

“Love Story”

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”
(2 Timothy 3:16-17).¹

2 Timothy 3:10-17

Love Story #1

I don’t remember when the Love Story I’m about to tell actually began. I’m sure it began before I knew how to read.

As you can see from the genogram on the screen, I am blessed to come from a family tree in which I can point to nine other vocational ministers besides myself within four generations. One of those was my Mom, and her Dad, her uncle, and her brother were pastors also. My Dad’s brother was a pastor, and Dad was a very active Deacon and leader in the church.

As a result of this heritage, the Bible had a prominent place in our home and in our lives. I don’t know when the Southern Baptist Convention began the programs known in my youth as the “Children’s Memory Work Drill” and the “Youth Bible Drill,” but they were big parts of my growing up, and Baptists continue them to this day.²

The Memory Work Drill involved memorizing about fifty Bible verses—different ones each year—and being able to quote them almost literally “backward and forward.” There were church-level competitions, association-level competitions, and state-level competitions, and it was in that context that I first became aware of the verses that are our text this morning.

The Bible Drill also involved a lot of memory, but it also involved being able to find any verse in the Bible in eight seconds or less—usually much less—without rustling or ruffling any pages. I tell you this to emphasize the point that thanks to my Mom’s insistence and persistence—not to mention the fact that I had no choice about it—I spent a great deal of time in the Bible from about age seven to seventeen. For most of those years, I didn’t appreciate having “a mean Mom,” but that discipline created an initial familiarity and comfort with the Bible and planted the seeds for a Love Story that began long before I met my Sweetheart.

We used official hardback Bibles in the competitions that provided familiarity while preventing cheating—rather like using the balls thrown into the game by the umpire. We practiced with the same Bibles, but brand new ones were issued for the competition.

I don’t remember the very first Bible that was my own, but I do remember the first leather Bible I ever had. It’s this one, given by my parents for CHRISTmas, 1963, and it shows that it has been used a lot. This Bible is the King James Version, which most Bibles were in those days, and a large percentage of Bibles in circulation are KJV are to this day.

Since the 1960’s, we in the English-speaking world have been blessed by an embarrassment of riches with respect to the various versions, translations and editions of the Bible that are available to us. One of the most significant moments in my spiritual journey during my teen years was an epiphany in which I realized that it was possible for a Bible that wasn’t the King James to be a “real” Bible. I could still take you to the place where I was standing when that happened, fifty-five years ago.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 6, 2020.

² There was also a “Youth Speaker’s Tournament,” which also continues today. I did that, too.

Today's focus is not on the English Bible. I'm trying to give you a sense about how this Love Story developed in my life, and then we'll move on.

I've read the entire Bible every year as part of my devotional life for at least the forty years since my ordination. I can't remember whether it goes back farther than that or not. I've tended to change the translation I read, study, and preach from about every ten years, though there was one period of twenty years when I stayed with the same one. The path I've taken looks like this:

1963-1970	(teen years)	King James Version (KJV)
1970-1978	(college & seminary)	New English Bible (NEB)
1978-1998	(chaplaincy, pastoring, teaching)	New International Version (NIV)
1998-2011	(pastoring)	New Living Translation (NLT)
2011-2019	(CBF years)	NIV2011
2019-	(CBF and beyond)	Christian Standard Bible (CSB)

For most of these years, I have been a prolific "Bible marker," underlining, highlighting, and making notes everywhere. That's part of why I had to change every ten years or so—my Bible was "all full" and I needed more space.

I've been interested to see that in the last year or so, I'm not much of a Bible marker any more. At the moment, I like my Bibles to be "clean," and rather than using just one Bible day in and day out, I've developed kind of a "tool kit" of various translations and editions to suit my mood and the need of the moment.

I begin and end every day in the Bible, because I continue to be "in love." I'm not in love with **the Book**, though I do delight in exquisite leather editions of Scripture. **I'm in love with its Author**; and that brings me to Love Story #2, and to our text.

Love Story #2

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

As I told you a moment ago, I first learned those verses long before I was ten years old in the Children's Memory Work Drill. Those words helped to begin the Love Story I've been telling up until now. Those words are our text this morning because today we come to Paul's second letter to Timothy in our Journey through the Bible, and those words are a part of that letter.

The letter that we call "2 Timothy" contains the last words we have from Paul's pen. He was executed during Nero's persecution of the Christians in Rome not long after this.

At this point, Timothy was the spiritual leader of the church in Ephesus, and there was persecution there, too. Much of what Paul wrote in this tender letter was encouragement to Timothy as he, too, faced difficult and dangerous challenges. These words were a part of that encouragement. And while the Bible says many things about itself,³ these verses are perhaps the strongest of all such statements.

³ For example, see Deuteronomy 4:1-2; Psalm 19:7-11; Isaiah 40:8, 55:11; Jeremiah 23:29; Matthew 5:17-18; John 17:17; Hebrews 4:12; 2 Peter 1:20-21.

When Paul wrote “*all Scripture*,” he was speaking primarily about what we call the “Old Testament,”⁴ but we do him no disservice to include what we know as the “New Testament” in that term. When Paul wrote “*God-breathed*,” we think he was inventing a word—θεοπνευστος—which occurs nowhere else, and that’s exactly what it means: “*God-breathed*.”

While we use the words “revelation,” “inspiration,” “illumination,” and “interpretation” to describe how the Spirit of God brings Scripture into being, ensures its transmission, and opens our hearts to its gracious message, we only guess at how God actually accomplishes these things. Somewhat as our breath is in our language and mixes with our words, so the breath of God’s Spirit enters into the language of Scripture and enables its very words to be means of grace.

The fact of the matter is that the Bible is a love letter from God to us. It is God’s own Word to us. The Bible reveals who God is, who we are, and why we are here. In the Bible, God reveals to us both our **sin** and our **belovedness**.⁵

When I first began preparing this message, I intended to follow an outline that I found in the margin of one of my Bibles, apparently notes from another preacher along the way. Here’s what that outline would have looked like:

Teaching: What’s Right
Rebuking: What’s Not Right
Correcting: How to Get Right
Training: How to Stay Right

That’s a good outline, but I decided not to do that. I’m going to tell stories instead.

Methodist preacher Fred Craddock was a storyteller *par excellence*. I could listen to Fred tell stories of faith all day long, and I’ve done that at least once. Heaven is richer and earth poorer since his arrival.

On one occasion, Fred told a story about the man we sometimes call “the Ethiopian Eunuch.” You’ll remember that this man, a high official in the Ethiopian government, had been to Jerusalem to worship and was reading the scroll of the prophet Isaiah as his chariot returned home.

When Philip joined him, the official asked, “*Who is the prophet saying this about—himself or someone else?*” (Acts 8:34). Fred noted that since what the man was reading could indeed have been written about him, the man was doing what we all do: **he came to the Bible hoping to find his own name written there**. And in countless ways, your name, my name, all our names, are written there. It’s a love letter, after all.

In late 2012, seventy-five year old Marion Shurtleff bought a Bible in a used book store near her home in San Clemente, California. After making her purchase and returning home, she discovered a couple of folded pages tucked in the middle of the Bible.

The contents of the yellowed notebook sheets contained a child’s handwriting that looked strangely familiar. To her amazement, Marion discovered her own name at the top of the first page. When she looked more closely, she realized that this was a four-page essay

⁴ Which our Jewish friends call the TaNaKh.

⁵ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2005).

she had written as a ten-year-old to earn a merit badge for the Girl Scouts in Covington, Kentucky—more than 2,000 miles from where she had just bought the Bible.

Marion was deeply moved. “I opened the Bible and there was my name,” she said in a phone interview. “I recognized my handwriting. I was shaking, literally. I was crying.”

Although it remains a mystery how her essay ended up in a Bible in a bookstore half thousands of miles away, one thing is certain. When you and I look deeply into God’s Word, we find our stories there, too. In the pages of God’s Word we see people like ourselves who pursue faith and hope, people who battle depression, doubt, lust, and pride. As we read the biblical stories about Abraham, Sarah, Ruth, David, Mary, and Peter, we find our names written there as well.⁶

In order to discover ourselves in those sacred pages, though, in God’s love letter, we have to spend time in those pages, with that letter. If you’d like some suggestions about how to do that, I haven’t found a better resource than Adele Ahlberg Calhoun’s book, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us*. I have Sandra Gray to thank for introducing me to this wonderful resource, and I commend it to you. One metaphor for how these disciplines work might be a cup of tea.

I like tea. I like black tea. I like peach tea. I like cranberry pomegranate tea. And I drink hot tea all year long.

If I’m drinking tea in the morning, I drink strong black tea. If I’m drinking tea for pleasure in the evening, I drink decaf tea. And if I’m working late to finish a sermon—these days, that usually happens on Wednesday or Thursday evening—I’ll use black tea, but I won’t leave the tea bag in the hot water very long. I want a little caffeine, but not too much.

We often come to the Bible like that, I think. Sometimes we just want the water to recognize the tea bag. Sometimes we want a little from God, but not too much. Occasionally, we want more.

Most of the time, though, it’s a waste of a tea bag not to let the tea steep so that all the flavor has been released and the color is rich and full. “Rich and full” was what Paul was talking about when he challenged the Romans not to “*be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God*” (Romans 12:2).

And “rich and full” was what Paul was talking about when he wrote the words that are our focus this morning: “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

All Scripture—the whole Bible—is “God-breathed.” **It’s a Love Story.** That’s why Zephaniah 3:17 is my favorite verse in the whole kit and kaboodle:

*The Lord your God is with you.
He is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you.*

⁶ Brian Mains, “Marion Shurtleff makes amazing discovery in used Bible, finds childhood essay she wrote 65 years ago,” *WCPO Digital* (5-28-13).

*He will comfort you with his love.
He will rejoice over you with singing!*

One more story and I'm done. This has been a week in which we've lost the amazing actor Chadwick Boseman, who was a follower of Jesus. One of the main characters in the story I'm about to tell was played by another wonderful actor who is also a follower of Jesus—Denzel Washington

The movie *Antwone Fisher* is the true story of a young man abandoned at birth by an incarcerated woman, and who was raised in abusive orphanages, foster homes, and reform schools. After his 18th birthday, he joins the Navy, where his anger toward life gets him in a lot of trouble. After several fights, Antwone is ordered to undergo counseling, and his psychologist (played by Denzel) encourages him to find his roots as a way to begin healing.

After several phone calls he reaches an aunt and uncle in Cleveland who escort him to the dilapidated apartment complex where his estranged mother lives. A suspicious and aloof woman answers the door. When she realizes that Antwone is the child she gave up at birth, the woman retreats to another room and sits down on a soiled and worn couch, crying silently.

Antwone asks for some explanation as to why she never came to rescue him or why she never sought him out. She cannot answer, but simply stares ahead, not daring to look at him, tears rolling down her expressionless face.

He gently kisses her on the cheek as if to say, "I forgive you," and walks away. As he gets out of the car at his uncle's house, Antwone walks like a man who feels completely alone in the world. As he enters the front door, however, Antwone's world changes as he's met by a chorus of cheers from a huge crowd of relatives, all waiting to meet him for the very first time.

There are children, couples, cousins, uncles, and family friends, all smothering him with hugs, slaps on the back, and beaming smiles. The hallway stairs are filled with kids holding up signs with his name scribbled next to smiley faces and rainbows. Antwone slowly takes it all in, overwhelmed.

He is then led into the next room where a grand feast is spread across a long table. The table is overflowing with chicken, mashed potatoes, pancakes, fruit salad—with all the soul food you can imagine. The room is prepared for a celebration. For the very first time in his life, Antwone is adored. For the very first time in his life, he belongs.

As Antwone surveys the room, an elderly woman sitting at the end of the table knocks to get his attention and then waves for him to come to her. She slowly raises her arms, grabbing his hands and then caressing his face. She's his grandmother, who he has never met. A tear runs down her cheek as she whispers with great effort, "**Welcome.**"⁷

As you think about that scene, my friend, try to imagine yourself being led into a foyer where your mother and father, your grandparents, your mate, your children, your best friends, and countless others whom you don't yet know wait for you. As you walk by them, they embrace you, slap you on the back, and hold up colorful signs with your name on them.

As you try to take this all in, you reach a huge room where a grand feast is spread across a long table. The table is overflowing with chicken, mashed potatoes, pancakes, fruit

⁷ *Antwone Fisher*, A Mundy Lane/Todd Black Production, 2002, written by Antwone Fisher and directed by Denzel Washington.

salad—with all the soul food you can imagine. The room is prepared for a celebration. Perhaps for the very first time in your life, you are adored. Perhaps for the very first time in your life, you truly belong.

As you survey the room, a radiant figure sitting at the end of the table knocks to get your attention and then waves for you to come to Him. He slowly raises his nail-pierced hands, takes your hands and caresses your face. A tear runs down His cheek as He says with deep emotion, “**Welcome!**”

That’s what God has in store for you, my friend, if you will receive it. **It’s a Love Story.**

And so we come to the Table of the Lord. The Savior has prepared the Table Himself, and there’s a place card with your name on it. It’s dinner time. Will you come?