

THE STORY

Upper Story and Lower Story

Explanation

The Story was first used as a church-wide year-long journey when Randy Frazee taught it on Wednesday nights at Willow Creek. This explanation was written by a staff member at Willow Creek as an internal communication to the teaching pastors about the concept of upper and lower story, and how to use it in constructing the messages based on The Story.

I am copying the teaching pastors on this email because I think it is applicable for every message in the series. There is an Upper/Lower Story framework to the Bible. Randy has advised that all teachers should come back to this Upper Story and Lower Story idea throughout the series (the Upper Story being how their text that they are teaching on fits in with the Big Picture of Redemption, and the Lower Story being all the practical, more immediate lessons the text has for us). This could be one of the most useful ways to unify the series, regardless of who the teacher is for any week.

The Bible contains an Upper Story and a Lower Story. The Upper Story tells the big picture, the grand narrative of God unfolding throughout history. The Lower Story contains the sometimes delightful, other times appalling particulars of human experience. Without the lens of the Upper Story, the Lower Story seems out of focus and perplexing. As we make our way through the Bible—*The Story*—we will be mindful of both the temporal, easily seen events, and the not so obvious yet truly eternal realities. In the opening chapters of Genesis, the two stories are virtually one. God, who is love, creates the universe, and places humanity at the crown of all he brings into existence. Man and woman, as individuals and also in their collective, reflect God's image. People are both the objects of God's love and lovers in return.

But when the first man and woman choose to reject rather than respond, the Upper Story transitions to God's relentless pursuit and restoration of what was lost. That Upper Story never changes even to the last chapter of the Bible. The details in the Lower Story describe the many ways people mostly—with a few notable exceptions—resist God, and wreak havoc with themselves and each other. In trying to be God, people ruin what God has made, and pass that curse to their offspring. In one dramatic episode, God decides to “start over” by destroying all life through a flood except for eight people: Noah and his family. In the Lower Story, those few given that second chance fail miserably to build the new world God envisioned, and evil continues to hold sway. But in the Upper Story, God makes the promise that he won't ever flood the earth, thus teaching every generation that he is intent redeeming what's broken, not destroying it.

One feature of biblically literate people is they tend to focus more and more on the Upper Story and live in that realm; that knowledge rightly colors how we approach and apply any part of the Bible. In a discussion we had recently, Randy and I came to the joint conclusion that in our own spiritual journey, it is knowledge of that Upper Story that gets us through the hard times in life more so than through the Lower Story information. Immature believers tend to focus more on the particulars of a story and its immediate application, while more mature believers are able to put all they read into the larger picture of the Bible's overall story, and make application from that level of reading. One of the side benefits of this series for our church—why I believe it is timely for us as a whole congregation—is that we can instruct our congregation to have this more full-orbed approach so we get away from the habit of isolated-verse-only application. This also will protect our folks from the common misapplications that can be made with some texts, including the “what it says to me” error that rips a verse out of its historical context. Hopefully we will guide people into seeing every text as fitting into a bigger whole. If we got significant numbers of our people to become not only more familiar with the Upper Story of the Bible but also to be wisely handling the various particulars of Scripture within that larger context, it would be an enormous gain for us, in my opinion.