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APPLY THE STORY

ALL RIGHT, BOYS and girls, it's Quiz Time! Hands on your buzzers!

Quickly, aloud so that I can hear you, answer these two questions.

1. Name the guy who was swallowed by a whale and lived to tell about it.
2. Name the young maiden who, through a bizarre set of circumstances, was taken to the palace and eventually married into royalty.

You answered "Jonah" and "Esther," right?

Wrong.

Read on.

If I was asked to choose the most important concept in this book, it would be the one covered in this chapter.

Our job as children's ministers and workers is to positively impact the kids in our circle of influence. Though stories are wonderful tools, they are only part of the equation.

The stories in the Bible are given for examples, so we can apply their timeless truths to our twenty-first century lives. Therefore, it is critical that as you tell a then-and-there story, you also tell why it is important here-and-now.

Telling a story is simply not enough. You can give all the facts and figures, all the dates and places, and all the historical events surrounding it, and still not accomplish a thing in the lives of your kids.

For instance, what good does it do to tell an eight-year-old that Jonah was swallowed by a whale? What is that going to do for him? He could walk out of your class and say to himself, "That was a great story about that guy and that whale. If I ever get swallowed by a whale, *I'll* know what to do!"

Excuse me?

Can you just imagine the kids in your circle thinking, "The next time I get thrown into a

lions' den...." or "If I'm ever told to bow down to a 90-foot statue...." or "The next time I have only five loaves and two fish, I'll be ready!"

That is exactly what could happen if you fail to apply the story to your kids, in their lives, in their world.

Let's look at "their world." What kind of world are your kids living in? Chances are that some are facing pretty desperate circumstances.

Many live in single-parent homes. Mom might have personal and emotional struggles, while Dad is virtually non-existent. Every day these kids ride a roller coaster of emotions. They are insecure, unsure of their parents' love for them. Perhaps some feel guilty, wondering if it was their fault that their parents split up.

Others live with an alcoholic parent, an unloving stepparent, a drug-pushing older brother, or an uncle who makes them very uncomfortable.

Perhaps they are not doing well in school. Struggling with low self-esteem, they know that they are not as smart as the other kids. They may be dealing with a bully or a peer group that is pressuring them to make unwise choices.

Possibly you have some extreme cases in your realm of influence: a kid suffering from leukemia, one who is living in a homeless shelter, or another who has never felt valued or loved.

Kids in the new millennium have turmoil and strife hurled at them from every direction. They are in dire need of hope, of true love, and of reassurance that they matter. What better way to illustrate to them that God truly loves them, that He knows their names, and that they matter to Him, than by sharing with them the great stories from God's Word? But they won't get the message unless you find a way to apply the stories to their modern-day lives.

So is it possible to do that? Yes, it is.

The boy in the story of the feeding of the 5,000 teaches us that even kids are important to Jesus, and they can use what they have to bless others.

David teaches us that even though we are young and inexperienced, God can give us victory over impossible obstacles.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego teach us to stand for what is right in the midst of godless authority, and God will give us strength to face the consequences.

What about extreme stories like Daniel, Job, or Noah? Can these almost-fantastical stories be applied to the lives of our kids?

Absolutely.

Through Daniel, we learn that God's angels of protection are always present.

Through Job, we learn that God is sovereign, and that all we possess is a gift from Him.

Through Noah, we learn that when we follow God's plan, the results will be amazing.

If we teach only the stories without teaching the applications, we may as well be teaching fairy tales.

Here's what I mean.

Remember the questions at the beginning of this chapter?

1. Name the guy who was swallowed by a whale and lived to tell about it.
2. Name the young maiden who, through a bizarre set of circumstances, was taken to the palace and eventually married into royalty.

The answers are Pinocchio and Cinderella.

Pinocchio was swallowed by a whale and lived to tell about it. Cinderella, through a bizarre set of circumstances, was taken to the palace and eventually married into royalty.

Jonah was swallowed by a whale and lived to tell about it. Esther, through a bizarre set of circumstances, was taken to the palace and eventually married into royalty.

Do you see a potential problem here?

Now imagine that you are six years old. How are you going to discern the difference between Jonah and Pinocchio, between Esther and Cinderella? Between a Bible story and a fairy tale?

You and I are adults, capable of discerning between the truth and a fable. You and I are fully aware that Jonah and Esther are real people and that Pinocchio and Cinderella are fictitious. But the kids in your class have not necessarily grasped that concept.

What do all four stories, Pinocchio, Jonah, Cinderella, and Esther, have in common? They each contain a story line so outlandish and fantastical that anyone, kids or adults, would have a hard time believing *any* of them.

So what is the biggest *difference* between them?

The fairy tales are entertaining and take you into the world of make-believe, while Bible stories can change you for eternity.

The problem is: you can teach the Bible stories as if they are fairy tales. If all you do is focus on the fact that Jonah was swallowed by a whale, what have you done for your kids? Absolutely nothing, except entertain them with a story so far-fetched it is difficult to believe. You may as well teach about Pinocchio.

Look at it another way: what is the lesson in the story of Pinocchio? That if you wish upon a star, your dreams will come true. That concept is not going to positively impact your kids.

But what is the lesson in the story of Jonah? There are many, but among them is the concept that God is a God of second chances. (Huge thanks to Bob and Larry and the rest of the VeggieTales gang for reinforcing that idea!)

Every time you teach a Bible story, apply it to your listeners' lives. Give them something that they can hold on to. Something that will give them hope, inspire their faith, and bring peace to their chaotic world.

Remember: a significant number of the kids you are ministering to come from unstable

and traumatic environments. For many of them, your class is the one haven of peace in their lives. When they leave your church, they are heading back into their negative and hopeless circumstances.

So for the too-few minutes that you have them, give them something to take home that will help them through the rest of the week. Give them hope. Give them value. Let them know how much their Creator loves them, that He knows the number of hairs on their head, and that He cares even about the minutia of their lives.

You can do this with a story.