**Share God’s Grace**

Acts 26:4-23

Here’s what we’ve covered so far in this short *Experience God* series.

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| **Experience God** | |
| * Hear God’s Voice * Know God’s Heart * See God’s Hand * Show God’s Love * Share God’s Grace | Our mission is to join God in His work of transforming people and communities through the gospel of Jesus Christ |

You can see this comes directly from our mission as a church - to join God in His work of transforming people and communities through the gospel. If we are going to join God in His work we have to ***develop these skills of hearing God’s voice*** and following His guidance.

* How has the Lord been speaking to you the last few weeks? How have you been listening for His still, small voice?

***How well do we really know God’s heart?*** Do our hearts break for the things that break the heart of God? Do we really love the lost and hurting and broken people around us? Are we out among the prodigals - the tax collectors and sinners? Or are we like the older brother in that parable - working hard at home and doing our best to avoid any association with unclean sinners?

Have you been ***watching for God’s hand*** at work in you and through you? Remember John 5. Jesus went where the hurting people were. That’s what the incarnation is all about, btw. Jesus didn’t remain at a distance, He came to us to live with us, to be with us. And it wasn’t that we were so deserving and wonderful and worthy - exactly the opposite. But isn’t that what we expect of people so often? That they clean themselves up and dress nicely and wear deodorant and come to our nice little church service where they will stand and sit and listen and only talk at the appropriate times.

* Do we know the usual ways of God? Do we love like He does? Do we see the Father working and move quickly to join in that work like Jesus did?

Because that means being active ***agents of His love.*** That means loving God so much - so completely, 100% - that His love overflows through us to our neighbors.

* Have you been praying for one or two “neighbors” the last few weeks? They might literally live beside you or they might be co-workers or family members or long time friends.

The wrong question is “who is my neighbor” because that question is about justifying our lack of love. The right question is ***“who needs the love of God today?”*** Who could use some encouragement, some prayer, some help?

And all of that leads us to the point of this whole series - **that we actually help people MEET JESUS**. Next Sunday we start that new series that will go on for eight weeks. This series has been all about preparing us for THAT series. Because if we love and serve people, if we pray for hours a day for people, if we become super spiritual and discern all these miraculous, amazing things about God and how He works - ***but we never actually introduce people to the SAVIOR*** - then we aren’t really helping people and we aren’t joining God in His work because we are leaving people short of actually hearing and responding to the gospel by which they can be transformed!

So let’s walk through Acts 26 and see how the apostle Paul masterfully moves from his story into the gospel story. This is a wonderful **skill for all of us to practice** - briefly but clearly sharing how Jesus changed your life as a setup to sharing the good news of His death and resurrection in place of broken sinners like us.

***I grew up going to church all the time.*** I knew there was a God and that He was holy, righteous, all-powerful and all-knowing. By the time I was a teenager I knew I was not righteous and holy - so my feelings toward God were **guilt and fear**. But as a young teenager I learned that “nothing you do can make God love you more; nothing you do can make God love you less.” I learned that God has loved us perfectly in Christ - because He died in our place to pay for our sins - and we can’t add to that or take away from it - it’s the perfect gift. And when I experienced the amazing grace of Jesus to forgive all my sins and take over as King and Leader of my life, my guilt was replaced by the joy of being forgiven and my fear was replaced by the peace of knowing God is my Father and I am His child and nothing can ever change that!

***That’s my story - what’s your story?***

I have two words for my **before Jesus** - guilt and fear. And two words to show how dramatically and completely Jesus changed my life - joy and peace. I use that quote “nothing you do can make God love you more… or less” because it’s clear, powerful and memorable - and helps express the gospel in a unique way, to hopefully shake up someone’s assumptions about Jesus and salvation.

So let’s walk through Paul’s before and after, along with his dramatic and life changing encounter with Jesus!

**Before Jesus**

* Raised **Religious**

“My manner of life from my youth… according to the strictest party of our religion, I have lived as a Pharisee.” Acts 26:4-5

Paul was defending himself before **King Agrippa**, one of the regional Roman rulers. He wasn’t Jewish himself but had served in the region long enough to be well versed in the customs and controversies of the Jews, as Paul just pointed out in verse 3.

And everyone in that area would have had a serious awe and respect for the word **PHARISEE**. As Paul said, this was the strictest, most intense branch of Judaism - and it was no joke. <https://www.jewishawareness.org/pharisees-and-sadducees/>

The word Pharisee comes from the Hebrew word for SEPARATE. They were known for their commitment to holiness and their refusal to be contaminated by even a hint of idolatry or worldliness. Pharisees were also devoted to Scripture. They memorized, studied and discussed God’s Word down to its most minute detail. Even Pharisees couldn’t afford to carry Bible scrolls around with them - so the way to know and easily discuss Scripture was by having it memorized. The lowest, entry level Pharisee would have had the Torah and the Psalms memorized - the first 5 books of the Bible and all 150 Psalms - verbatim. More advanced Pharisees would go on from there, and - as today - some would specialize in history while others would specialize in prophets or even a particular prophet like Isaiah.

The point is that the Pharisees were **RADICAL CONSERVATIVES**. You and I - and the Evangelical Free Church as a whole - we have a lot in common with the Pharisees. We love the Bible and work hard to memorize, study and discuss it. We are committed to holiness and discipline ourselves to avoid worldliness and idolatry. We believe in conserving and protecting our holy and longstanding legacies.

Now, being enlightened, 21st Century American Christians we scoff at the Pharisees and look down on them as hypocrites, so we pride ourselves in the fact that we are NOT bound by their silly, surfacy, weak, hypocritical, legalistic traditions like fasting twice a week - who needs that! And praying 3-5 times every day - just a legalistic burden! And giving a full 10% of everything, right down to your spices - that’s hypocrisy for sure. You MAY have picked up on my sarcasm there.

It’s safe to say that Paul was very sincere, very devout - he was raised very religious. We’d probably be hard pressed to find someone raised MORE religious than Paul was.

**Before Jesus**

* Reverent of **Scripture**

“My hope in the promise made by God to our Fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain.” Acts 26:6-7

The Pharisees were also known for their accurate theology. Jesus did not dispute with the Pharisees over their doctrines so much as their hearts. ***This means it is very possible to BELIEVE the right things and even DO the right things but still not BE right with God.*** Because it’s all about the HEART. And if your doctrine is accurate and your behavior looks good and religious it is easy to think you’re all good, but we can easily become Pharisees ourselves - whitewashed tombs that look good on the outside but inside are filled with selfishness and pride.

Remember when Paul made a whole ruckus in a meeting just by saying, “I believe in the resurrection of the dead and that’s what this whole trumped up trial is about” and the Pharisees and Sadduccees forgot about Paul and started going after each other. In “the biz” we call that a “truth bomb.” Paul was on the right side of that debate, as were the Pharisees. ***The Sadduccees denied the resurrection and the spiritual realm.*** They didn’t believe in angels or demons or even an afterlife with rewards and punishment.

That was Paul. Religious upbringing. Passionate commitment to God’s Word and God’s ways - at least in terms of practical obedience. Based on how he describes himself here and in 2 Corinthians 11, Paul was a “Hebrew of Hebrews,” he was “the best of the best.” So more than likely he was quite sincere in his love for the Lord.

I read Nabeel Quereshi’s ***Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*** a few years ago and that was one of the main things that struck me - his sincere love for God. Before that book I had understood that Muslims did not believe in a God of love, they didn’t seek to love God - Islam means submission and they were simply about dutifully praying and serving God, not loving him. But Quereshi - and the branch of Islam in which he was raised - truly, sincerely loved God. He grew up enjoying worship and prayer and the study of the Quran. He was moved by his parents’ devotion to God - raised hearing them pray and worship and express their love and devotion for Allah.

These are good reminders that as we reach out to people, we shouldn’t judge them before we get to know them. We should give them the benefit of the doubt and the presumption of sincerity. ***Many people are quite sincere*** - quite devout in their beliefs and religious practices. They might well be sincerely wrong in what they believe - but sincere nonetheless.

That was Paul. Religious. Reverent of Scripture. And:

**Before Jesus**

* **Rebelled** against God

“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus.” Acts 26:9

Here is another example of being sincere but being sincerely wrong. When Paul became aware of ***the cult related to Jesus of Nazareth*** he was the up and comer who was ready to chase down these false teachers and put them in their place. He knew that false messiahs had come along dozens of times and the people could easily be led astray by a winsome communicator - so you couldn’t trust a slick talker like this Jesus.

**Before Jesus**

* **Rebelled** against God

“I not only locked up many… but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them.” Acts 26:10

That’s when we first meet Saul in the book of Acts - at the stoning of Stephen, the first deacon and first martyr. Saul was in charge there, giving approval to his public execution.

**Before Jesus** - **Arrogance** and **Anger**

* **Rebelled** against God

“I punished them often… in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.” Acts 26:11

Later Paul would describe himself as the chief of sinners because of this very thing - capturing, beating and killing Christians. Imagine his burden of responsibility for the mothers whose sons he killed, the wives whose husbands he killed, the children whose fathers he killed… In the moment, Saul felt totally righteous - zealous for the truth, for tradition, for God and the Mosaic Law.

This is so important for us as we reach out to people. From our vantage point they might appear very far from knowing and serving Jesus. But ***from their vantage point they feel very devoted to a correct set of beliefs*** and a valuable set of practices. Think of a Buddhist raised to honor the traditions of his elders. Think of a Hindu with devotion to a collection of gods instilled in her from childhood. Think of a Mormon following a specific set of rules and practices in order to please God as he knows him.

That was Saul. He was raised religious. He was sincerely reverent of God and His word. Yet in this setting, Saul found himself rebelling against the God he claimed to serve. Looking back, he could have described himself with the two words: arrogance and anger. He was rightly proud of his knowledge, his diligent studies, his disciplines, and practices. Yet underneath that religious devotion was a turbulent anger that he knew, deep down, he could not control - and really didn’t want to control.

***What is YOUR BEFORE JESUS?*** What two words would best describe your life before you committed yourself fully to Jesus as your King? You’ll see the right side of your worship program is BLANK so you can work on your story. What did Jesus save you FROM? How is your life different because of Jesus?

The truth is that ***Jesus is changing us in all kinds of ways***. If you’ve known Jesus and you’ve been walking with him for years now, you don’t just have one testimony - you have dozens of ways you can look back and see how Jesus has changed you and keeps changing you. It’s like C.S. Lewis says in Mere Christianity - we might be content with God making us into a ***cozy little cottage*** so we get confused when He keeps knocking down walls and ripping out closets. But He isn’t content with making you into a nice little cottage - He is turning you into ***a glorious palace*** - because He plans to live there Himself!!!

We see Paul’s before. We will get to his after - how Jesus changed him completely. But what was the turning point? We see it in verse 13. For some of us the change took place more gradually over a period of months or years. For others it was a lightning bolt - it hit loud and hard and all at once. That’s how it was for Saul.

**Encounter with Jesus**

* Sudden **Revelation**

“At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun.” Acts 26:13

Paul was travelling with a group, proud and excited about his mission - sent by the chief priests to round up another band of these miscreant followers of Jesus. ***He felt righteous.*** He felt successful. But he was angry. He wanted these people to suffer. Part of him hoped they would blaspheme right in front of him so he would be able to kill them on the spot like Phinehas when he stopped the plague by plunging a spear through the chests of an Israelite man who brazenly took a Midianite woman into his tent. Phinehas killed both man and woman publicly and was praised directly by God Himself for standing up for the holiness of God to purge the evil and idolatry from the camp.

I bet that story was fresh in Saul’s mind as he traveled around Israel and the region seeking to stamp out this dangerous cancer from the people.

But suddenly ***a bright light came upon his entire group*** - a sudden new revelation. For Saul it was a literal light and a literal voice from Jesus. For most of us the revelation was more subtle than this - but no less significant. There was a friend who came into your life - a parent or sibling. They shared a Bible verse or brought you to a camp or conference. Your mind was dark until God gave you a sudden light of revelation.

**Encounter with Jesus**

* Humbling **Confrontation**

“When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice… ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” Acts 26:14

Saul was sinning against followers of Jesus - but Jesus took it much more personally than that. By beating, imprisoning, and killing Christians, Saul was directly attacking Jesus Himself. So, the Lord made an appearance.

Now, most of us don’t have a story quite this dramatic. Lots of Muslims in the middle east do - as they have dreams and visions of Isa, a man in a white robe. If you haven’t read *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, you totally should. Nabeel had some dramatic dreams and visions - and even told them to his mother who used her dream interpretation book to accurately tell him what the dreams meant. Amazing that God used a Muslim dream interpretation book to validate for Nabeel that Jesus was Lord.

***That was my turning point*** - a humbling confrontation of my personal sin.

That was your turning point too. Until Jesus shows you your sin and calls you to turn from it, you cannot be saved. Conviction for sin is a critical sign that God is working in someone’s heart. And sin is always personal. It is always a sin against God even when it is also against a person.

Sudden revelation - humble confrontation - leading up to a:

**Encounter with Jesus**

* Personal **Invitation**

“Who are you Lord?” And the Lord said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” Acts 26:15

This was ***Saul’s Meet Jesus moment***. He had heard all about this Jewish rabbi - his teachings, his claims. Remember, as a Pharisee Saul did believe in the theoretical idea of resurrection. But he was still pretty stunned by actual evidence that the Jesus who had been crucified was suddenly in front of him in glorious light, talking to him loud and clear.

***How did you meet Jesus?*** How did you hear His personal invitation to you?

There in the middle of your page you have your two words of before Jesus. Now write out a sentence or two about how you came to know about Jesus - how you heard the gospel and came to respond. Be sure the gospel is clear at this point. Be sure Jesus is the hero. Don’t express your turning point with religious phrases like, “then I started going to church and reading my Bible,” unless you go on to say, “and that’s how I learned that Jesus died for me and I had to commit my life to Him - I had to make Him MY king.”

Now look at how Saul was transformed into Paul.

**After Jesus**

* A new **Relationship**

“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting… I will appear to you.” Acts 26:15-16

The One Saul was fighting vehemently against became the primary love of his life, so he would later say, “To live is CHRIST and to die is gain.” “I want to KNOW CHRIST and the power of his resurrection…”

Here is the first transformation of Saul - ***from religion to relationship***. So many of us have made that very change. If you grew up going to church like I did, chances are it was just a set of religious exercises for you until you had your own encounter with the Lord like I did. Then Jesus became personal. He called you out of your sin into His glorious light, into His cleansing grace. And you were never the same because you were bound to Jesus in a loving, covenant, eternal relationship.

Even in this moment of Saul’s first confrontation with Jesus, the Lord promised to appear to him again. He promised relationship. Saul would have to stew for 3 days and wait for a trembling believer named Ananias to pray for him. But then he would have literal scales fall from his eyes and begin to see Jesus clearly from then on.

**After Jesus**

* A new **Identity**

“I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness…” Acts 26:16

Saul was actually given a new name, Paul. Most of us don’t have that much of a concrete change in identity, but every follower of Jesus is given a new identity in Christ. “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation - the old has gone, the new has come.” “The old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, that you should no longer be a slave to sin.”

To be a Christian, as Jesus said in John 3 - you must be born again. Just as you were born physically, you must be born spiritually - given a new identity, starting a new life. That’s what this time was for Paul. He incubated in the dark for a few days and then was reborn into a new identity, with a new mission.

**After Jesus**

* A new **Mission**

“To whom I am sending you, to open their eyes, so they may turn from darkness to light.” Acts 26:17-18

Instead of attacking followers of Jesus, Paul would become the greatest missionary for Jesus. Just as he was suddenly surrounded by the light of Jesus’ grace and truth, so Paul would become an ambassador of light - both in spoken word and in writing. The report quickly spread about Saul, soon after his conversion, that he was “preaching the faith he had once tried to destroy.”

The believers in the early church were so nervous to approach their former persecutor that ***only Barnabas was willing to go track him down*** - the great encourager and pastor of the early church. Barnabas took that massive risk and even went on the first missionary journey with Paul, supporting his launch into public ministry.

**After Jesus**

* A new **Message**

“Declared first to those in Damascus… that they should repent and turn to God.” Acts 26:20

Paul didn’t wait around. As soon as he had experienced the grace of Jesus he started preaching about Jesus.

**After Jesus**

* A new **Message**

“Declared first to those in Damascus then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles.” Acts 26:20

All of the disciples were supposed to have carried the good news of Jesus to all of Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth - but it wasn’t until persecution forced them to leave Jerusalem that the gospel began to spread. And it wasn’t until Paul set out that the church began to multiply all over the Mediterranean area.

What was the message? A call to repentance and faith.

**After Jesus** - **Peace** and **Purpose**

* A new **Message**

“That the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.” Acts 26:23

The good news is as simple as that: Jesus died and rose again. That is the light that lets a blind man see. That is the grace that transforms a persecutor into a preacher. That is the love that turns a life around. That is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

For Saul it was a transformation ***from anger to peace*** and ***from arrogance to purpose***. From self-advancement in his career as a Pharisee to total commitment to the advance of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What is your AFTER?

* If you struggled with addiction, how did Jesus set you free?
* If you were plagued by worry and fear, how did Jesus give you peace?
* If you were selfish and proud, how did Jesus give you new perspective and purpose?
* If you were greedy and obsessed with this world, how did Jesus show you the true joy of His kingdom?

Jesus changed my life. ***He can change your life too.*** In fact, **Jesus is the only One** who can really, truly, eternally change your life. Only Jesus can forgive sin. Only Jesus can set you free from the power of sin. Only Jesus can save you from death and hell. Only Jesus can represent you before the righteous judgment seat of God. Only Jesus can give you the power and love and presence of the Holy Spirit. Only Jesus can change your heart and fill you with His goodness, faithfulness and self-control. Only Jesus.

What can wash away my sin? ***Nothing but the blood of Jesus.***

What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Oh, precious is the flow that makes me white as snow - no other fount I know - nothing but the blood of Jesus.

It sounds a little gory at first. ***“There is a fountain filled with blood.”*** Where? In some freaky Hitchcock movie? No. At the cross of Jesus Christ.

That’s where we have to lead people eventually. ***We have to help them find their way to the cross.*** The Lord led you to the cross one day. Now He wants to use you and your story to lead others to that very same place. You didn’t have a bright light and an audible voice. You weren’t blinded for three days and then miraculously healed. But somehow you did see the light of God’s Word. You did hear the voice of Jesus calling you to turn from your sin and come to Him. You did experience His healing touch as He opened your eyes to see the glory of the cross, the hope of your salvation - the place of your healing and transformation.

Oh the wonderful cross! Bids me come and die and find that I can truly live.

***What’s your story?*** That’s your homework this week. Write it out - with a clear before and after. Make sure the gospel is clear as the turning point - that it’s not about you making yourself better through some religious exercises. Don’t help people become better Pharisees. Show them that their religious activities will never be enough to save them. What they need is a total life change. They need Jesus.

And He is waiting there with open arms.

Let’s keep praying for people and this fall, let’s help as many people as possible meet the Lord Jesus!

Let’s pray.