

A Testimony of a Changed Life

The first time I ever shared my testimony of how Jesus changed my life before a group, I was a sophomore in college. I was involved in a student Christian group, and I had been asked to share my story at our state-wide fall retreat. I remember working and working to write my story in the weeks before the retreat. I also remember how nervous I was to stand in front of a group of college kids to tell about what Jesus had done in my life. My audience was a bunch of college kids who loved Jesus. It was a very different setting than what we find in our passage today where we see Paul give a testimony of his changed life.

Today, we are looking at a passage that begins an extended treatment of Paul's imprisonment and trials. Over the next several chapters Luke will describe several appearances that Paul makes in court to defend himself. In spending so much time on this, Luke is making a defense for Christianity. He is making the case that Christianity is not a threat to the peace that Rome sought. He is also making the case that Christianity is closely related to Judaism, which would be important because Rome extended certain protections and freedoms to Jews that they didn't to others.

This all begins in our passage. Paul has arrived in Jerusalem (21:17) and visits James and the Jerusalem elders to report what God has been doing among the Gentiles (v. 19). They glorify God for this. But the leaders also let Paul know that there is a report about him that creates a dangerous situation. The word on the street is that Paul has been teaching Jews to forsake Moses and the Jewish customs (21:21). And so to quell these reports, the leaders of the church lay out a plan for Paul. He is to participate with some other men from the church in fulfilling a Jewish vow that involved presenting an offering at the temple. Paul agrees to the plan.

While Paul is in the temple some Jews from Asia, who have come to Jerusalem for Pentecost, see Paul and when they do they cry out that Paul is teaching "everyone everywhere" (v. 28) to turn away from the Law. They also wrongly claim that Paul brought a Gentile with him into the temple and as such has defiled the temple (v. 28). In response a mob seizes Paul, drags him out of the temple (v. 30), and seeks to kill him (v. 31).

News of this unrest comes to the Roman commander who rushes into the mob with soldiers to intervene. He arrests Paul and has him bound in chains just as Agabus foretold in the passage we looked at last week. He tries to figure out what is going on, but there is such chaos that he cannot and so he commands for Paul to be taken to the barracks. As Paul is being carried to the barracks, he requests an opportunity to speak to the people. The Roman commander gives him permission likely in hope that it will help him sort out what happened. And so Paul, beaten and bruised, stand before the mob and shares his story of how Jesus changed his life. His audience was a little different than mine. Paul begins by talking about his life before Christ.

Paul's Life Before Christ (22:1-5)

22:1 "Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you." ² And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet.

When they hear Paul speaking in the *Hebrew* dialect of Aramaic, they understand that Paul is not just some Greek-speaking Hellenistic Jew who grew up outside of Palestine. No, he is one of them. He speaks their heart language.

And he said: ³ "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day.

In talking about his life before Christ, Paul wants to demonstrate that he is a faithful Jew who was just as zealous for God as those now standing in front of him. He declares, *I am a Jew*. He was born in Tarsus but raised in Jerusalem *educated by Gamaliel* – a highly respected teacher of the law. Since Jewish boys entered this kind of training at 13, it's likely that he arrived in Jerusalem at least by this time.

Because of this connection to such a renounced rabbi, Paul would have been well known among the Jewish religious leaders. And as a young Jewish leader, Paul's zeal for God was demonstrated by seeking to crush this new Christian movement.

⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, ⁵ as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

We know that Paul stood by approvingly when Stephen was martyred (7:58). But by his own testimony, he was responsible for other believer's deaths. He had been given authority by the high priest and the Sanhedrin to arrest Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem. Paul's point to the mob is that he was Jewish and at one point he had been zealous to crush this movement called the *Way to the death*. He understood the mob's rage. At one time he had felt the same way. This is who he had been. But then he had a life-changing encounter with Jesus.

Paul's Life-Changing Encounter with Jesus (22:6-16)

⁶ "As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. ⁷ And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'

This *light from heaven* is so great that it outshines the *noon* day sun. This is how Paul knew that it was a *light from heaven*. It was a glimpse of God's glory. As a result, Paul *fell to the ground* and he heard a voice, which had a question – *Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?*

⁸ And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.'

Paul is making the point to the mob that the one who appeared and spoke to him on the road to Damascus was none other than *Jesus of Nazareth*. The One the mob knew had been crucified years earlier in Jerusalem, spoke to Paul. And if he spoke to Paul that means that Jesus is not dead; he is alive. And if Jesus is alive, then the Jewish leaders and people had been wrong about him.

¹⁰ And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.'

There is a kind of surrender expressed in Paul's question – *What shall I do, Lord?* He is yielding to Jesus the Lord. He is submitting to Jesus' will. Jesus tells him to go on to Damascus, where it will be told to him *all that is appointed for [him] to do*.

Paul goes to Damascus being guided by the hand because of his blindness (v. 11). This had to be humbling for Paul to receive such help. Once in Damascus Paul describes how he met another man with solid Jewish credentials.

¹² "And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³ came to me, and standing by me said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him.

Ananias embraces Paul as a fellow believer. He calls him *brother* and restores Paul's sight. And then he has a word for Paul regarding his calling.

¹⁴ And he said, 'The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; ¹⁵ for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.

In saying that it is the *God of our fathers*, who has appointed Paul, Ananias is making it clear that Paul is being sent just like God sent prophets in the Old Testament. And so the message to the mob is that Paul isn't opposed to the God of the Jews, he is in fact sent by Him.

The God of their father had *appointed Paul to know [God's] will, to see the Righteous One, and to hear a voice from [Jesus'] mouth*. This face-to-face encounter with Jesus is what qualified Paul to be an apostle. And as an apostle his calling was to be *a witness for [Jesus] to everyone of what [he had] seen and heard*.

Ananias goes on and says to Paul . . .

¹⁶ And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'

Ananias urges Paul to submit to being baptized as a public testimony of his faith in Jesus. In doing so, he would signify through water baptism the spiritual reality that through his faith in Jesus his sins were washed away.

Paul had been seeking to crush this movement that was drawing people away from their Jewish faith. But he has a life-changing encounter with Jesus. He believes and submits his life to Jesus. And because of this everything about Paul's life changes. In what we have just looked at it is clear that Paul has a calling from Jesus. In verse 10, Jesus tells him that once he is in Damascus, he will be told all that is appointed for him to do. And in verse 15, Ananias tells him that he will be a *witness for [Jesus] to everyone of what [he has] seen and heard*. But as we come to the end of Paul's address to the mob, Paul gets very clear about his calling.

Paul's Calling from Jesus (22:17-21)

Paul goes on to talk about another vision he experienced three years after the Damascus Road encounter. We know this was three years later because in his letter to the Galatians Paul tells them that after he became a follower of Jesus, he spent three years in Arabia before he ever traveled to Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18). In this vision, Jesus gets very specific about Paul's calling.

¹⁷ "When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸ and saw him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' ¹⁹ And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. ²⁰ And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.'

Paul has a conversation with Jesus in this vision. Jesus commands him to leave Jerusalem, but Paul pushes back. It doesn't make sense to Paul that he should leave Jerusalem. In his mind, he is the perfect person to be a witness for Jesus IN Jerusalem. He believes that because of his Jewish pedigree and how he had lived with zeal for the Law and the Jewish customs that he is the very one to whom the Jews would listen. But Jesus has a different assignment for Paul.

Paul already knows he is to be a witness for Jesus, but Jesus gets really clear about the focus of that calling.

²¹ And he said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'

This was his calling. He was to be an apostle to the Gentiles. And as he stands here talking to the mob, this is exactly what he had given his life to. He has proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ to Gentiles in city after city in Asia and Europe and his plan is to eventually take the gospel to Spain. In stating this calling, the mob erupts again.

²² Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live."

Paul's claim that the God of their Fathers had called him to go to the Gentiles is seen as blasphemy. And so they shout, throw off their cloaks, fling dust in the air, and call for Paul's death (v. 23). At this point things become so unruly that the tribune again orders Paul to be brought into the barracks. And the long process of Paul's defense and trials begins.

Paul's is an amazing story, right? Jesus changed his life from a persecutor of the church to an apostle to the Gentiles. His changed life has had an impact down through the ages including on all of us in this room.

As we think about Paul and his testimony before this mob how does this apply to us? I want to mention three things. First, from Paul's story we understand that **no one is too far from God to be saved**. Paul was a violent persecutor of the church. His actions led directly to the death of at least some believers. Others were thrown in jail. And yet, he was saved. Jesus changed his life.

Who in your life seems too far from God to be saved? Whose life seems so opposed to God that you can't imagine they would ever worship and follow Jesus? Paul's story reminds us that no one is too far from God to be saved. And so, we don't give up on anyone regardless of how unlikely it seems that they will come to Christ. We persist in praying for our friend, our child, our neighbor. We keep loving them. We keep finding relevant ways to share Jesus with them.

It may be that the person you think is too far from God to be saved is YOU. In your mind your sin is too ugly, too deep, too shameful for God to ever love and forgive you. Paul's story declares to you that you are not too far from God to be saved. Like Paul, if you will submit your life to God, confess your sin to him, you too will be saved. **No one is too far from God to be saved.**

Secondly, Paul's testimony here to his Jewish brothers demonstrates that **love must be what drives our actions**. One of the things I've reflected on in this passage is why Paul wanted to talk to the mob? They had tried to kill him when Paul had done nothing wrong. He had simply been in the temple fulfilling a Jewish ritual when the mob attacks him. If I was Paul, I would be done with them. But not Paul. He wants to share his testimony of how Jesus changed his life. Why? Love. Paul loved these people. He cared deeply about the Jewish nation.

In Romans 9:1-3 Paul had written:

*I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—² that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.
³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.*

In Romans 10:1 he said:

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.

Paul loved his Jewish brothers. Moments after they had beaten him and tried to kill him, Paul shared the story of his changed life with them because he loved them. His heart's desire was that they would be saved. Love is what drove his actions.

Here's the thing, we could stand up here and tell you every Sunday that you are called to be a witness for Jesus. And we could tell you how to do it, but if there isn't love in your heart for the people around you, it just isn't going to happen. Or it certainly won't happen well. Love must be what drives our actions of sharing Christ.

Do you have love in your heart for the people around you who don't know Jesus? Or would you have to admit that honestly you don't really care much about them? I have no doubt that if I had a deeper love in my heart for the people around me who don't know Jesus, I would pray for them with more fervor and I would find more ways to get with them to talk with them and serve them in hopes that God might open up a door to talk about him. Love is what leads to these kinds of things.

How do we see love grow in our hearts? Well, the Scriptures tell us that love is a fruit that the Spirit produces in our lives (Gal. 5:22) and it does naturally happen as we continue to grow in Jesus. But we can ask as well. Ask God to deepen the love you have in your heart for the people around you. Ask God to give you the kind love that Jesus had for each of us as he hung on the cross.

The last thing I would suggest is taking time to reflect on spiritual realities of the people in your life. In fact, let me get very specific, think of ONE person in your life who is far from God. This week spend time daily thinking about them. Think about where they stand with God. Think about what is true about them in eternity. Paul had *great sorrow and unceasing anguish in [his] heart* as he thought about his Jewish brothers and how they were cut off from God. Think about these realities. Let these truths move you to begin praying daily for that person, for his or her salvation. Let these truths stir up love in your heart for them. Love must be what drives our actions.

Finally, like Paul, we are called to share what we have seen and heard about Jesus. We are to be witnesses. Therefore, **be prepared to tell your story**. I don't really have time to develop this one much and so let me give you one practical thing that you can do.

Right now Steve Peterson and John Schwartz are leading a class on Tuesday nights called **First Steps**. This class is all about loving people and being prepared to share your story. Both Steve and John are guys who have a long history of living this out in their own lives. This class will prepare you to share your story, but even more it will stir love in your heart and help you think rightly about this task that God has given to us. It is not too late to jump into that class. The next time they will meet is Oct. 17th and that is the deadline for joining the class. It meets on Tuesday nights at 6:30 here at the church. If you want to join the class, let me encourage you to find it in our groups section online and sign up.

No one is too far from God to be saved. Love much be what drives our actions. Be prepared to tell the story of your changed life.