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. Welcome, everybody, to episode six of The Bible Roots Podcast. I am Randy Frazee, and I am the host of this wonderful new show. This podcast is devoted to the topic of Bible engagement. Why? Because Bible engagement is the number one catalyst for spiritual growth with no close second. I encourage you to check out episode one, where we lay out this discovery, and then I'd encourage you to continue to listen up through to where we are at today in episode six.

Randy Frazee:

Now, if you're a pastor or you're responsible for leading people spiritually, maybe through a small group, your family, or even one on one coaching or discipleship, this podcast is for you, and we encourage you, if you like it, to share it with others that might get something out of it. Now, today, my guest is Shelley Leith. We are really good friends, and we're going to spend the time talking about the story behind The Story, this wonderful Bible engagement experience that we both have the privilege of being involved in that has been quite effective in helping people and churches grow. Truthfully, it's where I got to try out all my hunches on Bible engagement. What a privilege for me.

Randy Frazee:

Shelley and I want to give you the behind the scenes look at The Story and talk about the secret sauce, what we believe made it so and continues to make it so amazing. And I think that the principles will help your effort to help your folks grow in the word and be more productive. Now, who is Shelley Leith besides just being a really good friend of mine? Shelley is the Director of Church Relations with Harper Collins Christian publishing, which is my publisher, and head of the Study Gateway, a place where The Story and tons of great Bible engagement resources live. Shelley, welcome to the podcast.

Shelley Leith:

Ah, thank you so much, Randy. I'm so excited to be here today.

Randy Frazee:

Well, we got so much to talk about and we just want to dive in. I like to start off with the question when we first met. Do you remember when we first met?

Shelley Leith:

Very well. I remember the day. It was in a board room in a Grand Rapids at Zondervan headquarters. Zondervan had flown both you and I in for this meeting, because they were trying to build these Bible engagement campaigns on some of their existing products, and so they brought me in, because I was on staff at Saddleback church at the time, and I had been building all the training materials for things like 40 Days of Purpose campaign, which ended up training thousands of churches on how to do a spiritual growth campaign. And so Zondervan was bringing me into consult with the team on how to build a churchwide spiritual growth campaign campaign, and how to market it directly to pastors. And they brought you in because of what you had been doing at Willow Creek with The Story, and that caught their attention. So why don't you tell the folks what The Story is exactly, and what it is that you were doing with it at Willow that made the executives at Zondervan sit up and take notice.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. I will do that, and I want to go back and also, because I really think that as it relates to this concept of Bible engagement, it's where it's come from. I really do believe that Saddleback had the breakout spiritual engagement experience, and then we took it to really more of a pure Bible engagement experience. I actually think even before that in chatting with Rick about, it was before that he took the concept of what we do around capital campaigns in churches. I've known from the time I was in my late twenties and pastoring that when you do a capital campaign in your church, you do this fully integrated six week experience leading up to sort your big Sunday give day, and it was always so effective as a spiritual encounter for churches.

Randy Frazee:

Rick took it to this next level of taking the topic of being purpose driven, and then what we have done is really said, "What if we did this around the Bible?" And I want to tell you the backstory of how this got started, which I think is really fascinating. So I was pastoring a Bible church in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, more on the Fort worth side, and Doug Lockhart, who was head of marketing at the time, later became one of the CEOs of Zondervan for a period of time, he called me up and said, "I want to show you a few Bible products that we have out." And so he came, met me in my conference room. He showed me three products, and one of them was The Story, and it immediately caught my attention, because I had spent quite a bit of time with my church trying to help them understand the big narrative of The Story.

Randy Frazee:

And we're in a Bible church, Shelley, so you would anticipate with Bible in your name that the people are going to be biblically literate, but I was noticing that our people were missing out on the big story, and if you miss out on the big story, well, it's like reading a novel. Like in my case, Robert Ludlum was one of my favorite. The Bourne Identity series, very complicated, very intricate like the Bible, and starting on chapter 17, you have no idea what came before it, who all the characters are, what's going on, the emotion of the story, and that's what's happening when people are reading their Bible. So I tried to get the congregation to do a unabridged chronology of the Bible that Harvest House put out, and I had 100 people sign up and two people finish the whole experience. It was just overwhelming to them.

Randy Frazee:

So when I saw The Story, I thought, "Wow, this is a really good idea." So what ended up happening is at that same time I was being recruited by Willow Creek Community Church to come up, and lead, be a teaching pastor, lead their spiritual formation initiative at the church, as well as move toward their small groups going into the neighborhood. And so I was very much exposed to a project called Reveal, and Reveal is where we learned this big aha. I think it's 650,000 people now and climbing have taken this survey. We've taken it three times here in Kansas City, and it keeps coming out the same. Year in and year out, the number one catalyst for spiritual growth is Bible engagement with no close second. Now, number two is serving, but it's way down the list.

Randy Frazee:

So I thought, "Wow, I want to build a Bible engagement campaign around this experience," and I couldn't convince the team to let me do it until 2007. So I was there in 2005. 2007, they let me do it on a Wednesday night at their New Community, and what my idea was, Shelley, and we can chat more about this, what my idea was, what if we instead of just having this tool called The Story, which Zondervan had already done, what if we wrapped community around that? And you know I got one of my best stories I like to tell is the story of the smoking statistic, that if you try to quit smoking on your own, that your chances are statistically 0%. If you try to add a tool like a nicotine patch, it inches up to 5%, but if you were at community around that, it goes all the way up to 40%.

Randy Frazee:

And I thought the same thing that would be true of breaking a bad habit is also true of developing a good habit. They know that this with Jenny Craig and all of the meals. When they build community around it, they're way more successful. I thought, "What if we built a full on community around it?" We launched it at Willow, and the attendance at Willow at New Community jumped up 30% to 40% to 50%, and it was really, really quite amazing. But in 2007 is when I got contacted by Oak Hill's church in San Antonio, and to go down to San Antonio, and I took over the main lead pastor role from Max Lucado, which was a bit intimidating. And so I made this brilliant move, Shelley, this brilliant move. I said, "I'm going to take the focus off of the fact that no name Randy is coming in to take over, and I'm going to focus the people in the Bible," and so we went all in to develop all of the resources, which is when we met to develop all the resources for The Story.

Randy Frazee:

We were building it as we were flying the plane, and it was just a crazy, crazy time, but the church grew, almost doubled during that time. We actually couldn't even handle the growth. People were parking on the access roads. Police officers were coming in and saying, "You have to have these people move their cars," which I never did tell them. I don't like to give people bad news. And it was just this incredible experience, and later, Zondervan said from 2005 to 2011, The Story as a tool, which is a wonderful tool, like a nicotine patch, sold about 5,000 copies, and the last I heard, The Story product brand has sold over 5 million products and climbing. Matter of fact, just last week, I got, if you're watching the video, YouTube on this, I just got the Korean version of The Story in the mail. So that's a little bit of the background of how this thing all got started for sure. Anyhow, what do you think of that?

Shelley Leith:

Well, let's talk about what The Story is.

Randy Frazee:

Yes. Yeah.

Shelley Leith:

Okay. So what is it?

Randy Frazee:

Yes. Okay. I thought, you know can also take a stab at this as well. We probably should have answered the question, "What The Story is," before we got into this wonderful success experience of what it's all about.

Shelley Leith:

That's right.

Randy Frazee:

But that's okay. Our people that are listening are super smart folks.

Shelley Leith:

They're hanging with us until we do the big reveal.

Randy Frazee:

That's exactly right. The best way I like to describe The Story is that it's an abridged chronology of the Bible. You probably have a better answer of how much of it is actual scripture, as opposed to the little connectors that we put inside of it, but it's 90 some percent of just the scriptures, but what it is, it's an abridge chronology of the Bible. So when a person wants to understand The Story, they are able to read it without repeating a lot of the same things, like in 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, so they can read it as a story. Also, we've taken out and you can help us with this as well, taken out the chapters and the verses, so it reads like a novel. We call it a novel experience. And then what we did is we built all kinds of curriculum and experiences around it, so a church can do it. You can do it as an individual, but it's ideally done as a small group, and the most ideal is when a church does it as a campaign.

Shelley Leith:

And The Story is a 31 chapter book, and we have then built books at every reading level, curriculum at every teaching level, so that truly the entire family can go through this journey together over the course of 31 weeks, one chapter a week, and everybody's books are aligned with each other.

Randy Frazee:

Yes. And we're going to talk a little bit later about the 31 weeks. You have been helping churches doing this now. Do you have any idea how many churches we've had done The Story?

Shelley Leith:

That's really hard to pinpoint, because what constitutes a whole church doing it?

Randy Frazee:

Right, right.

Shelley Leith:

I would say more than 10,000.

Randy Frazee:

Which is quite astounding.

Shelley Leith:

Yeah.

Randy Frazee:

I remember when we launched it at Willow and all the Reveal stuff, which means all the stuff the congregation had told us about what they wanted, and the second biggest discovery with the Reveal study is that the number one thing people want from their churches is to help them understand the Bible. And I remember sitting next to some of the other teaching pastors at Willow, when we saw just the room just fill up, this 7,200 seat auditorium fill up. And I remember leaning over to one of my teaching pastors and said, "I think the Bible is back. The Bible is back, man. People want a Bible, which is really cool." So you've done a lot of training. You've been on the front lines. I've been with you for several of them, and what in your estimation is the reason for the success of The Story from your point of view?

Shelley Leith:

Well, first off, you nailed it. It's the Bible. The Bible itself is unifying. So it's something everyone can agree on, and I always talk about the fact that that's what you chose to do as your first sermon series when you stepped into that pulpit at Oak Hill's church. I mean, that is the primary moment when church splits happen, and so you chose something that was unifying to do as your first series. It wasn't Randy Frazee's latest book or your snazzy series on movie titles, but you chose the Bible. Another thing that I think is behind The Story's success is that the book itself makes the Bible accessible. You cannot hand a full Bible to a new believer and say, "Start at page one." It will kill them by the time they get to Leviticus, right?

Randy Frazee:

Mm-hmm.

Shelley Leith:

So many people feel threatened by the Bible, or they might have grown up in a tradition that never had people open the Bible for themselves. It's actually shocking how little people know about the stories in the Bible. I was at Oak Hills on week two of The Story, and I heard this woman come up to you after the service, and she said, "You're referring to stories in the Bible, like you talked about Noah today, and you keep saying, 'You know the story,' but I don't know the story." And I remember her just kind of appealing to you to stop assuming that people knew the stories.

Shelley Leith:

So the genius of The Story is that it reads like a story. So because all the chapters and verses have been removed and the boring parts, frankly, so when you're reading it, it does not feel like you're reading the Bible, and it reads like a book that you can't put down. I've heard that from so many people, "I couldn't put it down." When was the last time you had that experience when you were reading the Bible? And when I get to heaven, that's going to be my first question for God, "Why did you put Leviticus so early in the Bible? I mean, why couldn't it be at the very end after we've gotten through the month of March?"

Shelley Leith:

So anyway, another thing that I think is the genius behind The Story is that it's arranged chronologically, which is the way that people learn most naturally. We learn by cause and effect, beginning, middle, end. The Bible is arranged by genre, and so you've got that repetition that's built in, and so you can find yourself halfway through 1 Kings and think, "Wait, I've read this before. I've already seen this." And you may also not be aware of the fact that all of those prophets, many of the events in the books of the prophets at the end of the Old Testament, overlap with what's happening in the events at the beginning in the books of history at the beginning of the Old Testament. So that makes it really difficult for most people to understand how the whole Bible fits together. [inaudible 00:15:28].

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. Go ahead. No, keep going. I got so many things that are popping in my head though.

Shelley Leith:

I'm sure.

Randy Frazee:

No, go, good. That's okay. That's okay. Go for it.

Shelley Leith:

Okay. So there's an interesting dynamic then to all of this for people who are really familiar with the Bible. So when you read the text of scripture in a different arrangement, without all the familiar biblical constructs, it throws you off. So we had so many people tell us that they're really nervous to read The Story, because they don't have the scripture references. They don't know where they are, but you know what we want you nervous when you read the Bible. We want you reading on high alert, because that's when you're going to start seeing things that you never noticed before, even if you read it 50 times.

Shelley Leith:

You could read a Psalm every day, and you lapse into Psalms mode, but when you encounter a Psalm in The Story, it doesn't shout, "I'm a Psalm," because it's embedded in the place in David's life where he wrote it. And so it feels to you like you're encountering it fresh, and you're seeing it's place in The Story, and it gets connected with the nuance, and the feelings behind why he would've written it at that. So you don't lapse into Psalms mode anymore. So I think reading The Story could possibly be the most refreshing experience spiritually for a seasoned Christian that you've had in a long time.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah, so many great things there, and I think there's so many multiple layers to this that you've brought out, which is why I think God has used it in a mighty way. There's a lot of research out today on the power of story. Jesus taught his stories every time he taught, and so to present it, the Bible as a continuing story has got power, and just the way God wired our brain. A couple things I want to... And I'll give you a chance to jump in, if you'd like. A couple of things I wrote down as notes as you were talking, number one, the fact that it's just the Bible, and that a real challenge for pastors that you can do creative series off of the current. A lot of my pastor friends did a series on relationships called This is Us because of the show, This is Us, was out and all of that, and while I think that is still good, I'm really all for that. You don't have to be as overtly out there creative, because your people are really interested in this.

Randy Frazee:

We talked about this, Shelley, that from research that most people, even your neighbor who doesn't go to church, has reading through the Bible on their bucket list. I mean, people know that this book is really special, and they come to church expecting to get the Bible, and I don't think you should be boring about it, but they're really, I think, super, super excited about it. I interviewed a guy about a month ago at the church, just giving his testimony of coming to Christ, and he had come to the church I'm at now, Westside Family Church, the Sunday that they were announcing that they were going to start The Story. And they held up The Story booklet, and he turned to his wife and said, "We're joining this church." And they've been here ever since.

Randy Frazee:

I wasn't even there yet. That was five years ago, and he's like, "This is what we've been looking for. We're going to have our whole family learn The Story. I so much want to get to The Story." And the issue of accessible, the Bible is really a challenging book. I mean, I think it's okay to even say it's kind of weird in places, to be honest with you. It is just freaking weird, and so to just Bible, I'm a big believer in Bible distribution, and I really like what all of that is about, but to hand this book to somebody without having a teacher, without having a guide, without having a hand I think is really important. And you and I have said this many times. The Story is not designed to replace the Bible. We don't call this the Bible, because it's not 100% the Bible, but it is a gateway for people to access the Bible for themselves, which I think is really pretty cool, and I'll tell you another thing that you mentioned with the chapters and verses taken out, and people were nervous about it.

Randy Frazee:

My teaching pastor this Sunday was teaching on were teaching through the seven I am statements of Jesus, and he was on, "I am the good shepherd," and he said, "If you just read Mark 10, you'll start in verse 1, because, oh, that's where you start this story is Mark 10:1, you really won't understand what Jesus is talking about as he compares himself as the good shepherd, as opposed to Mark 9, the bad shepherds of the religious leaders who were really being abusive to the people, and Jesus is comparing himself to that. And when you see even just those two chapters together, you get a better idea of what the Bible is trying to teach you, and now you take that with the whole Bible and read it as a story. It's a pretty good chunk.

Randy Frazee:

And also I brought a couple of things I wrote down. I'm sorry, Shelley. Is that I remember when we launched this at Oak Hills. One guy didn't contact me right away, but about a month in, he wrote me this long letter and says, "When you first introduced the idea of The Story, oh, I thought this was Bible light, and here we go, and all of this kind of..." You may recall this guy.

Shelley Leith:

I totally do.

Randy Frazee:

And he sent me The Story. It was all highlighted, and he acknowledged he had never seen it from this point of view before, and he was learning more than he had learned in years. Here was a veteran student of the Bible, who was confessing to me that initially he thought it was a bad idea, and now it was a good idea.

Shelley Leith:

We got so many of those stories, didn't we, Randy?

Randy Frazee:

We did.

Shelley Leith:

And we've been talking about the book, The Story, but we need to examine the power of The Story as a whole church experience. So back in my days at Saddleback Church, Rick Warren used to say that the power of a churchwide campaign was in the multiple reinforcements. So you have a prolonged focus on a single message reinforced in multiple ways using multiple learning modalities across multiple age groups. So can you tell us how this secret sauce of multiple reinforcements is kind of baked into the design of The Story church experience?

Randy Frazee:

Yeah, this is so important, and it's kind of like, "Duh," because most of us that are in church ministry have at least people on our team that have an educational background. And what you just quoted from Rick Warren has been known forever, and ever, and ever, that this is really successful. So on a normal church calendar, the pastor is over here doing this, and all of the children are doing something different. The students are doing something different. The women are doing something, the men and the small groups, and you're thinking, "Wow, we've got this smorgasbord of topics." Well, the problem is that none of them are going very, very deep in the lives of these predominantly suburban people, who do not have any margin in their lives.

Randy Frazee:

And so we have to really look at the efficiency and the effectiveness of an educational model based on how God has wired us. And so I would say a couple of things. Number one, we designed a church engagement experience for this 31 weeks with The Story to be preached on Sunday morning, because we realize, and it's still this way today, that you cannot do a campaign unless it has captured the senior leader's attention. And in churches, and this may be different for other organizations, because we're different on how we convene together, everything sort of emanates from that Sunday morning experience. That's where the big announcements are made, and that's where the senior leader is speaking. And if you don't have his or her attention, you are really not going to be able to keep your focus on this.

Randy Frazee:

So we help this to be driven by the sermons on Sunday. So you're getting this wonderful monologue experience wrapped around this beautiful worship music experience, which moves the soul. Then we integrated that sermon with the small group and the personal Bible study. So a lot of times a church will have, "Hey, we're going to have you individually completely disconnected to everything else we're doing read through the Bible in a year, one Old Testament, one..." And I like the plan, but it's an individual thing. It's not connected to their small group, and it's not connected to the sermon, and I think that when you combine those three things, they hear a sermon, which I like to do, as you know, Shelley, on the back end. I like the person to do their personal study first, and so we provide the study guides, and they do their personal study first, then they go to a small group, and they talk about it, and turn, and talk to... And then they come to the services on the weekend and hear sort of the cherry on the Sunday, if you will. No pun intended.

Randy Frazee:

They'll hear it, and I think that is important. The next level integration is the entire family is on the same page, and what I want to point out is something that is pretty obvious, and that is many, many people who are coming to churches are coming to buildings is because they have children. They are very driven by their children, and they want their children to have a biblical foundation, a moral foundation, and we know that if we can connect a conversation with the parent, with our children's ministry, and with the overall church, then it's super effective. So we got the whole family involved, and thanks to Zondervan for believing in this and really putting full steam on the students and children's curriculum.

Randy Frazee:

And then the final thing that was really key in my estimation, we said it over and over again, is that it is the Bible. It's the number one thing people are wanting, and so it's something that we discovered. Shelley, I don't know if you know this or not, but for quite some time, The Story was one of the top books on Amazon in the category of evangelism, of evangelism. We thought, "Really? This was a discipleship experience." And I think that the reason it was is because it's on everyone's bucket list.

Randy Frazee:

And so many churches like ours, many churches that have done this have used it as just that. When they are selling The Story for their people, which Zondervan deeply discounts, they package them in threes. You keep one, give two away, and it's become a... I did this originally to just help my people see God's great love for them from the Old Testament to the New Testament, that the gospel doesn't begin in Matthew 1, but it begins right in the book of Genesis on chapter three. As soon as man fell, the plan is getting put into place, and you got to see the whole thing, but it turns out that this is this concept of Bible engagement, particularly, The Story is a real generator of numerical growth, which is really pretty cool.

Randy Frazee:

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. Now, what I want to ask you, Shelley, because was what we thought was going to be the biggest roadblock. This thing is 31 weeks long. I mean, now we're going back to Donald Grey Barnhouse teaching the book of Romans for five years. Okay? Okay. Speak to the 31 weeks.

Shelley Leith:

Okay. So 31 weeks turns out if you start in September, take a break at Christmas, and pick up back again in January, line up chapter 27, the resurrection chapter with Easter, and then finish out, it covers pretty much an entire ministry year, and so you are dedicating every learning level in the church for the whole year to this idea. And it's when people did this, it turned out we absolutely had to do a lot of convincing to get people, to get unstuck from their 13 week or their eight week thing, but people learn best in community over time. And we tend to think over time, "oh, yeah. Okay. So eight weeks, that's good, or a quarter, that's good." But you know what? A prolonged period of time actually is more beneficial to that notion, because the community and the trust doesn't get built in a brand new group that started six weeks ago. It takes time to build that, and then the community becomes the feeding ground for producing that growth.

Shelley Leith:

Now, another maxim that is a business expression is, "Confidence is a byproduct of predictability." So just as when you're learning a new job, you are at first very unconfident about that, but the longer you do it, the more you learn, and the more it becomes predictable for you, the more confident you get. Well, we say the same thing is true in Christian education. As our people know what's coming next week, they're more likely to invite their friends to church, because they know that the pastor is going to be covering chapter nine of Esther, and oh my gosh, my neighbor would love that.

Shelley Leith:

So the confidence and understanding of scriptures, so when you are going to your Bible, if you have been reading The Story, and you say, "Well, I want to know what happened after that, because The Story doesn't cover that," you are now confidently going to your scriptures, and because you know more, you know about the backstory of this, and you know God's story. So we are building confidence because of this prolonged period of time. Confidence is a byproduct of predictability. So when you dwell in something like The Story for a whole ministry season, what could happen for your leaders is now they don't have to dream up something new to do every six to eight weeks. And now they are more confident, and they can relax, and they know what's... They've got their whole year mapped out, and so there's a predictability that emboldens the confidence of your leadership as well.

Shelley Leith:

But we realize that that is only a once every four or five years thing, maybe. You want to maybe come back to The Story on a regular basis, and I know that you did that at Oak Hills, because as your children grow up through their ministries, and as your adults grow in their discipleship, you want to return to this story through the Bible and give people a different perspective of it every several years, but we also ended up breaking up The Story into three eight week experiences, so that people could do this in their more typical cycle, and they could do maybe the first one in year one, and the second one in year two, perhaps, or something like that. So we have given you options.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. And I think that in a lot of the work that I continue to do with Zondervan and HarperChristian Resources, that we're really 90% of what we're doing and bringing out for churches is in six to eight weeks. They have done the research. That's optimal. So we're not denying that, but there's something very special about a ministry long campaign that moves forward. A couple things I wanted to comment on related to that is it's interesting that the Deuteronomy 31, Moses is about ready to be gone, and he knows that the Israelites are always constantly hedging on their obedience to God and God's commands. And so he sets down this final command, this final pattern. He said, "Every seven years, I want you to get all of Israel together, the men, the women, and the children, and I want you to read through the story from beginning to end." And he knew he set that pattern up.

Randy Frazee:

I think that that is a good pattern for churches today to do just that, and Israel, whenever they did that... Josiah reintroduced it. It was one of the greatest revivals in Israel when Josiah introduced it. After they came back from the captivity, the people wanted the word brought out and wanted it read. They had missed 140 years of this cycle. So you know how many cycles. They missed seven cycles or whatever it is, right? No, like 70 cycles of this, and they were so hungry for God's word, and it opened up this sort of revival for Israel.

Randy Frazee:

So anytime this is done, so the idea of repetition is important. I think I've got, well, at least one church I'm going to launch The Story for the second time for them as well. Real Life Church, Rusty George out in LA, out in your area, is doing it a second time. And several of my friends have done it twice. We're going to share some favorite stories down the road here in our conversation for sure. So those are some things. And the other thing is that our teams you had mentioned get exhausted.

Randy Frazee:

Every six weeks we're trying to put out bumper videos, and memes, and all kinds of creative this, and this, or that. When you have a 31 week experience, your teams really can dive in. When I came here, artwork that's hanging in my office today is this beautiful, original artwork that the church here did for The Story. I mean, it's just unbelievable. And when I asked them, they said, "We can't do this for everything else, but because it was 31 weeks, we went all in, and we had such a long term plan that we could bring a level of creativity and excellence to the table."

Shelley Leith:

And they had done that years before you ever came there as your pastor?

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. Yeah. I think five years before. You probably had encountered them, and we didn't.

Shelley Leith:

I did.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah, which is really, really kind of crazy for sure.

Shelley Leith:

Randy, my own small group that I've been in for years has done every video curriculum under the sun, and my whole group is unanimous in saying that your teaching through The Story is their favorite study that we've ever done for all time. I mean, seriously. And a big reason for that is this captivating idea that you thread through the whole series, and it's a term that you coined called the upper story and the lower story. I think that people would be really fascinated to hear you talk about that.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. You have mentioned that to me before, and I'm so grateful for them giving me that word of encouragement, and I'm surprised, but here's where it came from. So I'm at Willow, and I'm in the third week, the story of Joseph, and I had played around with the upper and lower story idea. And I said, "I'm going to use it for this chapter on the life of Joseph," and basically, the lower story is how we see The Story unfolding from our perspective, and so it's a six foot and lower, for me, quite a bit lower. For Greg, your husband, it's maybe six feet and plus, but so it's a horizontal perspective. You can't see around the bend. You're just trying to get through the day, pay the bills, pass the mashed potatoes. You're just trying to get through.

Randy Frazee:

And you interpret what you see coming at you, and what you can't see coming at you, fears. It's your point of view of the story. So in the story of Joseph, it looks like this is a case of sibling rivalry gone really bad. The brothers are jealous, and they beat him up, sell him into slavery. His life is up, and down, and up, and down, and it just looks like a horrible dysfunctional family story like you see so many times in the Bible, but at the end of the day, when his brothers come, and 22 years later, the fulfillment of the dream he'd received that his brothers and his family would bow down to him, when they're bowing down to him, there's a fulfillment of the dream.

Randy Frazee:

Joseph says on two occasions, "What you meant for evil in the lower story, God meant for good in the upper story," that God was weaving all of these lower stories, not just the good ones, but also betrayal and all of this. He's weaving it together to tell his one grand upper story. He got Joseph in Egypt in time to have him rise in power, so that the Israel would be saved from the famine, which is critical for God to keep his unconditional promise that the Messiah would come from them, and also give them a place to land while they're waiting for the land of Canaan to be made available to them when the evil of the Amorites had reached its fullness. And so he gave them this place of Goshan and the Egyptians were a great place for them to be, because they thought shepherds were abominable, and so they never intermarried with them, so it kept the purity of the line of Israel going.

Randy Frazee:

And I just said to people, "God is still doing that today." We see life from our lower story, and we may be mad at God, or we may be confused. We may be despondent, but if you're a believer, Romans 8:28 says, "All things work together for the good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose." Another way of saying that, if you love God and will just simply align your life to this one story he's already told us the outcome of, if you'll just do that, he promises that he's going to use even the things that seem challenging for you right now. He's going to use them for your good.

Randy Frazee:

So I'm at Willow, and I'm giving this message, and people came out of the woodworks, just came out of the woodworks. And so when we got together at Grand Rapids to really put this whole thing together, when you and I first met, I thought, "I'm going to weave the upper and lower story through the whole thing." And I won't go on and give you several examples, but you see this in every single story there is the lower story. Like in the book of Nehemiah, you can learn lower story principles of leadership from Nehemiah, but there's a bigger upper story that's going on to continue the bringing us of the Messiah and the fulfillment of God's promises, and it's just so powerful.

Randy Frazee:

I went to a church that's done The Story, did The Story in Quincy, Illinois, my good friend, Jerry Harris. And he introduced me in saying, "You know how we always talk about the upper and lower story? Now seven years later, this is the guy that brought us to it." So laying that upper and lower story is not just the sort of chronological reading of the Bible. There's this other sort of aha experience that people have with it, which I think is-

Shelley Leith:

Yeah, I tell people, "You're going to be giving your people the vernacular, like your own secret code language. They're going to be speaking upper story, lower story. It sets something special in place. It's part of the electricity that happens in a church when you're going through The Story."

Randy Frazee:

Yeah. Now, so we've been journeying together at least since 2011. So that's like, wow.

Shelley Leith:

'08, 2008.

Randy Frazee:

2008 is when we started. That's right. We started working on this in 2008. Oh my gosh. So that's like 100 years ago, back when the Dead Sea was just sick. Right? So can you think of some stories, some of your favorite stories that come out of this?

Shelley Leith:

Yeah. I'll tell you my one favorite story. So The Story you started taking hold in whole cities, that was something that you kind of spearheaded in.. What city did you live in?

Randy Frazee:

In San Antonio.

Shelley Leith:

San Antonio.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah.

Shelley Leith:

In San Antonio, and several other cities took notice and did that, and because it can cross denominational barriers, so this became quite popular. There was this one small town in Oklahoma that has an official population of 2000 people, and it had 16 churches.

Randy Frazee:

Geez.

Shelley Leith:

16. And those 16 churches did not get along. So the town dentist discovered The Story, and he thought, "This is the answer for my poor sick town, and he bought 16 Story kits with his own money, and he gave them to each of the churches in his town, and he invited them all to come to a training day that I did in the local school gymnasium, because that was neutral territory. All right? Nobody's church we could meet in, any one church. We had to meet in neutral territory.

Shelley Leith:

So when I arrived into the room, all these people were sitting in all their separate groups, not talking to each other, arms folded, very resistant to this whole idea, but I had just come from being with you, and we had just done the final rally in Frankenmuth, Michigan, the week before, and you had preached at this rally for the year long citywide experience that they had just done in Frankenmuth. And this is a town that only had seven churches, a lightweight town, but you had the Methodists, the Lutherans, the other Lutherans, the Baptists, the Catholics, and these two non-denominational churches that had actually split from each other the year before, but they all did The Story together.

Shelley Leith:

And so in the video, you see a woman from the Lutheran church, who ran into her friend from the Methodist church at the local library, and her friend asks her, "What did you think of the upper story this week?" Right?

Randy Frazee:

Yeah, I was there.

Shelley Leith:

And then the Catholic priest says, "I'm used to people talking about the weather, and the local ball team in the hallways, and for the first time I'm hearing them talking about the Bible." And then when you ended that video, Randy, you said something that just made me choke up. You said, "We think of innovation coming out of California or New York, but I'm here in this little town..." Oh, no, "I'm here to tell you that God sized innovation has come out of the little town named Frankenmuth, and I just had this enormous sense that God smiled on Frankenmuth today from ear to ear." The way you said it was just so gently and so heartfelt.

Shelley Leith:

When the video ended, I showed that video to the people in this little town in Oklahoma, and when the lights came up, I looked around, and there was not a dry eye in the place. And after a moment of silence, this one man stood up, and he said, "If they can do it, we can do it." And It was like this whole atmosphere in the room was just electrified, and the churches in that town went on to do something together for the very first time. And we're going to share that video about Frankenmuth that I show to them in the show notes for this episode.

Randy Frazee:

Oh, that is so good. Yeah, I remember that. It's going to go down in the top experiences of my life, going to the little town of Frankenmuth, a little Bavarian town where you get known for Christmas ornaments and all of that. And remember when I had all of the churches stand up, and then I finally had the Catholic priest, and I said, "Certainly there's nobody from the Catholic church here as well," and they all stood up, and they were rooting for each other? It was just a beautiful, beautiful day, and just so powerful how the word of God can be an organizer and a unifier, the John 17 unifier for churches.

Shelley Leith:

[inaudible 00:42:35].

Randy Frazee:

Instead of trying to just always do social justice things, which is fine and dandy, coming around the word of God in The Story, which is not a theological statement, is really a pretty good idea for sure. Now, I want to talk just a moment as we kind of wrap things up here, because I wanted to do a whole episode on The Story to encourage people to do The Story, sure, but it really was more learning about Bible engagement, and how to do it as a church campaign is really what this podcast is all about. But the reality is that HarperChristian Resources has more than just The Story. I mean, there's Believe, which is another experience we've done, and it all sits on a place called Study Gateway. Can you tell us about study gateway and some of the other types of resources we might find there?

Shelley Leith:

Oh, yeah. Thanks. Study Gateway is a streaming service that actually carries all of the video Bible studies that Zondervan and Thomas Nelson published. And so we've got a whole section about Bible engagement, and we have another whole section for churchwide experiences, and they would include the three eight week experiences based on The Story called God, the Creator, God, the Deliverer, and God, the Savior, and we'll be carrying your newest one called Abide, which is another amazing Bible engagement experience, and so with this subscription now, you don't have to get multiple DVDs for all the different groups in your church. Everyone in your church gets their own access to the entire Study Gateway library, so that they can not only do the study that they're doing with their group, but they can go and dive deeper on a topic of their own interest, or a scripture passage that's bothering them, or whatever.

Shelley Leith:

And they can watch it on their computer, or on their smartphone, or on their TV with Roku, or Amazon Fire, or Apple TV, or Chromecast. So it's this wonderful service that gives you instant access and inspiration on the go. You can take it with you wherever you go. You don't even have to be on wifi. You can download the videos onto your device and listen to them on the plane or whatever. So I'm actually offering a special deal to your listeners that if they want to sign up for a year long subscription for their small group, that's up to 20 people. I'll give them three months off of the annual price.

Randy Frazee:

Wow.

Shelley Leith:

And so they can just go to Studygateway.com, choose the small group plan, choose to pay annually, and use the code Roots, R-O-O-T-S, Roots, when you check out, and you're going to get your first 12 months for the price of nine.

Randy Frazee:

That is awesome. I kind of hoped that you would offer up for some folks that don't have Study Gateway. Here at Westside, we have Study Gateway, and we use it in a variety of fashions for our large number of small groups. We also have a group of essential classes that we do for people to get their grounding, and so we did Believe, which is another Bible engagement experience that I did with you guys for 30 weeks, and so I did that my first year here. So I did The Story my first time at Oak Hills. I did the Believe, because they had already done The Story five years earlier, same kind of outcome, same kind of results, sole with totally scripture. Maybe we'll do a episode in season two on the intrigue of Believe, and what's different about it, but there's people who've missed it. And so we're not planning on doing it anytime soon. We might come back to it.

Randy Frazee:

So we've just repackaged the Think, Act, Be Like Jesus is basically Believe broken down into eight week sessions. And so we use it at Westside to encourage our people. If you missed Believe, or you want to do it again, we encourage you to do it in these smaller three eight week segments called Think Like Jesus, Act Like Jesus, Be Like Jesus, and Study Gateway just makes the distribution of that so great. We can do it here on the campus. We could do it online, or our small groups out in the neighborhoods and businesses can do it right where they're at streaming, and we don't have the hassle of finding DVDs and getting lost in the mail, and broken, and things like that. So thanks for that offer, which is really pretty cool. I appreciate that.

Randy Frazee:

So I always like to end my podcast here and ask all of my guests this, and in this case, you are Queen Shelley for an entire day, and I know your husband, Greg. He is an awesome guy, a good friend of mine, helped me in a time of need. He told me that that's pretty much every day for you at the Leith household, but now it's not just the Leith household, but it's Queen Shelley for a day to the entire Christian community. And what are one or two things that you might want to say that they would have to do because you're Queen Shelley? It's a, "Here's a couple things I just really... You can't give me any backtalk. I really just want to encourage you with my experience. Here's what you need to do."

Shelley Leith:

Well, I think that I'm going to queue in on a couple of things that we've said. One is don't assume your people know the stories. We need to be inclusive and provide tools that will give our people confidence when they approach their Bibles. And so I love this notion of going back through The Story or something like that on a regular basis with your entire church family, to get everybody on the same page and to help everybody feel confident about the scriptures, and that inclusivity should extend to every family member. We were at one church where the children's ministry did not want to participate, and oh my goodness, what a miss. So maybe that's my second thing. Let's be inclusive of everybody, everybody no matter what your spiritual place is on the scale, and everybody no matter what age level you're at. Let's make the Bible accessible to all.

Randy Frazee:

Yeah, go all in. I was there at the church that will be left unnamed, that where the children's person who without question, Shelley, knows that one of the biggest challenges is getting the parents to engage their kids with scripture, and backing off of doing this with the overall church because you're so mesmerized by the existing curriculum you have, which is awesome. It's awesome, but to put that on the shelf for 31 weeks, so that the parents are doing the same exact thing is like a dream come true.

Shelley Leith:

Exactly.

Randy Frazee:

And boy, lean into that experience. And just a comment about just learning that people don't know The Story, when I was in Chicago, my neighbor at Willow, my neighbor liked to golf, and I liked to golf, but he never would golf with me. And finally, he accepts the invitation to go. I mean, he's like 4 houses down from me, and we finally get into car to go together, and he says, "Okay, I just need to get this off my chest right now. The reason I have been ghosting you on your invitations for golf is because you're my pastor, and I'm educated. I got a wonderful degree, and I'm very successful, but I just don't know that much about the Bible, and I'm afraid you think I do." He said, "Let me give you an example." He said, "I know that Jesus and Moses are two characters in the Bible, but I have no idea which one came first." And so I made him feel really good about it, and we've become really good friends and remain really good friends to this day, but he just reminded me.

Randy Frazee:

I remember one time here giving a sermon where I heard the pastor kept saying, "You know the story. You know the story," and then finally some member of the congregation yelled out, "Yeah, we know the story, Pastor, but we're paying you to tell it, and so tell it again, Pastor," which I think is really good. Hey, Shelley, this has been such a rich conversation. There's going to be a lot of things in the show notes, the Study Gateway links, and the video for Frankenmuth, and I think our encouragement is for churches that haven't really done Bible engagement campaigns to really give this a try. Maybe it's a 31 week experience like The Story, or like Believe, or maybe it's the new stuff coming out like Abide, or the smaller six to eight week series, but rallying everybody around the experience could be a real revival breakthrough moment.

Randy Frazee:

Matter of fact, Reveal has done a number of books and said for churches that are struggling, they recommend The Story as one of the things that they do to get them unstuck. And so this might just be the breakthrough experience that you needed to hear. So I want to thank everybody for joining us today on The Bible Roots Podcast. I hope you have enjoyed this. There's other episodes for you to listen to. This has been a fascinating one, and if you liked it, I'd encourage you to leave a review and to share it with somebody you know. We're looking forward, because we have another exciting episode coming. Until next time, this is Randy Frazee, and God bless.

Randy Frazee:

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.