

Share Your Story (Acts 22:1-5)

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Have you ever cringed when you have heard someone talk about religion? When someone shares their spiritual convictions it can feel intrusive and inappropriate to our everyday conversations. “Hey friend, how is your day going?” “Great! What do you think happens after death?” You probably haven’t experienced that drastic of a transition, but chances are you have a story or two of when the topic of religion felt like an interruption. Religion seeks to answer life’s deepest questions, so there must be a way to talk about these things without feeling uncomfortable and awkward.

I want to help you have cringe-free conversations about Jesus. Over the next three messages, myself and pastor James will share with you how you can have cringe-free conversations. Today, we are going to use the Apostle Paul as an example of how to share hope by sharing your story of how you started to follow Jesus. We are going to break up our stories into three parts: before, faith, and after. Today, we will cover the “before” part and how to transition a conversation so you can share your story. The transition piece may be the most helpful tool I can give you to equip you to share your faith in Jesus, but I’m not going to give you that tool until the end. First, we need to talk about how we share the beginning of our stories, our lives “before” we started following Jesus.

How we begin our story can either build a connection or cause someone to cringe and disconnect from us. We need to emphasize humility and not heroism in the beginning of our stories. If we paint ourselves as the hero of our story, people will react by saying, “Oh, so you think you are better than me.” If we humbly share our weaknesses in the beginning of our stories, people are more likely to respond by saying, “Oh, you are like me.” The Apostle Paul modeled this so well and if we follow his example we will have a greater impact on our friends who are not yet following Jesus.

Big Idea: Rap sheets are more winsome than résumés. When we share our stories, we should not steal the spotlight from the true hero, Jesus. Our goal should not be to impress people with our profound understanding of spiritual wisdom. We should aim at empathy and not admiration. Let’s see how Paul connected with a very hostile crowd by sharing his rap sheet and not his résumé. At first, it will look like a résumé, but we will see that Paul is actually sharing his sins and not his successes.

Before we get to Paul’s speech to the crowd in Jerusalem, we need to see the context of his speech. Paul was on trial for allegedly desecrating the temple by bringing a gentile, someone who is non-Jewish, into the temple. This was seen at the time as being a serious spiritual crime with severe consequences. There was a warning sign outside one of the inner courts of the temple at that time that threatened death to foreigners who entered. Paul was not guilty of this crime and wanted to clear his name. Paul used this conflict as an opportunity to share the good news of Christ. This was a difficult audience. How was Paul going to connect with them? How was he going to show empathy?

Acts 22:1-3, “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. 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.’”

Paul used language as a means to connect with this hostile audience. Paul decided to give his speech in Hebrew. Many Jews outside of Jerusalem could not speak Hebrew or Aramaic. Paul was

showing that he was devoted to his culture and people by speaking the ancient language of his ancestors. The words that he chose also showed great respect and honor to those listening. Paul used the same words that Stephen used to address the crowd that stoned him to death. They both addressed their crowds as “brothers and fathers.” These familial terms were used to communicate shared identity, “brothers,” and respect, “fathers.”

Paul also used his story and life experience as a means of connection. He admits that he was born in Tarsus, but was raised in Jerusalem. This explains why he went to Tarsus on his first missionary journey (Acts 9:30 and 11:25) and also explains how he had family in Jerusalem. Later in the book of Acts, we are told he had a nephew in Jerusalem, who saved him from a deadly ambush in Acts 23. Paul mentioned his training under Gamaliel, who was a pharisee who served on the Sanhedrin. Luke, the ancient historian and author of the book of Acts, wrote that Gamaliel was “held in honor by all people.” It is fair to say that Paul was “name-dropping” here. He apparently wanted to show that he was not a faraway religious maverick but a local boy raised in the holy city itself and trained by a renowned scholar.

We see why Paul shared all of these personal details at the end of verse 3. He wanted to show the crowd that he understood their motivation. He identified with their zeal for God. This is remarkable! He was about to be a victim of their religious rage and decided to empathize with them. Imagine what it would take for you to do that. When someone takes your parking spot at Costco that you have been waiting 15 minutes for do you think to yourself, “I understand your need to quickly get your errands done before dinner, go ahead.” I don’t think that. I find it hard to empathize with people who inconvenience me. Paul was empathizing with people who wanted to hurt him. This shows his incredible compassion for people.

I know that what Paul has said so far sounds like a résumé, but you will see that it’s actually a rap sheet. From his audience’s perspective, it was a résumé, but from Paul’s perspective, it was a rap sheet. The next two verses make that point clear.

Acts 22:4-5, “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.”

In this section, Paul was either showing the crowd that their zeal was equally matched or that his zeal went beyond theirs. In the first section of Paul’s address, he identified with his audience as a devoted Jew. Here he identified with them as a persecutor. In his writings, Paul referenced this part of his story numerous times. I believe that Paul was showing the crowd that he did more than just add his voice to a crowd’s call for judgment. He took matters into his own hands and personally sought to destroy this new Jesus movement, called “the Way.” In Acts 26, Paul confessed that he had cast a vote in having someone put to death for following Jesus. Here he admits that he did not discriminate in his persecuting of the church, he went after both “men and women.” He knew that their imprisonment and trial could very well lead to their deaths. It is fair to label Paul as a bloodthirsty religious terrorist. It is worth noting that Paul referred to the high priest and elders as witnesses of his violent appetite to persecute “heretics.” He was inviting them to “fact-check” his story. Paul was not sharing this with the crowd to gain their admiration. This was his confession. This was his rap sheet and not his résumé.

Paul viewed his persecution of the church as one of his most egregious sins. *1 Timothy 1:12-15, “I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful,*

appointing me to his service, ¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.” His rap sheet included the flattering titles of “blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.” This was not a résumé to be admired. Paul does admit that his religious zeal for God was misguided by ignorance. He was not excusing his behavior by referencing his ignorance. His confession of being the “foremost” sinner makes that point clear. Paul shared with this bloodthirsty crowd that their “zeal” was misguided like his zeal once was. He was essentially saying, “Guys, I was like you, and that’s not good.” Paul was not ashamed to speak of the sins of his past. He used his rap sheet to relate to others.

I believe that Paul wanted other followers of Jesus to not be ashamed of their sinful past as well. Paul not only referred to the sins of his past in his writings, but he also listed the former sins of those in the churches he wrote to. *1 Corinthians 6:9-11, “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”* Paul was not listing off the sins of those outside the church. Verse 11 makes it clear that these sins are a list of the former behaviors of the members of this church in Corinth. Paul wasn’t ashamed of his rap sheet and the rap sheets of other followers of Jesus. These rap sheets were not only honest, they pointed to the true hero of a Christian’s story, Jesus Christ.

Rap sheets are more winsome than résumés. Christians, we are not all that impressive. We didn’t start our journey with Jesus because we were smart or morally superior. We started with a mess and an awareness of our brokenness. This is where we should start the conversation with others about Jesus. Meet them in the mess and brokenness.

I want to get really practical this Sunday on how you can present your story in a way that is winsome and persuasive with others. We have seen from the example from Paul that starting with our rap sheet is a good place to begin. We want to relate to the brokenness that our loved ones are feeling. So, let me give you some practical tips on how to transition an everyday conversation into a gospel conversation and how to connect with others through the first part of your story.

The strategy or method I am about to teach you is not the only way, but I believe it is a very effective way and is modeled for us by the first-century followers of Jesus in the New Testament. This strategy is based on two general principles. First, gospel conversations are more likely to happen among friends. The gospel is shared most effectively when there is a relationship between the one sharing and the one being shared with. Second, a person is more open to a spiritual conversation when their life is out of rhythm. Someone is “out of rhythm” when they are experiencing something new or disruptive to their normal way of living. In these moments they are more receptive to a conversation about faith. “Out of rhythm” moments could be the passing of a loved one or a promotion at work. When your friend shares an issue, problem, or experience you can use that moment to transition to your story. First, you need to find the doors in your story. The doors are the simple entry points to your story. Paul used the door of “religious zeal” with his audience. I use my struggle with anger and my lack of ambition as entry points often. There are many “doors” to your story. You can find them by

listing the sins of your past. This is not a fun exercise but it's so helpful to fulfilling your desire to share your faith. Second, once you see a doorway moment, use a thoughtful transition statement. It has to be thoughtful because you don't want them to feel like you are not hearing and understanding their experience. Here is a transition statement that I think is incredibly effective. After you thoroughly listen and have asked thoughtful open-ended questions, you can say, "I haven't been through that exact situation that you just mentioned, but I have had a similar experience. Can I share something with you that has really helped me?" Then you start to share your rap sheet. At that point, you could share how you also struggled with anger, resentment, greed, pride, divorce, sexual sin, or whatever is on your rap sheet. Don't be ashamed of your past. Use it to relate to those you love who you want to see follow Jesus. Next week, we will cover what to say after you share your rap sheet.

----- Life Level Application -----

- 1) **Head:** Read 1 Corinthians 15:9-11 and Galatians 1:11-17. Are you surprised that Paul is not ashamed to speak of his past sins? How is Paul using the sins of his past to make a point to these churches?

- 2) **Heart:** Read Titus 3:3-7 and Ephesians 2:1-7. Are you shocked that Paul reminds those he is writing to in the church of their former sins? What point is he trying to make by bringing up their past sins?

- 3) **Hand:** How can sharing your past sins help someone else follow Jesus? What holds you back from sharing your past sins with others?

- 4) **Habit:** Read Philippians 3:4-9. Meditate on the life you were living before you started following Jesus. Reflect on how your life has changed since you started following Jesus. List some of the big changes that came to your mind and then take time to thank God in prayer for those changes.