport and by the end of the trip, you're best buddies," she says.

Jeff Rogers, GO Missionary, says The Story teams always arrive energized and willing to pioneer new territory. "We actually went into one of the prisons where the seminary was working — we scraped ceilings, and we painted ceilings, demonstrated mercy, and love and generosity. Every one of the members of The Story that were a part of that trip were just all about it," Jeff says. "Most people don't get too excited about going into a prison in the developing world to paint ceilings next to inmates that are in for murder, rape, stealing, whatever. It was one of the coolest things I've been a part of in a long time."

Working with GO Ministries, The Story Houston has sent more than 100 Houstonians to serve in the Dominican Republic over the last six years. The ministry provides medical services, seminary training, sports programs, and basic nutrition to families — including one hot meal to more than 1,000 children across the island nation, six days a week.

Sign up to serve on our next mission trip to the Dominican Republic:
thestory.church/contact ■

The Story's mission team paints an exterior wall and leads VBS for kids





DEBUNKING THREE COMMON MYTHS ABOUT THE BIBLE

By Eric Huffman, with excerpts from his book “Scripture and the Skeptic”

When I was twenty, after spending most of my childhood in and around various churches, I reached a decision that would shape the next thirteen years of my life. To put it bluntly, I decided the Bible is for suckers and simpletons who would rather be told what to think than learn how to think for themselves. Under the tutelage of a few persuasive college professors, I began to think of the Bible as a bunch of very old, mostly disconnected books which were piecemealed together - hundreds of years after they were written - behind closed doors, by committees of power-starved men.

I continued to quote sections of Scripture that agreed with my politics at the time, but I rejected every notion that the Bible is uniquely inspired, especially holy, or entirely true.

That all began to change in February of 2013 in the ancient Galilean village known as Capernaum, where I was confronted with overwhelming evidence in support of Christ’s resurrection. Standing near the Sea of Galilee late one afternoon, I asked Jesus to take over my life. I prayed through my entire flight home, and by the time the wheels touched down in Kansas City, I was convinced that I hadn’t just been wrong about Jesus for thirteen years - I’d been wrong about the Bible, too.

Over the next few months, I read as much of the Bible as I could, along with other books written about the Bible, in search of the truth. I fell in love with God’s word during that time, and several years later, my love affair with Scripture is continuing to blossom. I know I’m not the only one who has ever struggled to believe the Good Book, so here are a few of the myths I hear most often about the Bible, along with a few ideas about how to avoid being deceived by these misconceptions.

1. The Bible Is Just Another Old, Religious Book

When you hold a Bible in your hand, you hold the vast wisdom and witness of sixty-six distinct, ancient texts written by at least forty authors in three languages, across three continents, employing at least nine literary genres, over a span of more than 1,400 years. That alone would be enough to prove that the Bible is unique, but dig a little deeper, and you’ll

uncover more reasons to believe that the Bible stands apart from all other religious books.

We know that Jesus didn’t write any of the biblical texts, but all sixty-six books testify to the same God and His plan to save the world through the life, death, and resurrection of this mysterious, first-century rabbi from Nazareth. All twenty-seven New Testament books were likely written within a lifetime (~60 years) following Jesus’s death. Archaeologists have recovered almost 25,000 ancient manuscripts of New Testament books, totalling over 2.6 Million pages, as well as the remarkable Dead

Sea Scrolls that validate the historical integrity of virtually the entire Old Testament.

The most historically compelling fact about the almost 25,000 surviving ancient New Testament manuscripts is that they are in textual agreement over 98% of the time.

The most historically compelling fact about the almost 25,000 surviving ancient New Testament manuscripts is that they are in textual agreement over 98% of the time. Even where the manuscripts disagree,

their points of departure are inconsequential, as New Testament scholar (and outspoken atheist) Dr. Bart Ehrman acknowledged when he wrote, “Most of the changes found in our early Christian manuscripts have nothing to do with theology or ideology.”

Regardless of your religious persuasion, there’s no denying that the Bible is unprecedented and unrivaled. Its original meaning remains intact, and even after all these years, the Bible’s message is as trustworthy and true as ever.

2. The Bible Is Morally Flawed

No one can deny that the Bible is messy, or that some of its pages reveal the very worst of human depravity. What are we to make



of the examples of indiscriminate violence, oppression, slavery, misogyny, and xenophobia found in Scripture?

The first step is understanding how your perspective affects what you observe in Scripture. Imagine yourself in New York's Museum of Modern Art, standing in front of Van Gogh's masterpiece, "Starry Night." Hoping to understand the method to Van Gogh's madness, you lean toward the painting as far as you can and, raising a magnifying glass to your face, you zero in on a single, isolated section of his work. What do you see?

Chaos. Messy, formless, seemingly random yellow, blue, and black smudges with no apparent rhyme or reason. Feeling underwhelmed, you fix your gaze on another section of the painting, only to find an entirely different kind of chaos: dots upon dots upon more dots. The closer you get to Van Gogh's masterpiece, the uglier it looks and the less sense it makes.

Shaking your head, you step back for one last look, and there it is: the masterpiece you love. From a distance, what you failed to see up-close comes into focus: all the ordinary, ugly parts work together to make something extraordinarily beautiful. You glance around the room at other works of famous impressionists, and at once, you realize their true genius. They understood something that most people miss: up close, life can seem like meaningless noise, but from a distance, it's perfection.

Such is the case with Scripture. Read up-close with a magnifying glass, the Good Book contains some very bad things: references to slavery, misogyny, and oppression. Zoom in too close, and for too long, on those parts, and you'll likely feel disgusted by the Bible. But sometimes you have to step back to see the



Eric Huffman on his trip to the Holy Land in 2013

beauty. When you read the Bible with the right perspective, you'll discover the real reason why Scripture is often so messy. The Bible is messy because real life is messy, and real love is messy, and God is love. And you'll see that the messiness in the Bible simply sets the stage for the Savior, Jesus Christ, who came to reconcile this messy world to God.

3. Christians Are Often Wrong, So the Bible Can't Be Right

If Christians are going to champion all the ways the Bible has changed the world for the better, we should also be willing to acknowledge the ways people have used the Bible to do evil. For example, the same scriptures that fueled the abolitionists' anti-slavery struggle also served slaveowners as a means of justifying slavery and a tool for suppressing revolts. The same Bible that labeled peacemakers blessed has been wielded as a weapon to provoke countless wars.

But whether or not the Christians in your life are actually getting the Bible right has no bearing on the objective truth of Scripture. The Bible either tells a true story or it doesn't, regardless of how its followers behave.

A major turning point for me was learning how to think about the Bible for myself, instead of letting religious leaders tell me what to think about it. Taking a closer look at Scripture led me to a watershed moment. I realized that imperfect people have been twisting, tainting, and tearing apart the Bible for centuries, and yet the words on its pages continue to inspire and transform hundreds of thousands, if not millions more lives across the world every year. When I finally understood the intense scrutiny and gross mishandling this book has endured and overcome, I began to respect the scriptures more than ever before. I found myself falling in love with the Bible again, and I keep falling more in love with it every day. ■



3 WAYS CHRISTIANS GET IT WRONG

By Rolando Alvear, Online Campus Coordinator

What is the truth? This four-word question seems simple enough, but if you’ve ever been through a season of deep doubt and confusion, you know how complicated this question can be. This is especially true in today’s world, where the digital age has created a platform for literally everyone to spin their own narrative.

Living in the information age means we exist in a steady rhythm of rising, reacting, and responding to whatever is served to us on the electronic devices that are never beyond arm’s reach. Where culture and spiritual teaching are concerned, even well-meaning, church-going Christians are susceptible to the blurring of lines and perceptual misunderstandings of biblical truth. For example, here are three common beliefs that Christians often get wrong — and what the Bible actually says about each one:

1. God doesn’t give me more than I can handle.

This phrase is not contained in the Bible, yet it is one of the most used and misunderstood concepts among Christians today.

When claiming God won’t give people more than they can handle, people often use a scripture passage written by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10: “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.” — 1 Corinthians 10:13 (NIV)

Context is key here: Paul is talking about temptation. He says we will all be tempted at some point. When that happens, God will be faithful in providing ways for us to rely on him to escape the temptation. It’s a situation that is more than we can handle without help from God.

All of life is created by God and often, it is more than we can handle on our own. There are so many situations where we could not endure without calling on God to provide a way out of suffering. “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” — Psalm 46:1 (NIV)

2. God doesn’t care.

Sometimes we find ourselves in deep hurt and disappointment. When this happens, it’s easy for us to feel far from God, and to think He doesn’t know or care about us.

Scripture reminds us that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all present. Nothing is too difficult for Him when we call on Him for help. “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.” — Isaiah 40:28 (NIV)

If God didn’t care about you, your life, and your problems, He wouldn’t have sent Jesus to redeem you through the forgiveness of sin. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” — John 3:16 (NIV)

3. God wants me to be happy.

We usually think of happiness in terms of our circumstances. To be sure, feeling happy is great, but God wants us to discover something even better: joy.

The word joy appears 88 times in the Old Testament 57 times in the New Testament. Joy is described as a fruit of the Holy Spirit — a mark of high character. Joy is a key indicator that Christ is living in you. “I have told you this



so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” — John 15:11 (NIV)

Scripture teaches us to always rejoice in God; even when things aren’t going our way. “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” — Philippians 4:4 (NIV)

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What is the truth? It’s a tricky question that needs a lot more consideration than a few words on this page. So, we recommend digging deeper.

Our video sermon series, The Perfect Story: Skeptic’s Guide to the Bible, is a great place to start searching for answers to questions such as: Is the Bible truth or fiction? Is the Bible intolerant or inclusive? and Is the Bible too good to be true? Scan the code to watch the series on YouTube. In it you’ll discover why the Bible is trustworthy and true. Once you learn to trust the scriptures, you’ll find the truth we all seek. ■



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BEYOND A DOUBT: HOW GOD'S MIRACLES HAVE SHAPED MY STORY

By Geovanna Huffman, Executive Pastor of The Story



Eric and Geo with their children in Kansas City

Every so often, amidst the ceaseless hustle of my everyday life as a mother, wife, friend, and full-time pastor, I'm rendered speechless and still by a sudden, stunning awareness of God's amazing grace. In those hushed, fleeting moments, I take stock of my life and wonder how and why God could be so kind, so personal, and so wonderful, and I am keenly aware that my life so far can best be described as a series of wonders and miracles.

When I was growing up in Quito, Ecuador, my father was a talented architect who also served as an Associate Pastor of a large Pentecostal congregation, so it felt like we were constantly at church. Part of being my father's daughter meant that every weekend, while my friends went to the mall or to parties, my little sister and I went with our parents to share the gospel everywhere we possibly could, from the neighborhoods and suburbs of Quito to tiny churches in the Andes mountains or the Amazon jungle. I still remember driving up steep terrain in a rainstorm or along the edge of a cliff with a 300-foot drop below, and praying that God would let us arrive safely. I

For as long as I can remember, the church has always been my home away from home.

also remember the hostility we faced in some of the remote villages we visited, and how dangerous this work felt at times, but in every instance, by the grace of God, we managed to find our way home unscathed.

From a very young age, I taught younger kids about the gospel, helped lead Vacation Bible School, and served on our church's worship team. I know some "preachers' kids" who grow up feeling resentful toward the church, but by the grace of God, I never remember feeling that way. For as long as I can remember, the church has always been my home away from home.

Some days after school, my Christian friends and I would take our guitars and tambourines into the streets of Quito, where we felt it was our mission to sing God's praises for all to hear. We even boarded city buses packed with people - a captive audience - for whom we played and sang all our favorite worship songs. Looking back and remembering how aggressively evangelistic my friends and I were, it's a miracle that no one ever threatened, chased, beat, or killed us on those buses.

When I was little, and my sister was just a newborn, our brother died. Paul was very healthy and only two years old when he

suffered an allergic reaction to antibiotics, and suddenly he was gone. Both my parents - but especially my mom - went into shock for what seemed like a decade, a period of time that took a

heavy toll on our entire family. Now that I'm a mother, I can finally empathize and understand their grief, and I can see how it's only by the miracle of God's love and provision that my family and I survived such a devastating loss.



Around age 14, I began to sense God calling me toward pastoral ministry. There were other things that I wanted to do with my life, so I tried ignoring God for a while, but that almost never works. Once I decided to embrace God's calling on my life, I spoke with my local church leaders about it, but they told me that I must be mistaken because God doesn't call women to be pastors. I must have been mistaken, I thought to myself. Case closed.

In the days and weeks that followed, I took my disappointment straight to God in prayer. Why would you plant this idea in my heart and mind, I asked Him, if girls aren't allowed to be pastors? I still remember how the Holy Spirit's affirmation washed over me in that moment, as God prompted me to read from Isaiah 41:9-10.

**You are my servant;
I have chosen you and have not rejected you.
So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you; I will
uphold you with my righteous right hand.**

Even at such a young age, and in spite of the obvious challenges before me, I chose to trust in God's promises. At age 16, having graduated early from high school, God presented me with an opportunity to leave my home country and spend a year in Houston, serving as a worship leader for a Brazilian congregation in the Westchase District. It was unimaginably difficult to leave my family and friends behind and to move to a massive city in a foreign country. I had no family in Houston at the time, and I had almost no money. How I managed to avoid getting robbed, assaulted, or worse, I have no idea, other than to say it was by the miraculous grace of God, who never failed to strengthen, help, and uphold me with His righteous right hand.

After a year of serving with the Brazilian church, I got connected with a small Methodist congregation in Westchase where, for the first time, I witnessed a female pastor in action. Rev. Martha, along with the entire congregation, decided to take me in... literally. I moved into the guest room at Martha's house, and a year later, with her help and encouragement, I applied for admission to a small Methodist college, where I was accepted in the fall of 1997. A miracle!

Four years later, despite the fact that English was my second language, I graduated with honors (a miracle), with a 3.9 GPA (huge miracle), with no student debt (what!?), and oh yeah, with a husband named Eric Huffman (speaking of miracles)! That fall, I enrolled in a seminary in Kansas City, and I almost immediately began serving God as a pastor in His Church. And now I've had the privilege of fulfilling my call as a pastor for over twenty years and counting!

As much as we talk about welcoming skeptics at The Story, you might think that every single church leader has some dramatic testimony about how they found Jesus after surviving a long, dark season of doubt. But everyone has a different story to tell, and as I look back on my miraculous life so far, I honestly can't remember ever doubting the existence - or even the goodness - of God.

I can't say for sure why I've never struggled with doubts, although I know it's not because I've got this Christianity thing all figured out. I also know that it's not because my life has always been easy, privileged, or comfortable; I've experienced more than enough scarcity,

heartache, and pain to validate the occasional doubt about whether God is really good. However, just as skeptics often claim they haven't seen enough evidence to embrace God, I can honestly say that I've never seen enough evidence to doubt Him.

I love our church's mission to inspire nonreligious people, skeptics, and doubters to follow Jesus, and I hope we never lose sight of that vision. On a personal level, however, God has given me more than enough reasons to grow beyond the shadows of doubt by trusting that, in every circumstance, His grace is sufficient for me. ■

I've experienced more than enough scarcity, heartache, and pain to validate the occasional doubt about whether God is really good.



Eric and Geo with their children, Joelle and Koen



A NEW STORY FOR REFUGEES

How we're helping our new neighbors from across the world

By Kat Brough, Communications Manager

Huddled among the bustle of air travelers arriving at George Bush Intercontinental Airport, two dozen or so members of The Story Church chat and laugh as they put the finishing touches on their homemade welcome banner. Nervous excitement builds as arriving flights are announced. Finally the moment arrives, and the guests of honor step through the secure exit into the baggage claim area. Eyes meet, handshakes are exchanged, and a new chapter of life begins.



Photos of The Story Church serving with Houston Welcomes Refugees

This is no welcome home party for mutual friends, church missionaries, or guest pastors. This is a welcome party for Afghan refugees — a key outreach sponsored by The Story Church and a Houston Welcomes Refugees (HWR), whose purpose is to be the hands and feet of Christ here in Houston when refugees are placed here by the federal government.

“I think to myself — if I were in some foreign country, I would be so appreciative of somebody native to that country being helpful to me without any strings attached,” says John Sullivan, who serves as a board member of The Story Church and HWR. “I think that is such an amazing thing. I am so glad there are people to help,” he says.

John explains that as a legal immigrant, each person is vetted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and then again by the U.S. State Department. They receive a small

stipend for basic living expenses, but they are largely on their own to make ends meet once they land in Houston.

Afghans aren't the only refugees living in Houston as part of the ongoing government effort to provide safety and stability to people fleeing unsafe situations abroad.

“They're from all over,” John says. “It's kind of like a little United Nations, right there in our city. You can drive right by that area and never think twice about the people living among us with the same basic needs and desires that we all have, but in a completely foreign land.”

Welcome teams for HWR commit to interacting directly with the refugees for a period of six months. Participation includes helping to get refugees settled into their new apartment, accessing community support services, and practical things such as language, school, and work assimilation.

“If I were in some foreign country, I would be so appreciative of somebody native to that country to be helpful to me without any strings attached.”



A HWR team welcomes a family to Houston

Other ways to volunteer include collecting donated household goods to use in each new refugee apartment and decorating and furnishing each new apartment home with the donated items.

There are many advantages to a local outreach evangelism model compared to those where overseas travel is required to share Jesus. According to John, “we just kind of have an organic way to share the Gospel as opposed to beating them over the head with it.” Members of the welcome team focus on the relational aspects of supporting refugees — everything from sharing weekly meals, to learning their native customs, playing frisbee in Memorial Park, and exploring dinosaur bones at Houston’s Museum of Natural Science. Whereas Americans are used to running errands and moving through activities quickly, daily activities for Afghan refugees usually move at a much slower pace, so the time invested by welcome team volunteers is seen as a sign of respect.

“The greater call is to stay faithful to the Great Commission — making disciples of all nations — even when the people of all nations find themselves in ours.”

This outreach model creates opportunities for volunteers to come alongside people and love them before sharing the reasons for extending their kindness. “If they ask you, ‘Why are you doing this? What is it that is making you do this for free?’ and then we have the opportunity to say, ‘We believe in Jesus as our Lord and our Savior. And if we meet someone in need, we are supposed to love them well like he loves us,’” John says.

Program volunteers have also found that many refugees are more open to learning about the Christian faith here in Houston than they would be surrounded by established cultures and religious practices in their homelands.

Some Americans may feel uneasy about welcoming Afghan refugees to Houston, given ongoing tensions in the Middle East. When asked about this, John says HWR does not get involved in politics or speak to foreign policy. “There are certain people who think we can’t have anyone from Afghanistan because Al-Qaeda might be among them or whatever. But the greater

call is to stay faithful to the Great Commission — making disciples of all nations — even when the people of all nations find themselves in ours.”

Sign up to serve foreign refugees here in Houston: thestory.church/teams ■



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