

## **“The Greatest Story Never Told”**

**Acts 26:1-29**

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Palm Sunday, April 13, 2025

A preacher awoke one Sunday morning to perfect golfing weather. He desperately wanted to play a round. He knew he should go preach his sermon, but the temptation was just too great. So he called up one of his elders and lied saying, “I’m sorry but I must go out of town on urgent business. You all have to cover for me today.” He felt guilty as he drove to another town, but with such perfect weather, he pushed that guilt down and pulled into the golf course. As he stepped up to the first tee, St. Peter in heaven said to the Lord, “Hey! Isn’t that one of your pastors on that golf course? And on a Sunday?” The Lord said, “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of him.” The preacher hit a perfect drive - the best he’d ever hit in his life. It soared about 250 yards, bounced twice, hit the green, and rolled right into the cup! Hole in one! St. Peter looked at the Lord, raised an eyebrow, but he didn’t say anything. The preacher was ecstatic. Quickly he teed up for the second hole and his shot was another hole in one! The same thing happened on the third hole. At this St. Peter turned to the Lord in frustration and said, “Three holes in one? I thought you said you would take care of him.” “I did,” said the Lord. “Who’s he going to tell?”

Stories. We love to tell stories – about the time we hit a hole in one, hit a home run, hit it big. We love to hear stories. I know this because when I’m preaching, sometimes I notice people’s eyes glaze over, their heads droop...until I tell a story. Then suddenly eyes open up and heads turn up. Stories draw us in, Stories take us on journeys. Stories tell us truth. Jesus taught truth by telling stories. The Gospel, the Good News about Jesus, is the ultimate Story of God’s love for us. It’s “The Greatest Story Ever Told.” God wants us to tell everyone this story. Why? It’s better than hitting three holes in one. It’s a story which includes all of us, a story about the greatest tragedy and triumph in all history, a story that offers the hope of a happy ending for everyone. And yet like the lying preaching on the golf course, it’s a story we are often too embarrassed to tell. It’s the Greatest Story NEVER told.

In our “Friends for God” series we focused on blessing people so they can find their way back to God and become friends with God. We used B.L.E.S.S. to describe five practical things we can all do each day where we live, work and play. The B is for Begin with Prayer. Each morning ask God, “Who do you want me to bless today?” L means we genuinely listen to the pains and challenges of others. The E is for Eat. To build genuine relationships we share meals and spend time with people. The first S is for Serve. God wants us to meet the needs of those nearby. The last S stands for Story. We share how God’s story has changed our life stories.

Of all the five BLESS practices I bet this last one is the hardest. People love it when we pray for them, listen to them, offer them food, lend a helping hand. But when we start to talk about Jesus and what we believe – suddenly the walls go up. Why? The first four practices of BLESS feel like a gift – a prayer, a listening ear, a delicious meal, a helping hand. The minute we talk about our faith they may feel we’ve switched from giving to getting. We want to get them to think our way, believe what we believe, sign up for our church. This should never be our motive. The truth is: we can’t get anyone to do anything. Only God can truly change a mind, heal a heart, save a soul. God’s Story is the greatest gift of all – abundant and eternal life through

Jesus Christ. And the best way to tell God's story is by telling your story – what Jesus has done in your life. You say, "Well I don't really know the New Testament." Friends, I'm asking you to tell the YOU Testament – what Jesus has done for you.

Here is the advice the Apostle Peter gave the first believers:

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. I Peter 3:15

Here are some crucial instructions to notice. First, *make Christ the Lord of your heart*. If you have not taken that step yet, if the Good News has not made a difference in your life, you may want to ask a follower of Jesus to share with you their story. Second, once he is your Lord "*always be prepared*." Sounds like the Boy Scout motto: Be Prepared. What would you say if someone asked you why you are a Christian or why you seem more hopeful, joyful, peaceful? What if you were driving a friend to the airport, you're five minutes away, and the friend asks, "Why do you believe in God anyway?" Would you be prepared to give a reason for the hope that you have? Today, I'm going to help you be prepared when you walk out of the door. Third, notice you are telling your story because the person *asked* you. This is crucial. You are not telling them something they don't want to hear. You are not giving them something they didn't request. Fourth, it's the hope that *you* have. This is your story. It's not my story or the Apostle Paul's story. It's your story. They can debate theology, science, the Bible and the church. But they can't question the truth of your story. They may say, "Well that's good for you but not for me." But they can't deny the truth of your story. Fifth, when you share your story, tell it with *gentleness* and *respect*. Don't tell your story from a position of superiority. Force, judgment and condemnation have no part in this. Respect the other person's opinions, views, and even disagreements. When you give a gift, you give it away and let the other person do with it what they will. The same is true with the gift of your story. Some will trash it. Some will ignore it. Some will stick it on a shelf for later. Some will see it as the greatest treasure of all – the one they've waited for their whole lives.

To help you be prepared to tell your story let's follow this very simple format:

1. What your life was like before Jesus.
2. How you came to know and follow Jesus as Savior and Lord.
3. What your life has been like since then.

As an example, let's look at one of the best storytellers of all time: the Apostle Paul. He is on trial before King Agrippa, his sister Berenice, and the Roman Governor Festus. He is a prisoner wearing chains – something I hope will never happen to you when you tell your story. They just asked Paul to give the reason for the hope within him. He begins with gentleness and respect.

King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently. Acts 26:2-3

Paul then tells his listeners **What Life Was Like Before Jesus.**

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? Acts 26:4-8

Notice Paul was not an atheist. He grew up in a religious home. Some feel they don't have much of a story to tell if they weren't dirty rotten sinners. Paul proves you can be an every Sabbath "church-goer," right near the Light and still be blind and misguided like Paul.

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 26:9-11

Over the years I've heard many say, "I went away to college and got away from God." Well, in a way, that's what happened to Paul. He went away to college in Jerusalem and got away from God. Unfortunately, he was absolutely convinced he was doing God a favor by putting Jesus' people in jail and even voting for their deaths. He says he was obsessed, angry, out of control.

What was your life like B.C. – Before Christ? Did you wander away from God? Did you become an agnostic or atheist? Did you debate with people about religion? Or did you just not care? Paul chased after Christians. Did you chase after possessions, power, position, passions, popularity? Did you have an anger issue? Did an obsession take over your life? Did you feel an emptiness, a hunger for something more? Right a few words about what your life was like B.C.

Next, Paul shares **How He Came to Know and Follow Jesus as Savior and Lord.**

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. "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 26:12-18

This is one of the most dramatic transformations in history. Frankly I think it scares people. His story seems like it should come with one of those disclaimers you hear on a pharmaceutical commercial. “Taking Jesus has been known, in some patients, to cause blindness, falling down, heart palpitations, loss of appetite, flashing lights, hearing voices, and in a few cases death. Your results may vary.” To be a real Christian, you don’t have to have a dramatic story like Paul.

It’s true that your results will vary. The point when you trust in Jesus as your Savior and Lord is unique to you. For some it was as sudden and dramatic as Paul. You can even pinpoint the date. For others, it will be a longer, more gradual process marked by moments of discovery and new insight. Maybe the turning point was on a retreat, during a worship service, through a conversation with a friend, through a 12 step program or in a private time of prayer. Often it happens when people go through times of tension, trauma, or transition. During those moments, when the foundations of life are shaken, a person may finally be open to building their lives on the Rock of Jesus. Write a few sentences about how you came to know and follow Jesus.

Finally, Paul shares **What Life Is Like Since Then.**

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 finishes his story by describing the difference it’s made in his life. His anger is gone. His obsession with persecuting others has disappeared. Before Christ, he was prejudiced against all Gentiles. Now He loves them as brothers and sisters. And when his own people seize and try to kill him, he responds with peace and prays for his enemies. He confidently proclaims God is by his side through all these troubles to this very day. Most of all, he wants to tell everyone, Jew and Gentile, about the wonderful Good News that Jesus the Messiah died for our sins and rose to give us eternal life. Once consumed with vengeance, he now overflows with grace.

What difference has Jesus made in your life? Has he set you free from hostility, depression or addiction? Has he calmed your fears? Has he forgiven you and helped you be more forgiving? Has he given you grace and made you more gracious? Has he given you direction and purpose for living? Has he filled you with faith, hope and love? Take a minute and write down a few sentences that describe how you are different since Jesus came into your life.

Well that’s Paul’s story. Let’s see how well it was received.

At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.”

“I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am

convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”

Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

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 26:24-29

So he struck out with these three. He didn’t get even one hole in one. Yet King Agrippa and Festus do agree, “This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment” (Acts 26:31). The interesting truth is that Paul didn’t care whether he was in prison or not. His one hope in life is to tell the Greatest Story so all will believe and follow the Jesus who loves them.

Is that your hope? That is the ultimate BLESSing. A soccer trophy, a college diploma, a job, a wedding ring, a child are all great. But a loving, saving, eternal relationship with Jesus Christ is the greatest gift, the greatest BLESSing of all time and eternity. If we begin with prayer, listen, eat, and serve people God will give us opportunities to share the story of Jesus. We need to be gentle, respectful and prepared when we speak. When we get the chance, we must take it.

He loved golf. He was raised in a strong Christian home but like a lot of people, he got away from the Lord during college. And like a lot of people he ran after the things this world offers. After graduation he followed the normal route – dating, marriage, career, three sons. It’s the perfect picture of the American dream. But if you look below the surface there were challenges, struggles and pain. His oldest boy was born with severe physical and mental handicaps which eventually took his life at the age of 16. This and other wounds caused him to seek relief in increasingly unhealthy ways. Eventually he was sick and tired of being sick and tired. He sought freedom, recovery, and the Lord. His path was not easy, nor in a straight line. But over time he changed. He became a devoted follower of Jesus and felt an incredible passion and compassion for the homeless, the poor, the addicted and the needy. I first met him when he served with Code Blue. For the last fourteen years he assisted our homeless neighbors in whatever way he could. Crystal Myers of Code Blue says,

He was a true servant to the homeless and those in need. He would jump in to help out, especially when we were shorthanded, whenever he was asked and never minded making an extra bus trip when it was needed.

He also helped with Trenton Area Soup Kitchen, the Recovery services, worship services, Growth Groups, the REACH ministry, the Deacons, Alpha and Vacation Bible School.

His name is Art Axberg. Last Monday, the Lord saved him from cancer and called him home. I and many others deeply miss him. His life story was not easy but Jesus made it a miracle. And was not afraid to tell his story, scars, shortcomings and all, if it helped you receive the hope he found. Though he knew his time was short, one of his last texts to me was:

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:17

There is a hole in the life of someone you know.

Let Jesus use your story to fill the hole in that one.