



# Is This Story True?

By Mark Hillis

**T**he way I like to approach the Bible is with a sense of expectancy, even when it is a familiar passage. Someone may ask a question that disrupts my long-settled views and opens me up to a new exploration. Commentaries and Bible dictionaries can be very helpful on these occasions. It is great to find that others have been puzzled or inquisitive about the possible meaning of a story. Instead of hearing from children, youth, or adults, "We've heard that story before" as some kind of accusation, we can begin to promote an atmosphere where someone exclaims, "We've not heard the story like that before!"

Reading or hearing a Bible story is, for me, like the invitation to explore another world: similar to the way some people experience the worlds created within J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books or George Lucas' *Star Wars* movies. When we enter different worlds like these, we return to our own everyday lives somehow enriched or affected by those worlds. That is how I experience some of the great biblical sagas and stories, and even some of the brief ones and parables. Whether these stories have excellent and sympathetic characters in them (like Moses, Naomi, Gamaliel, or the Good Samaritan), or terrifying, crafty, or alarming ones (like Jephthah, Jacob, or Herod), the experience of entering the worlds of their stories can be transformative. In the company of others, it can be an important experience to learn about these people and to apply the lessons we learn to our own lives.

**What do we do, then, with the question, "Is this story true?"** Modern scientific investigations and rigorous historical studies have contributed to life in many positive ways. But these patterns of thought have also, in some situations, created a mindset that traps people into believing that a story (any story) must be narrowly assessed as either true or false. Some critical approaches to the Bible also emerged from that kind of mindset.

With adults, we need to open up the questions of truth in a rich and deep way. Even when we are confident that a particular story in the Bible is factual, that does not guarantee that the story is meaningful today. People who have faith in Jesus today provide the best proof that Jesus is alive.

With adults and older youth, therefore, teachers and leaders can ask them to explore their own experience for answers, even if it means asking them more questions.

It may also be possible to encourage them to do some research and to come up with their own answers to the question, "Is this story true?" For example, you could ask:

- What is true about this story for you and the people you live or work with?
- How shall we explore the many ways in which this story may be true or "ring true" in human experience?
- For whom is the meaning of this story true today?
- Who, in your circle, would benefit from hearing this story?
- How is this story "real" for you?

**With younger people and children,** how we respond to questions about truth is also very important. An embarrassed or evasive answer will show only that you are uncomfortable. Remember that we may not always have enough information to establish the factuality of certain events – they may simply be too long ago. Yet, there may be particular things about the time and place that are verifiable from those times. With that thought in mind, allow me to offer examples for answering "Is this story true?" with a child:

- Certainly. We know that many people in those times lived their lives like that and had those kinds of problems. In other words, the circumstances are true.
- Yes it is, for me. This story helps me to see that... *(name how the story is true for you).*
- It is a story that Jesus told. Jesus, when teaching, made up some stories.
- I don't know. I just love the story because it teaches me so many things.
- Let's find out! Encourage young people to participate in learning.
- You know, I wonder about that too. I wonder about the way this story is true.
- It's a very important story.

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