Randy Frazee:

You're listening to the Bible Roots podcast with pastor Randy Frazee. If you're a church leader, looking for creative ideas to help your church engage more deeply with the Bible, this podcast is for you. And now for today's episode. Well welcome everyone to the podcast. It's all about Bible engagement. We have designed this podcast for anyone who longs to see people, including yourself, effectively engage God's word. Everybody is welcome to dial in, but our crosshairs are on pastors and church leaders. And we want to stimulate your thinking and give you creative and effective ideas on how you can see the people you lead, engage God's living word in such a way that it transforms their very lives. Not only their lives, but their family, their church, their community, and even their world. In our first episode, we had a great conversation with Cali Parkinson and we established a case for the importance of Bible engagement. And our second episode, I had a fascinating conversation with Scott Beck of Gloo on how people grow.

Randy Frazee:

And if you haven't listened to that episode, I want to encourage you to do so, leave a review and share it with a friend. And today we have a good one. One I am super excited about, and I want to focus today on the importance of story and Bible engagement. To help us with this conversation we have Kyle Idleman, a good friend of mine. Kyle is the bestselling author and teaching pastor at Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky. One of the largest churches in America, he's mostly known for his award-winning book, Not a Fan, which is sold more than 1.3 million copies. And as an author, I'll tell you that's a lot of copies. And has sparked a movement among believers to ditch being fans of Jesus and become completely committed followers instead. Most of all, Kyle and I are colleagues and good friends. And Kyle, welcome to the podcast today.

Kyle Idleman:

Yeah, man, this is fun. It's great to talk with you about this.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah, it's really, really cool. We had a chance to meet, to kind of go over this in California and I treated you to a breakfast in Coronado Island, and it was a bit expensive. So, this podcast is brought to you by the sponsorship of Coronado Island.

Kyle Idleman:

It was a good breakfast. It wasn't that good, but it was a good breakfast.

Randy Frazee:

I'm not going to tell anybody how much I spent on that breakfast, but I did mortgage one of my kids to pay for it, pay it back. But Hey, thanks for coming on board. Hey, we have shared a lot of common themes and overlapped and all that kind of stuff, but let's talk about how, we first came together, particularly around this idea of story. And I did a thing with HarperCollins, Zondervan called the Story, which is his 31 week Bible engagement experience that really presents the Bible in a bridge chronology. And you were one of, at least in terms of big churches, I mean, Southeast Christian, 28,000 people or whatever, you have a whole city going to your church, which is really pretty cool. You were one of the first adopters of that. So, tell me what you saw on that, why and how it worked and all that kind of stuff.

Kyle Idleman:

Sure. Well, we have a very multi-generational church. We have a church that is very diverse in spiritual church background, and I'd say we're about a third Catholic and then a third of different mainstream evangelical background, and then a third of no church or everything else. So, when you have all those different types of backgrounds together, you're talking to people who are coming into it with very, very eclectic perspectives. And there's nothing like a story to help cross over that gap.

Kyle Idleman:

And we just saw the need for our church, especially to understand the overarching story of scripture and so that when we are preaching and teaching on certain texts, to understand that we're reading a chapter of a larger story. There's a lot more happening in the meta-narrative than maybe what we're talking about on this particular weekend. And so to help people understand that and to understand the redemptive plan of God through Christ and how that is woven through scripture was a really important journey for our church to take. And what you did with the story project really fit the needs of our congregation. And those needs were just, again, very eclectic. They were all over the place. What made you decide to do that?

Randy Frazee:

Similar kind of thing. I was actually pastoring a church in the Dallas–Fort Worth area at the time. And I was just really struggling for, just exactly what you said, for people to see that overarching arc, they knew individual stories, or I would say a lot of even mature Christians were operating a Christian life on about 10 Bible verses Philippians 4:13, Jeremiah 29:11, those kind of things. So, they just didn't really understand the bigger picture. They thought the gospel actually began in Matthew. They didn't really see the overarching concept of it. And I had tried several different ways, including an unabridged version of the Bible, chronological order and got about three people to finish it. It was pretty overwhelming task. And then one day guy from Zondervan, Doug Lockhart, who ended up becoming the president, came in and said, "Hey, I've got this new tool called the Story."

Randy Frazee:

And I go, "Man, I've been looking for this for a long time." And so I got pretty excited about it and well, we needed to do some editing on it to make a more even chapters. And then I thought, hey, the best thing to do would be to add some community around this, to get people through it. I had done some research on the effectiveness of community. And one of them was an example on people who want to quit smoking that if they try to do it on their own, the statistical chances of success or zero, if they add a tool like a nicotine patch, it's 5%. But if you add community, it jumps all the way to 40%. And so we thought, what if we took this experience and help people get through it by establishing community. So, that's when we created the idea of doing it as a sermon series, doing it in a small groups, doing with the children and all that.

Randy Frazee:

And you did it. You guys went all in, you actually took it to another level than what we experienced. I actually didn't do it at the church I was at in Fort Worth. But when I went to Willow Creek, I pitched the idea to Willow Creek and we did it for the first time on a Wednesday night. And I saw the attendance jump like 50% at new community. And I thought, man, we've really got something here. Then went to San Antonio. And that's when we launched it on Sunday morning, as we were writing it and saw this incredible outpouring of people, which I didn't anticipate. I started this with the idea of it being just for the people I was serving in Fort Worth. And I was really surprised at how people leaned into it. Because you had the same experience, didn't you?

Kyle Idleman:

Yeah, we really did. And to me that is the power of story is that it has the ability to naturally create community because you're a part of a story together. And then it connects people in a way that is more personal. I'll tell you where you see this is in the trend these days of TV shows and such where they don't just tell back in the old days, you might have a sitcom and each show was a 30 minute segment. And now they've figured out that they want to keep people engaged. And the way you keep people engaged is you thread that story. So, you watch one episode and it leaves you hanging to the next episode and then they develop their characters.

Kyle Idleman:

And if you just try to watch one 30 minute episode, you're not going to understand it. You got to go back and catch up and binge watch a little, and then you know what's going on. And that engages people. And then you see the community around that. Those shows, those stories, connect people to each other. And so I love that you did that. We saw that within our church as well. We tried to build a campaign around it, which I think was helpful. But I think the story is what kept people coming and kept people connected, just continuing to make sure that we were intentional to thread it throughout what we were doing.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. It's been really fantastic. Zondervan just called and said, it's just jumped over the 5 million mark, which is really pretty, as you know in publishing a really-

Kyle Idleman:

Oh, yeah.

Randy Frazee:

... assignment. Yeah. What excites me is the number of churches that have done it and the number of lives have been changed. So, let's talk a little bit about, we kind of delved into a little bit, but from your point of view, why Story is so important in Bible engagement? So, I know you've dove into a little bit, but I remember when we were in California, you had some things to say about that. I don't know if you can recall any of those.

Kyle Idleman:

Yeah, sure. Well, the way that Story connects to our emotions, to our heart is easy to underestimate or maybe a better word would be to undervalue. That we tend to think of Bible engagement as information like, okay, I know I'm engaged in scripture because of the information that has been downloaded to me. I think growing up in church and Sunday school and doing a little bit of Bible bowl, I think the emphasis was often on the head. It was often on facts and being able to recite certain verses. And certainly that matters and there's a place for that. But if you miss the heart, then you miss the point. And so scripture is beautifully written in story form because I think in large part, it connects our story to that. And so it's much more engaging of the heart. And so one of the things that we try hard to do when we do any kind of biblical engagement, teaching is to unashamedly wrap that in Story.

Kyle Idleman:

So, we might have outlines and make it more teaching and it's focus, but we're still going to connect that constantly to the story because that's what keeps people engaged. That's what keeps people connected. And I would say that people are inspired by Story. It's probably been 10 years ago, I was sitting around this table with maybe 20 people who were brand new to church. And we'd have that meeting weekly where we'd sit around and we would talk about how somebody came to church. But one of the things I started to recognize is that when one person would share a story early on, that was maybe a little bit vulnerable or a little bit personal, or go into a little bit more detail that it set the tone for the rest of the room, that stories became contagious. That person shared it.

Kyle Idleman:

But if the first few people didn't share that if they just gave a few facts, I'm married, here's how many kids I've got, and here's where we live, and here's what I do for a living. Then that's what the rest of the room did. But as soon as somebody pulled back the curtain a little bit and shared story than everybody else did too. And I love how scripture invites that, that as you are reading through, and studying through, and preaching through the different narratives, whether that's some historical narrative in the old Testament or whether that's a parabolic narrative and a new Testament.

Kyle Idleman:

That it invites other people to tell their story. And I often will tell younger preachers and teachers like pest of whether or not you've connected scripture to someone's head and heart is, do they tell you a story from their lives? In other words, if they just come up to you afterwards and say, that was a great message. And here's what I learned. But if they come up and they tell you a story and you're like, why are you telling me this story? It's because they've connected to something you said. And so I think the power of leaning into that biblically invites people.

Randy Frazee:

I think Kyle, brain science is telling us that everybody has kind of a story or a worldview going on in the center of their brain. And whenever you engage in story and in the story is engaging to them and they find themselves in your story that you're telling, they find themselves in the story, it connects you with them so that they become a character in the story, they get kind of lost in it. And then when you introduce the new idea or the disruptive idea, that's where the transformation takes place. And it takes place better with story than just listing out a series of facts, because the facts don't really viscerally connect with them. Would agree with that a little bit?

Kyle Idleman:

Yes. I do agree. And when you can build those into the story where they're learning some of that in story form, then they hold onto them differently.

Randy Frazee:

Oh, okay.

Kyle Idleman:

And an example of this would be, I could give you all kinds of information about Michael Jordan. Generation I grew up in, I could tell you about [inaudible 00:14:03] championships and scoring titles and MVTs and things like that. But if my son who's a big basketball fan, if he is studying Michael Jordan or, he knows who he is, he wasn't a part of that story. So, he can get the information, but he's not engaged in it in the same way that I am because I was a part of that. I experienced that.

Kyle Idleman:

And so I would say that, well, the story connects to our emotions and stories connects us through experience. And the power of that is what we hang onto. I know that you have this a lot too, where I can get away in this sermon with using the same information, same teaching information from when I preach that text four years ago. But if I tell the same story that I shared from four years ago, people will be like, oh, you've already used that story. I use that whole sermon, you just remember the story. But they remember that. That just sticks with them in a different way.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. I agree with you. One of the things you mentioned to me is the Bible is a story. You used the phrase in the beginning, the whole thing starts out with in the beginning. It could also say once upon a time. So, the Bible is a story, which seems to be an inefficient way to get information to us because you have to meander through all the characters and this or that. But it is interesting that God selected the Bible to be encased in a story.

Kyle Idleman:

And it's fascinating to watch how the marketing world today has figured that out. They understand that they need to wrap their product in a story in order to engage a consumer. So, when you sit down with any marketing agency now, if you're trying to sell a product, you're not talking that much about the product. You're telling the story of the product because it engages people. And I think that's frustrating to the people who develop the ... They want to talk about the product. But it's the story that draws people in. And I think God who designed our hearts and our minds knows how we think and knows how to connect us. And so the scripture begins in the beginning. And then even if you look at the new Testament, it's remarkable how many times, well, if you take the different genres, if Jesus is telling a parable, it starts, the kingdom of heaven is like ... Oh, he's telling a story.

Kyle Idleman:

So, in the beginning, once upon a time. Or where Jesus is, if one of the gospels is telling us about a moment in Jesus' life, Jesus was on his way when, and there's these common ways of beginning a story that we see throughout scripture that I think we can learn a lot from his communicators. Yeah, tip people off. Let them know, hey, you're getting ready to hear a story. But it's amazing to me how much real estate in scripture is committed to the story genre. I mean, it really is. If you compare it to historical textbooks and such, so much of it is narrative.

Randy Frazee:

And again, it would seem to be more efficient if you just listed it all out. But God who designed us knows that we connect to this concept of a story. And another thing I think we had talked about earlier is you have these very diverse members of your congregation and you're speaking to them all, and you got 30 minutes. That story's kind of a transcultural kind of medium. So, try to figure out, oh, do I speak now theologically to the babes in Christ? Do I now shift gears and speak to the mature Christ. Story of rises above it all in a way, doesn't it?

Kyle Idleman:

Yeah, it does. If you have a very diverse audience, it can feel very overwhelming to say, okay, I need to say this to these people and to those people. And when you're trying to tailor the message to all these different groups, you end up missing all of them because you're just barely touching on each one. But story has a way of doing that for you. It connects people that way for you. And I love the way you referenced the engagement of a story. And when we make a story engaging, one of the ways that I loved what the story project did was it, instead of it just being chronological, it leveraged engagement. And I wondered how intentional that is. And then when you're not just telling a story, but how do I engage people in this story when you're doing that? Are there certain ways that you're saying, okay, I can tell the story, but if I tell it this way, it brings in better engagement.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. When you talk about from a preaching point of view?

Kyle Idleman:

From a preaching point of view.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. I think I spend as much time figuring out how to tell a story in a message that might evoke some reaction to the people. So, they talk about comedians who are storytellers with the goal of releasing a lot of dopamine at the end of punchline. And just sometimes it looks like a comedian is just being very sort on the cuff with the story. But the reality is the best comedians have spent hours upon hours learning how to tell that story in such a way that evokes that sense of laughter that they're looking for and looking for that punchline that surprises people out of the blue.

Randy Frazee:

And so for me, in telling a story, I'm looking for ways in which to tell it. And sometimes I have to tell you too, Kyle, that when we're going through the story, I didn't want the contemporary story to overshadow the biblical story. I don't know if you ever ... One time a professor of mine who went to the church I had in Fort Worth said, "You had a very compelling sermon today, but your contemporary story overcame the story of the scripture and you should have done a better job." You know what I'm saying?

Kyle Idleman:

Yeah. Letting scripture be the hero, letting the biblical story be the hero is ... Yeah, absolutely. That's good.

Randy Frazee:

So, let's shift gears and turn it to you. Just a number of things I want to talk to you about. One is any thoughts on how you preach to encourage engagement, in the lightest story. But what are some other things, as you're preparing a sermon, delivering a sermon, I mean, you're not wanting just to people walk out to be smarter, but you're wanting them to engage the message. What are some thoughts you have there?

Kyle Idleman:

Yeah. So, one of the things that I try to do is have a specific person in mind as I'm developing a sermon. So, I know a number of preachers who practice their sermon writing this way, but I'll write a couple of names at the top of my manuscript or of my outline. And then as I'm preaching, I have their story in mind. And it helps me be a better storyteller. It helps me lean into certain moments in scripture when I am aware of a specific person. And what happens is people more broadly connect to it when you're focusing on just one person. So, the fear would be, hey, if I'm writing this and I've got a single mom in mind. Then man, maybe I'll talk to her, but I'll miss everyone else. But this is not what happens. That when you are focused on engaging it with that one person, it draws more people to it. An example of this would be the way that country music would work.

Randy Frazee:

There you go.

Kyle Idleman:

I live in Kentucky and live on a farm, but I am by no means very country. But I can listen to a country song, and there's a lot of specifics in the story I don't necessarily relate to, but it's the specifics of the story that make me relate to it. Even though it's not necessarily especially relevant in my life. And I can draw those connections myself. So, that helps me. Sometimes, I don't know if you ever do this, but I started off doing it subconsciously and now I do it intentionally. When I am preaching certain sermons, I will within the first few minutes kind of scan through the congregation and ... I've prayed about it already, but I'm looking to find the person that I know who needs this message.

Randy Frazee:

Yes.

Kyle Idleman:

And it's amazing to me how oftentimes God answers that prayer. And he puts, oh, there's this couple sitting right over here. And man, as soon as their story is on my heart, it changes the way I am preaching and teaching the story of scripture. So, that'd be one way to engage the story is to let others very specific and personal stories inspire that preparation and that delivery.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. Just this last Sunday, I had a message that's out of second Peter, where people were concerned about whether or not they had missed the second coming or whether he was coming back at all. And there was scoffers in the congregations that were convincing them that it's never going to happen. And so that's just kind of a story basis. And then I was told by a neighbor that he's bringing his whole family for his birthday and he's got a daughter that was adopted and is just really resistant. And he wanted to know how the sermon would affect her. Well that's all I thought about is the fact that she's going to be sitting in one of the services and I'm thinking, how is she hearing? So, all of a sudden I was concerned about how the story I was telling and the teaching was affecting her story. And I think it frankly took my message to another level. It made it less focused on me and more focused on connecting with her story.

Kyle Idleman:

Yeah, that's really good. And I think there might be those who would say don't lean into that moment. Hey, don't let your sermon be ... But I am with you completely that if you lean into that, you will end up drawing in other people along the way.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. Hi, this is Randy Frazee host of the Bible Roots podcast, which is brought to you by my friends at HarperChristian Resources. HarperChristian Resources equips you to understand the scriptures, cultivate spiritual growth and disciple your people with Bible study resources from today's most trusted voices. I want to talk to you a little bit about your, just something unique to you as a storyteller is the work you've been doing with movies. And tell us a little bit about that for someone who may not know what you're doing in that way. And just what you're learning about ... Because what you're doing is you're taking these movies and you're also helping to create engagement from it. So, tell us a little bit about what you're doing and how that connects to story.

Kyle Idleman:

Yeah, well the production company Kingdom Pictures has put out a couple of movies in more recent years. I can only imagine a movie and I Still Believe movie with Jeremy Camp. One of the things that I've done is kind of helped shape some of that story, but more from the perspective of how can the audience be impacted by it beyond just the entertainment for an hour and a half or a couple hours. What is the spiritual journey that this story should be inviting them on? So, there's a natural inspiration that takes place when you're watching a film like I Still Believe. But to then take that story and let that inform the way I did this was with Romans eight. I kind of took the story of Jeremy Camp and I put that alongside of the different texts in Romans eight and let his story shed light on, oh, this is what that means in scripture.

Kyle Idleman:

Here's how that made the difference for them. Here's how it can make the difference for me and my life. And so that's been, the idea is how do we better leverage something beyond just the entertainment or the inspiration of that moment and allow that story to more intentionally direct the path. One of my preaching professors, he talked about story, I really like this image, as opening up a window in a home where it's kind of stuffy. And when you open up the window and you let some fresh air in. And I think that whether it's in a sermon or those films for Romans eight, teaching through some of that deep theology and then just having a window that is open throughout the whole teaching, again, blowing the fresh air through there, I think that makes a significant difference in how people receive it and hear it.

Kyle Idleman:

And I don't know, like when you're preaching, do you have those moments where you've maybe been preaching 10, 15 minutes and you're like, I need to open a window. And if I preach 25 minutes and there's been no story, that's what it feels like. It feels like, ah, there's a window that needs to be opened in this house. It's getting stuffy. And so trying to strategically place those in the message or in the communication so that some fresh air comes in.

Randy Frazee:

Well, I want to talk about preparing a sermon. I'm going to hold off on that just for a minute because when I go to preach, I know when I have got an engaging manuscript. I don't know if you go to bed on Saturday night. I think you guys have Saturday services. We just have Sunday services. I go to bed on Saturday night. If I know I'm going to start off with an engaging story. I almost can't wait to get to the church and get up there and start teaching. If I've got a manuscript where it's been a busy week and I'm just giving them information, I just dread getting 15 minutes into the message and looking at the people like, okay, we're trying our best to stay with you here, but you're losing us, losing us. And that concept of opening a window is a pretty cool deal.

Randy Frazee:

Let me ask you the question about when it comes to movies. So, with the movies you're creating a follow up experience for the movie. So, a person can watch a movie I Still Believe and then have a follow up experience that might connect them from that story to Romans chapter eight, which is pretty cool. Something I think will link in the show notes along with all of the other things that you're doing. That's a pretty cool deal. Have you guys at Southeast done at the movie series, that's really popular in a lot of churches today?

Kyle Idleman:

Yes we have. We've done it the last, I don't know, three or four years. Done some version of it. I have to be honest, I have mixed feelings about it.

Randy Frazee:

Me too. I do too, but it works, I think.

Kyle Idleman:

It's really evidence of what we're talking about here is that people engage to it and you're taking a familiar story for most of them. And then you're using that as an illustration. I think that the danger where you have to be careful is what you referenced earlier is when the movie or the film becomes the scripture substitute, you got a problem. If it's an illustration and you can use it in a similar way that you might use a parable. I think that's really great. If you're showing parts of a movie and then you're teaching out of the movie as if that is the scripture, then people might engage to it. But that's not what we're called to engage them too. So, I think using those films engages people, but to what end is where we really need to be intentional, making sure that it's connecting them to scripture, that it's an illustration, but it's not a substitute.

Randy Frazee:

I think it's a good word on the caution story. I mean, we're doing that for Christmas this year. Just three weeks. I'm super excited about it. It really does draw a lot of attention. A lot of families bring other families in. And I know a lot of churches, I was just with our buddy in Houston. He used at the movies this fall to really have a big call for people coming back to church and it really worked. And I think it just shows you the power of story. But at the same time though, I think we need to be careful to not let that, like you say that story, which is so powerful, overrun our obligation to really move people toward that transformational truth of the scriptures.

Kyle Idleman:

Yes. Yeah. Yeah. I'm not sure who this originated with, but the idea of what you win people with is what you win them to. And using a movie as a way to engage people, if you're connecting them to the gospel to scripture through that, then that's great. If you're using it as a way to bring people in and they were entertained by it, then it works for that series. But then you've got a real problem because what you win them with is what you win them to. Now they expect that every week. That's not what we're called to do. So, yeah, we do it and I love it because of how it engages people in that way. But I do think the caution is wise.

Randy Frazee:

And I think it reminds us too also that when you're coming back to the series that follows, at the movie series, just how you need to keep story in the forefront of your preaching. How do you preach through didactic books like Romans and Ephesians, which really aren't as story based. Do you have a way in which you pull that off?

Kyle Idleman:

A few ways that we try to intentionally do that. One, I would say from a preaching standpoint, I do believe in the concept of matching genre for genre. So, if I'm teaching out of an epistle, I'm probably going to have more of a teaching sermon. If I'm preaching out of a narrative, I'm going to have more of a narrative sermon. However, I would say that, making sure to find the stor, so, within Ephesians, as an example where Ephesians five talks about, Paul talks about making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil. So, you've got this really practical challenge, but then you go to Acts chapter 19 and you read the story of Paul and Ephesus and the opposition he faced, and the evil he faced, and how he made the most of that opportunity. And so taking that passage and then connecting it to the story of Paul and Ephesus assigns a story to that.

Kyle Idleman:

And then engaging people, okay, so, what's that look like for you? What's your story here? Becomes a really natural bridge. And the other aspect of those letters and probably the beauty of those being written in first century Eastern culture is that they use so many metaphors and word pictures [inaudible 00:35:40]. And I think it's really helpful to understand that a metaphor is a story. A metaphor is a story. Just because we're not telling a story that has characters and the Ark. A metaphor has that same kind of connection, that same kind of power. So, finding the metaphor and then allowing that to be used in the same way that you would use a story, I think is effective.

Randy Frazee:

A couple things that come to my mind, which I think is brilliant is that, so when you're inside of a didactic thing, make the most of every opportunity, going into the book of Acts and finding a good example of that. Also in the letters, these are letters. So, there's an occasion that caused the author to write this story, write the letter. And it's usually a story. Like I was talking about the 2 Peter message. The reality is that there were people that were trying to convince them that Jesus wasn't returning. Well, there's a story there you can connect to. But also on the metaphor, I think I was telling you in California, how I was doing a little Q&A session with Mark Patterson to two group of the church planners. And they seemed to be more interested in writing a book, learning from us than our ... I haven't planted a church.

Randy Frazee:

So, they didn't have a whole lot to ask me about planning a church. And Mark said, when I'm writing a book, which would usually start as a sermon series, he says, I'm looking for the metaphor to hold the whole thing together. And I think what you're talking about is really important. A Pastor in, I just heard a message from, it was actually just a clip on Instagram. No, on Twitter. And he was teaching on being sealed in the holy spirit, which is a hard concept to get. And he took his cell phone, which he had a waterproof cell phone.

Randy Frazee:

So, he said, sealed means it's sealed. I think of a seal. But he took that the concept of being sealed, being kind of covered. And he said, I can drop this. I can step on it. I can drop it in a tub of water, but it is protected. It protected from all the forces that are trying to rob me of this. And when he dropped his cell phone in the water and you can just hear a gasp, including my own like, oh, you shouldn't do that. But he's like, no, it's protected. It's been sealed. And I'm assuming he drove that metaphor through the entire sermon. Is that kind of what you're talking about there?

Kyle Idleman:

Yes. Yeah. And that's a great example of, he's essentially creating the elements of a story by using a metaphor. And a metaphor is a picture and that is really what a story is. Like you're painting a picture. So, there are those, I think you accomplished some of those same things, I think metaphor is a form of story and to understand as you're doing word studies in the new Testament, Epistles, those different metaphors are, those are stories that can be held up and be developed, and will have the same connecting power for people.

Randy Frazee:

When you prepare a sermon, do you start with what the actual content is? Study the passage and then look for the story or the metaphor, or do you start with the story and metaphor or does it go back and forth?

Kyle Idleman:

One of the questions I really like to start with is what's it look like? And sometimes what's it look like as an example from scripture, sometimes it look like is a story out of the news. Sometimes what's it look like is a personal illustration out of my own life. Sometimes what's it look like is a metaphor that's found in the text. But I really like to start with, okay, what's this look like? Because once I have that picture in my mind of what's this look like, then a lot of the message writes itself. So, I like to start with that question and then it leads to what I would call different story forms.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. So, you'll study a passage and say, okay, in the case of 2 Peter, I mean, Peter's really trying to encourage people that Jesus is coming back. And so you'd say, okay, that's the content I've got here. Now, what does that look like? That's when you'd ask the question? What does that look like? And then that puts it into some a story or metaphor format. Are you like me? When you find that metaphor or that story, you just get super excited, because your sermon is about ready to take lift in preparation.

Kyle Idleman:

Yes. And it gives it different perspectives. So, for example, if you're talking about the return of Christ, in scripture gives us metaphor story, it's like a thief in the night. And then suddenly you start taking that metaphor or that story of a thief coming in the night. And you're thinking of the different ways to connect that to people. That you're not expecting it, you weren't prepared for it. You saw it happen with other people, you think, oh, that's never going to happen to me. And now it's here. It suddenly applies, the story has application, I think for a lot of preachers is a really difficult thing. And story will apply text for you if you let it, instead of trying to just teach information and let people apply it themselves. Stories often that bridge connects the information to the application.

Randy Frazee:

That is brilliant. That's brilliant. One more question and that is how does a pastor, teacher, I mean, learn to tell a story? You have any thoughts on that because there's an art to that, isn't there? It's not just, I mean we hear story, we're affected by story, but now you are the story teller. Is that something that just some people have a talent for? Or is it something that can be learned? Any thoughts related to that?

Kyle Idleman:

Yeah, I do think learned is the right word. Certainly there are more gifted, [inaudible 00:41:59], dramatic storytellers. But I do think it's something that happens with practice. Your illustration earlier of a comedian and how they work at that, the more you tell it, the more where to lean in and where to slow down, what can be left out and what should be emphasized. And for preachers where the transitions are. I'll tell a story in my first service and what I often will change in that story is how I come out of it or how I lead into it. There's something about telling that story in front of people. Some of my coworkers around here, some of the staff around here, they know when we're in a meeting together, one of the things that I'm going to do is I'm going to tell them stories. And because I'm practicing something out of a sermon and there are a few of them will be in different meetings and if they're like, oh, we're going to hear this story again.

Kyle Idleman:

Because I've already used it twice that week. But I'm trying to see how does this connect? Where's the humor in this? Where are the lean in moments? And it's pretty difficult to do that unless you are practicing that or connecting that to real people. So, I think that it is something that can be learned. For us in the writing form is a way to practice that, when you will write out a story, you will learn to lean into different details that just get missed. If you just say in your sermon, if you just say story here about X or Y, this story might be fine, but if you'll write that out. Don't read it, don't get up and read it. But if you write that out, you'll find different places where you especially want to lean in.

Randy Frazee:

That sounds kind of like obvious, but I'm just telling you, it's absolutely critical that you look at a movie, maybe the movie comes off of a classic book that was written that had already sold millions of copies. And so it was a long time in the making. And then they spend a year or two working on the movie script for it. And then they spend hours and millions and millions of dollars learning to turn that story into something that's compelling. Well, we got every six days we got to stand up and get something fresh. That's a challenge we have, but we have to engage in discipline. And so in the early days I used to put down, tell the story of this. And I felt a lot of times they fell flat. But I'm kind of a disciplined manuscript writer and try my stuff out on a lot of people in those six days, is that similar for you?

Kyle Idleman:

It is similar for me. I tend to write out those things. One of the ways that I would challenge people is if you have a story and you tell it a few times, it's amazing how when you get up to preach it, you don't need your notes. If you typically are staying behind your notes, when you start to tell the story, you know the story, especially if you cared a few times. So, just abandon it and tell the story, because it may not be exact, but what you'll lose and it being exact you'll gain in connection. And so one of the ways I would challenge preachers is to say, when you're going to tell a story, change your position or your posture, change your pacing. If you're behind a pulpit or music stand or table, then when you're telling a story, step out in front of that and people will lean in a little bit different.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah, they certainly will. I think also a caution is once you find your main story, you don't need four other stories to convolute it. Or once you find the metaphor, don't add five other metaphors in there, even though they might be interesting to you as a learner, or as a teacher, they're not as helpful. But just to really ride that metaphor. And usually what, I don't know about you, but usually what I start with is usually how I somehow finish with as well. So, I kind of bring a bow to that experience and leave them with a sense of completion on what to do with what I've just said. Is that similar for you?

Kyle Idleman:

Yeah. And I love that approach. Because you are helping people to engage in the tension of the story. Like when you're starting it one way and you're ending it, whether it's a bookend or it's to compare and contrast with different stories. When you do that, this is how they've been taught to listen to information. This is how they consume it. So, when you do it that way, you're letting them find some of that tension in the sermon that I think leverages the way they are discipled to consume already already in our culture.

Randy Frazee:

Okay. I want to ask you one more question. It's another step beyond story to more engagement. Then we'll wrap up. You and I chatted all the way up until we're late to the meeting that we went to the other, a couple weeks ago when we were in California and I bought you that really expensive breakfast. Eggs that came out of golden chickens or something like that. But it seems to me that preaching content, even story is one thing. But again, trying to figure out how the people can do something with the message so that it's not just information, even if it's a compelling story, trying to figure out how to get them to where they know exactly what to do and how to engage it.

Randy Frazee:

I think the world of preaching for just a sermon out there just to preach it, you've got to be thinking today, particularly with COVID and we were already getting people coming about 1.7 times a month on the average, and you're trying to get them to come back more frequently and you're wanting to get them to engage the sermon. So, when you give a sermon, are you looking for some action step that a person takes or different ways in which they can engage it?

Kyle Idleman:

Increasingly I am because I think people need that. Just very clear challenge or, okay, here's what I want to ask you to do today. I want you to pray this prayer, or I want you to look for this opportunity and I try to make that specific. But the other approach here that I really like is to use what I would call sentence stories. They're just quick little scenarios that are they're stories, but they're just short sentence examples. So, for example, in Ephesians five, I'm talking about make the most of every opportunity that I might have four or five, just one off sentence stories. So, tomorrow when you go to work and it's Monday and your high maintenance coworker starts talking to you about the weekend and your tendency is to move along as quickly as possible. Try something different, sit down and listen and ask a few questions.

Kyle Idleman:

And I might have a half a dozen of those where the challenges built in to a story, but if they're looking at that sermon, they wouldn't say, oh, that was a story, because it was only two or three sentences. But it's a story you're using an example about this moment and there's a character and here's the dialogue. And if you can build four or five of those in, the challenge is the same, but the examples help people apply it. So, tonight I'm going to talk to the University of Louisville football team and that gets a lot easier because I'm applying it to a group of people who are all in the same narrative. They're all in the same story. But that's rarely a luxury that we have. So, drawing people in with those short little sentence stories I think can be really effective.

Randy Frazee:

That is really cool. I don't know how you keep up with it all Kyle, I want to thank you for the time you've given us today. I was looking forward to this as much as anybody. I've admired your ability to write, your ability to speak, your ability to tell stories and just following our good friend, Dave Stone, who followed Bob Rossel too really gifted, gifted preachers. And yet you are all three, very, very different. And to see the church really just lean into the style that God has given you and how much we can learn from Story. You're intrigued with Story and all the different things that you're doing is really teaching us a tremendous amount. So, where can everybody find you out there in the social world?

Kyle Idleman:

Online, you can go to kyleidleman.org or on the social media channels. There's not a lot of Kyle Idlemans floating around [inaudible 00:51:11]. So you can never beauty

Randy Frazee:

[inaudible 00:51:12] Randy Frazee. Yeah. Just had Randy Frazee at everything. Yeah, that's pretty cool. And it's a great website. Any final parting word to pastors, teachers or just anybody as we wrap up?

Kyle Idleman:

Well, one thing that we didn't touch on that I would really encourage our listeners with is to share your personal story, not to be afraid to do that of when you connect it to your personal experience, you are in that moment, you are building familiarity and trust that nothing else will do. So, I don't know how you were taught in preaching and teaching, but I was probably taught not to do very much of that. And I would encourage, I mean there are lines and certainly there's caution. But I would encourage communicators to not be afraid to share their personal story as a way to help others do that in their own lives. And to build that familiarity and trust.

Randy Frazee:

I'm so glad you added that, man. We could do a whole nother episode on that and particularly in relationship to what we were taught in preaching and then where people connect with us today and just even the art of where's the line on that. And boy just we'll have to do another episode on [inaudible 00:52:40]

Kyle Idleman:

It sounds good.

Randy Frazee:

Personal story. Well, Kyle, thank you so much for being with us today, brother. Let's do this again.

Kyle Idleman:

Got it. Thanks.

Randy Frazee:

You betcha. Well, everybody, I hope that you've enjoyed episode three and if you enjoyed it, I would encourage you to leave a review and share it with a friend. On behalf of HarperCollins, Christian Resources, I'm Randy Frazee. See you the next time. Thanks for listening to the Bible roots podcast. We hope you were encouraged and energized by our discussion today. If you enjoyed this episode, we'd love for you to leave a review. This small gesture will help more church leaders discover our conversations around Bible engagement. And don't forget like, and subscribe to our podcast so you'll never miss a new episode. Now, may your faith be strengthened through God's word today and every day.