

SandStory Bible Study

Saturday Bible Study

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First of all, let me say what a privilege, what a delight, what an honor it is to be able to be here. There is nobody on the face of the earth that I respect more than God's laborers out in the vineyard. I've done it enough so that my five years in the pastorate has given me a huge, a deep, a profound, lasting respect for all of you and for what you do. And not just those in the pulpit, but those who stand alongside and support and pray and encourage. And so, thank you. Thank you for the privilege of being here.

Of course, one of the huge challenges of doing something like this is that I can't really give you a sermon, because you guys have done it better and longer than I have. And so, what I can do, perhaps, is share a little bit of encouragement. Because part of my story has been the story of growing up as an artist. And in some ways it's parallel to being a pastor in that often you are misunderstood and unappreciated and told that you really don't want to go into that vocation because you'll never make any money, and so for goodness sake, go be a lawyer or a doctor or a computer analyst, and then you can actually rake in some dough.

I mean, I remember when I was in art school, there were the two factions. There were the fine artists. And they were the ones who said, Ahh, I want people to pay me for what springs from my soul. And then there were the commercial artists. And they were the ones that said, I want to pay the rent. So that's what I did, as I went into commercial art. For twenty years I was in advertising. I started my own advertising business. But it was during that time that I realized the power and the energy and the strength of the arts. Because I really didn't appreciate what I had been given. The privilege of being able to share stories using artwork.

I guess it began to dawn on me late in my high school years, when I discovered that, that I could use my ability with art as the greatest pick-up line in the whole world. I mean I would saunter up to some cute gal, and I'd say, hi, do you mind if I do a sketch of you? They never turned me down. And so I'd pull up a chair and twenty minutes later, they'd have a reasonably good sketch and I'd have a phone number and a date for Friday night. Worked great.

But the great privilege of what you do, and what anybody as a Christian gets to do, is to depict the glory of God. We get to live out what it is to be Jesus in the lives of others. And it reminds me of the little girl in the Sunday school class. And the teacher had handed out pieces of paper and crayons. And she said, today, you get to draw anything you want to draw. And so little Melissa is over in the corner, and she is drawing away, and the teacher comes over and says, Melissa, what are you drawing? And she says, I'm drawing a picture of God. And the teacher says, Oh, well I didn't know that anybody knew what God looked like. And little Melissa didn't miss a beat. She said they will in a minute. So here we are, attempting to live out what Jesus looks like in the flesh. Now there is a challenge. There is a challenge in the pulpit and there is a challenge in doing it as an artist.

I got a chance to share this morning with some of the folks in the session upstairs. I was telling them about how it got to be a challenge. I had developed sand art during the time that I was

pastoring, because I had come to appreciate the power and the value of the arts. So every fifth Sunday I would do a Magic Marker drawing or a pastel or an acrylic or I worked in clay and wood. Just about anything to get people to remember what I was saying. I'd heard the statistics. Where you hear that people would remember thirty percent of what they hear but eighty percent of what they hear and see. And so I was trying to use every gate possible to get people to remember the messages that I was sharing. So I was doing all of these pieces of artwork, and eventually, after five years, I was starting to run out of ideas. Easter was coming up. I wanted to tell the Easter story in a new way. So I was thinking about that. Meanwhile, my wife, who is the practical one, she sent me down to the hardware store to get some mulch for the garden. And I was walking down the aisle where they had bags of sand. And one of the bags had ripped open and spilled out on the floor. People had scuffed through it. As an artist, you see images everywhere. And so, I'm looking at the sand and I'm thinking, you know, maybe I could do something with that. So I get home with the mulch, but I also have a trunk full, I have a sack of sand and a kitchen light fixture and some table legs. And I cobble this contraption in my garage. My wife, she knows better, I was out there like a lunatic scientist, you know. I got a tripod and a handycam, and I duct taped to the tripod and put it over the top of my table, plugged it into my television set, and sure enough, the images started coming together. And that was when I developed my very first SandStory. It was the one I performed last night; The Passion of the Christ. It's grown and developed, and I've improved it some since then, but it is still the SandStory that I perform most, most requested. And the great thing is, that I've gotten the chance to perform it in some of the most incredible places.

I met one of the pastors this morning from India. I was invited to go to the India Institute of Technology. It's kind of like MIT only much harder to get into. They have thirty thousand applicants for every one slot. So here the brightest and the best of India, four thousand students, and I get to perform for them. I said what do you want me to do? They said do anything you want. So I did a few things with images of India. Then I said let me tell you the story that changed my life. And I did The Passion of the Christ. And they got it. They understood it. As a matter of fact, these are all techie kids, and I wound up with over four hundred fifty Facebook friends from India. And I got a chance to interact with them, and to this day, a number of years later, I still have maintained connections with some of these kids that have now grown up and are now having families and conversations about Jesus.

But the phone rang one day, and it was odd, because I have never had any desire to be a celebrity or be on television. But it was America's Got Talent. Some of you "carnal" folks may have watched the show. You know, I turned them down; I was traveling, I was performing, I was having a great time. They called me back the next year. The third year, my wife, who is the brighter one of the two, said, Joe, Honey, why don't you just go down and try out? What do you have to lose? So I said OK. So they flew me down to Austin, Texas, and I tried out for the judges. But I knew what would happen, because the only SandStory that I had at the time that I could condense to ninety seconds – and that's all they give you in the show, is ninety seconds – was "God Bless the USA" by Lee Greenwood. So I knew what would happen, because the three judges that summer were Howie Mandel, Sharon Osborn, and Howard Stern. And I was going to do "God Bless the USA." Well, Howie Mandel, he'd give me an "X" and send me home. He's Canadian. Sharon Osborne, she's British. And Howard Stern, I didn't even know if he believed in God or not. So, go figure. I figured I'd get sent home.

The truth of the matter is that they actually loved it, they passed me on. I went all the way to finals. But it sort of became one of the SandStories that I've done a lot. I get a chance to do it regularly. Lee Greenwood's song has certainly become one of the anthems of our country. And it's sort of a reminder, to me anyway, that there is always going to be challenges and struggles. Until Jesus comes back, there is going to be difficulties. There's difficulties in your home church, there's difficulties in the conference, there's difficulties all over the world. And what we need to do, is we need to pray for our people. Pray for the difficult ones; the EGR people. They are the Extra Grace Required. We need to pray for our country. We need to pray for our leaders. We need to pray for our president. Lord knows we need to pray for our candidates. Oh my. But this is just a reminder of the fact that God's hand is not shortened; that he cannot save. And he raises people up and he puts them down. And so, regardless of what happens, I pray that God will bless the U.S.A.

GOD BLESS THE USA SANDSTORY HERE

Now I know that our kingdom is not of this world, and we have a citizenship in a better place, and certainly our ministry and our church is global. And that's really where our heart and our passion is. But the chance of telling stories and communicating to people that universal truth that Jesus is for everybody is the heartbeat of what I do.

I get a chance to go places and tell stories and do things that now are sort of amazing to me, because I get invited to do things and go places where I would never be allowed in as a pastor or a missionary or a Christian worker. But when I come in as an artist, it opens doors. And it really has been for me this incredible opportunity. And I want to share something with you that may not be obvious to you. One of the delights and one of the wonders of having conferences like this is that you get a chance to rub shoulders with people that are outside of your sphere of influence, and outside of your community. And you get a chance to hear of the good things that are going on. But God has blessed my wife and I, and we've gotten a chance to be in forty-seven states and twenty-eight foreign countries. We've gotten the chance to perform for all sorts of people and conferences. And here is some exciting news, and that is that God is at work.

So I was invited to Saudi Arabia to perform in a place where you can't have a church. They have these walled compounds where a lot of the expats and Europeans and Americans live, and they have their little church in there. But you cannot have a church building outside of that. And you certainly wouldn't be allowed to go out on the street corner and start proclaiming Jesus. And so I am over there performing for King Abdulla at the founding of the university that he founded, the King Abdulla University of Science and Technology. And sitting down with the event planner, who happened to be a young Arab woman, and we're talking. And she leans in close and she says, "I've seen your work on-line. And I know you draw pictures of Jesus. I'm kind of interested in this Jesus." And so for the next forty-five minutes, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, here I am telling somebody about Jesus. What an incredible opportunity.

And then to go places where there are conferences with hundreds of people that are excited about the gospel. That are excited about God. That are committing their lives to him. Gatlinburg,

Tennessee, thirteen thousand high school teenagers. And they sit still as stone watching the SandStories. And then erupt with enthusiastic cheers and a standing ovation. These are high school students excited about Jesus.

I go to churches that are not Methodist churches. Amazing. God is at work. Denominations that you wouldn't think would have any real interest in Jesus or the gospel, and they are enthused and excited. The Spirit of God is everywhere. What a neat thing. And so, don't be weary in well doing. Be encouraged. Be strengthened. God is at work. And if you start feeling a little bit lonesome and a little bit with that siege mentality with your little church, wherever you are, and you feel like you have to start building bulwarks and defending yourself against the enemy, be encouraged. God is at work, and he can work in you and through you.

I mentioned we all face challenges, but the greatest thing about challenges is that it pulls out of us greater strengths. And most of the time gives us the opportunity to be set free. If we draw on the resources that we've been given in the Scriptures, God is able to release us from the bondage of fear and of worry and of concern and anguish. And that's what Jesus wants for us. So don't be afraid.

I know most of you know that the command that's repeated most often in Scripture is "Don't be afraid." I think somebody counted three hundred sixty-five times in the Scripture God says don't be afraid. One for every day of the year.

I love the arts because it can encourage us in that very thing. There is a scene in a movie that I saw quite a while back. A movie called "Amistad," about bringing slaves over from Africa. And sitting in the hull of the ship are two African slaves, and neither one of them can read. But they happen to have a Scripture, a Bible, with the illustrations about Albrecht Durer, the masterful artist that created the "Praying Hands." And he did this wonderful series of biblical drawings of steel etchings, and the Bible, every third page has one of these drawings. And here the one slave is saying to the other, and he turns the page to the next illustration, and he says, see, this is the man. He was a prisoner, too. And see, they crucified him. And he died for us.

And so we can take the things that the world uses and the world sometimes distains, and we can use it for his glory.

One of the songs that I've picked up, I got a chance to use it on America's Got Talent, and I've used it with young people all over the country. It was actually a song that was written more than fifty years ago for a British stage play. But the song is actually about slaves, and what the slave feels like when he has been set free. It's been modernized and popularized by a current sort of epic pop star. Some of you may be familiar with it, but it's called "Feelin' Good."

“FEELIN’ GOOD SANDSTORY HERE

One of the things that I get a chance to remind young people of, and I would remind you of the same thing, and that is that, you know, I started last night talking about how stories are

important. I want to remind you that your story is the best story there is. We have a tendency to hear somebody on stage or to have a guest speaker in or we watch somebody on a YouTube clip, and we think, ah, you know, my story's boring. I was brought up, I went to college, I went to seminary; I pastored a church; I've been totin' this barge and liftin' this bale for all these years, and it's just not real exciting. And I want you to know that isn't true. That the very fact that you have connected your story with God makes your story fabulous. And it's so critical that you remember those times that God has worked in your life. And if you have a short memory, get a journal and write those things down. Because those are the stories that you can share with others that are going to change people's lives.

Is God alive? Why, sure. I remember the time when I was just married. I had a toddler and a babe in arms and my work wasn't going well. We didn't have but half a jar of peanut butter in the pantry, and we come home. We hadn't told anybody, and there were five bags of groceries on our front porch. God said don't worry, I'm going to take care of you. What a great story. And I know you've got hundred and thousands of stories in this room that we need to be able to share with this next generation, reminding them of God being at work.

Now it's human nature, the fact that we're fallen, that we're going to have a tendency to go to the dark side. Oh, how we love the gloom and the doom. Oh, everything is going to hell in a handbasket. One of the best sermons I ever saw was when I got a chance to be invited to the Orange Bowl Parade. I really didn't want to go, because I'd been to parades before. And yet my friend said, no, no, you don't understand. My family owns a store right on the parade route, and they have one of those marquees that's up high. And we go out there on the marquee. We set up lawn chairs and coolers and we have the best seat in the house. And the parade is down there and it's fabulous. I said, OK, we'll go. And so I went to the parade. And we sat there, and sure enough, we had a great time. But it was just another parade. And you had the clowns, and you had the beauty queens and the bands and they all went by, and kind of polite applause for all of it. And then along comes a beer wagon. Now all big parades have them. The beautiful draft horses and the wooden wagon with the large wheels and the big barrels of beer. It came along, and behind it was a guy. And he had a wheelbarrow. Yep, you can see this coming. And he had a shovel and he had a broom. And sure enough, one of the horses dropped some manure. This morning I was told that one of the churches here has a fundraiser where they sell manure. I thought what a great idea. Well, this guy, you know, he has his head down, his wheelbarrow, and he comes over and he sweeps the manure together and scoops it into his wheelbarrow. Then he sort of hides behind the wagon. And he goes on down the parade route. And then all of a sudden, the parade's going by, and we start hearing some cheering and some whistling and a roar down the parade route. Everybody starts looking to see what's going on. And finally it turns a corner, and we see what it is. It's another beer wagon. And everybody's kind of scratching their heads wondering what's the deal? Well the beer wagon comes up alongside, and there's a guy behind it. And he has a wheelbarrow. And he has a shovel. And he has a broom. But this guy's no shrinking violet. As a matter of fact, he's picked up some streamers that fell off some float and draped them around the front of his wheelbarrow. He's wheeling from one side of the street to the other. He's doing the beauty queen wave. He's blowing kisses. And sure enough, one of the horses drops some manure on the street. He goes over, circles it three times, gets his broom, sweeps it together, sticks his shovel in there, whoo!, thirty-five feet in the air, wham!, it lands right in the wheelbarrow and the crowd goes nuts! Now what's the difference? And you know

the lesson there, if you will pardon my language, is that everybody eventually has to shovel some crap. So do it with panache. Love it! Don't let it get you down. Let the negative go on by and enjoy the positive.

We worship the God of all heaven; the God of the whole world; the God that is all powerful. And it's in him that we find our strength and our joy and our contentment and our peace. And content and peaceful and happy are those that don't strut, who don't stand with sinners, who don't sit with the scornful, but those whose delight is in the law of the Lord. And they are going to be like a tree planted by rivers of water. And they're going to bear fruit in their season. And that's the way we should be. The prayer that Jesus taught us is a reminder of all of this: of his provision, of his love, of his grace. And let me close with this SandStory.