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Together

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Stories from
The Story



EVERY STORY MATTERS TO GOD.

Ever since The Story was born in 2015, this one statement has been a part of why we do what we do. Over the past decade, we've witnessed hundreds of skeptics and nonbelievers fall in love with Jesus and become true disciples. We've seen marriages restored and lives transformed. We've seen firsthand how the light of Jesus can prevail through storms and floods, illness and heartbreak, grief and loss, even addiction and sin. Through it all, we've learned that God is always on the move.

God speaks through our stories. Our prayer is that as you read the stories in this magazine, you'll open your eyes to how God speaks through your story too!

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LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

How the Church Showed Up When A Story Family Needed It The Most

By Kathryn Hill & Dilan Braddock



The morning of Sunday, October 20, 2024 began normally for Dan and Shelley Dietz. They woke up to get ready for their preferred early worship service, and Dan took their 2-year-old daughter, Sophie, to grab donuts as part of their weekly tradition. When he got back, Shelley - 28 weeks pregnant with their second child - said she felt a little bit off. Her doctor encouraged her to go in for a simple check-up. Dan headed to The Story assuming everything would be fine when he got a text from Shelley.

“Call my mom. My water broke. They’re keeping me here until the baby comes.” Dan replied with a scripture that he had just heard in the sermon: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” - 1 Peter 5:7

Dan stayed at the church, waiting for his mother-in-law to arrive. Seeing how shaken up Dan was, Margie, a leader of the 8:30 am Hospitality Team both he and Shelley served on, came over to pray with him. Just minutes later, their Sunday morning Discipleship group also rallied around the Dietz family. The group spent their entire group time praying for the health and safety of Shelley, Dan, and their unborn baby.

Meanwhile, at the hospital, the doctors told Shelley that if she could make it through the next 48 hours, she would be able to help keep her baby inside for longer. The family prepared for the potential of a long stay at the hospital. Just 52 hours later - on October 22, 2024 - Margot was born via an emergency C-section.

The Dietz’s spent the next 86 days traveling to and from the hospital to watch Margot grow in the NICU. Instead of a phone app informing them the size of their baby (popularly used to compare their growth to fruit) and what

body parts were developing that week, they witnessed it in real time through the glass of her incubator. They later learned from their doctor that if her water had not broken early, they would not have discovered in time that Margot’s umbilical cord was much smaller than it should have been and would have caused major complications. The timing of her delivery - although extremely early - saved her life.

Despite the miracle they were witnessing, Shelley describes this period as “the worst days of my life”. An engineer by trade, she knew there would be plenty of statistics and odds about Margot’s expectancy and risks. But she didn’t want to go to the internet and find out. Throughout the darkest season of their lives, Dan and Shelley weren’t alone. They relied on God, their friends, and their church community to carry them through it.



Shelley holding Margot during one of their many visits to the hospital during her NICU stay



The Sunday Morning Discipleship Group that surrounded the Dietz family with community, photographed in August 2025. Dan is visible on the top left hand corner.

The Story Discipleship Group that prayed with Dan that fateful Sunday morning continued to show up. They set up a meal train and shared it with the Gather Moms group that Shelley was also a part of. They continuously prayed over the Dietz family. On the weeks Shelley was able to be at church, she would be so overwhelmed that all she could do is cry. No one made her feel uncomfortable, instead they prayed for her and sat by her side.

“There were mornings when I didn’t want to show up, and Dan had to drag me to church,” Shelley reflects. “But every time I went, it was like the message was for me. I never once regretted going.”

Any time they walked into The Story, they immediately felt that they were safe. Soon, even people they had never met were sending

meals and cards to the hospital: a couple who sat two rows behind them every Sunday, extended friends of their parents, and a cousin of their Sunday group leader. They describe being “overwhelmed by prayer” and “deeply humbled” by the love they received from their community. They didn’t pretend to be okay; they came to church broken, and God met them there.

“I’ve heard it said that church is a hospital for the sick, not the healthy,” Dan says. “It’s okay to be vulnerable. It’s okay to be crying in the pews. It’s okay to ask for help at church and to not be ‘fine’.”

Despite the pain and the fear of the unknown, Shelley was overcome by a supernatural peace about the outcome - a peace that could have only come from God. Nearly every other day in

this nearly three-month period of waiting, Dan would send a single text message to Shelley: “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” - 1 Peter 5:7

“I knew this wouldn’t be forever,” shares Shelley. “Margot would one day crawl; she would grow up. I knew she would one day be at church with me. Coming to church became this source of hope that things would be normal, and church would be part of the normal we would raise her in.”

On January 26, 2025 - a day before her original due date - Margot went home with her parents. She was a perfectly healthy baby with no complications, and their new season of normal life began.

After calling The Story home since 2018, Dan and Shelley learned they would be moving to New Mexico at the end of 2025 for Dan’s job. Before they left their Houston home, they had one more moment to celebrate with their community. On August 31, 2025, the Dietz family stood up in front of the church and had Margot baptized by Dilan.

“We want to make a public commitment to welcome our daughter into the Kingdom of God and to support her in her faith journey so that she may come to know Jesus for her entire life.”

Now, over a year and a half since Margot arrived prematurely, the Dietz family continues to cling to 1 Peter 5:7 as a guiding verse for their lives. While it reminds them of the pain and anxiety they experienced in that season, it also reminds them of hope. It reminds them of a group of friends that stood with them in the deepest valley for months, all while facing

their own challenges. It reminds them of the peaceful warriors who ceaselessly covered their whole family in prayer. It reminds them of a God who still works miracles today. Shelley and Dan will always remember that no matter what they face in this world, they can “Cast all your anxiety on [Jesus] because he cares for you.” ■



Pastor Dilan Braddock baptizes Margot on August 31, 2025



FOSTERING HOPE & A FUTURE

The Champion Project Transforms the Lives of Foster Children in Houston

By Kathryn Hill

The statistics for foster children can seem hopeless: 66% end up homeless, in prison, or dead within one year of aging out of foster care at the age of 18; 88% of reported child sex-trafficking victims were in foster care when they went missing. Girls in foster care are 600% more likely to be pregnant before age 21. And unfortunately, foster kids experience post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) five times more than the general population and twice the rate of veterans overall.

The Champion Project, a local faith-based organization and newest Strategic Partnership of The Story Church, is on a mission to change the story for Texas foster youth. They are “a trauma informed mentoring program that works in 24 hour staffed facilities for youth

in foster care, to help provide stability and consistency in the lives of teens in foster care”, and are “built on the vision that each church will create a safe and loving environment for their local youth in foster care by welcoming them not only into their church doors but also into their lives demonstrating the unconditional love of God.”

The Champion Project began in 2019, and currently serves nine congregated (or group) homes, reaching over 100 foster children ranging in age from 4 to 18. Elizabeth - one of the co-founders of the organization - had previously founded a non-profit dedicated to equipping aged-out foster youth to share their stories as a form of advocacy.

“As we helped these young adults share their stories, we quickly realized how re-traumatizing it was for them,” shares Elizabeth. “We kept hearing that they just wished they had a consistent adult figure in their life that could have been there for them.” From there, The Champion Project was born.

As Elizabeth and her co-founder, Audra, looked at the foster care system as a whole, they saw an immediate need: there weren’t any organizations, churches, or resources going into the group homes and 24-hour care facilities. These kids were moving between homes every 6 months on average. Elizabeth shares that because these children have trouble trusting because there “wasn’t anyone in their lives that they could say cared for them.”

Through close partnerships with local churches, The Champion Project began sharing the love of Jesus and transforming and redeeming these young lives. Today, volunteers serve in multiple capacities to reach these children. Tutors visit them at school and on weeknights, helping them learn to read and increase their reading level. Mentor teams bring them to church, share meals, and host fun activities and outings to connect with the children. For the first time in many of their lives, the children have an adult - a name and a face - they can trust.

“They’re not used to seeing people continuing to show up for them,” says Elizabeth. “They feel safe. They feel loved. They’re smiling. The mentors and tutors create an environment where they can feel connected and comfortable.”

The Story Church first began serving with The Champion Project as a host for their “book bus”, a traveling initiative which brings books, toys, and play to churches near group homes. For a few hours, these children enjoyed plenty of fun in our gymnasium and courtyards.

“I know a lot of these kids have been through a lot,” shares Josh Hanson. Josh, who has been part of The Story for many years, is an avid reader and an athlete, and has volunteered at our book bus events. “Having the opportunity to put books in the hands of kids who don’t have the chance to read otherwise and being able to give them individual attention, even if it’s just for a few hours, is valuable.” Josh enjoyed being able to talk to the kids about what they liked to do, and spent the majority of his time playing basketball, football, and dodgeball with the group. “I just wanted to match their energy and make sure they were having fun.”

For the first time in many of their lives, the children have an adult they can trust.

As the seasons changed and Christmas drew near, The Story’s annual “Christmas Wishes” program adopted The Champion Project to support. Members of The

Story’s community shopped for hundreds of gifts, compiled into a list based on what the foster kids all shared they really wanted to receive this year. Carrie Meloy - a Partner at The Story Church and member of our Strategic Partnerships Team - helped organize the list and ensure each child had something to pick from.

“All the kids were so kind and happy to be there,” shared Carrie, a mother of two high school teens. “You never know how teenagers are going to be. The little ones were ecstatic to pick out gifts.”

Carrie recalls looking at the list and seeing one gift in particular that stood out. “One kid wanted a specific book and wrote the name on his wishlist. My husband, Matt, and I bought it and set it aside. The morning of the event, Matt asked one of the staff members to help find the child, and he got to walk over and hand him the book.” The child was thrilled. “He yelled out, ‘You got it! I can’t believe you got it!’ Someone had paid attention to what he really wanted.”

Others, such as Ryan, volunteered their time to make the Christmas Wishes event a one-of-a-kind experience for these children. Ryan dressed up as Santa to take a photo with each child, which was then used for a craft activity where they created a frame as a keepsake.

“This one younger boy finished his frame and came back for another printout of his photo. Right after he finished the frame, he brought it over to me as a gift for ‘Santa,’” shares Ryan. “It was hard not to cry at that moment, still dressed as Santa. I took it home, and it now hangs in my house as a reminder of why loving these kids matters.”



Ryan - dressed as Santa - in the frame he now hangs in his home

The Story’s partnership with The Champion Project is just beginning. Starting this year, The Story will be the church home for “Boys to Men”, a local group home for foster boys. Mentors will undergo an annual trauma-care training program in addition to ongoing training support from Champion Project. Alongside leadership, volunteer mentors will become an adult they can trust. These boys will soon be able to call The Story home and become a part of our community for however long they stay, enjoying outside activities such as trips to Main Event, sports games, cooking classes, and more.

“Volunteers don’t even know these kids are here,” shares Elizabeth about the foster care system. “They’re the hidden population. If we can inspire them at a young age to not go in one direction, we can make generational change.”

Dea Taylor, the Administrative Director for The Champion Project, witnesses how Jesus changes the lives of both the kids and the volunteers daily.

“I’ve seen so many people profoundly impacted,” Dea shares. “We really have amazing volunteers that just show up consistently. We’ve had teenage interns completely change their career plans after working with us. We have former foster children who come back and share about their lives now.” They’re college graduates, parents of their own families, living a life they never expected. “It’s a blessing to be on the sidelines and observe the love of Jesus in action.” ■

To start serving as a Mentor for The Story’s adopted home with The Champion Project or to stay in the loop on related events, visit: thestory.church/serve





ABSOLUTELY GOD

Looking Back at Maybe God's First Eight Years

By Pastor Eric Huffman

In the fall of 2017, I stumbled into a conversation that would forever alter the course of my life and ministry. Julie Mirlicourtois, who had been serving on The Story's staff for eighteen months, barged into my office and said, "I'm convinced we need to start a podcast!"

A little bit about Julie: in 2015, the same year that The Story began, she and her husband, Ryan, moved with their two small children to Houston from Chicago, where Julie had spent years working as a producer for Oprah Winfrey. Prior to her stint with Oprah, she also produced "Face the Nation with Bob Schieffer" and "The Early Show" on CBS.

Upon moving to Texas, Julie became a "free agent," and a few weeks after their family began attending The Story, we asked her to produce a few testimony videos on a volunteer basis - a far cry from Oprah and CBS News! Funny thing, though: when she agreed to start working for The Story, Julie wasn't yet a Christian. I could see the Lord working on her, however, and within a few months, I had the privilege of baptizing Julie in a horse trough. In April of 2016, Julie joined The Story's staff as our full-time Media Director, and she is our church's longest-tenured staff member (excluding Pastor Geo and I, of course).



Julie spent most of her life as a deeply spiritual, non-religious skeptic. She believed in God - vaguely - but she didn't trust religion. In her search for something more, Julie prayed, meditated, and even visited psychic mediums on occasion, but nothing ever satisfied her until she met Jesus. Ever since, thanks in part to her many years of searching, she has become a unique force for the Kingdom of God. When Julie talks, I listen - even when she's saying something I don't want to hear.

And back in 2017, as Julie explained all the reasons why starting a new podcast made sense, I didn't want to hear it. My plate was already overfull with a thriving, two-year-old congregation and two small children at home. Besides, I thought, who listens to podcasts? And more to the point, who on earth would listen to the podcast of a 39-year-old Methodist preacher from Texas?!

Julie wouldn't take no for an answer. Sensing my hesitation, she ran an end-around and enlisted the support of my wife, Geovanna, at which point I knew I had no choice. Within a few weeks, Julie, Geo, and I - along with a small group of passionate people from The Story - were praying and making plans to launch this new project, and in January 2018, the Maybe God Podcast was born.

2018-2019: Maybe God Is Born

For the first few years, we focused on creating audio-only episodes that spoke directly to non-religious skeptics. We tackled topics ranging from art and sexuality to grief and death, and we shared powerful testimonies about overcoming doubts and near-death experiences. Within just a few months, Apple Podcasts included Maybe God on its list of best Faith & Spirituality Podcasts.

Those early years were wild and fun. I recorded most of my voiceovers in the only quiet space I could find: my tiny office bathroom we playfully called the *Poodio*. We obviously weren't taking ourselves too seriously, but that didn't stop us from tackling the most serious and controversial topics.

Some of my favorite episodes from the first two seasons focused on the most controversial social issues of our time: Christianity and the LGBTQ community (featuring David Bennett, Adam Hamilton, and others), evolution and the Bible (featuring Dr. James Tour), and the Christian response to the migrant crisis along our southern border (featuring Pastor John Garland).

Our goal in tackling these topics wasn't merely to stir the pot, but to add some biblical clarity and Christian love to the conversations that were happening in the culture.

2019-2021: Maybe God Made a Movie

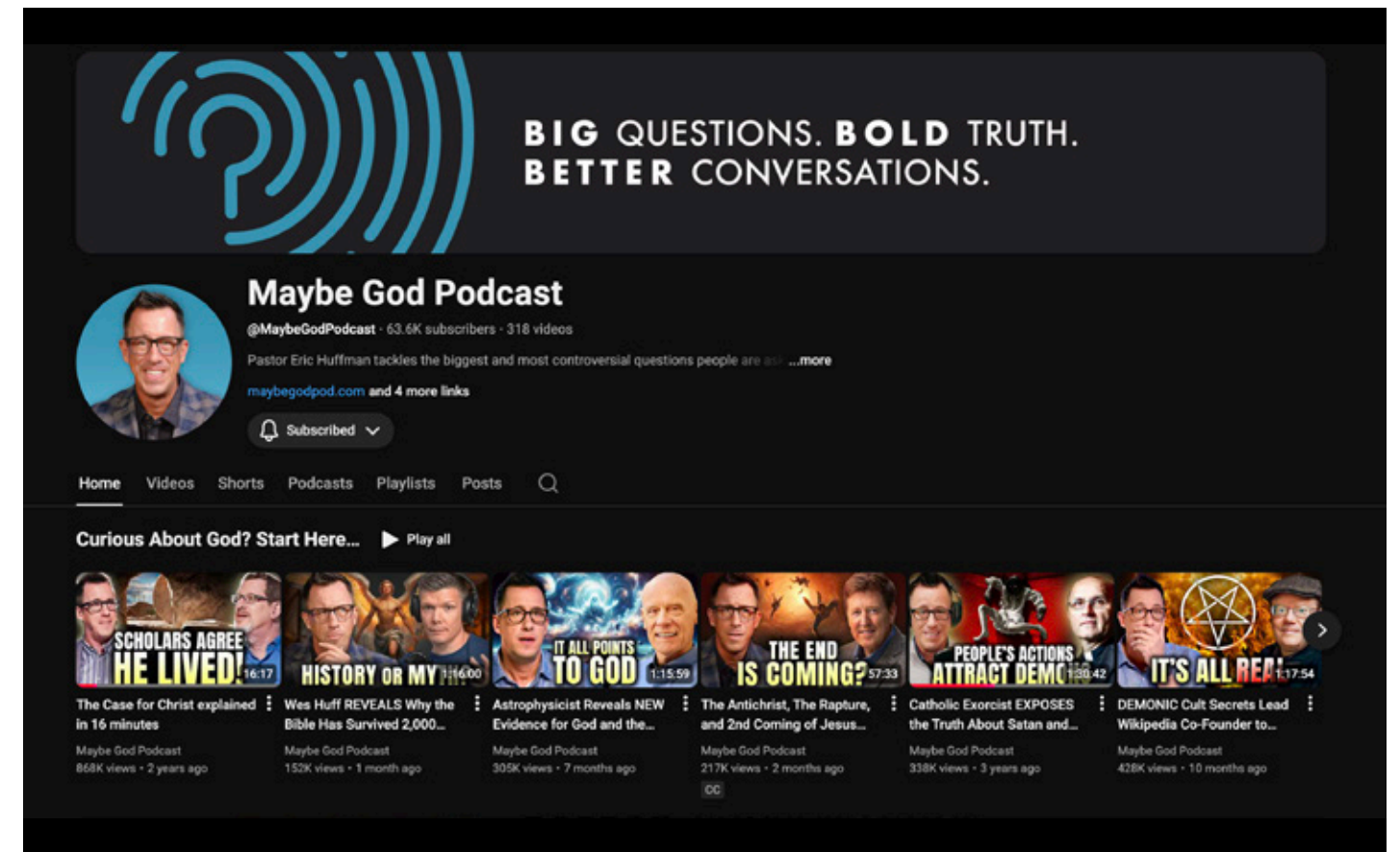
Our episodes on the migrant crisis inspired the Maybe God team to take on a whole new challenge. In 2019, Julie felt a nudge from the Holy Spirit to produce a film highlighting the ways that many Christians were rising above the divisive, political noise in our culture by loving the strangers and migrants that God was placing in their path. After three years of intense work - including a trip to Honduras where they witnessed the deep suffering that migrants were escaping - Julie and the Maybe God team released *ACROSS*, our four-part docu-series.

Upon its release, *ACROSS* received multiple film festival awards and was screened by groups across the country. Making this docu-series was a massive risk for many reasons - it was expensive, incredibly time-consuming, and controversial - but I was (and remain)



so proud of Julie and our incredible team at Maybe God for laying everything on the line to address this critical issue in such an impactful, Christ-centered way.

During this very busy stretch, our team somehow managed to release some outstanding episodes, including in-person interviews with two of my personal heroes: Dr. William Lane Craig and Country Music Hall of Famer Randy Travis!



2022-2026: Maybe God Is on YouTube

The success of *ACROSS* taught us a lot about the power of video to communicate Truth, so in 2022, we began transitioning Maybe God from an audio-only podcast to a video-based YouTube channel.

From 2018-2022, our podcast had 10,000-15,000 listeners per month, but our shift to YouTube has resulted in massive growth. As of February 2026, Maybe God's YouTube channel has over 64,000 subscribers, and our videos have amassed over five million views and counting!

As Maybe God's reach has grown, so has our ability to book even more outstanding guests. In recent months, I've had the privilege of speaking with the brilliant Wesley Huff, perhaps the world's most well-known Christian apologist, Lee Strobel, the best-selling author of *The Case for Christ*, and Larry Sanger, a co-

founder of Wikipedia who recently became an outspoken follower of Jesus, among many others.

Over the past eight years, the Maybe God Podcast has released over 150 episodes that have been downloaded or streamed almost six million times. It's truly overwhelming to think about what God has done through Maybe God, and it all began with one enthusiastic, new Christian storming my office with a wild idea, refusing to take "no" for an answer.

Maybe God Is Reaching Out to the Lost

Since we recorded our very first show, our mission at Maybe God has been to inspire doubtful believers and hopeful skeptics to boldly seek answers to their most challenging questions about God. Although we've made our share of mistakes along the way, we've never lost sight of that mission, and the Lord has blessed this project beyond measure.

I've learned so much from our guests and the stories they've shared. I've learned that it's okay to ask questions. God can handle our doubts; in fact, He can use our doubts to inspire us to pursue the Truth. I've also learned that nothing - not even sermons, services, or studies - is nearly as powerful as a heartfelt story, a testimony of faith. Most importantly, the last eight years have taught me this universal truth: whenever we step out in faith and take risks to share Christ and his Gospel with others, God honors our efforts with grace upon grace.

Our amazing Maybe God team, under Julie's direction, is currently planning to double-down on what God has done by pushing out more content, more consistently, and to cultivate an online community of people who are pursuing God's Truth together. Given all God has done since 2018, we can only begin to imagine what He will do in the years to come!

Maybe God Is Here for You

If you're new to Maybe God and you aren't sure where or how to get started, I'd like to offer a few ideas, including a list of my all-time favorite episodes. The first thing to know is that YouTube is the best place to find Maybe God's content. Visit [YouTube.com/maybegodpodcast](https://www.youtube.com/maybegodpodcast), and be sure to subscribe when you're there! ■

New to Maybe God?

Here's a list of Pastor Eric's favorite episodes, categorized by topic, to help get you started!

THE BIBLE

Wes Huff Reveals Why the Bible Has Survived 2,000 Years of Scrutiny (1/3/26)

THE AFTERLIFE

Agnostic Engineer's Life Radically Transformed by Near Death Experiences - John Burke (3/21/24)

SCIENCE & FAITH

Astrophysicist Reveals New Evidence for God and the Bible - Dr. Hugh Ross (6/21/25)

Dr. James Tour Exposes the Shocking Truth About Life's Origins (12/21/24)

POWERFUL TESTIMONIES

Randy Travis Finds God in Darkest Moments (6/27/22)

Why This Woman Converted from Islam to Christianity - Hatun Tash (4/26/25)

SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND THE OCCULT

Ex-Hollywood Witch Turned Christian Reveals Occult's Dark Secrets - Jac Marino Chen (7/19/25)

Ex-Satanist Reveals Dark Secrets Behind Occult Rituals - Riann Swiegelaar (1/10/26)

CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

Voddie Baucham Speaks Up about Trump, Wokeism, and Growing Up Fatherless (2/15/25)

Why Rebecca McLaughlin Chose Jesus' Love Over Same-Sex Relationships (8/17/24)

MAYBE GOD CHANGES LIVES



Always Jesus

"This podcast is the one for you. Notice I didn't ask who you are or what your beliefs or existential questions are - Maybe God speaks to that yearning in our souls that we can either ignore or press into. Eric and his team do not turn their gaze from the raw, real, ugly, or even mundane. I am often so moved by the outpouring of deep, real faith in the stories shared here. I'd say this podcast will change your life, but what will actually happen is it will bring you to asking God to change your life. Grab your tissues, go find your Bible someone gave you when you were 12, and buckle up: Maybe God is the real deal." - BPTruth

Instrumental in My Journey

"Shortly after accepting God back into my life in April of 2025, I discovered Maybe God podcast and it has been instrumental in my faith journey! I really appreciate Pastor Eric's ability to guide conversations thoughtfully and draw out deeper insight, which has expanded my understanding of God's word. Keep up the amazing and life changing work!" - Laura A.

A Needed Voice for a Baby Christian

"I came to a non-denominational church almost a year ago. Still, there are messages I struggle with. I find myself getting defensive. I can't buy into some of what I hear in church. This podcast helps me know that I'm not the only one who feels the need to push back on things that rub me the wrong way. I love hearing other's views on the word and the problems they may have with it." - E. C.

Atheist Turning Back

"I started listening to Maybe God a year and a half ago. I was searching because I had totally lost a belief in God even after being raised in a strong Christian home. For years I hid my ugly truth of being an atheist. Eric and his team spearhead taboo issues along with atheism in their podcast and with Eric's book '40 Days of Doubt'. I am now a believer again. I still have my dark place of doubt, but I am able to see the truth through Maybe God. Thank you Maybe God team!" - Matt J.

Embracing Tension

"This podcast combines the power of asking deep questions with the real human story. Instead of staying at a distance with just fact or idea, Maybe God looks at tension and weaves it masterfully with real, compelling stories from real, beautiful people. I am so thankful for the way this podcast has challenged me, helped me see outside of my paradigm, and if I'm honest, oftentimes left me in tears." - Vanessa J.

Subscribe to Maybe God on YouTube:





NOT ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL

How High School Students Discover the Light of Jesus & Share it with their peers

By The Story Staff

At The Story, we often share stories about how Jesus has radically changed the lives of adults: people turning away from things that were harming them, broken relationships being redeemed, and finding hope in hopeless situations. But these transformative encounters don't just happen to adults. As our student ministry continues to grow, we're seeing these stories come to life in the next generation.

Marcus is one of our graduating seniors in 2026. His mother, Christine, has been a part of The Story's community for years - faithfully serving on the Sunday media team, participating in countless discipleship classes and Bible studies, and never afraid to ask her questions. Marcus grew up witnessing her faith in action at home, but made his own decision to follow Jesus last year.

Throughout his first three years in high school, Marcus struggled with severe depression and anxiety. At his lowest point, he opened up to his mom and spent a season in an inpatient facility to receive treatment and care. But it was at his lowest that he became curious about God and Christianity. Marcus picked up the Bible.

"When I picked it up, it was like 'Where has this been all my life? This is the guide I've been looking for.'"

Marcus's curiosity drove him to continue asking questions and coming back to the Bible for answers. On a car ride towards the end of his junior year, Marcus gave his life to Jesus in the passenger seat. In what he can only describe as a "miracle", the weight of depression that he'd been experiencing for years was gone. Marcus was ready to go all in.

"My life before Jesus was without direction and purpose. There were times when I just felt alone wherever I went," shares Marcus. "After meeting Jesus, life has brightened up for me. It's like I can finally see through the darkness now that I have light."

A few months later, Marcus stood in front of The Story to be baptized. "I remember feeling so excited for weeks leading up to it," shares Marcus about his baptism. "Some people expect being baptized to be this awesome thing that changes your life for good, but it's a way of showing others and God that you're true to your faith. That you're not scared to share your faith with the world. When I looked at the pictures after, I noticed that in all of them, I couldn't stop smiling. But I didn't do it to smile or feel happier. I did it to show Jesus that I'm with him."

Throughout this final school year, Marcus does his best to show up every week for Sunday

morning Sessions and Wednesday evening small groups under our Student Ministry. He says that showing up helps him be around people who share his faith, discover questions from other students that he wouldn't have asked, and not feel as alone as he once did. At home, he encourages his younger brother to read his Bible more and explore his questions as well. At school, Marcus enjoys sharing his faith with his friends, no matter what they believe. Both his Christian and Muslim friends alike had the same thing to say about Marcus: there's something different about him now.

"It feels like there's less stuff that weighs on me now," says Marcus. "It's all Jesus."



MK served in the Dominican Republic in the summer of 2025 alongside a group of high school students

Mary Katherine - who goes by MK - is another student in our upcoming graduating class. MK surrendered her life to Jesus in middle school and says it's the most important thing that has "carried her through high school" and prepared her for the outside pressures she would face over the past few years.

"My desires shifted," shares MK about what surrendering to God looks like in her life. "I no longer feel the need to fill myself with worldly things. And I'm able to feel more vulnerable with Jesus."

Like Marcus, MK doesn't have a faith community at school, and relies on her involvement with the Student Ministry and conversations with her family to explore her deepest questions. As she faces the same pressures that many other high school students face to go to parties, drink, and more, MK turns to Jesus at every opportunity she gets, especially when she feels tempted to fall into sin herself.

"I've learned that God wants to carry our weight and doesn't want us to feel ashamed," shares MK. "Before, I would try to hide like Adam and Eve in the garden. But as I've grown in my relationship with Jesus, I'm able to share things with him more freely."

MK sees her walk with Jesus through a unique lens. Parents - when faced with certain situations or challenges - may say something along the lines of "I'll love you no matter what." While MK knows that is true for many parents with their children, she says that Jesus fully embodies the statement. His sacrifice on the cross is a constant reminder that no matter what she does, when she honestly seeks repentance, Jesus still loves her.

Her vulnerability goes beyond her quiet time with Jesus. She brings it into her weekly small groups.

"Coming to the light out of darkness and out of hiding in sin, you physically feel the weight come off your shoulders," MK says. "It's the best thing to be surrounded by faithful people. It's a constant reminder that we have hope."

MK has been plugged in with a weekly small group for the past few years, and now enjoys

co-leading a small group of Middle School girls. She knows what it's like to be a sixth grader with questions and doubts about the Bible, and now she shares her wisdom with the next generation of students.

"The student ministry is so approachable," shares MK when talking about how her groups have been a constant through high school. "Don't be afraid to be new. You're welcome here."

Both Marcus and MK have learned three valuable lessons about walking with Jesus at a young age. First, that God's word - the Bible - is where they can turn for answers and hope. MK regularly prays before she starts her daily study, "Holy Spirit, help me read this through a heavenly perspective." Second, that belonging to a community of believers is crucial to growth. And third, that walking with Jesus looks different but can truly change your life.

"Don't care what other people do and don't hold yourself to worldly standards. Hold yourself to godly standards, MK advises. "If we're supposed to lead lives that look like Jesus, we can do that only through his name."

"Have confidence in Jesus and trust in him, without being afraid of what others may think or say about you," Marcus echoes. "Take the step. We need God in our lives." ■

"If we're supposed to lead lives that look like Jesus, we can do that only through his name."

MK (center) pictured among fellow middle and high school students, as well as Student Ministries Coordinator Haley McCloskey, on a Sunday morning.



BEFORE SKEPTICS BELIEVE

Why Guest Experience Matters

By Bruce Ammons, Director of Guest & Care Ministries



Every Sunday at The Story Church, we gather to remember and proclaim a simple truth: God is writing a story of redemption, and He invites ordinary people, including non-religious people, to be part of it.

What we sometimes forget is that for many who walk through our doors, they are stepping into The Story at a fragile moment. Some arrive curious but cautious. Some are wounded by past church experiences. Some are searching for hope but unsure where to find it. And many are quietly asking a question they may never say out loud: Is this a place where I am safe to bring my doubts, questions, and imperfections?

Scripture reminds us that long before we ever searched for God, He was already moving toward us. “We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). That is the heartbeat of the gospel—and it should also be the heartbeat of our guest experience.

A warm and inviting guest experience is not about polish or perfection. It is about presence. It is about reflecting the heart of Jesus, who consistently noticed people others overlooked, welcomed those on the margins, and created space for belonging before belief.

Jesus rarely rushed people into decisions. He walked with them. He ate with them. He listened to their questions. Again and again, He simply said, “Come and see” (John 1:39). Faith often unfolded over time, through relationship.

The same is true today.

Most guests do not place their trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior on their first visit to a church. That kind of surrender usually requires trust—and trust takes time. But research and ministry experience consistently show that when people attend repeatedly, when they feel known and welcomed, the vast majority eventually choose to follow Jesus.

A warm and inviting guest experience is not about polish or perfection. It is about presence. It is about reflecting the heart of Jesus.

In other words, return visits matter!

People rarely return to places where they feel ignored, confused, or invisible. On average, only 10% of church guests ever return to a church after their first visit.

This is unfortunate as research shows that 85% of guests who visit for a second time will then become regular attendees, and potentially, over time, fully engaged church partners.

This is why guest experience matters so deeply to the mission of The Story Church. From the parking lot to the worship center, from children’s check-in to conversations in the lobby, every interaction communicates something about who we believe God is. The apostle Paul reminds us, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Romans 15:7).

Hospitality is not an accessory to the gospel; it is an expression of it.

When we greet guests warmly, help them find their way, and anticipate their needs, we are quietly saying, YOU matter to God, and YOU matter to us! When we follow up thoughtfully—with a note, a message, or a next step—we are saying, YOU belong here with us!

Meaningful follow-up is not about pressure or persuasion. It is about care. It reflects the shepherd heart of God, who leaves the ninety-nine to seek the one (Luke 15:4). It mirrors the early church, where believers were known for their devotion to one another and their sincere love (Acts 2:42-47).

At The Story Church, we believe everyone has a story and that every story matters to God. A thoughtful guest experience simply helps people to attend repeatedly, so they discover how their story connects to His.

We may never know the courage it took for someone to walk through our doors. But we can honor that courage by being intentional, gracious, and attentive. We can be a church where people belong before they believe, where questions are welcomed, and where the love of Christ is not only preached but felt.

Peter urges the church to “offer hospitality without grumbling” (1 Peter 4:9). Why? Because hospitality opens doors—sometimes literal doors, sometimes spiritual ones. It creates space for the Holy Spirit to work in ways we cannot manufacture or rush.

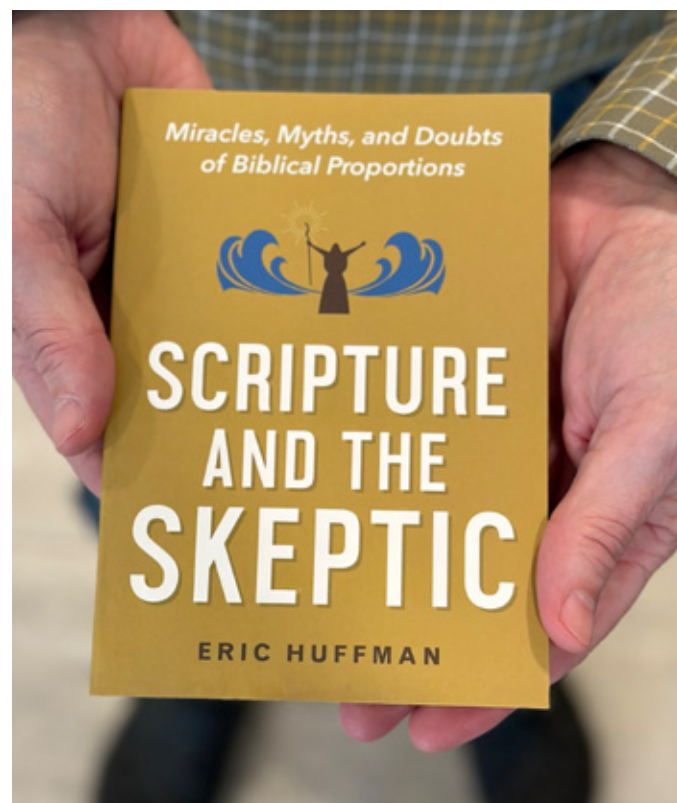
A great guest experience does not save anyone. Only Jesus does that. But a great guest experience can remove obstacles, build trust, and invite people back into a place where transformation can occur. And when people keep coming back—keep hearing the gospel, keep encountering grace—their story often changes.

Lives are healed.

Faith is awakened.

Jesus is followed.

That is why we intentionally take care of our guests. Not to impress, but to love. Not to grow bigger, but to be faithful. Not to tell our story—but to make room for the story God is still writing. ■



**New to The Story?
Stop by our Welcome Table
to connect with us!**

**You'll receive a small gift
to take home with you, and
we'll mail you a signed copy
of Pastor Eric Huffman's
book, "Scripture and the
Skeptic". We can't wait to
meet you and get to know
your story!**



SAM'S STORY

Sam unexpectedly walked into The Story one afternoon just before Easter in 2025. He had never been to a church before but found himself feeling a magnetic pull to walk in and talk to a pastor. Within the next hour, he surrendered his life to Christ and knew he was ready to go all in.

“Growing up in a devout Pakistani Muslim household, my life was structured around daily prayers, Quran recitation, and Ramadan fasting. I recall Sunday school lessons criticizing Christianity, particularly the notion that Jesus denied his divinity – a claim that always struck me as odd. Despite fulfilling my religious duties, I experienced a persistent sense of spiritual disconnect within Islam, a feeling that this ingrained way of life wasn't truly connecting me with God.

As I grew older, this feeling lingered. My curiosity about the world and various historical

mysteries eventually led me to a journey of inquiry. For the first time, I delved into the details of both Islam and Christianity. I was surprised to find inconsistencies in the faith I was raised in and, conversely, a compelling truth in the teachings of Christianity.

As I began to study Christianity, a profound shift occurred. It felt like a light turning on. The idea that God would leave behind a tangible piece of evidence, like the Shroud of Turin, especially in our technological age, resonated deeply. The image of the crucified man stayed with me. My life has been marked by periods of darkness and a feeling of being alone, but now, walking with Jesus, I experience a sense of calm, release, and love. I now believe that God was watching over me during those difficult times, guiding me toward this truth. Knowing this, I am ready to dedicate my life to Christ, no longer feeling alone but embraced by His presence.” ■

INTRODUCING THE DISCIPLESHIP PATHWAY

For over a decade, our staff team has been diligently working to establish key ministries in our church that allow us to thrive in our mission to inspire people to follow Jesus. Although several of the ministries have been alive and developing for years, it has helped us tremendously to chart what we're doing through each of these vital ministries. I have been working with key staff members for the last couple of months to put together this Discipleship Pathway chart. When our Board of Directors saw it for the first time, their reaction was priceless, one of them said - "...so this is what we've been doing for years, it's good to see it on paper!" Pastor Eric and I agreed and we also wanted the congregation to learn more about the journey that many of our congregants tend to follow after they find The Story.

Although this is not the final version and we will continue to update this chart, I think it's a great start to show you all the different ways to connect and serve God through our church community. It also shows the rigorous discipleship process that many of our board-level leadership follows. I want to thank Pastor Eric, Bruce Ammons, and Dilan Braddock for their contributions. We will of course continue to evolve as a church community and to refine this discipleship pathway, but it is good to see it on paper and to be able to guide first-time visitors in a pathway to faithful discipleship through our church.



Geovanna Huffman
Executive Pastor



Sunday Worship Guest

A first-time guest that makes contact with us through the Welcome Table or through a "connect card." Guests receive an email the following day, a copy of Eric's book "Scripture and the Skeptic" within a week, and they are invited to join Starting Point Class through email as a first step to learn more about The Story and basic beliefs.



Starting Point Class

A class designed to teach basics of Christian faith through a Wesleyan lense and to offer ways of connecting at The Story. Topics covered include: Who is Jesus? What is the Gospel? What is sin and grace? How can I join a core class or team?



Core Classes & Teams

Core Classes are short-term courses that provide introductory level bible teaching through relevant theological discussions. Core Classes are offered twice in the spring and fall seasons. Teams and Team Coaching Gatherings are also a great way to connect with others at The Story, examples of teams include hospitality, communion, coffee, prayer, care and many others.



Discipleship Groups

Long-term Bible study groups for committed Christians that delve deeper into scripture while offering more in-depth training on how to pray, serve, and care for one another. These take place in the spring and fall seasons and require long-term commitment from individuals.



Partnership Course

A "graduation" course for Christians who have faithfully participated in TSC's Discipleship process. This is a step of commitment to the mission of The Story Church that teaches the sacrificial aspects of Christian discipleship. Leaders for groups, teams, and church governance are selected from the Partner roster.



Leadership Cohorts & PODS

Invitation-only leadership formation groups that provide intensive bible training and deep discipleship. The goal is to train and equip Story Partners to lead core ministries of the church and groups.



Residents in Ministry

High level leadership formation for board level candidates, Strategic Partnerships Team candidates, and for people who have a call to ministry. Our church is committed to preparing people who have a call to ministry to serve at the local church level or to plant new churches - as we recently trained and deployed the leadership of The Grove Church.



FOR GOD & FOR OTHERS

The Importance of Serving on Sunday Mornings and the Impact It Makes

By Kathryn Hill

Every Sunday, individuals and families enter the grounds of The Story and immediately encounter a friendly face to help guide them to an open parking spot. They walk in the front doors to a warm “hello!” from a stranger with a nametag. If they need a pick-me-up, fresh brewed coffee and tasty donuts await them in the Family Room. Families with kids are greeted and helped every step of the way through check-in all the way to their classrooms. In the sanctuary, they’re guided to a seat waiting for them. They participate in worship and the sacrament of communion as the trays make their way along the pews.

By the time they walk out of The Story, they’ve experienced the sacrificial service of dozens of volunteers. These volunteers serve on a multitude of teams - arriving early to prepare

and staying late when needed - and are always ready to make each guests’ morning unforgettable.

The experience is transformational, not just for those on the receiving end, but also for those who choose to serve. Wesley and Lisa rotate serving on three teams: Hospitality and Coffee separately, and together with the Kids ministry. Steven enjoys his work with the Parking Team. Dennis and Jennifer spend Sundays together on the Hospitality team, and throughout the week serve separately on the Prayer and Facilities teams. Here’s what they have to say about the importance of serving:

Q: How has serving on Sunday teams impacted your worship experience and life?

Steven: It takes so many people to make Sunday mornings happen at The Story Church, and I enjoy serving as part of the parking team. In the year and a half that I’ve attended The Story Church, there’s been growth. Every week, someone pulls into the parking lot for the first time. I want them to have a good impression of our church, so I’m happy to help direct them to a parking spot and welcome them with a greeting.

Wes: Many people who come to the church are truly searching and will reach out to those of us at the coffee bar. It has offered unique opportunities to share the love of Christ with very hungry people. One time when I was serving, a young man came in who was visiting from Cleveland that had been out of church for many years. He was really searching for Christ and opened up to me about his whole life. By listening and then praying with him, I felt God moving in his life. I don’t know where he is or what happened to him, but it was a great example of how coffee and conversation can help Christ reach those who are hungry.



Lisa: One of the responsibilities of the Hospitality team is serving communion, and I have found beauty in the fact that communion is for everyone. It reminds me of the grace and mercy God showed us all by Jesus dying on the cross.

Q: Tell us about the impact of serving on teams outside of Sunday mornings.

Jennifer: Being a part of the Prayer team has helped me to slow down and be more intentional about depending on God, releasing control, trusting in His power and presence, and remembering God is always working.

Dennis: Serving on the Facilities team has helped me focus on stewardship and using my creativity and handy skills to create a safe and beautiful environment for our community to be able to enjoy. I am grateful and humbled to be able to serve in this way.



Communion is an integral part of our weekly worship - and volunteers both prepare every tray and help pass them through the pews

Q: What's it like being able to serve together as a couple?

Lisa: It's been a lot of fun serving together with the kids ministry and it brings back a lot of memories. The kids are full of energy and excitement, and we always end up having a good time. It's nice to serve with Wesley because I get to see his youthful enthusiasm and silliness. He loves to make the kids laugh, and it reminds me of what a great partner he is.

Wesley: The kid's ministry is a big reason that we chose The Story over other churches we visited. It really reached our kids and we were impressed by how much they learned. It's a real joy to see the young kids' zest for life and curiosity about God. It's also hard, because 5-8 year-old kids hopped up on donuts have a lot of energy, and that's where serving with Lisa makes a huge difference. It's good to have a

partner that you love, trust, and understand to work with you. The last time that we served with the K-2 group, Ethan, our 4th grade son was able to help us. That was a huge blessing to see him lead other kids in the lesson.

Dennis and Jennifer: The Hospitality Team has allowed us to serve side by side, which has been very sweet. It has been nice sharing the same purpose and encouraging each other. It has also helped us be more intentional about making others feel welcome. Serving on this team has helped us realize that sometimes a simple smile or conversation is all it takes to make someone feel comfortable and welcome.

Q: Why is it important to serve?

Steven: Sometimes people wonder if serving at church makes a difference, but I can say with confidence that serving on the Parking Team impacts others. I'm a school teacher, and some

of my students attend The Story Church. They get to see me directing traffic and greeting visitors, and I'm happy to tell them that I enjoy being on the parking team when they ask about it. I want my students to know that helping out at church is important.

Lisa: My mom always told me that church isn't about you; it's about worshipping God and serving others. I now know the joy that comes from putting yourself aside and serving God. It has made me be more intentional in serving, and I will go out of my way to speak to people at church just to make sure that they know I am truly happy to see them there. It has made me more focused on what I can give others than what I can do for myself. I also just really like building relationships with other believers!

Dennis and Jennifer: It is a practical way to live out our faith and to create community. We have been blessed by serving and we hope to continue to serve more as we grow in our faith. Serving has helped us to shift our focus from ourselves to others. It has helped us to trust God more and live out our faith through action. Our favorite part of serving is the joy that comes from working alongside like minded believers and seeing the impact made in each others' lives, sometimes in small simple ways like a prayer of comfort, creating a safe and welcoming place, or a warm greeting.

Wesley: It is one important way to serve my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. More than anything, it has focused my study and my prayer life. Because I know that I am teaching children about Jesus or greeting and serving potential visitors, I continually pray that I will be a positive witness to those that I come in contact with. It has made me try to be more focused on what I can give to the church and others than what I can get from church. ■

Learn more about our Teams and sign up to start serving on one:



thestory.church/serve



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