**Share Your Story**

Acts 26

***I grew up*** going to church every Sunday morning, Sunday night and Wednesday night - sometimes more often. My parents taught me to love and trust in Jesus from my earliest days.

But there was a shadow over my faith - really two shadows - ***guilt and fear***. I never doubted the holiness and power of God, nor was I ever confused about my own sinfulness. The result was guilt and fear. I kept hearing that God is love and that Jesus forgives, but I was never sure that love and forgiveness really applied to me.

But then as a young teenager I heard this message at a conference: ***“Nothing you do can make God love you more. Nothing you do can make God love you less.”*** A youth leader helped me understand that my relationship with God was like my relationship with my own parents. They might get upset with me sometimes, but nothing could ever change my relationship with them. They would always be my parents, just as God would always be my heavenly Father. Nothing I did could make Him love me more or less. His love for me was perfect, complete and unchangeable.

The good news suddenly felt so much better than I had realized as a child.

Over the coming years, the more I came to understand and believe all that Jesus did for me the more my ***guilt was replaced by joy and my fear was replaced by peace***. I still struggled, of course, and had highs and lows. But in general I felt secure in my relationship with God as my Father - I felt peace in His love. And I grew in my joy in the Lord as His perfect love drove out my fear and His power increasingly helped me live in freedom from sin.

**That’s my story**. You’ve heard it before. But that’s my 90 second testimony. Notice the three parts:

**Share Your Story:**

1. Before Jesus
2. Meeting Jesus
3. After Jesus

I used two words to present my life before Jesus - guilt and fear. Then I was able to ***show the difference Jesus made in my life*** - the change He made, highlighting how my guilt was replaced by joy and my fear replaced by peace. In the middle, I shared about a youth conference and a youth leader who helped me understand that truth of the gospel. I focused on one sentence that was especially helpful for me - “Nothing you do can make God love you more. Nothing you do can make God love you less.” And I explained the permanence of a relationship with God.

That’s my story. And it’s **a very useful tool for sharing the gospel** with others.

Today in Acts 26 we hear Paul for the third time in Acts sharing his testimony. Notice how he uses the same **three parts** - before Jesus, how he met Jesus and after Jesus. Let’s walk through these parts of his story and you can think about how you can use YOUR story as Paul did to present God’s story!

**Part 1 - Before Jesus**

“My manner of life from my youth… according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee.” Acts 26:5

Paul was thoroughly trained, even as a young child, in the Jewish religion. He came to Jerusalem when he was young and trained **under Gamaliel**, one of the most prominent rabbis of that whole time period. He studied the Law, the Prophets and the writings. He memorized the entire Pentateuch - the first five books of the Bible, probably also the Psalms, Proverbs and much of the Prophets. All of that was expected of seminary prospects by the time they finished fifth grade. That level of commitment and Bible memory was the qualifying test to become a Pharisee.

This was the Navy Seals of religious training. But for Paul (who at that time was still called Saul) it was EMPTY RELIGION.

**Part 1 - Before Jesus - Empty Religion**

“My manner of life from my youth… according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee.” Acts 26:5

The contest among the Pharisees was about who could **APPEAR the most devout**, the most learned. It wasn’t about what was really going on in your heart, it was about what people SAW. It was surface piety, covering over a dead, hollow heart.

Jesus called the **Pharisees** ***“whitewashed tombs.”*** He said, “You look holy and pious on the outside, but in your hearts you are filled with death.”

* They said ***long prayers*** in public, but didn’t pray in private.
* They gave large ***financial gifts*** in public, but didn’t really love and serve people.
* Even their own immediate family the Pharisees would ***neglect***, saying, “What money I would have given to you I have already devoted to the Lord.”
* They gave 10% of all they earned, right down to 10% of the mint leaves they grew in their little personal gardens. But they had no interest in justice and mercy.

The strongest words of Jesus were directed at Pharisees like Paul. He warned them over and over again. ***He confronted their shallow religion and empty faith.*** He called them to true repentance and genuine faith. But consistently the Pharisees resisted and rejected Jesus and the gospel.

Paul was no different. In addition to his empty religion - just going through the motions of loving and serving God - Paul’s whole life became characterized by chaotic violence.

**Part 1 - Before Jesus - Chaotic Violence**

“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth.” Acts 26:9

In his zeal for the Jewish religion, Paul became the chief antagonist of the new Christian movement. He rightly saw Christianity as a threat to Judaism - like **a cultic corruption**. So Paul made it his mission to stamp out the Jesus cult like a pesky little fire.

He rounded up Christians, threw them in prison, had them beaten up and many of them killed. When Stephen, the first martyr in the early church, was stoned to death, it was Paul who was standing by approving of the execution.

**Part 1 - Before Jesus - Chaotic Violence**

“I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.” Acts 26:11

Raging fury. That was Paul’s defining characteristic. Since his theological compass was off, his direction in life was also askew. Empty religion set him on the path to chaotic violence. Instead of being guided by the love of God, he was ***fueled by his own anger and lust for power***. Any threat to his own advancement he confronted with raging fury.

***What was YOUR life like before Jesus?*** What two words would you choose to describe your life? Were you religious like Paul? Did you go to church but it didn’t really mean much? Was there a degree of spirituality but not a lot of real love for God?

Was there also chaos in your life? Maybe not violent but maybe another kind of chaotic impulsiveness. Maybe you felt an emptiness and sought to fill it with something - attention, success, approval, love, money, power…

That’s part one. Now onto the turning point.

**Part 2 - Meeting Jesus**

“I journeyed to Damascus… At midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun…” Acts 26:12-13

Here is Saul the Pharisee, traveling with his entourage ***with authority from the Chief Priest*** and the whole Jewish council. He must have felt like he was at the top of his game with nothing but glory in his future. Everything was working out exactly as he had hoped. His zeal was paying off. He had power and purpose. He was recognized and had a powerful band with him to crush the Christian movement in Damascus.

But all of those thoughts, all of those plans were suddenly driven out by a blinding light from heaven. Saul and his companions were literally knocked off of their horses.

**Part 2 - Meeting Jesus** - **Calling your Name**

“When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying… ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” Acts 26:14

As you think about your story, hopefully this makes you thankful for ***how the Lord got YOUR attention***. For some of us, God has to literally knock us flat. But for others, God can be more gentle and we are ready to respond.

Saul needed the full **2x4 treatment** - right between the eyes. Maybe you did too. That’s why in recovery it’s called “rock bottom.” How much chaos, how much anger, how much unfulfilled desire, how much brokenness do you need to endure before finally surrendering to Jesus?

After asking why Saul was persecuting him, Jesus said:

**Confronting your Sin**

“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against **the goads**.” Acts 26:14 [add image to slide]



Goads were spikes designed to keep oxen moving in the direction the farmer wanted. Oxen are huge, powerful animals. But when they kick against the goads they only hurt themselves. ***What would be a gentle prod becomes a piercing pain.***

The same is true for us **when we fight against God**. We are only kicking against the goads.

On the ground, blinded by the light, Saul finally heard the voice of God. ***The man who had dedicated his life to memorizing and teaching Scripture, finally heard God speak.***

**Part 2 - Meeting Jesus** - Confronting your Sin

“I said, ‘Who are you Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.’” Acts 26:15

Saul knew that **only the God of Israel - the LORD** - could do this. When God appeared in the Old Testament, it was often in blinding light. The shekinah glory of God filled the temple as a blazing light. He probably wondered if he was already dead. Everyone knew that you could not see the God of Israel and live.

And he also knew that this encounter with God was new - so he had the humility to ask, “Who are you, Lord?”

And in His grace and mercy, Jesus spoke to the great persecutor of the church. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” There is ***both gentle mercy in this and fierce confrontation.*** God is both blazing justice and tender compassion. Until we realize this truth we will not understand how He is trying to make Himself known to us.

Think of the patience and kindness of Jesus to appear directly and personally to Saul. But this wasn’t a wishy-washy, “you’re doing fine my boy” sort of meeting. This was a direct confrontation of Saul’s sin. By persecuting Christians, he was persecuting Christ. “Why are you persecuting ME?” Jesus asked.

***He used Saul’s name, but he also confronted Saul’s sin.***

Jesus does the same for each of us.

How did Jesus call YOUR Name? How did Jesus confront YOUR sin?

Remember, even though our sin may be against other people, it is ALWAYS a sin against God first. He is your Creator. He is the One to whom you owe your very life and your complete allegiance. So even thought Saul was persecuting and killing Christians - individuals with families - his sin was primarily against God. It was JESUS he was persecuting. And it was to Jesus that Saul had to give an answer.

The same will be true for everyone. One day every person on earth will stand before the Lord Jesus on His throne, exalted in glory. And in that moment the truth will be crystal clear: every sin we have ever committed was a violation of Jesus, an affront against Him.

But hear this: **when Jesus confronts your sin, it is a profound mercy**. When Jesus helps you see how you have failed Him, how you have been fighting against Him, it is one of the greatest gifts He can give you.

Before you know Jesus you think the best gifts from God are physical - health, wealth, jobs, “blessings.” ***But the best gifts of God are actually spiritual***: conviction of sin, forgiveness of sin, the transformation of your enteral soul (that’s called regeneration), freedom from the power of sin, the filling of the Holy Spirit, the illumination of the Spirit to help you understand Scripture…

Here are the three essential steps of meeting Jesus:

**Part 2 - Meeting Jesus**

* How did Jesus call your name?
* How did He confront your sin?
* How did He comfort you with grace?

With Saul, ***Jesus literally called his name***. He got Saul’s attention by knocking him off of his high horse and making him blind for three days. The Pharisee who thought he could see all truth suddenly couldn’t see anything at all. It took some severe measures to get this man’s attention. But now Jesus had his attention.

Saul’s friends could not hear the voice of Jesus. But Saul did. ***Jesus spoke directly to Saul*** and the main thing the Lord communicated was that Saul was fighting against HIM. He showed Saul his sin. But Jesus didn’t stop there. He went on to show Saul His grace.

**Part 2 - Meeting Jesus** - Comforting you with Grace

“I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness… that they may receive forgiveness of sins…” Acts 26:16,18

When Jesus calls you, ***He changes you completely***. He doesn’t just confront your sins, He forgives your sins. He doesn’t just forgive your sins, he sets you free from the controlling power of sin. He doesn’t just forgive and free you, He gives you a new heart and fills you with His own Holy Spirit so you are literally, spiritually, entirely a new person - born again, made new.

The beauty of your story is that you can ***highlight different moments and lessons to connect with different people***. Paul is the master of this - “becoming all things to all people.” He deliberately draws attention to certain features for one audience and adjusts for others. Notice that in this chapter he makes no mention of Ananias. Some of what here Paul says Jesus told him we know from earlier in Acts was Jesus speaking through Ananias. For other audiences Paul shares about Ananias to encourage them by the courage of a believer they probably knew. But for King Agrippa, who wouldn’t know Ananias, Paul focuses on the direct encounter with Jesus Himself.

**My story** I shared at the beginning is my standard gospel overview story. But I have another one I often share with men that focuses more on freedom from the power of sin. That was a longer and more up and down journey, but no less significant. With more religious background people I play up my church involvement. With less religious background people I focus more on purpose and fulfillment.

***Jesus is the answer for EVERYTHING.*** You can tell your story 100 different ways. It’s worthwhile to practice and improve the way you share your story to make it as clear and compelling as possible. That’s why I suggest focusing on one or two key changes the Lord made. For me it was guilt and fear being replaced by joy and peace. For Saul it was religion and violence being replaced by relationship and purpose. Let’s move into part 3 - after Jesus!

**Part 3 - After Jesus - Personal Relationship**

“I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen in me.” Acts 26:16

Two transformations are apparent in this verse. We’ve already seen how Jesus called Saul personally - appearing to him directly and calling his name. Here again we hear Jesus speaking personally to Saul, calling him from empty religion to **personal relationship**.

 Jesus said, “I have shown you some things and ***I will show you more***. Now it’s your job to proclaim those things to the Jews and also to the Gentiles.” Jesus was promising Saul **a personal, ongoing relationship**.

**Part 3 - After Jesus - Personal Relationship**

“To appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen in me and to those in which I will appear to you.” Acts 26:16

This is how Paul became **the 13th apostle**. He says, “as one unnaturally born.” The other 12 apostles got to travel and serve with Jesus for three years. Paul got knocked down and blinded and then had some personal fireside chats with Jesus along the way. It was “the hard way” but still, Paul was privileged to know Jesus like few others, to commune with the Lord and be so in tune with the Holy Spirit that he wrote over one quarter of our New Testament.

This is a monumental change - ***from empty religion to personal relationship***. So many people today are living with empty religion. They go through the motions of attending church, saying some prayers, giving some money. But it’s all empty. It’s just some rituals and rules. There is no love there, no passion. No personal relationship.

***What have you seen in Jesus?*** How has He made Himself known to you? How have you personally experienced His love and mercy, His peace and patience, His guidance and power?

This is what Jesus wants with every one of us - **a personal connection** that is as unique as you and me. He doesn’t want you to try to copy someone else’s relationship with Him. He wants you to love and serve Him as YOU and only you can.

That’s the key to the transformation - a personal relationship. Then look at how Jesus changed Saul.

**Part 3 - After Jesus - Peaceful Purpose**

“I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness… I am sending you.” Acts 26:16-17

This was not only Paul’s conversion, it was his commissioning. Jesus called him to come follow Him and to come serve Him. The two always go together. Don’t fool yourself that you follow Jesus if you don’t serve Him. Don’t be deceived that you have this deeply personal relationship with Jesus when you don’t obey Him. **Jesus is Savior and Lord** - always the two together, never one without the other. You cannot claim Jesus as your Savior while rejecting Him as your Lord.

As soon as Saul placed his faith in Jesus to save him, the Lord sent the former Pharisee on his first missionary assignment. Notice that the violence and chaos are gone!

**Part 3 - After Jesus - Peaceful Purpose.**

“I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem…” Acts 26:19-20

As soon as he recovered his sight, ***Paul got to work preaching the gospel***. It was several years later before Acts 13 and the first formal missionary journey. But Paul did not delay his obedience, he immediately started preaching the faith he had just days before fought violently to oppose.

Look at the mission Jesus gave him in verse 17:

**Part 3 - After Jesus - Peaceful Purpose.**

“I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God.” Acts 26:17-18

Paul went “first to the Jew” but then also to the Gentiles. It became his primary mission to bring the gospel to far off Gentile nations. Israel had the light of God’s Word, but was still lost in darkness, as Saul had been as a Pharisee. ***The Gentiles did not even have the Law and Prophets***. They were lost in utter darkness. They were prisoners of Satan, belonging to the ruler of this world as those who were slaves to sin, walking in service to their fleshly desires.

**Part 3 - After Jesus - Peaceful Purpose.**

“That they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” Acts 26:18

What a peaceful purpose the Lord gave to Paul! A purpose to give people PEACE! For the one who had brought violence, pain and death to people, ***now he was bringing peace, forgiveness and eternal life to people!***

What a total transformation!

**Paul’s Story:**

* From empty religion to personal relationship
* From chaotic violence to peaceful purpose

Jesus changed Paul’s life completely. He did the same for me and for you - and He wants to bring that same kind of life changing grace to everyone we know!

So use your story! Your testimony of how you learned about Jesus and how Jesus changed your life is your most powerful tool to share the gospel.

Practice telling your story. Practice sharing your story. Get it down to 90 seconds or 2 minutes. Develop a gospel elevator pitch that features your testimony.

One of my favorite stories to tell is of my friend, **Stephen Baldwin**. Oh, you don’t think he is my personal friend?



**STVB** as we call him came to our church in Chicago for a 3-night outreach event in which he portrayed the thief on the cross. It was very cool.

Big brother Alec became the most successful actor, but Stephen, Daniel and William also had acting careers. As a teenager and young adult, many believed Stephen had the most natural acting talent. I remember him as the goofball Young Riders. He got his big break in the Usual Suspects. So in 1995, Baldwin was reaching the peak of his acting career. He was successful, he was likeable, he was getting famous - getting invited to the insider parties.

In his mind, he had it all. He met a beautiful Brazilian woman named Kenya on the bus in NYC, they had a whirlwind romance, got married and eventually had two beautiful daughters.

Stephen did nothing halfway. He was an adrenalin junky who liked fast cars, faster motorcycles, skydiving and anything else that was dangerous. When he fell in love with Kennya, he committed everything to her.

<https://www1.cbn.com/700club/stephen-baldwin-jesus-freak-hollywood>

Life seemed to all be in place.

But then they got a new housekeeper from Brazil who started talking with Kennya. Stephen couldn’t understand their chatter - but heard this woman singing a lot about Jesus. He tried to get her to quiet down, but she loved the Lord and felt called to reach out to her boss and his family.

Eventually, Kenya became curious about this Jesus Augusta kept singing about. She started reading the Bible and going to church. Pretty soon Jesus became more than just an idea and Kennya joyfully started a personal relationship with the Lord. It took Stephen a full year before he got curious.

At first, he was just confused - wondering what had happened to his wife. She was getting up early and kneeling on the floor by their bed. She was reading this old book all the time (the Bible). She was talking differently and acting differently. She was going to church all the time.

Finally, Stephen concluded that his wife must be having some kind of spiritual experience - nothing else explained why someone would keep getting up so early and kneeling on NYC hardwood. So, he started going to church and slowly, so slowly, started reading the Bible.

What finally pushed him across the line was September 11. Seeing the city he loved come under attack, and seeing how fleeting and fragile life really is, within a month of 9/11 Stephen had his Damascus Road experience. He calls it a shouting match with God. He said, “OK, God, if you’re real - if this whole thing is true - then I’m all in. I don’t do things halfway and it seems like you don’t either, given the whole Jesus thing.”

Stephen Baldwin was never the same. The talented young actor who had been all about adventure, adrenaline, and advancement - after committing to Jesus - found his adventure, adrenaline and the mission he wanted to advance in Jesus and the kingdom of God.

I met Stephen when he came to perform in a one-man stage play, portraying the thief on the cross. Since 2001, he has become one of the most vocal Hollywood personalities for Christ. It cost him a lot in terms of his opportunities in Hollywood, but he has never looked back. He travels all over the world speaking to young people, sharing his story and doing all he can to call people to faith in Jesus!

What’s your story? Who can you share it with this week?

Let’s pray.