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Interview with Sally Lloyd-Jones

Award-Winning Author of The Jesus Storybook Bible, Tiny Bear's Bible, How to Get Married, Being A Pig is Nice, Thoughts to Make Your Heart Sing, Song of the Stars, Bunny's First Spring, The Story of God's Love for You, Baby Wren and the Great Gift, Baby's Hug-A-Bible

1. Why did you decide to write *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name*?

Sometimes I go into Sunday schools and ask two questions of the children "How many people here think you have to be good for God to love you?" and "How many people here think God will stop loving you if you stop being good?" I wrote this book for the children who put up their hands.

Unfortunately, quite a few do. These are not children who don't know the Bible. These are children who know their Bible stories very well, who could answer all the questions, who go to Sunday school, who are "good." But somehow they're missing the most important thing of all, the true heart, what the Bible is all about.

2. What's so unique about *The Jesus Storybook Bible*?

The distinction between a children's Storybook Bible (which is a shorter retelling); and a children's Bible (which is a translation) is probably obvious, nevertheless I think it's crucial to make here because it sometimes gets lost. In a retelling, of a children's Bible Storybook, you have some hard choices to make. You are translating in the sense that you're finding a way to speak children's language; you're putting difficult concepts into words that a child can understand. Unlike a translation, you're leaving bits out, you're selecting stories, keeping some, leaving others out, cutting and paraphrasing.

The Bible is of course an adult book, so in order to make it accessible to children, by its very nature, as you retell it; you're going to have to reduce it down. Unfortunately, the danger is that you reduce it down into moral lessons. The entire Bible is hammered down into one long lesson on obedience. Almost like a Bible Aesop's Fables. Each story becomes a lesson so you can fix your behavior and be a better person. Children are then likely to be left with the impression that they must be good for God to love them. Disastrous and inaccurate. It's as if Jesus never came.

So I wanted to write a children's Bible storybook that first and foremost told the Great Story of the Bible--the story running under all the stories of the Bible like a golden stream--the story of how God loves his children and comes to rescue them. The Story that at the center has a baby, the child upon whom everything would depend--Jesus, the only, real true Hero of the Bible. I wanted a Bible Storybook that was, like the Bible is, not all about us and what we should be doing--but about God, and what he has done.

3. Tell me more about the subtitle "Every Story Whispers His Name"--the idea of children learning the continuity of the Bible. Is that one reason for this book?

Absolutely. If you lose the greater story of the Bible, the danger is you start thinking that it's all about you and what you should or shouldn't be doing. You can start to think it's a book of rules to follow (of course there are rules in it and they show us how life works best but if we could save ourselves by following the rules, Jesus never would have had to come); or you can think it's a book of heroes to copy (clearly that can't be right though. So many of the people God uses are not heroes at all--they're broken sinners!).

But if you see that everything in the Bible is pointing to the greater one, the greater Hero, the greater David, the



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greater Daniel, the Greater Shepherd, the True King--it transforms everything. Suddenly, it's an incredible adventure story, a wonderful love story.

The rescue of Noah and the ark was great--but it was not enough. Isaac was a brave son--but there would be another braver son. The Promised Land was good, but it wouldn't last. The law was good, but it wasn't enough. A greater rescue, a more wonderful home, a more obedient son was coming.

The Bible isn't a book of rules, or a book of heroes. It's most of all a Story, and there's only one hero of that Story. And it isn't us!

It's all about Jesus, it's always all been about Jesus, from the very beginning. Jesus himself said it, didn't he?

"Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." Luke 24:27 (NIV)

4. How do you hope *The Jesus Storybook Bible* inspires others, especially children?

Children's lives are so filled, it seems to me, with rules and lessons and instructions and directions and dos and don'ts. (Of course these are all important in their place; all children need guidance and that's appropriate!) But I don't always see much Grace being extended to children. We know, as adults, where to find Grace in the Bible. We go the Bible for strength and comfort in times of need, don't we? But I worry that children aren't always being offered that refuge, for when they are in need of strength and comfort. I worry that they don't always know that this incredible, outrageous Grace is for them too.

Children need to know that they are loved by the one who made them. No matter what. Always. Forever. Period. And it isn't depending on how good or nice they are. It's always and only depending on Jesus and what he has done for them.

How great if we can help our children understand something of that incredible Agape love God has for us that doesn't depend on us. The unconditional love He has for us. Shown to us in Jesus. The love that will not let us go. Ever.

5. Are you surprised that *The Jesus Storybook Bible* is impacting people of all ages, and not just children?

Now with hindsight I'm not. Now it makes perfect sense. Of course, it would be just like God to use a humble children's book to reach grown ups--even pastors and academics. (Jesus after all has such a high view of children, he told us grown ups to learn from them and become like them, didn't he.) So that makes perfect sense!

And then the whole thing of the book breaking out of any mold--reminds me that God is always doing so much more than we could ask or imagine.

But at first I was very surprised. I never imagined anything of the sort as I was writing it. Which I think is just as well. If I'd been sitting down every morning to write with pastors and theologians crowding around, peering over my shoulder (along with my normal crowd of dysfunctional people who crowd around my chair to criticize me as I write) well, I probably would never have written a word!

It sounds strange, but the consistent reaction from many adults is that it makes them weep. (I think that's good?) Parents are reading it to one another as their devotional before bed. Pastors are using it to help them with their preaching. I heard someone call it, "the Storybook for preachers."



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And of course, families are reading it together. Teenagers and college students have told me they are enjoying it. I heard from one dad that his young boys listen to each of the stories and as they near the end of each story, they whisper just one word: "Jesus." I couldn't ask for a better response. May all of us to be whispering His name in all the stories of our lives!

So the book seems to be breaking out of the traditional audience for a children's Storybook Bible, which I didn't foresee and am thrilled by. I like books that break out of the mold.

With a children's book you must distill everything down to its simplest form. Arthur Schopenhauer's said, "Use ordinary language to say extraordinary things." The Story is extraordinary; using simple language lets it through more powerfully. I think adults are responding because they are hearing the complete plot line of the Bible told in its distilled form, and they are being reminded of the magnificent story that we are all a part of.

6. How has writing *The Jesus Storybook Bible* impacted your life?

In so many ways. In the people I meet (in person, via the web, in the letters they write to thank me, in the moving stories I'm told). It's incredibly humbling and wonderful and encouraging. Many times they make me cry, these stories and letters of the way God has used the book to reach a child.

I've also been impacted just by the experience of writing it. It's God's Glorious Story and my honor and privilege to have been able to retell it for little (and not so little!) ones.

Every story was a great blessing, struggle and challenge to write. All at the same time. And sitting down at my desk every day was like an all out battle and mini desk revival every time! But what a privilege and I'm so grateful.

Working on this book was also one of the hardest things I've ever done. And several times I wanted to give up. How grateful I am that God didn't let me. Another thing God impressed on me throughout was this: just because it's hard doesn't mean you're not meant to be doing it!

From the outset, the Lord gave me a vision for this book that he also gave me the strength to keep hold of no matter what, even when it seemed impossible. I grew through it not just as a writer, but also as a Christian. I learned that despite all the internal resistance that comes up for me whenever I set out to do something new (all those reasons why you can't do this, shouldn't be doing that, should give up, are wasting your time, etc.) my job is to just get out of the way and let the Story through. I can't afford the luxury of self-doubt. Someone said that and I aspire to that.

Certainly by the time I'd finished writing the book, I had a whole new level of awe for the incredible Story I am part of. And I had definitely fallen more in love with its Hero!

Probably all of it is best summed up with one thing that I need to learn to do more of: get out of the way!

7. How has social networking, and blogging in particular, helped spread the word about *The Jesus Storybook Bible*?

I think it has everything to do with it. There is a constant stream of blogs every week since it was published. Once again, I know I could not be doing what I'm doing without people out there doing what they are doing. (So a huge thanks to all you bloggers!)

It's what you always hope for with a book. That people will love it so much they'll feel like it's their own and want to share it with everyone else. How wonderful. And, of course, it is theirs, because it's God's Wonderful Story.



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8. What did you use as guidance, such as Bible stories, devotionals, or readings, when writing *The Jesus Storybook Bible*? Did experiences from your personal life inspire your writing of these stories?

Here I must mention Dr Tim Keller, my pastor in New York (and the first one I acknowledge in the book). His teaching informs every word. He taught me how to find Christ in all the Old Testament scriptures. I could not have written this book without the benefit of his teaching. There's always a point in every sermon he preaches, where everything looks to Jesus. It's the turning point of the sermon. It's the point where Grace comes in.

I also got hold of a tape series from a theological seminary to help me follow the plot line of Redemption from Genesis to Revelation. That gave me all the connections and filled in any gaps between the stories so I could be sure to be getting the thorough story down.

Then I prayed before reading each story in the OT to ask God to show me the angle to use. And then mostly, I let myself be guided by what moved me, knowing that what moved me I would write with passion and tears. As Frost said, "no tears in the writer, no tears in the reader."

For each story I identified what character trait/truth of Jesus to draw out from that story (always many more than one!). I thought about each story as building a portrait of Jesus. I told the story with that trait central in my mind so that the entire story turns on it.

Hans Hoffman said: "The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak," I keep that taped in front of my desk.

9. How do you feel about working with such talented artists-Jago and David Suchet?

Incredibly lucky! (Except, of course, that I don't believe in luck.) Seriously, I'm humbled and honored and extremely grateful. I know that I could not do what I'm doing without the wonderful team I'm a part of.

In an illustrated book the illustration is like the front door; it's what gets someone to pick up the book in the first place. Without compelling illustration, the words wouldn't even be read. The words can't do their job unless someone one picks up the book. Thanks to Jago they are picking up the book! But then the illustration has to do more than that, they have to keep a child's interest. The words need the illustrations; the illustrations need the words.

And as far as audio books? Having a talent as huge as David Suchet to read your words ...? I have to keep pinching myself. An audio book is only as good as the voice and the storyteller. People will simply switch off the audio if the voice isn't compelling and again, the words won't stand a chance.

So you see, as the writer I'm extremely indebted to both Jago and David and utterly dependent on both of them:--it's the illustration that gets the book picked up in the first place and that keeps the reader reading; and the voice of the actor that engages and transports and holds the listener. Either way, the words won't stand a chance without those two.

10. How do you think the narration with David Suchet in the Deluxe Edition will add to *The Jesus Storybook Bible*?

In some ways I think it's the ideal way it should be experienced--hearing it read to you.

As with most children's books (some would argue all books!) the words are written to be read aloud.



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Then of course the Bible itself is after all part of an oral tradition, it came to us initially through the spoken word. How fitting then to hear the wonderful story of God's love through a voice. And what a voice! With the book open in front of you seeing Jago's images and hearing David's voice reading to you--heaven!

Also, a friend shared a quote that became a central to me as I wrote the book. He told me that when Luther was translating the Bible (and in some ways as you're retelling the story of the Bible for children, that's what you're doing, you're "translating" the adult book, the Bible, into words a child can understand) Luther debated what kind of language to use. Should he go into the universities and listen to the professors and use their lofty words? No, he decided, he would go into the homes and listen to a mother speaking to her children.

That was the language he was after, a mother speaking to her children. So that became the tone I was after in the book. Speaking was always central to the whole endeavor!

Funnily enough, when I met David at the recording, one of the very first things he said about the text and how he was going to approach it in his recording was "This is me reading to my daughter." How confirming that was!

11. What are your hopes for the *The Jesus Storybook Bible* in the future?

That more and more children will get to hear the Story that belongs to them. So they can know God loves them with a Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love.

12. Are there any future plans for *The Jesus Storybook Bible*?

There are some very exciting rumblings about a 5th Anniversary Edition of the book where I'd get to write some more stories and a curriculum and some other wonderful things that are probably a little too early to share.

13. Why did you focus your career on writing for children?

I don't know that I set out to do that. That makes it sound like I knew what I was doing all along!

I kind of stumbled into it and discovered it. When I had my first job as an editorial assistant at Oxford University Press (in Oxford), I was working in the school text books division. Down the corridor was the children's book dept and I kept hearing all this loud gaffawing and howling laughter and fun and high jinks coming from there. And I think I decided then--that's the area to be in! And my next job I moved into children's publishing and worked on children's books.

As an editor, though, I always felt a bit as if I was on the wrong side of the desk. It took a lot longer for me to realize writing was a possibility for me. And funnily enough my first book, *Handbag Friends*, was published by that same editor, David Fickling, who was doing all the laughing and loud gaffawing down the corridor that had attracted me in the first place!

Plus, the other thing that works so well for me with children's books is I don't believe I've really truly completely properly grown up, which maybe helps...

Whatever, I'm so grateful. It is an honor to write for children. Writing for children I am very aware is a high calling and carries with it a great responsibility.

14. What impacted you as a child for the Lord? When did you become a Christian? Is there anything you'd suggest to parents/aunts/uncles/grandparents to do to help kids love Jesus at an early age?

I count it a great honor that I became a Christian as a small child. (I was four!) I don't remember a time when Jesus



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wasn't my best friend. This was radically real to me. I prayed. I had conversations with Jesus. I knew Jesus was with me when I went to boarding school at eight.

First off, I don't begin to presume to tell parents or grandparents or teachers or anyone else what is best for their child or any child, but perhaps I can just share some of the things I have found to be important when speaking to children in my own work (for what they're worth--perhaps blindingly obvious, but steaming on regardless!):

- Extending Grace to children and encouraging them (not only telling them and instructing them and trying to corral them and being their policeman!)
- Speaking to children on their level (not patronizing them, they can sniff it a mile off and don't like it anymore than we do!)
- Giving children credit: they can understand more than we assume--they may not understand every word. Some things may be above them. Why not let them reach up, stand on tiptoes to understand. Better that than dum everything down out of a fear they won't understand. I love what Madliene L'Engle said, "When I have something important to say, I put it in a children's book."
- Staying humble before them: Jesus has a very high opinion of children. He even told us to learn from them. Children can teach us a lot.
- Letting them see our weakness (not pretending you're perfect--which just gives them that impression again that it's about being good and then God will love you); it's not about not having weaknesses, it's about how you deal with your weakness, how you bring them to God, how you trust the Lord when you're scared, that's what will bless them and help them and teach them and equip them in their own lives
- But most of all, in all your dealings with children, trying to constantly keep the focus on the Story--and on the one true Hero. Let them meet Jesus. He's the one who will capture their hearts. And change their lives.

Because rules can't change you; but a story can.

15. What's one of your favorite stories in *The Jesus Storybook Bible*? Which one best showcases the "Every Story Whispers His Name" subtitle?

Favorite story?

So hard. I love them all for different reasons. It's what parents say about their children, isn't it? But if I had to choose, I suppose one of my favorites is the story of Leah and Rachel "The Girl No One Wanted." I wrote it for one of my nieces who was having a terrible time in the school playground. She was only about 5 or 6 and already being called names. And she was suffering from a horrible idea about herself. Feeling ugly. Unloved. Not wanted. Left out. The whole deal. And I hated hearing that. So I thought maybe this story of the one God chose, might help her (and other little ones like her) see it differently: see the truth and know that her under cover identity, no matter what anyone in any playground said, was "Princess"--the daughter of a King--and He had chosen her and wanted her and said she was beautiful. (Which, of course, she is anyway--inside and out!)

But in terms of which story is really my favorite--maybe can I say what children always say when asked this question (hating to leave anyone out): "They're all my favorites!"



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Story that best show-cases the byline: "Every Story Whispers His Name":

That's hard too! Because I didn't really even begin to touch on all the various parallels and pointing to Jesus that happens in Scripture. But one of the ones I think that struck me the most was Abraham and Isaac. I was blown away when I saw the many parallels in that story to God and His Only Son. God, the Father whose only son climbed the same mountain with wood on his back, but who didn't get to keep his son, whose only son wasn't spared, whose son became the sacrifice provided just in time, the sacrifice that lets us all go free, that lets us be spared. His son wasn't spared so we could be. It is heart-breaking. It really opens your eyes to the incredible love story we are a part of!

16. What titles have you released since *The Jesus Storybook Bible*?

Baby's Hug-A-Bible comes out early next year (an adorable cuddly little bible in verse for the tiniest ones).

How to Get Married: By Me, The Bride, (Schwartz & Wade/RH US, April 09) Illus: Sue Heap

Being A Pig is Nice: A Child's Eye View of Manners, (Schwartz & Wade/RH US, May 09) Illus: Dan Krall

The Jesus Storybook Bible, Illus: Jago

Thoughts to Make Your Heart Sing, Illus: Jago

Song of the Stars, Illus: Alison Jay

Bunny's First Spring, Illus: David McPhail

Tiny Bears Bible, Illus: Igor Oleynikov

The Story of God's Love for You, Illus: Jago

Baby Wren and the Great Gift (RH US, April 2016)

17. Where can we find more information about you and your work?

- My site: www.sallylloyd-jones.com
- My blog: www.sallylloyd-jones.blogspot.com
- By following me on twitter: www.twitter.com/sallylloydjones or www.twitter.com/JSBBible

Joining the fan page on Facebook: www.facebook.com/SallyLloydJonesFanPage and www.facebook.com/JesusStorybookBible

About the Author:

Sally Lloyd-Jones is a leading writer of inspirational books for children, with an expertise in conveying biblical truth to young children. She is the author of three bestselling children's Bibles, including the Gold Book Award-winning *Baby's First Bible* and, most recently, the Moonbeam Award Winner - *The Jesus Storybook Bible*. She has written many picture books for children, including *Handbag Friends*, *Time to Say Goodnight* and the critically acclaimed, *How to Be a Baby: By Me, the Big Sister*. A native of England, Sally lives in New York City, and can be found at www.sallylloyd-jones.com.



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who speak English as a second language. Visit Zonderkidz on the Internet at www.zonderkidz.com.

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