

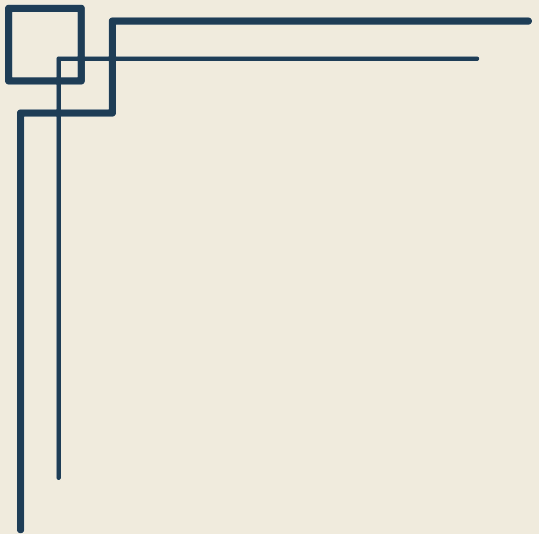
HOW TO TELL YOUR STORY

THE HERO'S JOURNEY GUIDE

**An eBook exploring the connection between
your testimony and ancient story structures.**

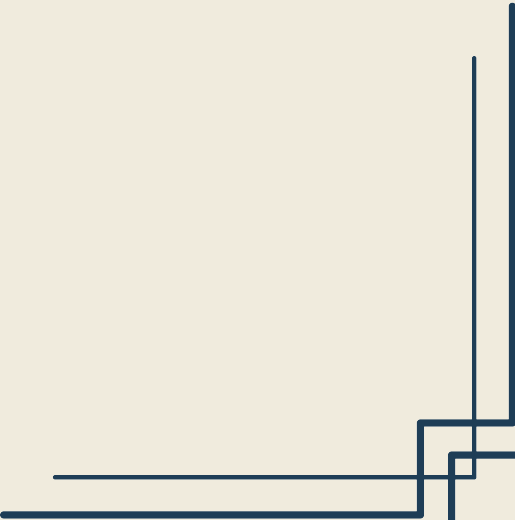
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Introduction

Today, we embark on a journey to explore the profound connection between a single storytelling structure and testimonies that move your ministry forward. Our aim is to present a storytelling framework that transcends cultural boundaries to engage a universal audience. In this eBook, I argue for implementation of a single storytelling structure guaranteed to engage and relate with all people across all cultures. In doing so, you will be equipped to become a more effective and impactful storyteller.

I firmly believe in the inherent connection between God and stories. God loves stories because He is a storyteller. Because His life and His very breath are in us, we are also innate storytellers. He uses story to communicate with and through us, just as we communicate with one another through relatable narratives.

As humans, we are drawn to narratives, be it through film, TV shows, art, books, or the ageless art of storytelling. We regularly and increasingly engage with streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, and Disney Plus.

Stories wield immense power, and within them lies the potency of our testimonies. Unfortunately, this art form seems to have faded within the Church. While we acknowledge God's incredible work worldwide, we often neglect to share how He has transformed our individual lives.

Most Christians don't know how to share their stories or what to say when they're asked to give a reason for their hope. It requires a lot of vulnerability and there is a lot of fear and pride that keeps us from testifying. Today, my hope is to provide you with tools to address that challenge.

As we begin this journey together, it's important to note how this eBook is meant to be used and read. The purpose of this resource is to use it as a workbook, as your guide to crafting your story and to tell it well. Yes, we will argue for and spend considerable time discussing story structure. Yes, it'll get a little nerdy. But, if we are going to share stories of God's faithfulness, let's do everything possible so our story relates to the minds and engages the hearts our audience.



"The Ordinary World"

The Importance of Storytelling

Storytelling isn't just a human inclination; it's part of God's character. He urges us to testify to His actions in our lives and in the lives of others. As the body of Christ, we are meant to embrace storytelling, to be a storytelling people. God chose to communicate to humanity primarily through stories, the very fabric of scripture. Curt Thompson emphasized the transformative nature of reflecting on and sharing our stories, suggesting that “the process shapes not only the narrative but also the neural networks it represents.”* In simple terms, storytelling is a healing process. We thrive when we listen to and tell our stories.

Think about the implications of that for a minute. As an example, consider someone who has been rescued from a traumatic upbringing and redeemed into a new life in Christ. As this person shares their story, they heal and inspire others. Scripture tells us to go and testify of what God has done in our lives, because it is just like our Creator and Savior to command us to do things that He knows are good for us. Story is powerful.

Part of that power lies in how it is told. Every story has a structure, a framework that begins with once upon a time, moves us to they had to do something, and ends with ... and they lived happily ever after. As beings created in God's image, we are hard-wired to engage with the same story structure He used to narrate His own stories throughout history. Today, I aspire to demonstrate that there exists a specific structure to follow when giving our testimony, one that resonates with anyone willing to lend an ear.

* Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul*, pg. 77

“Call to Adventure/Meeting the Mentor”





"Crossing the Threshold"

A Biblical Foundation

The call to testify echoes throughout scripture:

- Revelation 12:11 CSB - Conquer through the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony.
- Revelation 19:10 CSB - Worship God, for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.
- 1 Timothy 6:12 CSB - Fight the good fight of faith.
- Acts 22:1-21 and Acts 26:1-32 - Paul's testimony.
- Acts 4:33 - Apostles giving testimony to the resurrection.
- Romans 10:17 - Faith comes from what is heard.
- John 4 - The woman at the well testifying.
- 1 Peter 3:15 - Urges us to give a defense for the hope within us.
- Psalm 107 - A song that categorizes different stories and journey's.

God takes stories seriously. The scriptures are littered with calls to remember what God has done.



“Tests, Allies, and Enemies”

"Tests, Allies, and Enemies"



Why Use a Story Structure?

There are many reasons to present stories in an organized manner. First, scripture tells us to do all things “decently and in order.” That’s why a story is defined by its framework. Dan Harmon, the creator of the show *Community*, wrote that “without some semblance of structure, a story is not recognizable as a story.” If you recall a movie you disliked, it’s likely the film lacked a good storyline; it lacked structure. Why would our testimonies be any different?

It's important to follow a proven structure when we give our testimony so we can relate to and engage with our listeners more effectively. This is particularly valuable when sharing stories across diverse cultures and language groups.

A story structure is a template for marketers and content creators to work more efficiently and, therefore, reach a wider audience. We need to consistently create content at scale in today’s digital age. A structure is a valuable tool to overcome creative blocks such as uncertainty, fatigue, and anxiety.



“Tests, Allies, and Enemies”

Why Use The Hero's Journey Story Structure?

The heavy lifting of researching and distilling the most impactful way to tell a story has already been done for us. Through extensive research, ex-Catholic Joseph Campbell noticed consistencies in stories shared across cultures and times when ancient civilizations had no interaction with one another.

While there are many storytelling structures, only one is the optimal choice. In his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell argued that the story structure he identified and named “The Hero's Journey” is the most effective because it is embedded in our DNA over the millennia through evolution. As Christians, we would argue it is embedded in our shared consciousness because we're created in the image of God.

Only the Hero's Journey has a proven track record of engaging with people across all cultures since Genesis 1. Legendary authors C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien supported Campbell's claims that the Hero's Journey, also known as the *Monomyth*, was hard-wired into us by God.

Long before Joseph Campbell named it so, the Hero's Journey story structure was the primary storytelling framework used throughout the stories of scripture. Knowing the plan from the beginning, God's own story—the story He has used to communicate with humankind throughout history—marches to the same rhythm. As evidence that God hard-wired this structure into us, the Bible as a whole, and the stories contained within, all follow a familiar pattern, including the stories of Adam and Eve, Moses, Joseph, Jonah, Samson, and even Jesus' ministry.

We know God orchestrated every event in history, including the birth, death, and resurrection of His only Son, and He did so knowing the stories would relate to all of humanity.



“Tests, Allies, and Enemies”



"The Belly of the Whale"

Christ the Fulfillment of the Monomyth

Another reason to embrace the Hero's Journey story structure is because the God who wired the structure into His people also fulfilled the monomyth through His Son, Jesus.

The apostle Paul was one of the world's greatest storytellers. He knew how to engage an audience so intimately that they would risk their lives to become part of the story. Paul employed the Hero's Journey story structure to engage a popular cultural belief system.

One such belief centered on the myth of the Corn King. There have been many versions of the Corn King story throughout antiquity, but they all tell of a deity who rules in the summer months but sacrifices himself every fall to ensure a bountiful crop harvest, only to rise again every spring, reborn to do it all over for another prosperous year.

In Acts 17:16-34, Paul referred to the myth of a dying and rising god, possibly the Corn King Ceres worshipped by his Athenian audience. He employed the internal logic of story and skillfully engaged with the cultural narrative to draw parallels with Jesus and show the Athenians that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Corn King myth.

Even though Joseph Campbell may not have been a follower of Christ, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien agree that our response to stories told in the pattern of the Hero's Journey is intentionally woven into our very existence by the God who would fulfill it. Lewis once suggested to Tolkien that, "...*Jesus was the fulfillment of the monomyth.*"

J.R.R. Tolkien agreed that the gospel sounds like a reframing of the Corn King myth because Christ was a myth that became fact. Christ defeated death, and so fulfilled the myth that was already hidden in every culture. He fulfilled the hope that was already written on our hearts.



"Approaching the Innermost Cave"



“The Ordeal”

* Romans 6:3-5 CSB

Louis Marcos is a Professor in English at Houston Baptist University and the author of *Restoring Beauty: The Good, the True and the Beautiful in the Writings of C. S. Lewis: A Student's Guide*. He aligned with the idea that the power of The Hero's Journey story structure is wired into us by God, and that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Monomyth. Marcos wrote, “Perhaps the reason that every ancient culture yearned for a god to come to earth, die, and rise again was because the Creator who made all of the nations placed in every person a desire for this very thing.”

This is the most exciting application of the Hero's Journey: As the fulfillment of the monomyth, Jesus emerges as the greatest hero, the Savior every culture has talked about since the dawn of time. The distinguishing factor in His story is that it's not just a myth, for He is alive!

The best part is that we get to share in this story by participating in His death and resurrection. Romans 6:3-5* says, *“Or are you unaware that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in the likeness of his death, we will certainly also be in the likeness of his resurrection.”*

We get to share in Christ's death and resurrection. This means that our stories, our testimonies, are a fulfillment of The Hero's Journey in the same way Christ is the fulfillment of the monomyth. The Hero's Journey structure isn't just important; it's crucial—especially in our testimonies.



What is The Hero's Journey Story Structure

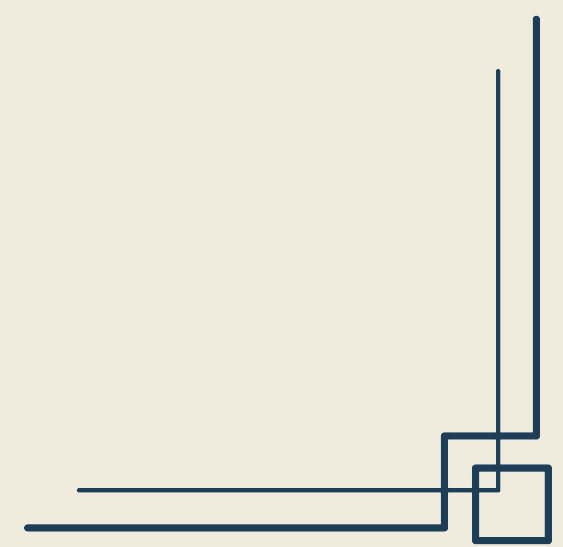
Now, let's delve into the storytelling structure ingrained in us by our Creator. As you learn the framework, think of your favorite movie or Bible story. The basic structure begins with a character living out the status quo, also known as their ordinary world, but something isn't right. There is some kind of internal or external conflict. The character meets a guide who calls them to an adventure to resolve the issue, but the character refuses. Eventually, the character accepts the call and embarks on a journey with the guide into a whole new world.

The character goes through trials and struggles, learns new things about themselves and this new world, and overcomes things they once thought impossible. However, there will be sacrifice, so the character will pay a price for their victory.

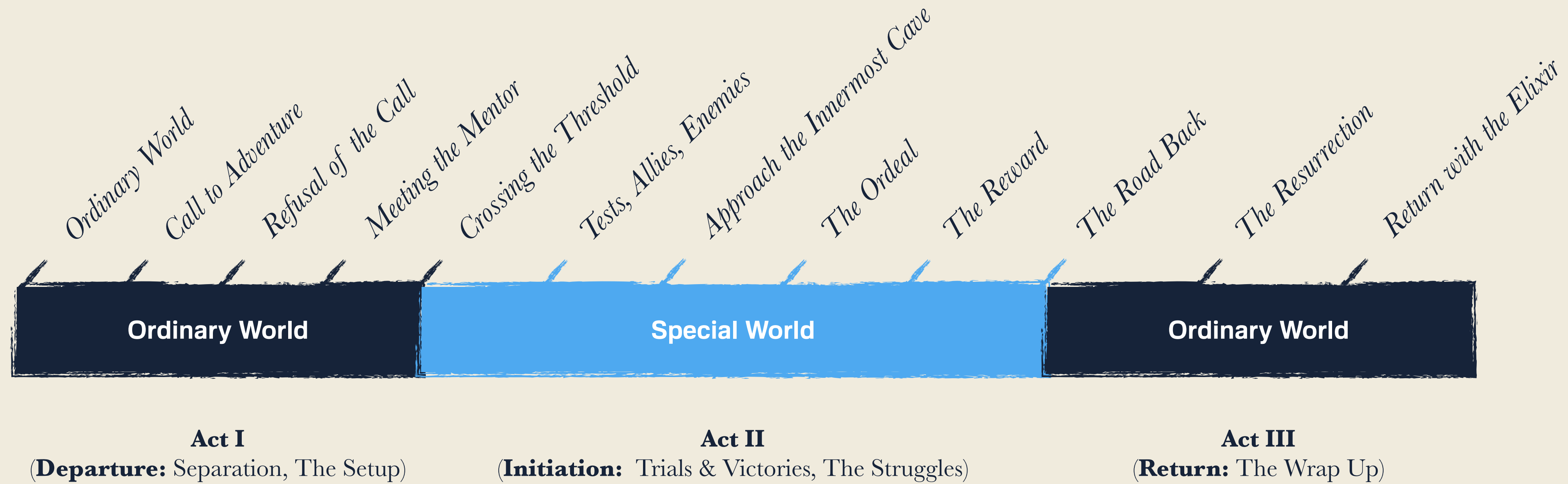
They will take their new experience and invaluable insights back to their ordinary life, but when they return, they will find that the normal they once knew no longer exists. Because they have gone through such significant change and transformation, they now live in a new status quo.

The most successful Hollywood film franchises, including Star Wars, The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, The Hunger Games, and my favorite Batman franchise, Christopher Nolan's Batman Trilogy, all follow this structure.

The Hero's Journey structure is relatable to everyone because it's the story we all live on repeat. It's the cyclical story of our lives. My own journey into ministry followed this story structure. There was a clear call to ministry, a call into adventure. However, I had no interest in fundraising, so I refused the call for years. Upon accepting the call and joining God on this journey, I've experienced challenges and struggles along the way. I've learned new things about myself and about God that I've been able to apply on new and future journeys.

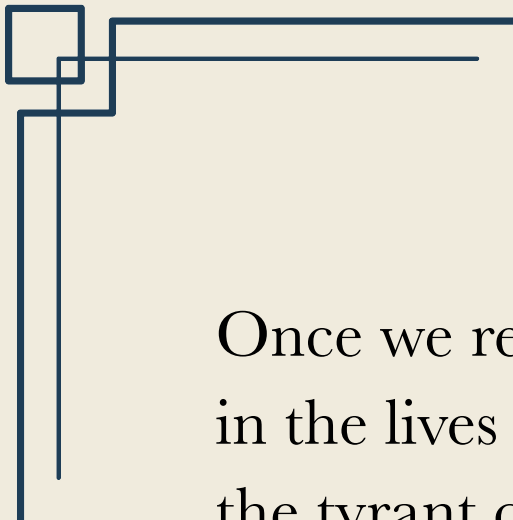


The Hero's Journey - The Full Length Structure



The full-length version of the Hero's Journey includes sixteen steps categorized into three acts. The three-act, sixteen-step story plot depicted in the diagram above is the bread and butter for every movie producer, author, and storytelling expert.

I encourage you to examine the plot as you read your Bible to see where these common story elements show up. It's fun to start with Jonah's story because it is the most obvious. There's a clear call to adventure and a refusal of the call. In fact, the Belly of the Whale step in the diagram above is named after Jonah's story.



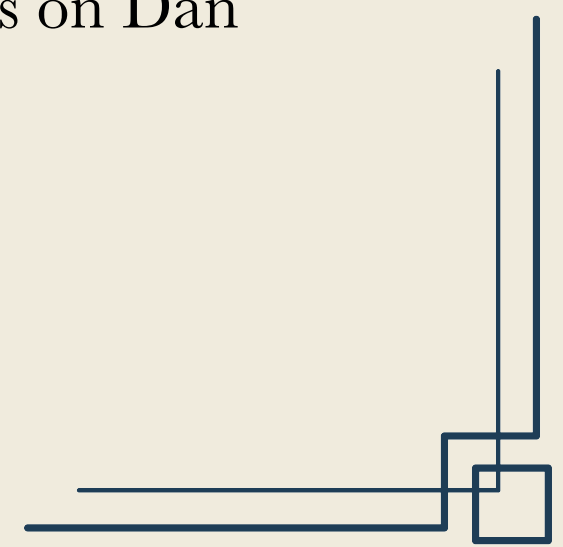
Once we recognize this structure, we begin to see how it repeats in our lives and in the lives of others. Joseph Campbell wrote, "The hero of yesterday becomes the tyrant of tomorrow unless he crucifies himself today." And so as Christ sanctifies us, we repeatedly share in the death of our old selves and resurrection to new life.

This understanding of the power in the Hero's Journey plot opens the door to a myriad of additional stories beyond the initial salvation story. This realization is particularly encouraging for those of us whose stories begin with, "I grew up in a Christian home and never knew a day when I didn't know Jesus."

Such stories might seem less powerful at first, but they too possess the profound elements of death and resurrection as we share in Christ's story. Regardless of your past, we all share a story that is just as powerful as the next follower of Christ because we all died with Christ on the cross to our old selves and were resurrected to new life.

Christ's story doesn't end with our initial transformation; it unfolds with every act of sanctification, offering a multitude of stories to tell. This insight is crucial when asked to give your testimony. While many of us may revert to our initial transformation experience, that's just the beginning, the first act of our ongoing story. Recognizing this structure in others becomes equally important as we observe Christ pursuing people who haven't yet said yes to Him.

Now that you've seen the structure in its entirety, I want to provide the condensed eight-step version we'll be working from when discussing your testimony. The focus of this eBook is to show how The Hero's Journey can be used as a model and guide for personal testimonies. So, for our purposes, we will focus on Dan Harmon's Story Circle.

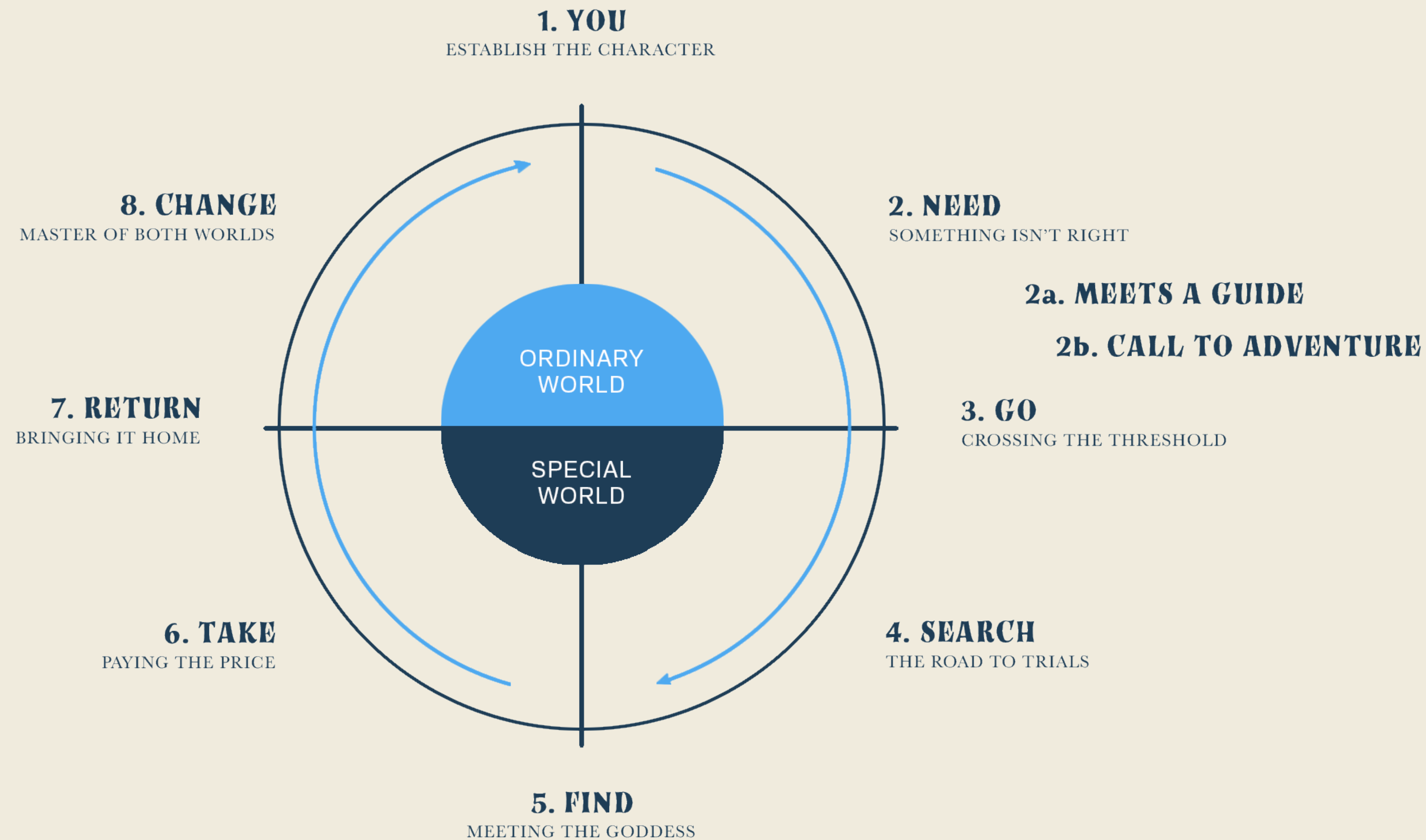


Dan Harmon's Story Circle

The story circle is derived from extensive storytelling research done by Dan Harmon, the creator of the television series *Community*. In fact, the Russo Brothers trialed his story circle method on *Community* alongside Harmon to ensure that it worked. The Russo Brothers then went on to employ the model in the screenwriting, directing, and production, of some of the Marvel Cinematic Universe films.

The success of the story circle lies in our innate ability to relate to it, mirroring our own lives. We serve a God who loves us, who pursues us, who came and entered into our brokenness. It only makes sense that the story of Jesus would follow a structure we relate to, the one He created us to engage with, *so that all might know*.

Next, I will illustrate how this story structure can be applied in the context of a testimony by sharing my own salvation story.





"The Reward"

My “Salvation Story” through The Hero’s Journey

- 1. YOU - Establish the Character:** My name is Zach Leighton. I grew up in a Christian home, but my faith was not my own. I knew all of the Sunday school bible answers, but I didn’t have a personal relationship with Jesus.
- 2. NEED - Something Isn’t Right:** For the most part I followed the rules, but throughout my teen years I put my hope in being good enough on my own, I was self-righteous, and yet I lived a double-life. In my private life I was addicted to pornography and I was filled with self doubt and anger. I lived in constant guilt because of my porn addiction, and I lived with self-doubt because I couldn’t muster up the strength to be good enough to stop my addiction on my own. I wasn’t capable of being good enough on my own strength.
- 3. GO - Crossing the Threshold:** I was introduced to the real Jesus when I was 18, when my best friend Justin Almas showed me what it looked like to have a relationship with God. Justin showed me that God wanted a personal and intimate relationship with me, that he loved me, which I always knew in my head, but he showed me that Jesus liked me and he wanted me to know him.
- 4. SEARCH - The Road to Trials:** As Jesus began to work in my heart through my relationship with Justin, I found myself reading the Bible and praying a lot more often. I wanted to go to church. I started to find this desire in me to make my faith my own.
- 5. FIND - Meeting the Goddess:** As I started pursuing the Lord, my porn addiction just stopped. I found myself less angry and more in love with Jesus. I still struggled with anger and self-righteousness, but things were changing. I was finding a relationship with Jesus. Things were different.
- 6. TAKE - Meet Your Maker:** When I was 18 I got baptized and made a re-commitment to Christ. I remember asking Jesus into my heart when I was 6, but this was different. I wanted to follow Jesus for the rest of my life.
- 7. RETURN - Bringing It Home:** I said yes to Jesus in front of my entire congregation and that’s when everything really began to change. My addiction to porn was gone. My parents starting seeing a difference in me. I wasn’t as angry or liable to fly off the handle at my brother and sister. Christ saved me from a life of self-righteousness, addiction, and anger and into a life where Jesus sits on the throne of my life.
- 8. CHANGE - Master of Both Worlds:** From that moment on my life completely changed. My priorities changed. From that moment on every decision I made was affected and informed by my relationship with the Lord. My life with Christ affects every decision that I make. I walk in grace rather than guilt. I still struggle, but things are different and not only am I confident in my eternal dwelling, I get to spend eternity with my creator, my savior, my king. Jesus changed everything for me.

“Salvation Story” Questions - Applying The Hero’s Journey

As I shared my story, hopefully, you could see how the sequence fit the story structure, and how it relates to the audience. There was structure, and so it should’ve been both engaging and relatable. We can replicate this story structure with anyone’s testimony simply by asking the right questions. Included in the diagram below is a set of questions we’ve developed to help guide the storytelling or interview process. You can answer these questions for yourself if you want to craft your own Hero’s Journey structured testimony, or these questions can be used in an interview setting to pull someone’s story out of them in a structured manner.

- 1 YOU: (Establish the Character)** - What is your name and can you quickly summarize your background?
- 2 NEED: (Something Isn’t Right)** - When did you realize something was wrong in your life, and what did you place your hope in prior to knowing Jesus?
- 3 GO: (Crossing the Threshold)** - When did you first start to experience Jesus pursuing you, and inviting you into relationship with Him?
- 4 SEARCH: (Road to Trials)** - What challenges or struggles did you face as Christ began opening your heart?
- 5 FIND: (The Mid-Point)** - What was so compelling about Jesus and why did you finally say yes to His authority and Kingship in your life?
- 6 TAKE: (Meeting Your Maker)** - Did saying yes to His invitation to follow Him cost you anything?
- 7 RETURN: (Bringing It Home)** - How would you define how your identity has changed since saying yes to Jesus?
- 8 CHANGE: (Master of Two Worlds)** - How does your relationship with Jesus affect your life now?

Application Beyond the Initial Salvation

Ministries that embrace content aligned with the Hero's Journey resonate with audiences universally. We discussed earlier in this eBook that The Hero's Journey is a story structure that plays out in all of our lives repeatedly and cyclically. This is especially true for Christians as we walk through the sanctification process.

God is always at work calling us to adventure in different areas of our lives. He does this when He invites us into relationships with others, and especially when He calls us to lay something down at the foot of the cross. It might be an invitation to walk in freedom from depression, anxiety, or addiction. He might reveal a vice as idol worship. If we consistently accept those calls to adventure and walk the journey alongside Him, then we should have countless stories to tell.

To show an example of this, I want to share another one of my testimonies.

"The Road Back"



"Magic Flight"



My "Sanctification Journey" through The Hero's Journey

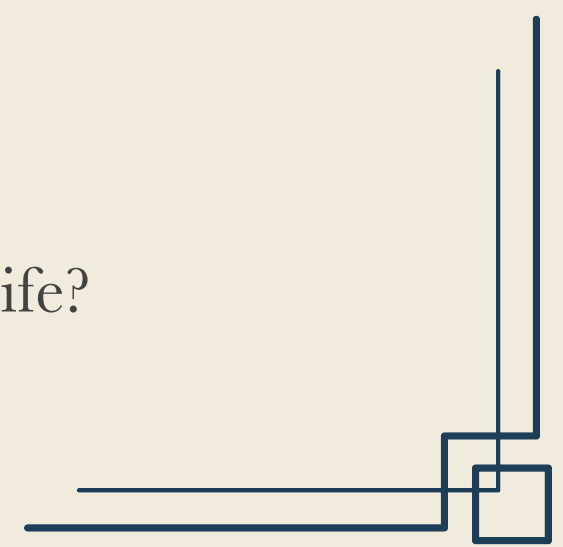
- 1. YOU - Establish the Character:** My name is Zach Leighton and I grew up in a Christian home. I put my hope in Jesus when I was 18 and I've been following Him ever since. But my Christian life is by no means perfect.
- 2. NEED - Something Isn't Right:** I've struggled with anger and placed my hope in being good enough on my own, even though that's one of the things He saved me out of when I was 18. I've struggled with anger my whole life and I've never been able to figure out why. I thought that anger was the root sin in my life and that I just need to be less angry and lay anger at his feet, but Jesus knew me better than I knew myself. He knew there was something deeper.
- 3. GO - Crossing the Threshold:** My wife was incredibly patient with me and simply kept saying maybe you should see a therapist to help you figure out what the root cause is. I was stubborn for the first 7 years of our marriage, but the problem kept getting worse. I never did anything to harm my wife, but the lack of control I had over my anger was scaring me. So I reached out to a Christian therapist.
- 4. SEARCH - The Road to Trials:** As I began to explore the root cause of my anger, I found something I didn't expect, which as a side note, is often the case in this step in the Hero's Journey. My therapist helped me realize my anger was rooted in something deeper. I thought anger was my core sin issue, but what the Lord revealed to me during therapy was that I worshiped control, success, and performance. And when I didn't have control or I wasn't successful or didn't feel like I performed, then I got angry. Tim Keller defined power idolatry as potential worship of success or performance. I didn't care to have power over other people, but Oh, I sure cared about whether or not I was successful or performed, primarily in work. When I realized that I came to step 5.
- 5. FIND - Meeting the Goddess:** I found what I was really struggling with and I was able to lay that specific sin down at his feet. I was able to identify what was truly making me angry. If I blew up in a fit of anger, or something little set me off, I could take a step back, realize I didn't have control in that moment, and lay the worship of control at his feet.
- 6. TAKE - Meet Your Maker:** Now I can lay the specific sin down and have an understanding behind the surface level struggle.
- 7. RETURN - Bringing It Home:** Now that I know what's really going on, I know what I need to lay down. I've shared in his death and resurrection by specifically laying down my worship of control, success, and performance, and I can share in his death of those sins and resurrection to new life again.
- 8. CHANGE - Master of Both Worlds:** The Lord continues to pursue my heart. He continues to show his great love for me in that he died for my worship of control. He died for my worship of power. And I can lay those things at the foot of the cross and I'm more in love with him now because he continually shows up and shows that he's pursuing the deepest levels of my heart. He's making me more like him every day.



“Sanctification Journey” Questions - Applying The Hero’s Journey

As I shared my second story, hopefully, you could see how the narrative sequence fits the story structure. At its heart, the Hero’s Journey story structure is a template for sharing any testimony.

Included in the diagram below is a set of questions we’ve developed to help guide the storytelling or interview process for any Sanctification Journey. You can answer these questions for yourself or in an interview setting to pull someone’s story out of them in a structured manner.

- 1 YOU: (Establish the Character)** - What is your name and can you quickly summarize your background and how you came to know Jesus?
 - 2 NEED: (Something Isn’t Right)** - As you’ve followed Jesus, what was an area of your life where you felt He was calling you into greater intimacy, obedience, or Lordship over your life?
 - 3 GO: (Crossing the Threshold)** - When did you first realize that Jesus was asking you to lay that at his feet, or that He was calling you to something better in your life?
 - 4 SEARCH: (Road to Trials)** - What challenges or struggles did you run into as you walked through this experience and as He guided you through this process?
 - 5 FIND: (The Mid-Point)** - What happened as you walked in obedience to this call? What did you find out about yourself, and what did God reveal about Himself through this process?
 - 6 TAKE: (Meeting Your Maker)** - Did saying yes to this journey cost you anything?
 - 7 RETURN: (Bringing It Home)** - What have you learned through this process?
 - 8 CHANGE: (Master of Two Worlds)** - How is your life different after answering this call and walking in obedience to King Jesus in this area of your life?
- 

"Crossing the Return Threshold"





Common Storylines

OVERCOMING

ESCAPE

THE RIDDLE

REBIRTH

PURSUIT & ORIGIN

RESCUE

THE QUEST

VOYAGE & RETURN

THE RIVALRY

TRANSFORMATION



"Master of Two Worlds"



Conclusion

In conclusion, recognizing and embracing The Hero's Journey structure enriches our storytelling experience. Implementing the structure to share the redemptive work God is doing in your ministry will allow you to give a testimony that engages with anyone who will listen and your audience. As we comprehend this narrative structure, we gain endless stories to testify of the greatness of God's work in our lives.

As we embark on this journey of storytelling and testimony, our hope is that you're inspired to see the divine narrative woven into the fabric of our lives. God is at work in the stories we tell; He's at work in the grand redemptive meta narrative, and your story fits into that greater story. Your testimony mirrors the ultimate Hero's Journey — the story of Jesus. May we, as His disciples and storytellers, continue to testify to His greatness in every act of our ongoing journey.



“Resurrection”

"Freedom to Live"

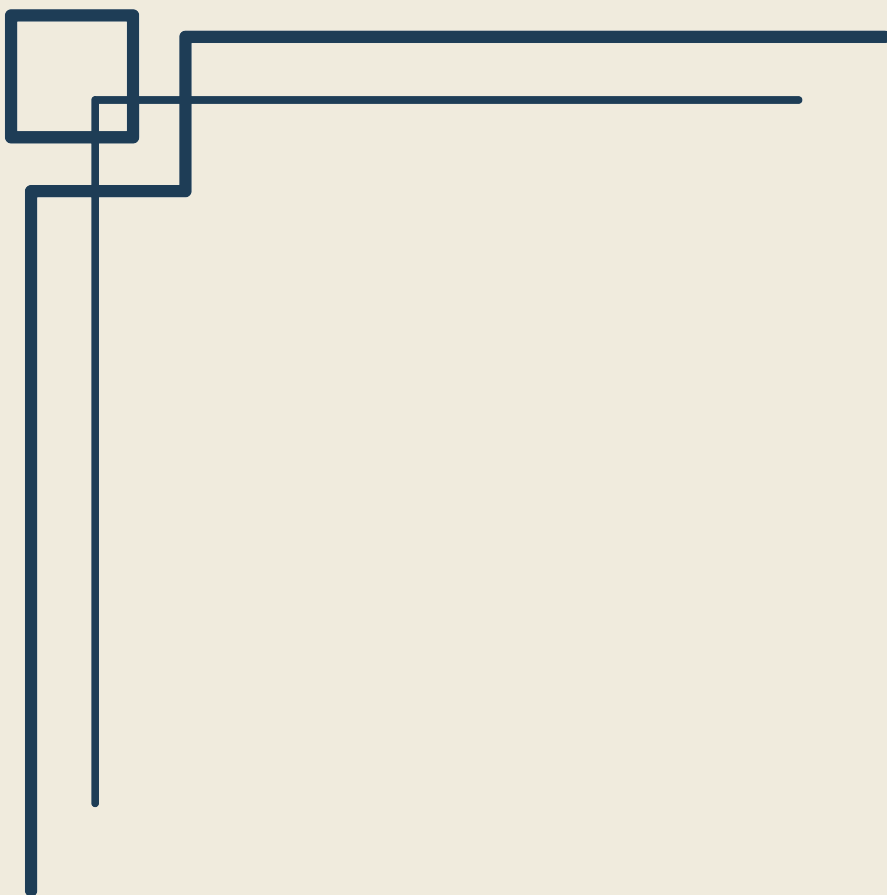




About the Author

Zach Leighton is the Founder of Reliant Media Group. Reliant Media Group is a nonprofit Christian media holding company dedicated to storytelling that brings the gospel to life. Through our distinct brands (Reliant Creative, Kingdom Stories, Voyager Faith Films, Story CoOp, CORE Media, and Global Creatives Collective), we equip, inspire, and support churches, ministries, and Christian creatives to share authentic, transformative stories that amplify the impact of the gospel across diverse platforms and audiences.

Zach's passion and call is to help the Church testify of all that Jesus is doing. Both ministries exist to serve that greater call and purpose. Zach has worked in the ministry space for over a decade, and he has a heart to support and serve the Church and help her use story and narrative to glorify God, as a tool in her communication efforts, and to ultimately see her push back darkness. He believes that as image bearers and disciples of a storyteller, the Church should be a storytelling people.



Helping the Church testify of all that Jesus is doing.

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