

GOOD NEWS! GOD HONORS US BY ENTERING OUR STORY

LOEWEN

Loewen has studied, lived and worked in South Asia and Central Asia since the early 1980s. A specialist in Persian culture and society, he has earned an MA in Persian and a PhD in Middle Eastern Civilizations. Loewen runs leadership training programs in many different settings both for the church as well as professional institutions.

ENTERING YOUR STORY

I brought some candy with me for the national staff of an NGO in Central Asia. They thanked me of course, to which I replied, “It was nothing.” And really it was a very little gift, but one elderly man made the point, “But you thought about us.” When someone thinks about us, we feel encouraged; we feel honored. Afghans say this with the idiom “So and so entered my story” (*qissa* /هـ ص ق/). This means “the other person honored me by paying attention to my situation.”¹ And this reflects our human condition. We would die inside if absolutely no one cared for us or thought about us. Sadly, many people have exactly this experience.

“Entering someone’s story” is an apt description of really caring for another person, as “story” refers to one’s life experiences—the sad and the happy, the ups and downs.

Most people think only about their own and their family’s “story,” which they seek to make interesting and satisfying. However, when someone enters our story they show us honor, and when they ignore us we feel dishonored and perhaps insulted.

When we look at the mega-story of the Bible, we see an amazing full-orbed story of good news.

1. THE GOSPEL IS THE STORY OF HOW GOD HONORS HUMANS BY ENTERING OUR STORY

Throughout the Bible, we see God engaging humans: God entered the garden to talk with Adam and Eve, even after they had shamed God by disobeying Him and trying to gain more honor for themselves. God entered Abraham’s life, honoring him with great promises and a mandate to bless the entire world and care for all peoples of this world. God entered Moses’ story to save the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt. God entered the community of Israel by directing them to build a tabernacle where He could dwell, with the promise “My name will be there.”

Ultimately God entered our world as “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” In the Messiah, God supremely honored humankind by entering our story in the most vulnerable way. God’s story is the story of the Messiah entering our stories and honoring us.

For God so honors the people of the world and gives them dignity that He generously gave everything of His own being so that anyone who truly treasures and completely follows the Messiah as their true patron and master will never be ashamed or dishonored. They will indeed experience genuine honor and dignity for the rest of their lives and beyond. (paraphrase of John 3:16)

Jesus walked with human beings, healed them and loved them. “When He saw the multitudes, he had compassion on them.” That is, He entered their story. The story Jesus told of two lost sons in Luke 15 classically reflects how the father honored his own shamed sons by entering their lives. Finally, Jesus voluntarily offered His own life to restore dignity to every human being.

2. AS FOLLOWERS OF THE MESSIAH WE ALSO ENTER GOD'S STORY

The gospel story is much more than God honoring us by becoming involved in our lives.

The prophets of old called people to love and honor God with all their hearts, and to train their children to follow God as well.

When Jesus walked among the people, He called them to repent and embrace God's kingdom. Since the Messiah has favored us by entering our story, every beneficiary of this news rightly responds by embracing the Messiah as their supreme master and patron—becoming totally loyal and “keeping the faith” in the sense of remaining true to their Master. Such believers have full confidence (trust) in their Master to protect and support them in all of life, and serve this Master and return favors for His amazing provision of salvation. Such believers boast of their Master, spreading His story to the world.

As we believe in this way, we enter God's story.

3. AS FOLLOWERS OF THE MESSIAH WE ALSO ENTER THE STORY OF OTHERS

As we enter God's story, we become part of His story. And His gospel story continues and spreads as believers enter the lives of others. We cannot be faithful to our Master and ignore other people. It is impossible to honor God and not care for others (1 John 3:14). Anyone who experiences God's honor in their lives and enters God's salvation story will naturally enter the lives of people around them.

We must do for others what God has done for us. Miroslav Volf puts it this way: “Inscribed on the very heart of God's grace is the rule that we can be its recipients only if we do not resist being made into its agents; what happens to us must be done by us. Having been embraced by God, we must make space for others in ourselves and invite them in—even our enemies.” As God honors us, so we must honor others. This is a transformed and new way to gain honor—by honoring others! When a believer does not honor people, he dishonors and shames God. We read,

Since God first honored us, we honor one another. If a person says, “Glory to God!,” but pays no attention to his brother, such a person shames God and lies to Him because if this person pays no attention to his brother whom he sees, how can he give honor to God whom he does not see? God has given this mandate to us: “Whoever honors God, must enter his brother's life.” (paraphrase of 1 John 4:19-21)

This is the law of Christ. When we join God's story, the

Messiah's law reorders our way of life. It turns on its head the old culture of endless honor competitions, envy, boasting and struggling to make a name for oneself and one's social group or tribe. In this new system we disdain selfish ambition and in gracious humility esteem others as genuinely significant. In this story, we become interested in others and care for them, even our enemies. E. Stanley Jones writes:

In the highest reaches of Christian caring, the caring reaches even to enemies and to those who mistreat you.... The future of the world is in the hands of those who care, not on a limited scale—myself, my family, my class, my race, my party—but in the hands of those who care with unlimited caring. If the Christian movement becomes the society of universal caring, it wins. If it becomes the society of limited caring, it loses. No matter how good its doctrines, beautiful its liturgy, strong its teaching, and loud its claims, if it isn't the society of universal caring, it ultimately loses.

Paul commends his colleague Timothy to the group of believers in Philippi, “Timothy truly cares about how you are doing. All the others are looking out for their own interests. They are not looking out for the interests of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 2:20b–21). Timothy is part of the Jesus story when he is genuinely interested in others. He entered the Messiah's story by entering the story of other people.

God's story goes full circle, a dance of receiving honor from God and returning that honor by esteeming others. This story transforms the worlds of twisted honors where we resort to dishonorable means and vices in order to accumulate self-absorbed honor and build up our own stunted stories.

This God-Spirited, “other-oriented” story catapults me to rejoice in the growth and joys of others, as a Persian poem says:

با هر دلی که شاد شود شاد میشوم، آباد هر کی گشت من آباد میشوم

I rejoice with the one who is full of joy, I flourish with those who flourish.

As a practical conclusion, think of three ways you can enter the lives of other people. 

¹ Afghans more often use this term negatively, as in “He isn't in my story.” By this they mean “he doesn't care about me” or “he never thinks about me.”

² *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* by Miroslav Volf (Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 129.

³ *A Song of Ascents: A Spiritual Autobiography* by E. Stanley Jones (Abingdon Press, 1968), pp 292–294.