



Telling Your Story

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

"Agrippa said to Paul, 'You are permitted to speak for yourself.' Then Paul stretched out his hand and proceeded to make his defense: 'In regard to all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, I consider myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I am about to make my defense before you today; especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently. So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem; since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion. And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day. And for this hope, O King, I am being accused by Jews. Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead? So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities. While so engaged as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, at midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' And I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified

by faith in Me." So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance. For this reason some Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death. So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.' While Paul was saying this in his defense, Festus said in a loud voice, 'Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad.' But Paul said, 'I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth. For the king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do.' Agrippa replied to Paul, 'In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian.' And Paul said, 'I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains.' The king stood up and the governor and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them, and when they had gone aside, they began talking to one another, saying, 'This man is not doing anything worthy of death or imprisonment.' And Agrippa said to Festus, 'This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar'" (Acts 26).

Every Thursday morning I gather with about 75 men in what we call Men's Fraternity. Every other week one of the men gets up and tells his story. These stories are more powerful than anything else we do. They have a way of sticking in our minds. As we hear someone else's story, we can't help but reflect on our own story. As we make those connections we learn about ourselves and the ways God is at work in our own lives.

Christians love to tell stories. What we call "the Gospel" is really a story—a true story—about God's relationship with humanity; about how we were lost through our rebellion and how he chose to rescue us and bring us home by offering up his only Son. It's a great story

we love to tell. We even have an old song about that: "I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory, to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love."

We also love to tell our story. We love to tell about how we came into a relationship with Jesus ourselves. We call this our "testimony." Christians have been sharing their testimony for many years, and for good reason. There's just something powerful about it. It's hard to argue with someone's own story.

These testimonies can take many shapes and sizes, but usually our story of salvation has three parts. Part One: Life before Christ: "I was a miserable sinner." Part Two: How I met Christ: "I found Jesus and he saved me." Part three: Life after meeting Christ: "Now I'm happy and fulfilled." It's pretty simple. From time to time there may be some variation, but that's usually how it goes.

I. Paul tells his story before Agrippa and others.

In Acts 26 we hear the apostle Paul sharing his salvation story before King Herod Agrippa II and several other important people. Let me give you some background. Paul was in Roman custody and had to be moved from Jerusalem to Caesarea for protection from the Jews. Although it was clear he had done nothing worthy of death or imprisonment, he had been held in Caesarea for two years. First, he was held in custody by Felix, the governor of Judea, and then by his successor, Festus. Festus wasn't sure what to do with Paul and might have let him go but Paul appealed to Caesar. When a Roman citizen like Paul appealed to Caesar, the law required he be given that right. But before Festus sent Paul to Rome, he needed some help on what to write in his report to the Emperor about Paul. So when King Herod Agrippa II paid Festus a visit he asked him for some advice because Agrippa was supposed to be an expert on the Jews. When Agrippa heard about Paul's case, he wanted to see Paul for himself and hear what he had to say.

So amid much pomp and pageantry, Paul appears before Agrippa, his sister Bernice, Festus, and many of the military officials and leading people of the city. And when Paul gets the opportunity to speak, he just tells his story. In many ways, his story follows that familiar pattern. He tells of his life before Christ. He tells about how he met Christ in a personal way. He talks about his life after meeting Christ. It all sounds pretty familiar. Or does it? If we look just a little closer we can see some unusual things about Paul's story. We'll see some things that might make us think again about our own story.

II. Paul's telling of his story teaches us about our own story.

A. Paul was not miserable: The first thing I notice is the way Paul describes his life before Christ. Paul never says he was miserable before he came to Christ. He doesn't wallow in all the creative ways he found to sin. As a matter of fact, he makes it clear that he was well known as a young man by his countrymen. He had everything going for him. He was the kind of young man that stands out from the crowd. Today he might have been a National Merit Scholar or Division One recruit. People would look at him and say, "Man, he's going places. He's got talent. Have you seen him

throw a football?" Or "Have you seen his SAT score?" In Paul's case it would have been more like, "What a fine young man. So devoted to his faith. So committed to our law. He's going places, you know. He's going to be a Pharisee, and he'll be a fine one at that." At a young age he would have traveled from his home town of Tarsus to Jerusalem for his studies. It was the ancient equivalent to an Ivy League Prep School. This is the kind of guy Paul was. By all accounts he was a great success.

Someone might look at this and say, "But look at what he did to Christians." He says he did many things hostile to the name of Jesus. He locked his followers in prison. When Stephen was stoned, Paul was there, giving hearty approval. He was "furiously enraged" at them and chased them down into foreign cities. It sounds like Paul was such a miserable sinner, but you have to remember that in his own mind he was serving God. He was doing good. This was an expression of his zeal for his faith. This was something you put on your resume.

This might be more like your story as well. Maybe you've never related to those stories. "I found Jesus after years of drug addiction and sexual promiscuity." But, the pathway to genuine salvation can often lead through the land of high performance, committed religiosity, playing by the rules and always trying to do the right thing. For some, Christianity is just another arena in which they can show off their moral talent. But it gets tiring. And pretty soon you begin to see that sin is far deeper than any outward behavior you can manage. Like pesky weeds growing in your garden, you discover things sprouting in your heart, things like jealousy, envy, resentment, greed and even rage. And you can't control it. It's when you come to the end of your own goodness and you stop striving to earn your way to heaven like you strove to get into that right college that you discover a real Savior—Jesus.

B. Paul says more about Jesus' life than death: Another thing about Paul's story is when he defines what he really believes in he says more about the life of Jesus than his death. In v.6 he speaks of being on trial for "**the hope of the promise made to our fathers.**" He says in v.7, "**For this hope, O King, I am being accused.**" What is this hope and promise all about? It's about the resurrection of Jesus; his life. So he asks in v.8, "**Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead?**" I mean, that's what all Pharisees believe, right, O King Agrippa, expert on the Jews? So the weight of the content of his message is on the resurrection. Even in v.23 when he speaks of the suffering of Christ he immediately follows that with more about the resurrection: "**the Christ was to suffer,**" he says, "**and by reason of His resurrection from the dead He should be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.**"

I certainly don't mean to downplay the cross. We need the cross. We love to sing, "Amazing love, how can it be, that thou my God should die for me." All of that is right. But here is my point: Without the resurrection the cross means nothing. The resurrection was God the Father's "Yes!" to His Son's sacrifice. It was God's affirmation that the death of Jesus really did constitute payment in full for your sins and mine. That's why Paul can say in 1 Cor. 15 that

if Christ was not raised you're still in your sins. The cross without the resurrection is nothing more than a tragic story about a really good man who was willing to sacrifice his life for what he believed. There is no hope in that. And, excuse me, but that's really not all that unusual. Lots of people have done that. But no one has been raised up like he was.

So when you tell your story, don't forget His story. After all, it's not really about you; it's about Him. And don't just talk about his death; talk about his life; talk about the fact that he conquered death and he lives today to give that same resurrected life to those who trust in him. You see, what people need today is hope. You can't live without hope. That's why there are so many people today who are lost and despairing—there is nothing to live for but the moment and that gets old. But when you have the hope of the promise of resurrection, you have a reason to live. You have purpose. That's what people need today.

C. Paul didn't find Jesus; Jesus found him: The third thing about Paul's story is that he didn't go looking for Jesus and find him. It was the other way around; Jesus found him. He says, "I was going to Damascus to track down a few more Christians and haul back to prison. It was in the middle of the day when I saw a light and I heard a voice: '**Saul, Saul why do you persecute me? It's hard for you to kick against the goads.** You've been fighting me off, Saul, and you're getting tired of it.' And then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said, 'I'm Jesus whom you are persecuting. You think it's those Christians you're fighting, but it's me. I take it personally. They're MY people. I'm in them and they're in me.'"

That was it. That's all he needed to know. You say, "I found Jesus. I just decided one day I needed the Lord and I went seeking after him and found him." It doesn't work that way. The fact is you were dead in your sins and last time I checked dead people don't seek anything. But what really happened is the Lord Jesus sought you. He began to poke you and prod you as with a sharp stick. You felt those pokes and prods in your conscience as he gave you a heightened awareness of your own selfishness and sin. And you felt it in a hunger for something more than all the pleasures this world could offer. You felt it as you sat at your Grandma's funeral and wondered if this is all there is—75 years and then you're gone for good. You see, that wasn't you seeking him; that was him seeking you. And the glory is that he found you and introduced himself to you so that now you know him as your Savior and Lord.

When you tell your story, remember that. Remember that he sought you first, and any seeking you did was only in response to him. It's like in the aftermath of the collapse of the World Trade Center. Rescue workers frantically looked through the rubble for signs of life. Often they would call out for those who might be buried alive. If there was anyone in there, they could never find their own way out. They depended on others seeking them. Jesus said, "**The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost**" (Lk.19:10). The wonderful thing about knowing that is, like Paul, he sought you out when you were in total rebellion against him. And if he sought you out then, how much more will he continue his gracious work in you now that you're his. That's what Paul says in Romans 5:10, "**For if while we**

were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." In other words if that's how he treats his enemies, think how he'll treat his friends! When you tell your story, remember that he found you when you were his enemy.

D. Paul's conversion didn't make his life easier: The fourth thing that strikes me as different in Paul's story is that he doesn't say anything about how wonderful and easy his life became after becoming a Christian. Of course we know all that Paul had been through. He speaks in v.21 of his captors trying to put him to death. Here he was standing before Agrippa and the whole lot of them in chains. By now he had been in prison for two years. Life was much easier for Paul apart from Christ. And yet in the midst of this he can also testify to the fact that God had been there for him. He says in v.22, "**...having obtained help from God, I stand...**" So there is no question that for Paul, while life may have become much harder and more painful as a result of meeting Christ, there WAS sweetness and a joy and a sense of God being there for him through thick and thin.

You might feel like Paul. You look at your life in Christ and compare it with your life before Christ and if you're totally honest you have to admit that life was easier before. You didn't have this nagging burden of having to do the right thing. You didn't have to deal with family members who think you've gone off the deep end. You could stay home and watch football on Sunday mornings. Sometimes we wonder if life is like this because we've done something wrong. But remember this is what the Lord told us would happen. He didn't sugarcoat what it means to follow him. He said, "**A slave is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you**" (Jn.15:20). So if you feel a little picked on, welcome to the family.

We do a great disservice when we tell our story and we leave the hard part out. We need to be honest with people. Following Jesus will not be easy. There will be hardships you would have avoided without him. But as great as the pain might be, greater still is his presence. You see, if you look at your life in Christ with the right set of eyes you can say as Paul said to Agrippa, "Through it all, God has helped me. He's been there for me." When you tell your story, tell them that as well.

E. Paul's story was as much about a call as a conversion: Perhaps the reason things were harder before than after is that his story was as much about a call as a conversion. Did you notice that? We often say, "Well, I became a Christian here. And then a few years later I got a call to do this or that." This is the fifth thing: Paul's conversion and call are wrapped up into one. Look again at what Jesus said to him that day on the road to Damascus. First he says "**Stand on your feet.**" In other words, "I'm about to give you your marching orders." Here they are: "I'm making you a minister and a witness. I'm going to send you to both Jews and Gentiles and here is what you're to do: open their eyes so they can turn from darkness to light and the control of Satan to God." That's quite a mission! How would he do that? By preaching the gospel. And what happens when they turn? What does God do? Paul says he will

forgive their sin and give them an inheritance to share with others who are part of the same family.

Then Paul says in v.19, **"So King Agrippa, I wasn't disobedient to the heavenly vision..."** That was his call. And he was obedient to that call. What's your call? We're not all called to do exactly what the apostle Paul did. But all of us like him are called to be a "minister" and "witness." We have to be obedient to that calling. That's part of our story.

Mike Breaux tells the story of when his daughter Jodie answered God's call to go into missions work: "During her junior year of high school, Jodie struggled to find a faith of her own. She wanted to know in her heart that all of what she'd been taught to believe was true and that Jesus Christ was real. Honestly, she was headed down a dark road. But God pursued her down that road. She eventually found a faith of her own, and when she graduated from high school, she said, 'I don't think God wants me to go to college right now. I want to take a year to go to Haiti, and I want to serve people in a medical mission down there.'

"I said, 'Are you sure you want to do this? Jodie, it's 3,000 miles away from home. It's AIDS-infested and the poorest country in the western hemisphere. And do you know it's controlled by the voodoo religion?'

"I know all that,' she said. 'But I feel like God wants me to go and help those people.'

"I said, 'Okay. If that's what you want to do, we'll make it happen.' One of the hardest days of my life was putting my little girl on an airplane and watching it lift off...

"One night I got an e-mail from Jodie. She wrote: 'Dad, tonight has been the most remarkable night of my life. I got called out to this hut to deliver a baby.... I'd never done this by myself, but I was the only one around. They called me, and I get to this hut, and there's this naked, screaming lady on the dirt floor. I got a flashlight, and I'm thinking, Here I am, 18 years old, and I'm in a hut in a third-world country with a naked, screaming, pregnant lady. I have a flashlight, and I don't know what I'm doing—but I'm here. To make matters worse, this lady from the voodoo religion walked into the hut, dressed in her red and blue voodoo garb, and began to chant some voodoo incantation in Creole. She put some kind of oil on the lady's head, and when she started to walk away from me and the woman, she stopped at the woman's belly, put some other kind of salve there, and walked the opposite direction—all the while chanting this Creole spell. I didn't know what to do. She stood at the head of this woman and stared a hole through me. When I was getting ready to deliver this baby, I just looked back at her, and I started singing. I knew she didn't understand English, but I just started singing: "Our God is an awesome God, he reigns from heaven above, with wisdom, power, and love, our God is an awesome God."'

"Jodie said that the voodoo lady became completely unglued. She grabbed all of her stuff and ran out of the hut. Jodie wrote, 'That night I knew that that baby was going to be born with the blessing of God and not the curse of Satan.'"

Her father writes, "As I read Jodie's e-mail, my fatherly side thought, You get on a plane tomorrow! What are you doing in a hut with a voodoo woman in the first place? But then my heart beat so fast for her as her brother in Christ. I thought, Way to go, Jodie! Way to make a difference with your life! Way to stop floating around accidental-like! Way to put your life in the hands of the destiny-maker! Way to make a splash! Who knows who that little baby she delivered that night is going to grow up to touch...all because of one courageous girl who said, 'Okay, God, I want to put my life in your hands; I want to make a difference.'"

You see, like Jodie we're called as ministers and witnesses and we need to be obedient to that calling. And, frankly, if we fail to do that, we're the ones missing out. Is your life just a little boring? Is it like that movie *Groundhog Day*, just the same thing day after day, no sense of adventure? Have you forgotten that you're called on a mission? Have you forgotten that part of our story?

CONCLUSION

One of the most interesting things about Paul's story here in Acts 26 is that he didn't get to finish it. Festus interrupted him and said, "Paul, you've gone mad! You've been reading too many books." But Paul says, "I'm not mad. I'm completely sober. I'm talking about things that have happened right out in the open for all to see." And then he asked Agrippa, "Do you believe the prophets? Come on, I know you do." So Paul isn't just telling his story because it feels good. This isn't some kind of emotional catharsis. He wants Agrippa to have a story, too. But Agrippa says, "Paul, in such a short time do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian? I mean really, Paul. You're not dealing with a lightweight here." And Paul says, "My desire is that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains." In other words, "I want you all to have a story like mine. You can leave the chains out, but everything else is good." That's a bold thing to say to a king.

And that's where Paul's story leaves us. It leaves us on one side of this or the other. Either we have a story or we don't and we need to get a story. If we have a story, we need to tell that story, keeping in mind all that Paul has taught us here. But if you don't have a story, if you can't really say in some sense with Paul, "I saw a light. I heard a voice," then you need to do the very thing Paul tells us to do in v.17. You need to turn from darkness to light and from the control of Satan to God. The Bible calls that repentance. And you need to believe the promise, **"that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."** (Rom. 10:9).

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