



Steve Yeschek lost his sister, Judy, after a five-year battle with cancer. She was a woman who, as Steve described her, was a party animal. She was someone everybody loved because she exuded excitement and a thrill for life.

Steve is a believer and when he tried to share Jesus with her over the years, she would laugh it off and keep partying. But at the age of 44, her world caved in. She found out she had breast cancer. She later learned her husband had cancer, too. Then she discovered her husband was having an affair. He then announced he didn't love her anymore and left her.

It was in that context that she began to ask eternal questions and soon trusted Jesus as her Savior. From that time until her death, God's purpose became her priority. She now approached her new life in Christ with the same gusto she lived life as an unbeliever. She boldly shared her faith even as she was undergoing surgery after surgery, praying for a miraculous healing from the Lord.

Judy ultimately came to see that the greater miracle would be for her friends and family to come to know Christ. Even as she struggled for every breath, she talked her way out of the hospital so she could be baptized. She invited everyone she knew to come to her baptism service where she shared her story. Her 84-year-old father came to faith in Christ that night and was baptized—along with her ex-husband, a number of nieces, a college roommate, her aunt, and her sister.

Ten days later, Judy died. Even still, more people were impacted. When Steve read the message she had prepared for her own funeral service, another 100 people prayed to receive Christ that day.

Sometimes the most powerful proof for the truth of the gospel is our own story. Our story may not be so dramatic; our witness may not impact so many people, but our story can still make a difference.

I believe this is why the apostle Paul tells his own story time and time again. If you read the book of Acts you'll see three times he told the story of how Christ had met him on the Damascus road and turned his life around. It seems Paul never tired of telling his story.

He tells his story in the book of Galatians as well. Two weeks ago we started a series on Galatians called Freedom from Religion.

In this letter Paul defends the gospel against those who tried to add to it. He preached that salvation was found in Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone. There is nothing you can add to what Christ accomplished through his death and resurrection to be made right with God. But a group of teachers had come into Galatia and said, "What Paul preaches is fine, but it's incomplete. If you Gentiles want the full gospel, if you want to be fully acceptable to God, you have to keep our Jewish laws." In other words, it's not Christ alone, it's Christ plus the law. They didn't subtract Jesus from the equation, they just added a few laws.

They backed this up with three arguments. First, they attacked Paul. They said Paul wasn't a real full-fledged apostle: "He's a Johnny-come-lately apostle. He never knew Jesus face to face and so how can we trust what he says? This gospel of free grace is something he must have made up himself. He didn't get it from God; he got it somewhere else." Paul deals with that in chapters 1-2. Second, they said Paul's gospel is inconsistent with Old Testament Scripture and the way God has always worked: "We Jews have been worshipping God and keeping his laws for 1,000 years. God doesn't change. This is how he's always worked." Paul deals with that in chapters 3-4. Finally, they said Paul's gospel will result in people just going out and living immoral lives: "God is holy. If we throw out the law, anything goes. People will go wild!" Paul will deal with that in chapters 5-6.

So here in chapters 1-2 Paul takes on this first argument that he's not the real thing and neither is his gospel. How do you think Paul deals with this? How would you deal with it? The way he deals with it is to tell his own story. He gives his own faith-story and through that he hopes to prove that not only is he a true apostle, but the gospel he preaches is true as well. It wasn't given to him by man but by Jesus himself.

1. Our story is powerful proof of the truth of the gospel.

A. The origin of the gospel.

Paul states his thesis in verses 10–12: *"For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ. For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."*

Paul says the reason why his gospel is true is that it's not "according to man." In other words, it's not a human invention. He says, "I preached it but I didn't invent it." But then he goes even further and says he didn't even receive it from a man, as if it was already an accepted thing that was just being passed on to him. Nor was he taught it by human teachers. This, by the way, is how **we** get the gospel. It's handed down to us. We learn it from others. But not Paul. For him it came through "a revelation of Jesus Christ." Jesus himself revealed it to him. It wasn't an invention of his own or a tradition handed down to him by others; it was a revelation from Jesus. He's talking about what happened to him on the Damascus road when he met Jesus and saw him for who he truly was and understood salvation was found in him alone.

The whole reason Paul says this is he cares about the truth of the gospel. Two versions of the gospel were being offered in Galatia: Paul's and the Judiazers'. Paul doesn't say, "Hey, whatever works best for you is fine. Let's all try to get along. After all, we all believe in Jesus." No. He was passionate about people getting the gospel right. He was even willing to offend people in the process. That's why he says, "Who am I trying to please now? I'm not trying to please people. I'm a bondservant of Christ." The false teachers said Paul was a people-pleaser who trimmed the law from the gospel to make it more pleasing to man. They saw him like a car salesman who cuts all the extras away to make the car more affordable to the penny pinching customer. Paul says, "No way. I'm standing on the truth and if you guys don't like it, so be it."

We should be people who care about truth, especially the truth of the gospel. It ought to matter enough we're even willing to stand for it when others may not like it. That doesn't mean we should try to offend people. But there always comes that point in which our stand for truth might be offensive. You see, our culture communicates that truth doesn't matter. Everywhere you turn people express opinions. Everyone has some gospel to share. It may be "prosperity living" or "the art of Zen" or "the power of self assertion" or a hundred other things. The world is full of opinions about the good life. But how often do you hear "this is true and that's not true"? Not very often because most people think one opinion is as good as the next. Truth just doesn't matter that much and as soon as anyone claims to have the truth they're labeled as arrogant and narrow. But for us the question of truth must matter terribly. That doesn't mean any one of us has a perfect "corner" on the truth but we do contend for the truth. There is a lot at stake, so much so that Paul could say up in v.9 that if anyone distorts this truth they can go to hell.

Sometimes the truth of the gospel is seen most clearly when contrasted with other beliefs. Deepak Chopra was praising the Dalai Lama as one of the world's most influential leaders, and wrote in *Time* magazine: "The most inspiring thing the Dalai Lama ever

told me was to ignore all organized faiths and keep to the road of higher consciousness. Without relying on religion, we look to common sense, human experience and the findings of science for understanding." The Dalai Lama sounds wise, but his advice means you ignore the Christian faith because it's an organized religious faith; you ignore the church of Jesus Christ, which Jesus said he would build; and you reject the gospel because it flies in the face of all common sense, human experience, and science. The gentle-looking man in the maroon robe is offering another gospel. We can't just say, "Okie-dokie, whatever works for him." No! Part of why we're the light of the world and the salt of the earth is because we care about truth.

B. The power of the gospel.

But let's get back to Paul's story. Paul next reaches even further back in his story. He wants to prove his gospel is true by showing how it reversed the entire direction of his life. Look what he says in verses 13–17: *"For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus."*

Paul gives a picture of himself before, during and after his encounter with Christ. In one sense he was unique. We can't make the very same claims Paul did. We haven't seen the risen Christ like he did. We didn't get the gospel directly from God like he did. But, like Paul, the gospel transforms our life. And if you've experienced that, you can use your story just like Paul did to back it up. Sometimes the most powerful proof for the truth of the gospel is our own story. Paul shows us there are several elements common to the person who has become free in Christ; elements to consider when you tell your story.

First, there is your life before Christ. Twice he refers to his past "in Judaism" to speak of his Jewish belief and way of life. But he wasn't just an ordinary Jew. He says he persecuted the church of God "beyond measure." That means way beyond what was expected; to the extreme. He wasn't just trying to cause a little harm, he was trying to destroy it; to stamp it out. And that was because he was "extremely zealous" for his Jewish traditions. He was way ahead of his contemporaries. He graduated with a 4.8 GPA, took all the AP courses, had the lead in the school play, ran on the track team and volunteered at the homeless shelter. His parents had one of those bumper stickers that said, "Proud parent of an honor student at the Future Pharisee Academy of

Jerusalem." It's like he says, "You guys want to talk about the law? If anyone could glory in the law it's me. No one was as zealous as I was."

Part of our story is what we were before meeting Christ. You don't have to make up any stories about what a criminal you were; just tell the truth. You might have grown up in Sunday School, accepted Jesus at the age of four, and always tried to be good. Remember that for Paul his lostness was seen in his zeal to be good. But his world orbited around him, and so did yours.

But then he tells of what happened during his conversion. Notice the focus has changed. Before, Paul was the focus, "I persecuted...I tried to destroy...I was advancing...I was more zealous..." But now the focus is all on God. It's not about what he had done but what God had done. He says, "God set me apart from my mother's womb. God called me through his grace. God was pleased to reveal his Son in me." He never even says, "I decided to accept Jesus into my life." God is now the subject of all the verbs. Paul is no longer the one who did things for God; God did it all for him. We want to say, "But Paul, you must have contributed something. Come on, wasn't your excellent Jewish pedigree and education an asset to God? How about your amazing dedication and zeal?" No! If you tell your story in such a way that you get any of the credit, you're not sharing the gospel.

Paul tells us what happens in every conversion including yours and mine. First, God set us apart from his mother's womb. Even though Paul's former life was set against God, God was at work from the moment of his conception. God's choice always comes before our choice. Our story is not incidental or accidental; we were set apart; we were pre-loved. Then he calls us by his grace. Every conversion is a response to a call. And the basis of the call is God's grace. God doesn't go looking for someone who suits his purposes and then picks them because he thinks they'll do a good job. He comes to us and says, "Come to me. I love you. I sent my Son for you. I'm ready to forgive you and cleanse you and make you my child." Next, he gives us an inward revelation: "God was pleased to reveal his Son to me." We don't see the risen Christ but there is an inward light that shines in our dark heart to give us "*the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ*" (2 Cor. 4:6). Conversion involves illumination. With our hearts we see things we never saw before. Finally, this revelation was given "so that I might preach him among the gentiles." His conversion included a commission. You can't meet Christ and be left the same; your purpose changes; your mission changes.

Paul's mission was to preach to the Gentiles. It was very specific. What's your mission? If we aim at nothing we'll hit nothing. What are the spiritual gifts God has given you? What are the concerns and passions he's placed on your heart? Last week Eric Sorenson challenged us to set our minds on things above rather than earthly things. Do you have a mission that's focused on

making an eternal impact? That may look different for all of us. Your mission may be to be an example of a Godly man or woman in the marketplace. It may be to pour yourself into your two pre-school kids so they'll follow Christ. It may be to help the homeless in the name of Jesus. It may be to win your fellow athletes to Christ. If you don't have a mission, start praying for one. Ask yourself, what burden has God placed on my heart? What do the people who know me the best say about my gifts and talents?

But that's not all. Paul also tells of what happened after his conversion. Remember he's trying to prove that his gospel came from God and not from man. So he says after his experience on the road to Damascus he didn't consult flesh and blood; he didn't run up to Jerusalem to sit at the feet of guys like Peter and James. He went to Arabia and then to Damascus for three years. We don't know all that took place during those three years. Some believe Paul was tutored personally by Jesus. What we do know is that those were hidden years. In our day, when a guy like Paul is converted we put him on the *Larry King Live* show or on the *700 Club* or at least in one of our pulpits. We should learn from Paul that young converts, no matter how talented and famous they are, need time to be hidden from the public eye to deepen and mature in their faith. Do you have an "Arabia" experience in your story, a time when you were out of the limelight but deepening in Christ in ways that can only happen in secret? That's part of your story.

c. His visit to Jerusalem.

But Paul takes this even further. He's shown how the gospel changed his life but now he wants to stress even further that he was independent of the apostles. So he gives sworn testimony about his first encounter with a couple of them. Look what he says in verses 18–24: "*Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy." And they were glorifying God because of me.*"

He admits he went to Jerusalem but only after three years. When he got there he only saw two apostles: Peter and James. He didn't go to learn from them; he just went "to become acquainted with them." And he was only there for 15 days. It's like he's saying, "Listen, how could I possibly have gotten my gospel from the Jerusalem apostles? I went to see them only after three years; I saw only two of them, and it lasted only two weeks! And just in case you don't believe me, I'll say that under sworn testimony!"

To seal his argument he says he went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. These areas are way north of the influential churches

of Judea where the apostles might have been hanging out. The people in those churches had never even met Paul, they just knew him by reputation. They heard about the total turn around of his life: "The guy who used to persecute and try to destroy us is now preaching the faith." And when they heard about the turnaround in his life they glorified God. The implication is, "You should be doing the same thing. Instead of trying to discredit me, you should be glorifying God because of me. The very churches you align yourself with glorified God because of me!"

Let's summarize where we've been. Paul is defending his gospel. People were saying, "Paul isn't a real full-fledged apostle. He's a Johnny-come-lately who never knew Jesus face to face. How can we trust what he says? He must have made up this gospel by himself." Paul counters that by telling his story. His story proves that his gospel is true because it came not from man but by a revelation of Jesus Christ. His changed life bears witness to the reality of this. How else can you explain the reversal in his life from persecutor of the faith to preacher of the faith? It's true for us as well. Sometimes the most powerful proof of the truth of the gospel is our own story.

Let me give you an assignment this week: write down your story and find someone to share it with. If you can't find anyone to tell it to, sit in front of the mirror and tell it to yourself, or tell it to your dog or cat or bird.

Conclusion

Sometimes we can tell our story with just a word and that's powerful as well. Courtney Ellis was a graduate student in English at Princeton. Often, her fellow students openly ridiculed the name of Christ. She writes, "To my great detriment, I stayed silent. I was quite vocal about my belief in Christ at church and with my friends, but I was terrified of what might happen to my reputation if the people at my school found out I believed in Jesus. Most of them were just ignorant about who Jesus is. Several of them had never even met a Christian before and assumed that all Christians were the uneducated, judgmental stereotypes we see in the media. Yet, I was still afraid."

As the program went on, she began to feel guilty for these silences. If she couldn't be obedient to Christ in such a central thing, how would she be able to serve him in other ways? One day a fellow female student asked her flat outright before class, when many other people were around, if she was a Christian. She knew she was at a crossroads and had a clear decision to make. She took a deep breath, and said a soft, shaky, "Yes." The student looked at her for a second, skeptically.

"Interesting," she said. "I always thought that Christians were like circus freaks...but you're actually kind of smart!"

Our stories may not come with all the bells and whistles, it may just be a word combined with your life, but it's still true: sometimes the most powerful proof of the truth of the gospel is your own story.