

Last week I was on Amazon, looking for new fishing lures and equipment, because my kids are on a huge fishing kick and are asking to go fishing three or four times a week. One thing I noticed as I was online is that every manufacturer says their fishing lures are the best in the world. This lure was used to catch record-setting bass, this lure was used to win a major tournament, this lure is used by all the professionals. All the lures had master marketing, but I found myself skipping all the advertisements and scrolling right down to the review section, where I could see what verified customers had to say. I could see that Bob from Ohio bought this exact lure three months ago and he posted pictures of his catch. George from Louisiana said he's never caught so many fish in his life. When real-life people are sharing their real-life experiences, that's what makes the greatest difference. What's true for how we spend our money and what products we buy is all the more true for the deeper things in life—like what we believe, and where we place our faith.

We are continuing our study in the Book of Acts, talking about how God moves in power through the gospel and looking at examples of sermons in Acts. We've seen Peter share the gospel to the masses in Jerusalem, Paul share the gospel to the philosophers in Athens, and Stephen share the gospel to the Jewish leaders in the Sanhedrin. Today we turn to Acts 26 and listen to Paul share the gospel to the king of Judea. Here's the major lesson we are going to see: Paul shared his personal story to point people to Jesus' story.

Let's set the stage before we dive into Acts 26. In Acts 21, Paul traveled to Jerusalem to meet with the leaders of the church. While he was worshipping in Jerusalem, some Jews who saw him and said, "This is the guy letting Gentiles into the faith and telling Jews they don't have to keep the law. He's teaching them to reject our tradition and cultural heritage." The Jews loved their laws and their traditions, so there was a riot, and the Roman army stationed in Jerusalem had to intervene to keep the angry mob from killing Paul. While he was in Roman custody, over 40 Jews took an oath not to eat or drink anything until they killed Paul. Word of what was happening got to the Roman commander, so Paul was transferred under heavy guard to Caesarea, the capital of the country and the official administrative and judicial seat of the entire region. Paul stayed there as a political prisoner, locked up for his faith, for two full years. During that time, the Jewish leaders kept asking the Roman leaders to kill Paul. But the governor said, "He has not committed any crime. You guys have different religious beliefs. He thinks Jesus is your long-awaited Messiah. You don't. But your disagreeing about that doesn't make him worthy of death!" That didn't satisfy the Jewish leaders. They wanted Paul dead. So the governor brought this case before the king of Judea, a man named King Agrippa. Acts 26 is the account of Paul giving his testimony to the king. Let's take a look.

"The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee. And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?

"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force

them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities. (Acts 26:4-11)

Paul was speaking to the most powerful man in the entire region, and one of the most powerful, influential people in the entire world. He wanted to tell this man, King Agrippa, about Jesus, about the gospel, so how did he start? With personal testimony: “This is who I was before I met Jesus.” Paul said, “Before I surrendered to Jesus, my life was upside down, and I didn’t know it.” He said he had sincere but clearly misguided religious passion. He was obsessed with persecuting Christians, chasing them in other cities, imprisoning them, and approving of their deaths. In other words, “Though I didn’t know it at the time, I was 100% committed to a path of destruction. You can ask all the people who knew me—they’ll tell you the same story.”

“On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied.” (Acts 26:12-15)

Paul was on another one of his missions to arrest and persecute more Christians. He was hot with passion to put an end to Christianity, all this talk about Jesus. Then, right when he was in the middle of his mission, Jesus appeared to him. Jesus called him by name: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Do you see how deeply, how personally Jesus identifies with those who believe in him? Jesus didn’t say, “Why do you persecute the church?” He said, “Why are you persecuting me?” The church is the body of Christ; Jesus identifies with us.

Then Jesus said, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” Most people don’t instinctively know what this means, because we didn’t grow up in an ancient agrarian culture. In Paul’s time, most farmers worked their ground with the help of oxen. A farmer would follow behind the oxen, and sometimes the oxen were stubborn. Sometimes the oxen didn’t want to move, didn’t want to work, didn’t want to go where the farmer wanted, so they would use their rear legs to kick back. When they did that, the farmer used a goad, an 8-foot-long wooden pole with a sharp metal spike at the end. When they resisted, when they refused, when they kicked back, they only hurt themselves by driving a sharp object into their own flesh. Jesus said, “Saul, that is what you are doing. You keep fighting me. You keep running from me. You keep resisting me. But Saul, you can’t win in a fight against God. God always wins. And the longer you resist me, the more pain you are causing yourself. Instead of constantly struggling and suffering, it’s time to surrender.”

This is so relevant for us! Some of you here today are exhausted because you’ve been kicking against the goad. You know what God is calling you to do; you know he’s been calling you to do it for a long time. But for some reason, like a stubborn ox, you keep resisting what you already know God wants. Friends, it never works. You are not going to win a fight against God. Instead of constantly struggling, maybe today is the day you finally wave the white flag, surrender, and finally trust and follow Jesus.

That’s what Saul did. Jesus spoke to him directly.

“Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” (Acts 26:16-18)

Paul began his testimony with, “This is who I was before I met Jesus.” Then he transitioned quickly to, “This is how I met Jesus.” Paul didn’t know it, but God had great plans for Paul’s life. Paul was running at a full-speed sprint in one direction, and Jesus showed up in his life like a brick wall, spoke to him, and said, “I have bigger and better plans for your life than this. It’s not always going to be easy, it’s going to be hard and cost you a lot, but it’s time to surrender and follow me.”

“So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.” (Acts 26:19-23)

Paul shared who he was before meeting Jesus and how he met Jesus, then he concluded by sharing, “This is how Jesus changed my life. I literally went from traveling from town to town arresting and killing Christians, to traveling from town to town preaching the Christian message and baptizing people into the name of Jesus. I went from trying to bring an end to the church to doing more to advance the church than anyone on earth. I went from being a religious, legalistic, narrow-minded zealot, to being a passionate, loving, joy-filled follower of Jesus. God changed my heart, and now he is using me to change other people’s hearts, too.”

The reality is, Paul played a unique role in church history and world history. He traveled all over the known world, he preached to thousands of people, he stood before mayors and governors, philosophers and priests, kings, and even the emperor himself. He wrote thirteen books of the Bible. Not every Christian is called to be a preacher or a missionary, but we are all called to be a witness! We are all called to share Jesus with the people in our lives—those in our neighborhoods, on our sports teams, at our places of employment, in our extended families. You don’t have to preach a long sermon. You don’t have to give a meticulously annotated lecture. You don’t have to win an argument. It’s way simpler than that: I can share my story to point people to Jesus’ story. If you belong to Jesus, you have a part to play in the mission of Jesus.

To be clear, your testimony isn’t the gospel. Your testimony points people to the gospel. As you think about sharing your story, who you were, how you met Jesus, and how Jesus changed your life, let me give you a few encouragements / suggestions.

Lean into authenticity, not accomplishments

Most of us have a “social resume” we feel comfortable presenting to the world. When we meet someone new at a dinner party or on the sideline of our kid’s soccer game, most of us lead with our highlights: where we went to school, what we do for work, our hobbies that others find interesting, how well the family is doing. We highlight our accomplishments and bury our failures in the fine print. Not Paul! He was standing trial before King Agrippa, and if there was ever a moment to spin his resume and make himself look respectable, that was it. From a human perspective, that man held Paul’s life in his hands. It really would have been smart to make sure that man thought highly of him. But instead of focusing on what would have made him look good, he directed the spotlight to his areas of deepest regret and shame. “Let me tell you what I did in my ignorance, all the lives I hurt, all the pain I caused, all the pain I left in my wake. I was so arrogant. So self-righteous. So blind.” He was real. He was raw. He was authentic. He was vulnerable.

We often think it's broadcasting our victories that will draw people to us, but it's our vulnerability that impacts others the most. I met someone a few months ago, and I instantly liked him. He was dynamic, smart, and successful. I was intimidated by him. Then he told me he spent 18 months in prison. He said, "I heard people cry every day: 'I'm here because of my lawyer.' 'I'm here because of the cops.' 'I'm here because of the system.' 'I'm here because my friends turned on me.' I sat in my cell, listened to every excuse under heaven, and came to the realization that the only reason I'm here is me. The mistakes I made. The choices I made." He told me what got him sent there, how God rescued him, and how his life is now. I went from impressed and intimidated to being inspired and feeling connected to him in a matter of moments. He told me he spent time in prison, but I found myself trusting him at a deep level and wanting to grow our friendship. That's the power of being genuine and humble. Whatever your story is, have the courage to lead with authenticity.

Communicate like an eyewitness, not an expert attorney

Some people freeze up when they think about sharing their faith because they worry that they won't have the right words or information to say. What if they ask about the age of the earth? What if they ask about the original manuscripts of the Bible, or about Christians in politics, or about homosexuality, or any other topic out there? But your job isn't to be an expert attorney, submitting 100 pieces of infallible evidence in response to any possible question or objection. Your job is simply to be a witness to what you have seen and heard! The Bible says that the Holy Spirit does the work of the expert attorney; he is the one who convicts people. Our job as followers of Jesus is not to sit in the seat of the lawyer but rather to take the witness stand and tell our story. That's what changes lives.

When you invite a friend to your new favorite restaurant, they don't expect you to quote the entire menu from memory and know how everything in the kitchen works. All you have to say is, "They smoke the best brisket I've had in my entire life." It's your personal testimony that is so compelling. The same is true with faith.

In John 4, Jesus met a woman at a well, revealed the secrets of her life, and then told her he was the Messiah. "The woman went back to the town and said to the people, 'Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?'" (John 4:28-29). She gave her testimony, they investigated, then they believed.

Richard Coraine famously said: "All it takes for something remarkable to happen is one person with enthusiasm." The woman didn't just share. She didn't share in a mokey, defeated, discouraged way. She shared with joy and excitement, and it was her joy and enthusiasm that prompted others to rush out to meet Jesus. "They came out of the town and made their way toward him" (John 4:30). They then spent time getting to know Jesus and then they said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world" (John 4:42).

In John 9, Jesus healed a man who had been born blind. Once he could see, everyone who knew him his entire life asked what happened. He said, "A man named Jesus touched my eyes and healed me." The Jewish leaders didn't want that to be true, because they wanted to kill Jesus. It's hard to kill a man who is healing blind people. "A second time the Jewish leaders summoned the man who had been blind. 'Give glory to God by telling the truth,' they said. 'We know this man is a sinner'" (John 9:24). In other words, you tell us he's not the Messiah. "He replied, 'Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!'" (John 9:25). He said, "You can come to whatever conclusions you want to, but there is one thing I know for sure, he changed my life. That is who I was then. This is who I

am today. Jesus made all the difference.” He didn’t claim that he had the answers to every theological question. He said, “I know what Jesus has done for me.”

Focus on the invitation, not the outcome

After Paul shared his story with the king, “Then Agrippa said to Paul, ‘Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?’” (Acts 26:28). He wasn’t ready to get baptized that day. “Paul replied, ‘Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains’” (Acts 26:29). Paul’s clear and unquestioned desire was for the king to become a Christian, but he left the outcome and the timing in God’s hands.

Paul talked about this in 1 Corinthians 3:6-7: “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.” We don’t have the power to do anything supernatural in people’s hearts. We can plant, we can water, we can share, we can pray, we can invite, we can love, we can serve, but we trust God for the outcome.

I met a friend years ago who didn’t have a relationship with the Lord. I and several friends in our community reached out to him and shared the gospel with him over the course of a couple years. Every few months, we would grab a meal or coffee, and I would share my testimony, just like we’ve been talking about. I would explain the gospel as clearly as I knew how. I thought, “Surely, he’s going to respond.” He didn’t. Then one day a total stranger knocked on his door and asked him if he died that day, if he would go to heaven. He said, “No, but I have some friends who are talking to me about that.” The guy said, “They must not be very good friends if you still don’t know the answer.” He said, “They are great friends. They’ve told me everything I need to know. I just haven’t made a decision yet.” That guy left, and, as my friend tells it, when he closed the door, he went to his living room, got on his knees, and surrendered his life to the Lord that very day. The next week, I had the chance to baptize my friend. You can’t control the outcome or the timing. We plant. We water. God is the one who does the work.

I began today by talking about the process we go through when evaluating what products to buy, and how most of us are less interested in marketing campaigns and more interested in authentic reviews from real-life customers. That’s what so many in our culture and city need today when it comes to faith. They don’t need to hear another sermon from an expert, or another book written by a scholar. They need you, a real-life follower of Jesus, to be willing to boldly, authentically, humbly, passionately, share your story and point them to Jesus. Then step back and let God do the work.