

*Nathan Daily*

# LIVING IN SCRIPTURE

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*Nehemiah 9:6-37*

*One Main Thing*

Reciting the story of God instills the people of God with identity, purpose, and hope.

*Introduction*

The Bible is a daunting book. At first glance, these sixty-six books full of strange names, unfamiliar words, and ancient practices written in diverse cultural settings long ago and bound into a single volume that typically runs at least a few thousand pages can intimidate even the most curious and patient of readers. At the same time, God's people regard the biblical books as living Scripture and, thereby, continue to find purpose in life, meaning in monotony, and comfort in trouble within the pages of these old texts from ancient Israel and the early church. A primary way to begin to encounter and grasp the complexities of the Bible is through a

model provided by ancient Israel and the early church themselves: reciting the story of God.



Readers do not encounter the Bible as a single story with a beginning, middle, and end. The books do not form a strict chronological scheme, and, often, they repeat events (e.g., Samuel–Kings and Chronicles or the Gospels). In fact, many of the books are not even narrative story but poetry, letter, law, proverb, and more. Rather, the Bible is a series of unique books, each telling its own story in its own way. It is within these unique books that biblical authors appeal to an underlying story. Summaries of this story are found throughout the Bible in several recitals of God's saving actions (Deut 6:20–25; 26:1–11; Josh 24:2–28; Neh 9:6–37; Ps 78; 105; 106; 135; 136; Acts 7:2–53; 13:16–41; Heb 11). These recitals highlight moments such as Creation, the call of Abraham, the life of Jacob, the Exodus, the gift of law at Sinai, the tragedy of the Babylonian Exile, and the death of Jesus. Through the memory of seminal moments from the past where God brought deliverance or enacted judgment, the believing community's recitation of the story invites imagination toward God's capability for action in the present.

Deuteronomy 6:20–24 envisions a child asking a parent the meaning of God's laws for Israel. Throughout the book, Deuteronomy exhibits a concern for children understanding the law because there is always a next

generation who must make decisions about life in relation to God (Deut 1:39; 4:9–10, 25; 11:1–19; 32:46). So, the parent must not answer the child with a simple “it is the law so we just do it” or even with a discussion of the particular law that generates the question. Rather, the parent should respond with a story. Here, as in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6), the story of the Exodus from Egypt provides definition for the laws that God gives to Israel. The laws of Deuteronomy simply will not make sense for future generations apart from the story of God’s gracious salvation of the Israelites. The beginning of understanding or true education is grounded not in the imperative, “just do it because I said so,” but in the indicative—the story of what God has already done.

Psalm 105 and 106 both present a recital citing many of God’s acts of deliverance from the time of Abraham to the conquest of the land of Canaan. Even though both focus on God’s past actions as a basis for praise (105:1–3, 45; 106:1–2, 47–48), the tone of each Psalm is very different. Whereas Ps 105 almost exclusively presents God as the subject and is positive throughout (105:8–11; 24, 37, 39), Ps 106 offers several of the same events to highlight human sins of the past (106:6–7, 13, 19–21, 24, etc.) in contrast to God’s salvific action (106:8, 10) and covenantal fidelity (106:43–44). The story functionally offers itself as joyful praise (105) or as somber plea for forgiveness and deliverance (106).

Nehemiah 9:6–37 expresses the most detailed illustration of the recital of the story in the Bible. Beginning at creation and ending in the time of Nehemiah, the prayer recites many of the highs and lows encountered throughout the story of God (9:6–31). By beginning the final section of the prayer with the word “now” and ending with the words “we are in great distress” (9:32, 37), the story becomes a statement of faith. As the community shifts from recital of past event to present day trouble, readers realize that the community prays the story of God to (1) align themselves with the people of God from long ago and (2) express certainty that God can act again on behalf of this people. The community finds itself within a larger story and expects that its own situation can change because the story itself has taught the nature of God (9:31).

Acts 7 presents a speech by Stephen in the final moments of his life. By consistently speaking positively of God’s action throughout history beginning with Abraham and carrying the story through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, Stephen refutes the charge of blasphemy (6:10–11) and shifts the charge toward his audience (7:51–53). Stephen does not directly defend himself during his speech. Rather, by reciting the story he aligns himself with those who accept the good God has done throughout history and witness to the vital role of the death of the innocent Righteous One within the story of God (7:52; cf. Luke 23:47; Acts 3:14).

Each of these examples presents a story visualizing a God who acts and remains faithful for the benefit of a people. The recitals are not history lessons but are claims by the faithful that God moves, reacts, and works. Knowing that the very core or nature of God is bound up with acting and doing provides great hope for God's people. Hearing and reciting the story of God provides the faithful community with a fertile starting point for understanding tradition, reflecting on its own place within the story, and expecting, no matter the situation, that God is the one capable of adding another chapter to the story.

### *Application*

Christian identity hinges on recognizing God's action as primary gift and human reaction as secondary response (1 John 4:19). Therefore, the story of God informs and rearranges reality and imagination for those who know they are a part of the story.

Through encounter with text, the story of God shapes silence into speech. Many biblical books begin with images from the story of God so that readers will understand their current plight is encased within that story (Matt 1:1–17; Mark 1:1–3; Luke 1:1; John 1:1–5; Acts 1:1; Rom 1:2; Gal 1:1–5; Jas 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1, 20). Similarly, even though the Bible is big and there is always more to learn, the Christian's speech has a beginning when infused with the outline of the story. The outline, found in Neh 9 or Acts 7, is not the end of

Bible study. Rather, every encounter with a biblical text is an opportunity to gain greater clarity for retelling the story. Reciting the story of God is not a challenge to memorize the details of history or Bible trivia but an invitation to fullness and purpose within the Christian life afforded by grasping the significance of God's actions from Creation to the End (Gen 1:1; Ps 104; Rev 1:8; 22:13, 20).

Through practice of worship, the story of God shapes chaos into coherence. Worship is a powerful response from created toward creator when story saturates practice with meaning. The Lord's Supper practiced weekly without the story lacks purpose and could even be confusing. Fastened closely to the story, the Lord's Supper looks backward with memory and forward with anticipation, encapsulating the story in one visible act (1 Cor 11:26). Consistent practice of the story of God in worship enables Christians to regularly recite the story with others. Practice breeds coherence so that the story of God, rather than the competing chaotic stories heard throughout the week, has opportunity to consistently form the people of God.

Through repetition in life, the story of God shapes despair into hope. The hope envisioned at the end of the story does not allow escape from the often-painful reality of the present (Rev 21:3–4). However, time with text and worship facilitate the story's ability to impact ordinary demands of life. This repetition, stimulated by story and encountered in community, tends to open

the eyes of the faithful, contradict stories of despair, and elicit speech and action from those who know they are in the story (Luke 24:30–35). Though the story never guarantees a life of ease, it does present God’s people with potential for imagining each day from a new and hopeful perspective, the perspective of a God of covenant who, in fidelity, will bring the story to completion (Luke 24:30–35; Phil 1:6; Rev 22:20).

### *Conclusion*

Through reciting the story, readers of the Bible understand themselves as players in an ongoing drama initiated and sustained by its primary character: the God of Abraham. Reciting the story functions as a bridge, for the community of faith, between foundational claims of Scripture and specifics of Christian practice. The story sparks the people of God to more clearly envision its own place within God’s purpose and, thereby, desire to love, live in, speak of, and enact God’s own vision for the world.

### *Discussion*

1. Why do people like to tell stories?
2. Create a top-ten list of the acts of God in the Bible. Share your list with others. Discuss why the you chose these events. How were your choices easy or difficult? How does your list differ from that of others?

3. Why do so many recitals of the story of God include the promise to Abraham (Gen 12)?
4. Name several doctrines, teachings, or practices within your church community, and explain how each is more meaningful when understood in the context of the story of God.
5. Nehemiah 9:32–37 expresses the distress of Nehemiah’s post-exilic community. If you prayed the story of God in Nehemiah 9, how would your community conclude the prayer? How does this passage fit your own church context? How is your context different? What issues do you currently face as a group?
6. Pick your favorite book of the Bible. How does this book relate to the broader story of God? Are there any specific verses, images, or themes within the book that directly rely on or relate to the story?
7. What stories or narratives does the world consistently tell that compete with the story of God? How can we make sure we are impacted by the story of God rather than the stories of the world?