

Pursuing the Storyteller's Great Commission

HOW DO GOD'S
COMMANDS FOR
FAITHFUL LIVING
APPLY TO FICTION
WRITING?



StoryEmbers.org



Introduction

When people think about the Dominion Mandate and the Great Commission, they tend to envision soldiers strapping on indestructible spiritual armor and running onto the battlefield to either recruit new converts or vanquish evil.

We *are* supposed to spread God's truth and confront sin. But sometimes we become so focused on the conquest that we forget how to be compassionate—and that's when the browbeating happens.

Hitting readers over the head with a book (even if it's not as thick as the Bible) *hurts*. A writer's job is to nudge readers toward the source of *healing*, not inflict more pain.

How? By contrasting the brokenness of humanity with the wholeness that God originally intended for His creation. By reflecting glimmers of God's character. And by meeting readers in moments of struggle and doubt like Jesus did.

The Dominion Mandate isn't just about stewardship, and the Great Commission isn't just about evangelism. The full interpretation of those verses is much broader and richer.

This compilation of perspectives from our team will remind you who you are and how your writing can fulfill a divine purpose. Each article came from a series we released in January 2023 that explored the foundational mindsets described in the first resolution of our manifesto: "We resolve to be passionate and dedicated in our pursuit of excellent storytelling, knowing that we are reflecting the Creator's image within us and fulfilling God's commands to take dominion over the earth, love fellow image-bearers, and steward the resources He has provided."

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Chapter One – Bearing God’s Image as a Storyteller Involves More Than Exploring Christian Themes

By Daeus Lamb, Community Director

“Bearing” the image of God ought to be an active verb, because it’s a mad dash with no finish line. To steal from C. S. Lewis, it continually guides us “farther up and farther in.” God has bestowed this gift and responsibility on all of mankind, but not everyone intentionally pursues it. Even Christians are confused. We assume image-bearing means that God physically resembles us, or that we share His attribute of creativity, so we don’t need to invest much effort. We can just “be ourselves,” throw in a few Scripture quotations, and call what we’ve created good.

That mindset overlooks the purpose God designed us to fulfill and the rich fellowship we can enjoy with Him. Because reflecting our Creator is our ultimate calling, it radically affects all of our other callings. Both the Dominion Mandate given to Adam and the Great Commission given to Christ’s disciples show us how to approach everything in life, including writing. If our views on those two directives are misaligned, our stories might shrivel on the vine.

How do we fix a problem that’s lurking in our subconscious, though? Since I need to lay a sturdy foundation first, most of the practical advice will appear near the end of my article. The payoff, however, should be worth the wait.

Defining Image-Bearing

Theologians have proposed various interpretations for image-bearing. Historically, the most common has been to contrast man with animals. Our sense of morality, endowed authority, higher intelligence, and awareness of our own souls sets us apart from the beasts of the land, sea, and air.

While these traits are all outpourings of our God-inherited image, they become sterile and inanimate if treated as inclusive—like trying to assimilate a lion’s anatomy by studying its bone fragments under a microscope. Image-bearing holds deeper connotations than a passive resemblance to God’s character.

My favorite little-known fact about the word “image” in Genesis 1:26 is that it’s derived from a root of “shadow.” Obviously, we’re not of the same substance as God. A shadow is not as powerful or



dimensional as the being who casts it. But it mimics everything its source does. Ergo, we are divinely sanctioned plagiarists and copycats.

The second implication of image-bearing is that we are signposts pointing to God. John Piper agrees: “Now what would it mean if you created seven billion statues of yourself and put them all over the world? It would mean you want people to notice you. God created us in His image so that we would display or reflect or communicate who He is, how great He is, and what He is like.”

Lastly, our likeness to God enables us to cultivate an intimate relationship with Him. “I pray...that they also may be one in Us... And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me” (John 17:21–23). We can experience close communion with the Trinity primarily because believers are clothed in Christ’s righteousness—but *also* because we are similar enough to have the potential to function together.

To summarize the concepts I’ve covered, image-bearing indicates that...

- We are shadows of God.
- Signposts to God.
- And suitable for God.

Great Grampy Tolkien combined these three truths into one word: *sub-creation*, the art of fashioning new wonders out of God’s original masterpiece. It’s a synthesis of reality and imagination, like historical fiction compared to recorded facts or Narnia compared to Earth. We don’t create *ex nihilo* like God did, but we do introduce readers to places they’ve never seen before. And the yearning to engage in worship underlies each keystroke.

We *could* draw immediate application from this premise. However, we’ve yet to receive our marching orders. The Dominion Mandate reveals the *cosmos* we should be building toward, and the Great Commission reveals *how* we ought to be building toward it.

Defining the Dominion Mandate

Immediately after God brings Adam and Eve together in Genesis 1, He says, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the Earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the Earth.”



When we read this verse, the word that usually pops into our minds is *stewardship*, and much to Jesus's chagrin, we've been conditioned to equate it with *conservation*. Remember the parable of the talents? One servant protects the coins entrusted to him instead of investing in a lucrative venture, angering the master upon his return.

When God appointed us as caretakers of creation, He expected us to present it back to Him a hundred times more abundant. The Dominion Mandate does not authorize us to lay claim to *our* desires, but to advance *God's* plans. Remaining static is an act of disobedience.

Defining the Great Commission

Matthew 28:18–20 urges us to convert, baptize, and disciple all nations. Many Christians think the Great Commission is purely evangelistic, but it's not. It can encompass Bible studies for believers, child rearing, politics, and even demonstrating through our behavior how to follow Christ's commands.

However, if we focus on the aspects of the Great Commission that appeal to us, we're not truly honoring it. For example, the friendships we form should lead to conversations about sin and holiness and eternity. The stories we write should comfort and convict believers, not just shove tracts into a crowd. And the decisions we make about when and how we discuss our faith should be based on wisdom, not shame for the gospel and apathy toward the lost. We don't get to choose only one side of the coin.

A Cord of Three Strands: How These Precepts Flow Together

In the same sentence where God announces, "Let Us make man in Our image," He assigns dominion to all of mankind. And when Jesus tells His disciples to "go forth," both the phrasing and the context draw strong parallels to the Dominion Mandate as if the ideas are companions. Image-bearing describes the goal of sub-creation, the Dominion Mandate describes the scope of our impact, and the Great Commission describes the method of moving forward.

United, the trio generates a miniature version of the Christian Storyteller's Manifesto:

We resolve to write with passion, ambition, and fortitude (Dominion Mandate) in service to Christ's kingdom (Great Commission); to allude to God's nature, beauty, and character (image-bearing); to foster a more robust and mature culture (Dominion Mandate); and to abide in God through prayer and immersion in His Word (image-bearing) so that we'll grow regardless of how much or how little we influence readers (image-bearing) and our stories will be disciple-makers instead of fortune cookies or greeting cards (Great Commission).



Sub-creation begins to overlap with the Dominion Mandate and the Great Commission when we realize that our role surpasses our personal dreams and pet projects. God has called us to be sub-creators of a *New Creation*.

How Fallible Image-Bearers Can Brew Hot and Holy Stories

When we're assembling a puzzle, being able to study a picture of the finished artwork fundamentally changes how we sort through the pieces. Similarly, the better we understand our identity as God's children, the better equipped we'll be to practice our faith in and through our writing. Our responses to the challenges we face will be more radical, biblical, and confident.

I'm going to tackle some of the most debated topics (all of which we've addressed more comprehensively in other articles that I'll link to), though the list could extend for pages.

Q: How explicitly Christian should our stories be?

A: The popular mantra in the industry nowadays is that stories don't need to be blatantly Christian, which is a potentially dangerous half-truth. If we classify fiction as "neutral" or "secular," we destroy our potency as image-bearers. We'll be lukewarm, and God will spit us out. Our stories, along with everything we do, should aim to fulfill the Dominion Mandate and/or the Great Commission. The breadth and tone is up to each of us as individuals, but we ought to be winning ground for the kingdom in some way or another.

Q: Should our stories proclaim the gospel?

A: Stories can contribute to the Great Commission without even mentioning God. Since we have many options and opportunities for evangelism—which are usually more effective than fiction—we don't, as I explain in a past article that asks the same question, need to "resort to witnessing on a page corner." Stories are neither insignificant nor sufficient in and of themselves. We can hoodwink readers into lowering their guards so that they contemplate a worldview they might have auto-rejected otherwise, but we can't presume to turn our stories into a substitute for preaching.

Q: What issues are we allowed to portray?

A: The Dominion Mandate orders us to take dominion over the *whole* Earth. The Great Commission orders us to disciple *everybody* in *everything* the Bible teaches. How can we deny that we must travel as "far as the curse is found"? Sin-laden situations may be difficult to depict,



but *someone* must brave the darkness to reach the suffering. A few writers will use this as an excuse to indulge in their own or readers' vices, but it should instead encourage us to expose and crush evil.

Q: What can prevent us from carrying out the Dominion Mandate and the Great Commission in our writing?

A: Inattentiveness to God's Word will weaken us as His shadows, because we won't have a frame of reference for who He is. Sanctification is an ongoing process that requires our diligence. We may not get the chance to point someone to Him every day, but we can point ourselves to Him every moment. Through the Holy Spirit's presence, we are all being made suitable for God, though sin can stunt our fruitfulness. The quality of our Christian walk affects the spiritual quality of our writing.

Until the End of the Page

Our identity as image-bearers touches every jot and tittle of our writing. It's vast enough that I couldn't encapsulate all of it in what I've typed here. This article is but the first in a series devoted to the opening resolution of our Christian Storyteller's Manifesto: "We resolve to be passionate and dedicated in our pursuit of excellent storytelling, knowing that we are reflecting the Creator's image within us and fulfilling God's commands to take dominion over the Earth, love fellow image-bearers, and steward the resources He has provided."

Each successive installment will continue to unpack the complexities of image-bearing, the Dominion Mandate, and the Great Commission.

- In chapter two, Josiah DeGraaf will discuss what taking dominion looks like and why a combative stance isn't always effective.
- In chapter three, Sarah Baran will refute the misconception that the Great Commission is limited to direct evangelism and show how to love readers through empathetic storytelling.
- And in chapter four, Rachel Gilson will conclude the series with advice on stewarding our skills, experiences, and even our relationships to craft stories that both God and readers will delight in.

We hope that by the end of this series you'll have renewed clarity and vision for your life and your writing. Christ promised to be with us and work through us—all we have to do is remember who He is.



Chapter Two – Taking Dominion with Your Stories Involves More Than Fighting Culture Wars

By Josiah DeGraaf, Marketing Director

The Bible’s language can sound harsh to modern ears.

When God commands Adam and Eve to “take dominion” in Genesis 1:28, the images that phrase conjures up may make a few readers cringe. How does aggressive behavior align with the New Testament’s exhortations to be humble and meek?

The instruction raises even more questions for us as writers. If God wants humans to rule over the *whole* Earth, shouldn’t that encompass fiction? And what tactics are we supposed to use when claiming the territory for His kingdom?

Some Christians treat the publishing industry as a front in the war to redeem the culture. They argue that we ought to present an alternative to the liberal agenda and lead readers to a Christian worldview. Over the past sixty years, this mindset has changed from being evangelistic to pious to pugnacious. The hordes of “indoctrinating media” must be met with equal ferocity!

But is the Dominion Mandate *only* a bugle blast to engage in the fray around us? Or are we overlooking the higher vision it contains?

Before we can integrate Genesis 1:28 into our storytelling, we need to reflect on God’s handiwork in the preceding verses.

What Taking Dominion Means

“Taking dominion” can feel heavy-handed because of the wreckage we’ve seen human authorities leave behind. When we consider how *God* exercises dominion, however, Genesis 1 depicts a starkly different outcome. Throughout the chapter, God turns chaos into order. He separates the seas from the land to provide homes for His creatures. He suspends lights in the sky to penetrate the darkness and measure the passing of time. He plants vegetation to produce sources of food.



The benevolence that characterizes God's actions offers us an example of the noble goals our stories can accomplish. When we write, we shape disparate elements into cohesive, compelling stories that delight readers and show them how to arrange their lives according to God's design. And just like the opening of Genesis, the monumental task ahead of us starts with a single word.

Taking Dominion During Story Creation

First, we till our memories for ideas we can fertilize our stories with. We unearth the deep thoughts locked within our minds. We excavate social interactions that made us laugh. We gently touch the wounds that define us. Then, as our story pokes its green stalk through the surface, we cultivate it with our artistry. We find the right arcs to grow the characters. We weed out the subplots that threaten to choke the roots. We intersperse metaphors to convey emotions that are difficult to express and imagery to reveal the entire landscape in vivid color.

And when our garden is complete, we name it—giving voice and form to the human experience.

As trivial as tapping out little black symbols in a quiet, secluded room might seem, writing is the process of bringing harmony to discord and healing to brokenness. We're fulfilling the Dominion Mandate (and, by extension, the Great Commission) without ever moving from our desks. The knowledge that we're walking in our Creator's footsteps ought to stimulate our drive and creativity.

Biblical dominion is beautiful.

Taking Dominion of Storytelling Impact

When we unlatch the gates to our gardens—our stories—to welcome readers in, though, should our motivations and focus shift toward preparation for combat? Some writers lunge at the chance to join the next virtuous volley of Christian material. Others hesitate to approach the battle lines, concerned that they don't belong in such a divisive context.

Scripture *does* urge us to cast down strongholds, take every thought captive, and oppose evil. Affirming God's reality in our stories can be rightly compared to jubilant warriors winning conquests.

However, before charging into the oncoming crowd, we must remember that Christ's kingdom is not of this world. His weapons are spiritual, not carnal. So we don't need to adopt a belligerent stance. We cast down strongholds not by vilifying sinners and other religions but by leveraging



consequences to persuade flawed characters to discard the lies they believe. We take every thought captive not by debating hot-button issues on our social media platforms but by demonstrating the inner peace and joy that comes from faith-oriented living. We oppose evil not by sermonizing for page after page but by portraying the triumph of the righteous and destruction of the wicked.

Boldness has a place within the realm of fiction. But our version of warfare is not and should not be the same as our enemies'. Because of the Spirit's power, we don't need to worry that subtlety will reduce our imprint.

Reframing the Purpose of Storytelling

Readers may be asking how, specifically, they can take dominion with their projects, especially if they're currently unpublished. Contrary to most of the articles I write for Story Embers, or even this series as a whole, I haven't included many practical applications. The reason? We far too easily miss the point when we jump straight to implementation without reveling in the grandness of our calling.

Rachel's installment will outline how we can properly steward our gifts to achieve all of the biblical mandates we've been discussing. For now, let's bask in the opportunity to imitate God's magnificent and magnanimous work. To transform messes into masterpieces. To nurture the good, the true, and the beautiful in our stories and the lives of our readers.

If that doesn't both intimidate and energize you, you're not recognizing the full potential of Genesis 1.



Chapter Three – Loving Readers with Your Stories Involves More Than Sharing the Gospel

By Sarah Baran, Staff Writer

Writers are missionaries. Sure, we may cosplay as caffeine-addicted insomniacs with questionable search histories, but beneath the silly clichés, we explore uncharted (and often dangerous) territory in hopes of reaching broken hearts and lost souls.

The Great Commission tasks us with a heavy responsibility—not just to proclaim the gospel but to witness to others through the testimony of our lives, our work, and our relationships. As storytellers, we face a unique challenge: How can we universalize our message when fiction encompasses a broad audience with a wide range of beliefs?

The Great Commission calls us to be more than megaphones. First Corinthians 13:1–3 warns us that love must underline our words and actions or our efforts will be in vain: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have no love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.”

Love is the propellant of outreach, the fundamental pillar of ministry, the distinction between Pharisaical pulpit-thumpers and shepherds guiding their flocks. If we want readers to care about the truth we carry, we must first prove that we care about *them*. Without the intimacy of one-on-one connection, however, loving individual readers through a story written for hundreds can seem too impersonal to be plausible.

That didn’t stop Jesus from meting out parables to the crowd gathered beside the Sea of Galilee. When we understand the four mindsets that most readers come from—the searching unbeliever, the unrepentant skeptic, the apathetic churchgoer, and the struggling Christian—we’ll know how to touch each one. A thread of grace can unite them all.



Weep with Those Who Weep: Using Compassion to Breach Worldview Barriers

The obvious goal of the Great Commission is to broadcast the news of salvation. But fiction doesn't allow for "street preaching." While in-person evangelism may require a direct approach, novelists must subtly and artfully translate their values into themes, character arcs, and symbolism. If I wrote a book about a woman who grew red horns and a tail after cheating on her husband, readers (both Christian and non-Christian alike) would cry foul. Not only would the phenomenon be absurd but also derogatory toward people whose choices I disagree with.

The tension between God-breathed Scripture and man-made ideologies places us in a sticky position. How can we fairly represent characters who oppose our worldview *and* promote the gospel without alienating a secular audience or watering down our convictions to avoid offense?

Consider how Victor Hugo handles the character Fantine in *Les Miserables*. She forfeits her innocence under pressure, resulting in an illegitimate pregnancy. Shunned by society, she descends into poverty, despair, and eventually prostitution. But despite her ugly situation, Victor Hugo never influences us to hate her. She's not willfully wallowing in immorality—she's desperate to feed her starving child. Instead of condemning her, Hugo lets the tragedies that befall her expose her foolishness.

Compassion enables us to impart our beliefs and engage opposing worldviews without sermonizing or casting judgment. For instance, I can imagine the factors that might motivate a female protagonist to be unfaithful to her husband. Perhaps he's emotionally cold or persists in bad habits. Showing sympathy toward her won't compromise my worldview if I balance her mistakes with unpleasant consequences.

Empathy is crucial when pursuing the Great Commission in storytelling. The gospel isn't a weak child who only wins a fight when his opponent is handicapped. If we treat other worldviews with as much honesty as our own, readers can't accuse us of distorting their behavior to make Jesus more appealing. We should pay attention to the circumstances that might shape a person's perspective (e.g., sexual abuse victims tend to support abortion), not with the intention of pouncing on fallacies, but to equip ourselves to address deeply felt needs and problems. Never underestimate the power of pausing to listen.



Love Your Enemies: Unrepentant Does Not Equal Unredeemable

Since fiction shouldn't attempt to proselytize, following the Great Commission as a storyteller means revealing fragments of truth instead of a full scroll. How we portray people who reject virtue and embrace their own vices reflects our attitude toward them in real life, which affects our reputation overall.

Not everyone detaches themselves from the lies they cling to, and conversion arcs aren't necessary to point readers to the narrow road. Apart from proper development, what protects an antagonist from coming across as an insensitive caricature of evil is the *opportunity* for redemption. Sometimes the most loving tactic is to intersperse glimpses of mercy, whether or not the character is receptive.

In *Lord of the Rings*, the One Ring mutates Sméagol into a miserable creature who eventually betrays Frodo. But ultimately *no one* can withstand the Ring's seduction, not even the heroes. So Sméagol's plight isn't entirely his fault—which deprives him of poetic justice and strips away his culpability, leaving us with a character who exists only to be hurled into Mount Doom.

Compare the deformed hobbit to Thenardier, a sleazy con man who repeatedly defrauds the protagonists of *Les Misérables*. He's given multiple second chances throughout the story, and at the end when Marius offers him money to start his life afresh, he uses the undeserved gift to become a slave trader. We see traces of compassion even in this repulsive character, because Hugo never dismisses him as too far gone.

What makes villains truly reprehensible—and thoroughly human—is when they bind themselves to wickedness *regardless* of the numerous outlets for escape. Thenardier falls into bankruptcy because of his unscrupulous decisions, not because a deity cursed him, no matter how he tries to absolve himself of blame.

With those precautions in mind, we shouldn't ban conversion arcs either. Some of the greatest Christian heroes began as persecutors and critics of the church, like the Apostle Paul and Adoniram Judson. Returning to fiction, Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment* and Dalinar Kholin from *The Stormlight Archive* both undergo drastic transformations, including remorse for the wrongs they've committed. When depraved, darkness-driven people turn to the light, we're reminded that *no one* is beyond God's deliverance.

Iron Sharpens Iron: Fiction Edifies the Body of Christ



Because the Great Commission focuses so heavily on evangelism, we forget that the commandment also mentions discipleship. Our job is not finished when we hand out tracts and someone professes belief. We're supposed to continue mentoring our brothers and sisters in Christ through the variety of mediums and settings available to us. And the outworking of discipleship through fiction is twofold: exhortation and encouragement. I need space to unpack each of those, so I'll address the first in this section and the second in the next.

We exhort readers when we challenge their habits, attitudes, and perceptions through poignant thematic questions and character arcs. Although life-changing books are rare, all of us have read stories that lingered in our memories, simmering with revelations that never struck us before. Overcoming the barrier of familiarity is a benefit that in-person discipleship lacks. In fiction, we can convey truths that have become trite from new and emotionally evocative angles.

For example, as a child raised in church, Christ's death and resurrection had been reiterated so frequently that it felt on par with the multiplication table—something I memorized and recited out of perfunctory devotion. But when I read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, associating Aslan's sacrifice for Edmund with Christ's sacrifice for me cleared the haze. I gazed at the cross with a sense of awe and gratefulness.

This doesn't license us to browbeat readers with our favorite underappreciated Scriptures, however. While we can (and should, if possible) seek to teach as well as delight, condescension isn't loving. Instead, we should draw from our own struggles, epiphanies, and growth, as Martin talked about in a previous manifesto series. After all, we're not grouchy schoolmarm forcing reluctant pupils to learn a mathematical formula—we're fellow students helping each other study so that everyone can discover the answers and succeed on the exam.

Bear One Another's Burdens: Uplifting the Downtrodden with Authentic Depictions of Reality

Encouraging readers might seem easy-peasy. We position a soldier on a battlefield and orchestrate events so that he emerges a hero. He's the wisest, bravest man in his contingent because of his strong faith! Of course we also allow him to accumulate a few scrapes and bruises for good measure. His experiences will assure readers that they can conquer any difficulty, physical or spiritual, right?

Let me introduce one of the saddest products of Christian fiction: the Elsie Dinsmore series. Elsie is a shining role model of all the traits we should exhibit as believers, and the surrounding cast



contrasts starkly with her. They have trouble maintaining self-control, unlike the patient and prim little Elsie who never distrusts God. Their failures highlight her triumphs, epitomized by the final, burning object lesson that unless we emulate Elsie, we'll never be acceptable to God.

Outrageous theological inaccuracies aside, the Elsie Dinsmore series demonstrates how damaging “holier than thou” characters can be. If we open up to a friend about the sins we're wrestling with, or a trial we're going through, and they assert that we're suffering because we're not close enough to God, we'll feel misunderstood. Likewise, when we rely on platitudes to soothe and solve complicated issues, we gloss over the legitimacy of readers' pain. Believers should embolden each other to lay their unworthiness at the feet of Christ, not hide guilt and shame behind a smile.

Look at Dorothea Brooke from *Middlemarch*. Dorothea's naïve, self-righteous ambitions push her to marry a clergyman whose eloquent speeches conceal hypocrisy. When her poor discernment becomes apparent and her future threatens to suffocate her, she grapples with questions and conclusions that a Sunday School pamphlet couldn't cover. We recognize ourselves in her flaws, and her determination to find a purpose amid her predicament inspires us to climb out of our own ditches.

Life is not all rainbows and sunshine. Christians aren't perfect. Following Christ doesn't eliminate hardship. Implying the opposite, whether intentionally or not, discredits the gospel and our attempts to spread it. Discipleship demands candor, not pithiness and Aesop morals.

Fiction Is a Ministry

The Great Commission can be obeyed in our quietest moments, when we're hitting backspace for the hundredth time or researching an obscure historical detail. We're so much more than entertainers. Through the skills God helps us cultivate, we can reach the unreachable. We can speak to people without them ever hearing our voices. We can sow thoughts and ideas in fertile hearts and minds.

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.” Our books lose meaning when we lose our love for others. Although the rules for compassionate storytelling are relatively unambiguous, outreach begins with *us*, not the pages within a glossy spine on a shelf. To share the radical love of Christ with others, we must first rest our own sin-tainted souls in the shadow of His cross.



Chapter Four – Stewarding Your Gifts as a Storyteller Involves More Than Honing Techniques

By Rachel Gilson, Staff Writer

Sometimes the biblical ideals that inspire grand visions for our stories also weigh on us like boulders we must carry uphill. The prospect of imitating God’s design is as challenging as it is invigorating. How are we supposed to influence *one* person, much less the *hundreds* who will read our stories, when our own time, energy, and knowledge feels bleakly scarce?

Over the past few weeks, different members of our team have been exploring the implications that the Dominion Mandate and the Great Commission hold for writers. But emphasizing the significance of those passages without describing the habits we need to put into practice wouldn’t be fair.

However, the application is simpler than we might expect: God has bestowed each of us with gifts according to our needs, and when we learn to recognize His provision, we’ll understand how to multiply it. He never coaxes us to follow in anyone’s footsteps except His own, nor to race against anyone except our old selves. And His grace is sufficient for both.

A Posture of Gratitude

When I’m faced with a daunting task, my first response is usually to lament how ill-equipped I am. *If only I could afford to buy this tool, I would double my productivity. If only my network were broader, I would get more interactions on social media. If only my health were better, my paycheck bigger, my relationships stronger.* Training ourselves to fight self-deprecation is one of the most important steps in stewarding the talents our Master has left in our care.

First Corinthians tells us “it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (v. 4:2). To be faithful means to be steadfast and resolute in our beliefs. It’s an attitude that stems from trusting God, not ourselves. In our competitive culture, we tend to prioritize results, but our book sales, social media followers, and five-star reviews won’t deepen our relationship with the Lord, nor should popularity be our main objective. When I survey the people in my life who display the most confidence, peace, and joy in their work, all of them share a common virtue: gratitude. “In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1 Thess. 5:18).



Gratitude positions us in submission to God and shifts our focus from striving toward the future to thriving in the present.

Maintaining gratitude will grant us stamina—and even direction. It turns our weaknesses into potential and our strengths into action. But how do we identify these assets? Although we'll review a handful over the coming paragraphs, the most powerful one is already within us, and that's where we need to start.

1. Spiritual Resources

As believers, we partake in the wonder and mystery of a relationship with the Holy Spirit. He is our daily, even moment by moment, Comforter who brings us discernment and communion with our Heavenly Father and His Son. We can approach the Father whenever we wish, with worry or praise or any emotion on the spectrum, because prayer is a conversation, not a soliloquy. The Trinity offers us an inexhaustible connection to our Creator.

Creation itself tugs on our souls too. When we're tired and discouraged, a stroll through a garden, park, or beside a country road can rejuvenate us. "Never be within doors when you can rightly be without," as the beloved teacher Charlotte Mason would say. Every vein on a leaf and butterfly wing shows us a glimpse of God's colossal imagination.

As created beings who bear His thumbprint, we also yearn to blend truth and beauty into masterpieces reminiscent of "in the beginning." Poets, painters, musicians, writers, and filmmakers span from one side of the globe to the other and from the pages of history to now. Even fields that we don't view as "artistic," such as athletics and business, brim with physical expression and clever problem solving. No microscopic insect or human profession escapes the effects of intelligent design.

Whenever we're in need of restoration or ideas, we can look to God for limitless support and His handiwork for bountiful examples. Slowing down, watching, and listening is the best strategy for growing our finite perspectives.

2. Life Experience

Trials and blessings shape us. Whether through the formative seasons of childhood, grief, or celebration, we carry with us the unique culmination of the plot points our divine Author planned for us before we were born. No one else can write the stories we can, but that assurance is easy to



downplay when our peers seem more steeped in a certain topic. Assessing our level of understanding is wise, but instead of letting doubts stall us, we should seek out beta readers, workshops, and mentors who can help us convey the themes God has laid on our hearts as authentically as possible.

We may be more perceptive than we give ourselves credit for, though. Perhaps our social sphere enables us to write the opposite gender with increased accuracy, perhaps a friend who attempted suicide enables us to write about mental illness with palpable empathy, or perhaps our jokester siblings enable us to write humor with memorable one-liners. We're apt to assume that anyone could handle these portrayals, but that's because the traits that are second nature to us don't seem special. Although we can't capture everyone's reality, we can introduce readers to a specific character, and that's where we can lean into our own backstories.

Oftentimes we overthink God's instructions. The Great Commission is a tall order, but it's not intended to confuse or intimidate us. If we're faithful in our daily walks with the Lord, managing our time and responsibilities effectively, our life experiences can flow out of and through our communion with Him. We'll have tough days, lazy days, and distracted days when we forget to pray and study Scripture, but He doesn't expect perfection. We can return to obedience and rise with a new morning, asking Him what He's trying to teach us and how we can integrate those lessons into our projects.

3. Jobs and Hobbies

Whether or not we agree with the adage "write what you know," it serves as a reminder that all of us have areas of expertise we can draw from. Of course we can (and should!) research unfamiliar material and request outside feedback, but taking an inventory of the data we've already stored in our minds will reveal possibilities we may have overlooked.

I spent more than six years in healthcare revenue cycle management, which is fancy terminology for the department that ensures hospital claims get paid. Most people's eyes glaze over when I start explaining the role. It wasn't my passion, or relevant to my speculative fiction manuscript, but it did expose me to a corporate buyout, how different personalities behave while in leadership, and various approaches to troubleshooting. I probably won't ever write about a wizard overlord wielding overdue bills against peasant subjects who keep ignoring his summoning spells, but I did meet people who expanded my awareness of human idiosyncrasies and inclinations.



Any real-life observation or detail can be woven into a story, even our favorite recreational activities. When someone loves music, we can sense it with each strum of their guitar. The same is true for authors who incorporate their personal interests into their plots—like Gillian Bronte Adams, whose fondness for horses is evident in *Of Fire and Ash*, or Kristy Cambron, whose fascination with Parisian history undergirds *The Lost Castle*.

4. Relationships

God has surrounded each of us with community, whether a spouse who brainstorms with us, a friend who fangirls over all of our early drafts, or a church that prays for us when rejections and writer's block drag us down. Even if we feel isolated, we lose nothing, aside from pride, when we reach out. I'm always amazed at how many successful people are willing to lend advice. Brandon Sanderson explains why in one of his lectures: "People who are passionate about things generally look forward to the opportunities to be passionate about it in a way that's going to make your story better. So find people and make use of them."

Not *every* relationship needs to revolve around our writing. But when we open up to the people closest to us about our dreams and struggles, we may discover that the support and accountability we've been longing for is more accessible than we realized. And whether we stumble upon our tribe in our backyard or not, online networking can be invaluable too. Instagram is a particularly useful platform for finding writers of similar genres, conferences that coincide with our career goals, freebies packed with tips, and webinars led by award-winning authors and editors. Since God designed humans for companionship, our efforts to connect will bear fruit of one kind or another.

5. Untapped Resources

All of us eventually hit a plateau in our writing where we lack the tools to continue climbing upward, as Daeus talks about in the free mindset course here at StoryEmbers. This is normal, and the sooner we acknowledge that we need help, the quicker we can resume making progress.

As I alluded to before, a wealth of information is available online, waiting for us to click to unlock it. In addition to paid courses, sometimes authors will run promotions, send e-books as a reward for subscribing to their newsletters, or discuss story craft on YouTube. The volume of content can be overwhelming, though, and we need to be choosy about where we're investing our time and money. Narrowing our search to a specific category (such as revisions or characterization) can



reduce aimless scrolling, but we also need to evaluate the credibility of a company or individual we're considering trusting.

Anyone can start up an editing or coaching service. So a proven track record consisting of testimonials, education, and competent communication is essential. Better yet, poll your writer pals for referrals to resources that enriched their journeys.

How to Cope with a Shortage of Resources

The above list is meant to be encouraging—but life can also yank us into rough seasons when we're unable to afford courses and conferences. Or maybe the combination of our location and slow internet prevents us from building friendships with other writers. How do we cross these valleys?

While our circumstances can be complicated, the solution isn't: kneel at the foot of God's throne, thank Him for His generosity, and ask for His continued provision. As we lay our desires in His hands, we need to be watchful, but not impatient, for His answer. He may surprise us.

A year and a half ago, I joined a discipleship group at church to look for an older female mentor. Three weeks in, I discovered that one of the other girls was a fantasy writer who hoped to attend the same writing conference I'd heard about through a mutual favorite author on Instagram. Fast forward a year, and we both hopped on a plane to Realm Makers, where we made lasting memories and new friends. The outcome was unexpected, but the Lord saw my most pressing need.

Putting His Kingdom First

Jesus charged His followers to make disciples of every nation and baptize them “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). What if we treated our stories with the same immersion and reverence? To scatter our ideas in the shadow of the cross, knowing we're sinners stumbling along, and seek His blessing and guidance as we try to honor Him with our lives and our writing?

That may sound like an immense burden, but when we set our sights on His kingdom, we march forward in *His* strength. Allow that to ease the pressure of writing the *right* story the *right* way. Let's be faithful stewards of the abundance around us and embrace the exhilaration of creating in the likeness of God!