

## JESUS—THE MASTER STORY TELLER

Presented by

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I would like to begin my sermon by asking you a question: Is there anyone present today who does not enjoy—and I mean **really** enjoy—being completely and totally mesmerized by a fabulously told, attention-grabbing, mind-gripping, jaw-clinching, heart-riveting story? And I'm not talking about some sort of mundane, weak-as-tea, "ho-hum" type of story. Rather, I'm talking about the kind of story that—from its first intriguing word to its last tantalizing syllable—seizes every one of your thought processes, unwittingly moves your body to the edge of its seat, and practically "freezes you in place" as you listen so intensely that, when the story is finally over, you are literally physically exhausted as a result of the emotionally exhilarating experience. Let me repeat my original question: Is there anyone who does not enjoy such a story? I seriously doubt it because the truth is that we **all** enjoy being entertained, enthralled, and having every fiber of our being engaged in a beautifully told, fast-paced, heart-pounding story—whether it is real or fictional. Such a story—in the hands of a talented, knowledgeable, golden-tongued orator—is the epitome of what King Solomon described when he said, "A word fitly spoken is like **apples of gold in settings of silver**" (Proverbs 25:11).

And speaking of the Old Testament, those of you who have been in our Sunday-afternoon "All about the Bible" class for the last eighteen months know exactly what I'm talking about when I speak of "a fabulously told, attention-grabbing, mind-gripping, jaw-clinching, heart-riveting story," do you not? I **know** you do—because during that year and a half we were exposed to several such stories during our studies of God's Word. As an example of just one such account, let me bring to your remembrance the stunning story that the prophet Ezekiel presented in chapter 37 of his book—the story of what our teacher called "the vision of the valley of dry bones." Here, from the first ten verses of that chapter, is what Ezekiel had to say.

"The hand of the Lord came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was **full of bones**. Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, there were **very many** in the open valley; and indeed they were **very dry**. And He said to me, 'Son of man, **can these bones live?**' So I answered, 'O Lord God, You know.' Again He said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord God to these bones, '**Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live**. I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the Lord.' " "

"So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, **there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling**; and the bones came together, bone to bone. Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them. Also He said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, "Thus says the Lord God, "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." ' So I prophesied as He commanded me, **and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army**" (Ezekiel 37:1-10).

**Wow!** Talk about an attention-grabbing, mind-gripping, jaw-clinching, heart-riveting story! Ezekiel certainly knew how to tell one, didn't he? In Ezekiel's comments we see the remarkable prophecy about the future return to Palestine of the discouraged, disenfranchised, and disillusioned Israelites—from the various places among which they had been dispersed over many years of ill treatment. Ezekiel's vision began with an entire army that had been slain, with its soldiers' bones left to bleach in the Sun—and then the prophet's vision ended with that whole army being **raised to live again with great strength and power!** The return of any ethnic people from the borders of a conqueror so powerful that it could capture and deport an entire nation would have been viewed throughout the world of that day as a totally unimaginable and impossible happening. In fact, it would have been beyond belief in that era that the restoration of Israel could **ever** occur. Israel's state had been destroyed; its king had been captured, blinded, and carried away to Babylon to die; countless thousands of the people had been slaughtered; the heart of the nation had been carried away into captivity; the beloved city of Jerusalem had been plundered and razed; and the holy temple of God had been sacked, burned, and destroyed. No language on Earth—no matter how seemingly beautiful or graceful—could adequately describe how dead and hopeless the Jews' dreams and ambitions were at that point in their lives. The people themselves expressed such hopelessness when they cried out, "Our bones are dried; our hope is lost; we feel ourselves cut off" (Ezekiel 37:11).

Yet, the sensational story told by Ezekiel (which was an elegant, breathtaking word-picture from God to the faithful remnant of Judah) foretold a very real future revival of the seemingly dead and apparently completely destroyed nation of Israel—a revival that took place exactly as predicted when King Cyrus the Great issued a decree freeing the Jews from seventy years of Babylonian and Medo-Persian captivity, and allowed them to return to rebuild the city of David and Solomon's temple within it. Ezekiel's words, as it turned out, were **truly** "like apples of gold in settings of silver."

But as good as some of the Old Testament worthies were at recounting such stories, they could not hope to match the story-telling ability of the greatest teacher the world has ever known—**Jesus Christ**. As proof of that statement, I offer into evidence the account found in John chapter 7 where we find the record of the chief priest and Pharisees sending soldiers to seize Jesus in order to bring Him back to them for questioning about His actions and teachings. But those soldiers returned empty handed—causing the chief priest to inquire in anger, "Why have you not brought Him?" The soldiers' response, as recorded in John 7:46, was this: "No man **ever** spoke like **this** Man!" And how right they were!

Part of Christ's talent as a teacher was His amazing ability to take profound spiritual truths and make them understandable to all types of people. Although Jesus interacted with people in practically every social class, most of His teachings were aimed at those whom we would call "the common folk"—people like shepherds, fishermen, housewives, laborers, and others like them. It is not by accident that Mark 12:37 says of Christ that "the common people heard Him gladly." Because many of the people who heard

Jesus were not highly educated, it was necessary for Him to teach them by using words and ideas that could easily and correctly convey the spiritual concepts He knew they needed to learn to be pleasing to God. To solve the problem of how to teach important heavenly truths to people in a manner that could be easily understood, Jesus frequently used a teaching tool known as a **parable**.

It has been said that a parable is “an important story with a hidden message.” While that is correct, a more-accurate definition of a **biblical** parable would be that it is “an **earthly** story with a **heavenly** meaning.” Our English word “parable” comes from the Greek word *parabole*, which means “to throw alongside.” That same Greek word also is related to our English word “parallel,” which describes two similar things that have been laid side-by-side. The idea is that two things “thrown alongside” each other are easier to compare. The goal of a parable, then, is to compare one thing to another—with one of the objects being an event from **everyday life**, and the other being an **important spiritual lesson**. For example, in Luke 15:1-7 Jesus compared His relationship with His followers to the relationship that a shepherd has with his sheep. In Matthew 13:1-9 Jesus compared the person who teaches the Gospel to an individual who plants seeds. And, in Matthew 5:13-16 Jesus used such words as “salt” and “light” to describe the influence that Christians should have on those around them.

The New Testament records more than thirty parables that Jesus taught the people of His generation. Some of those parables were little more than one-line comparisons that, while brief, nevertheless packed a serious spiritual punch. Others, like the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, were longer stories containing passionate plots and intriguing individuals. Yet regardless of their length, **all** of Jesus’ parables were intended to remind us of God’s great wisdom—and of our need to obey His commands. Of course, along the way, the parables also provide **us** with some intriguing ways to teach **others** the truths found in God’s Word.

When Jesus first began His earthly ministry, His disciples did not understand why He so often used parables to teach people. In fact, Matthew 13:10-17 records a conversation between Jesus and His disciples on this very matter. When some of the disciples asked Christ, “Why do You speak to the people in parables?,” He answered them by saying, “I speak to them in parables because seeing, they do not see, and hearing, they do not hear, nor do they understand. In them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says,

‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand,  
And seeing you will see and not perceive;  
For the hearts of these people have grown dull.  
Their ears are hard of hearing,  
And they have closed their eyes,  
Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears,  
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,  
So that I should heal them.’

“But blessed are **your** eyes because they see, and **your** ears because they hear. Assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men have desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.”

What we learn from this conversation between Jesus and His disciples is that the Lord sometimes taught via parables in order to **reveal** the truth to those who **were** willing to believe it, all the while **concealing** the truth from those who **were not**. In Luke 8:9-10 Jesus told His disciples, “To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’” Like a doubled-edged sword, Christ’s parables cut two ways. They enlightened those who anxiously sought the truth, but left uninformed those who stubbornly refused to do so.

As we search for the central meanings of Christ’s parables, we need to remember to consider the implications that the parables would have had for people living in Christ’s day. We also need to remember to relate the parable to Christ’s proclamation of the good news about the kingdom of God—the church. Parables are much more than “simple folk stories.” They are expressions of Christ’s teachings about God, salvation, and the Christian Age that was dawning as a result of His ministry on Earth.

A good example of this approach would be the parables in Luke 15:3-32 that deal with “the three lost things”—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. The historical context behind these parables can be found in Luke 15:1-2 where we are informed that Jesus “received sinners and ate with them.” The Pharisees and scribes, who were “the religious elite” of their day, saw such an action on Christ’s part as disgusting because, in their view, it transgressed God’s holiness. They reasoned that if Jesus truly **was** righteous, then He would not associate with such people. Rather, He would keep Himself pure by separating Himself from sinners.

In response to the murmuring of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus told them the parables about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. In Luke 15:7 Christ explained that God rejoices more over the repentance of one sinner (like one of those who had been sitting with Him around the meal table!) than He does over “ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.” This same type of message is found in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who, in Luke 18:9-14, went up to the temple to pray.

In a similar manner, in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32, that wayward son represented the tax collectors and sinners who finally were willing to come to God for salvation, while the older son represented the scribes and Pharisees who were too proud to extend forgiveness to those who needed it most—**or to seek forgiveness from God for their own evil thoughts and actions!** Toward the end of that parable, Christ said,

“The son arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; **for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found**’” (Luke 15:20-24).

I want you to stop and think for just a moment about the impact of Christ's words on that occasion. Put yourself in the place of that father. His younger son had left home under what obviously were less-than-perfect circumstances. For all the father knew, his son might have been...**dead!** But can't you, in your mind's eye, see that father—every single day since his son had left home—going to the window, peering pensively into the distance, and weeping unashamedly as his heart broke at **not** seeing his son coming back down the road toward his house? Honestly, is there **any** story (other than perhaps that of the crucifixion of our Lord Himself) that is more soul-stirring, gut wrenching, and heart rending than this beautiful parable told by Christ? Ezekiel told of the return of **an entire nation**; Christ told of the return of **one father's son**. Yet both stories grip the human heart, stir within us genuinely deep-seated emotions, bring unwelcome tears to our eyes, and elicit the most-earnest kind of joy in our souls, do they not? Such is the power of a well-told story in the hands of a master story teller—proving once again the wisdom of Solomon's statement that "a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver." No one illuminated Solomon's observation better than Jesus Christ—"the master story teller."

One of the major themes contained in Christ's parables is the importance of being willing to accept and follow Him unreservedly as Lord and Savior. For example, in Luke 14:15-24 in the parable of the great supper, Jesus taught with supreme clarity that the proper time for such a decision is **now**—and must not be delayed. In the parable in Luke 14:28-32 about the unfinished tower and the king going to war, Jesus demanded that His followers count the cost and be prepared to give up everything in order to follow Him. In the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price in Mathew 13:44-46, Jesus stated that the kingdom of heaven is of such intrinsic value that all other treasures in our lives **must** take second place.

But again, Christ's parables were not "just stories." Instead, they were messages that contained a call for people to make a radical, life-changing decision to put Him first in their lives in order to get to heaven. This is why we may rightly say that biblical parables are indeed "earthly stories with **heavenly** meanings."

As Christians, we need to recognize that fact, and be alert to what Christ—as the master story teller—is teaching us through such parables, lest we become like some of the people of Christ's day and, "seeing, we do not see, and hearing, we do not understand." After all, it **is** the ultimate destiny of **our souls** that is at stake! That one fact alone should make the lessons about spiritual salvation contained within the parables of paramount importance in our daily lives, don't you think?