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“Writing Your Personal Testimony”

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Acts 26:1-23

Faith sharing matters. When you are a Christ-follower, you are a witness for Jesus Christ. When you are a witness for Jesus, you are making a connection between your friend and God. Faith sharing matters. But it's hard. Have you ever tried to share your faith, and halfway into it, you feel as though there is *no* connection between you and this friend or family member of yours? You think about what you will say, and the next thing you know, it feels like everything conspires against you?...

MEDIA CLIP from “Back to the Future” of the lightening storm on the clock tower. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6_6HkumQWo 2:46. Everything hung on Doc Brown's ability to connect the two cords in time, or else Marty McFly would be stuck forever in 1955. And everything – lightening strikes, clock-tower bells, crumbling concrete, curious policemen, falling trees, balky starter motors – everything seemed to conspire against Marty's attempt to get back to the future where he belonged.

This is how I feel every time I step up to preach! ☺ This is also what happens to *you* when you open up a spiritual conversation with a non-Christian friend in order to share Christ with them. God asks you to make the connection with your friends and family so they can experience His powerful love and forgiveness.

If you haven't shared your faith in a while, chances are you are starving yourself from seeing God's power in action. For Doc Brown to make the connection, the interference was wind, rain, lightening strikes, crumbling concrete, curious policemen, falling trees, and balky starter motors. What is it for you? What keeps you from making connections? Fear? Politeness? Feeling of weakness? Lack of confidence? Lack of knowledge? Or something more base: Lack of interest in other people. Inconvenience – I can't be bothered right now. I have my own problems to deal with. Or maybe you're thinking “Are you kidding? I'm the one driving 88 miles per hour in the DeLorean.” If any of these is you, hear the Good News:

We've been handed power to change the world in a way the world has never seen because it is from beyond this world. Sometimes I think we Christians forget the magnitude of the power and the trust placed in us. We miss the central fact of our faith: *Christ changes lives!*

- To know Jesus is to walk from darkness to light.
- To find him means to find meaning and purpose.
- To follow Him makes you realize *it's not all about you*.
- You begin to realize you do have a place in the universe.
- You see that you have value beyond what any other human can give you.

Opening your life to God's Holy Spirit doesn't make you better than anyone else. It simply makes you better than you were.

What's my story? I was living to be a rich and famous performer. I wanted to be popular and I would do whatever it took. But one afternoon I was sitting on a subway in NYC, I was looking around at all the people and wondering – “How many of these people have the confidence I have, knowing that the Creator of the universe cares about them personally? They need to know this. I'd better get started.” I put my dream away and started living for a much bigger dream: Making connections between people and the Creator. My goal in life became to get to heaven and take as many people with me as possible. Church, we cannot keep this to ourselves! The power that came at Pentecost not only ignited the church in the book of Acts that day. That

power in all His fullness is available to you and me as the church today!

Mission is God's idea. It is God's unswerving purpose. The entire Bible, from Genesis through Revelation is a missionary book about a missionary God whose purpose it is to call and create a missionary people. Ergo, you become a missionary, right here! You and I live in a mission field. *Where we live our lives* is where God wants us to share our faith. 5 years ago I went to Cuba. There, I witnessed Methodist churches where faith sharing is the norm. My translator Omar, who gave up a high family position in the Communist Party to become a Christ follower, shared how the Cubans were amazed that some Christian American high school kids had never led anyone to Christ before. In American Christianity, sadly enough, it's the *norm*. And what's happened? The Mainline churches became sideline churches, and many have become flat line. In the Cuban Methodist Church, though, the norm for every believer to have shared Christ with 5 or more people. And the church there is doubling every year, and impacting their society for Christ.

Through the Bible we've been learning how God does mission. Right away you see that God doesn't often call the ones who have all their acts together. Look at all the trouble Paul's been having! So that means if you are feeling apprehensive about sharing your faith, you may be right where God wants you. Consider our church as an extension of the Bible. The explosive power of that Acts 2 community has not changed. Look at this example in Acts 26. Paul has been arrested, and tried, and sent to a higher court. He works all the way to King Herod Agrippa. Acts 26 is his testimony before Agrippa.

Acts 26:1 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: 2 "King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, 3 and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.

- Paul appropriately takes into account his setting. (He's a prisoner in court, talking to the one King who does know the Jewish culture).
- When you share faith, you have to be an anthropologist. You have to analyze the culture and the time. Is this a 20 second comment that could open the door to sharing faith? Or is this a 2 minute audience? Or do you have 20 minutes?

4 "The Jews 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. 5 They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee. 6 And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. 7 This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me. 8 Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? 9 "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. 11 Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

Paul shares what his life was like. What he lived for. What he thought. What he did.

- Lived as a Pharisee—v.5
- Imprisoned many Christ-followers—v.10.
- Condoned the deaths of many believers—v.10.
- Persecuted Christians—v.11.

12 "On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. 14 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.' 15 "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. 16 '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 of me and what I will show you. 17 I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them 18 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.'

Paul shares what happened.

- Where was he going? Damascus.
- What time was it? About noon.
- What did he see? Light from heaven.
- Who was with him? His companions.
- What did he hear? The voice of Jesus.
- “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” 2 Cor. 5:17

19 "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. 20 First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. 21 That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. 22 But I have had God's help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen— 23 that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles."

Paul shares what his life is like now.

What evidence of Paul’s repentance and conversion can be found in the following verses?

- verse 26:19 Obedient to God’s call on his life...
- verse 26:20 He went to other places: Damascus, Jerusalem, Judea, Greece/Rom
- verse 26:21 He was persecuted.
- verses 26:22-23 He testifies to important and unimportant people.
- Notice it’s not all rosy! Paul tells Herod Agrippa it’s not easy.

And he gives the local king the opportunity to hear and turn his own life over to Christ. He says to Paul in verse 28 “Do you think in a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian? 29 Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray God that no only you but all whoa re listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains I’m wearing.” And that’s it. We’re going to do something a little unique this Sunday. (Visitors/seekers you’re off the hook from me! Not from God though...)

As I was thinking about this, it just occurred to me: Do my kids even know my faith story? They know I work here and they have to be here all the time...but do they know why? How many of our children or grandchildren or friends or siblings don’t know our faith stories? They need to. I pray you feel a burden to share your story. I pray you feel such a burden that you are miserable until you share your story. ☺

Imagine if we reached out. Imagine the impact if more of us connected our friends and families to God: on our schools, our politics, our workplaces, would be changed for good for God...

Here is the worksheet we give to all youth and adults who get baptized here. I invite you to fill it out, using Paul’s example...

STUDY GUIDE

Acts 27 - Romans 3

You Gotta Read This. It’s Fascinating Stuff!

Monday: Read Acts 27. Sailing to Rome, Storm, & the Shipwreck. (1-44). Luke’s detailed description of travel on the Mediterranean is intense! Every detail matches and adds to the understanding of ancient sea trade. More importantly is the picture of Paul, a prisoner being taken to Rome, yet still a leader. His unshakable faith in God gives him powerful confidence even in the face of the danger of a huge storm and shipwreck. When have you been hit by a “northeaster?” (v.14). What happened? What did you learn from the situation? Paul remained calm in these crises. How do you react? What is the greatest pressure situation you are facing right now? What can you learn from Paul here? What is your part, and what is God’s part in the resolution?

Tuesday: Read Acts 28. Malta, Rome, and Paul’s Final Years. Winter in Malta (1-10) Washed up on

shore, the survivors winter on Malta, with hospitable people. Paul survives a poisonous snake bite. How has God used a disaster in your life for ministry? What have you learned from this? Arrival in Rome & Ministry There (11-31). When they arrive, the whole company is made welcome by Christ-followers living there. Paul is allowed to rent his own quarters, with a military guard. For 2 years Paul waits for his case to be heard. He welcomes visitors in his home and shares the gospel, “boldly & without hindrance.” (31). How do you react to your current limitations? (schedule, physical health, job).

After Acts: Luke’s history of the early church ends here. What happened to Paul afterwards? While in prison Paul wrote our NT books of Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon. Paul continued to evangelize the Gospel, may have traveled to Spain (see Romans 15), wrote more letters, and was rearrested, likely by Nero. When Paul went to meet his Lord, he left a church which has spread throughout the Roman empire, with 100s of 1,000s who had come to know Christ through the missionary effort begun by this small but great man.

How would verse 31 serve as a fitting epitaph on Paul’s grave? What do you need to build into your life now, so that your faith in Christ will be what people remember about you at death?

Most of the Rest of the New Testament is made up of epistles, or teaching letters, written to specific churches in specific places dealing with specific issues and understandings of the faith. We can learn a lot about the churches based on the advice and teaching in each letter. In these letters we don’t study the history of the events; we trace the ‘argument,’ the flow of thought of each writer.

Introduction to Romans

Author: Paul. Date: @57AD. (before the persecution by Nero in 64AD). Theme: The dynamic nature of being made right with God through faith in Christ. (v.1:17). Historical Impact: The monk Martin Luther rediscovered the great truth of justification by faith & began the Reformation which reshaped much of the Western world. John Wesley was listening to Luther’s commentary in Aldersgate Chapel. Wesley had struggled with his deep sense of alienation from God, and felt his heart “strangely warmed.” Thrilled and filled with the gift of righteousness he received by faith, Wesley began his 50 year ministry in England. The great revival had powerful positive impacts on the entire world. It still has the power to warm hearts and move people. Read it to learn more of this power in your own life!

Wednesday: Read Romans 1. Paul’s Greetings & Hopes to Visit Rome (1-17). Which passage impresses you the most? How has God’s call changed your goals? V.16 should sound familiar. Have you ever been ashamed of the Gospel? Do you have a sense of obligation toward others? What grabs you about v.17? God’s Wrath Against Humanity (18-32). Paul makes some bold statements: God’s righteousness has been revealed in His anger against people, because they/we suppress the truth about Him. God can be known in creation, and human conscience. Thus there is no excuse for our disobedience. Everyone has some knowledge of the Lord. But our response has been NOT to turn toward God, but to turn away: stooping to worship idols. Paul lists a number of ways people substitute God for other things, in order that each person would see himself or herself in need of God’s grace. How do you feel seeing some of your faults on this list? Glance at a newspaper: How do current events demonstrate Paul’s point here? Is the world broken, or is it not?

Thursday: Read Romans 2. Those Who Know God Need This Too (1-29). Paul attacks judgmentalism. This attitude was prevalent among the Jewish Christians, who had knowledge of God. It applies to us in the church just as much today! Have you taken God’s relationship with you for granted? When did your faith become more than a ritual? What helped that happen?

Friday: Read Romans 3. God’s Faithfulness (1-31). Those who know God’s Law do have an advantage: possessing God’s very words! Belief or unbelief does not nullify the truth of them. Paul shows we who think God’s law is the way of salvation is really God’s way of showing our need for Him. Memorize Romans 3:22-23. All have sinned, but by faith we are saved! When did you truly sense your sin & need for God’s grace? What impact is it having on your life right now?

YOUR TURN!

Introduction

- Name _____
- Age/Year in School _____
- City _____
- Email _____

Attitudes and actions before I became a Christian—If appropriate, include some background. Avoid naming religious denominations, since it may alienate listeners. What did you “live for” before coming to Christ? What was most important to you?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Circumstances surrounding my conversion—Consider time, date, place, people, motivation, etc. This is a natural place to summarize the Gospel: the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Changes in my attitudes and actions since my conversion.

Be yourself!

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____