

Explore the Bible: The Testimony

January 24, 2018

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Feb. 11 focuses on Acts 22:3-8, 15-22.*

In the Scripture passage studied in the previous lesson, the Apostle Paul insisted he still would go on to Jerusalem in spite of the promise of persecution. He did not fail in his persistence, nor did his fate prove otherwise. His arrival prompted both good and bad reception in Acts 21.

Now, we get to a public speech in front of the crowd that was pursuing Paul as he was arrested. This is significant, because even the commander allowed Paul to address the mixed crowd. This reminds us God's favor gives us opportunities.

Let your study group know the most powerful story they ever will tell is their Christian testimony—a “personal faith story that needs to be shared.” When God changes our lives, he shapes our story to be told and heard. Paul's testimony here provides a simple example for how to share our transformation stories.

Former Life (Acts 22:3-5)

Why would Paul start out this way? Consider his audience for a moment: In this crowd there were folks who received him, a vocal group who rejected him, and the bystanders who were curious. Each needed his background to shape the story.

This element really is a confession of who we were before encountering

God. It is important to speak to the folly of our past, because we have to admit that we fall short on our own. Paul claimed he was a religiously devoted Jew who was “zealous for God,” and admitted to how he was off-track.

Why was Paul’s background important for those who were rejecting him? They were zealous as he once was! He once was in their shoes. Paul’s former life spoke to how wrong and misguided he was, and our former lives should tell the same about us.

Without a “former life” to tell others about, we have no springboard to tell about how desperately we needed God in our lives. Think of it this way: If we don’t see that we are sinners, we won’t see that we need saving.

Life-Changing Encounter (Acts 22:6-8, 15-16)

Consider Paul’s encounter and conversion in Acts 9, and notice how similar he once was to the crowd he was addressing. As we read his recounting in Acts 22, notice verses 9-14 are important, because those who witnessed his transformation affirmed Paul’s change.

Have a few people in your group answer this question: *What was your critical point of transforming from your former life to your life in Christ?* Some people see a specific moment, but others see a length of time. Each of these is valid. When we share our stories, we need to take note of when and how our lives changed.

When God is encountered, we have the choice to stay in our former life or move forward in a new way. Paul was baptized. God forgave his former sins and washed him clean. His account is no more or less powerful than yours: Transformation happens to every person who receives salvation from God.

This must be understood.

New Purpose (Acts 22:17-21)

Evidently, Paul's transformation was so radical that God told him it would not be accepted— yet. Consider these thought-provoking questions about this crowd in Jerusalem: *How many of these people saw Stephen's death happen? How many of these people witnessed Paul's significant transformation?*

Jerusalem's setting was significant. This crowd formed over years, not just minutes. Yet, this was the right time for Paul to share about his transformation and God-given purpose. He was to go to the Gentiles, and that really stirred up the zealous Jews.

Ask your group to respond to this statement: *God's purpose is radical.* God's ways are above and beyond ours, which means his purposes for us challenge humanity's comfort. For Paul, it meant going to the unclean nations, but for you and me, it may be different.

Let us be clear: God's purpose for all of us is the same, but our individual lives may have more specific callings. All of us unify behind "following God" and "leading others to God." *Consider having your group members share about their callings.*

Rejection (Acts 22:22)

Paul's story was compelling! This crowd listened to him intently until verse 21. It is true our personal testimonies will catch the attention of those who agree and disagree with us. It is also true that some will reject our stories.

We need to prepare ourselves for this. Sharing our testimony makes us vulnerable. Encourage your group by assuring them: *When your story is*

rejected, it does not mean your story is worthless. Your story is a tool God will use for his glory, and he is always glorified.

Conclusion

If they haven't already done so, encourage each member of your study group to sit down and write out his or her personal testimony. This is important because our God-given stories of transformation deserve thought; they also deserve to be shared. Because sharing can bring nervousness, it is helpful to use Paul's example here as a formula for ours.

We are surrounded by people who don't know God or follow God, and they are not interested in being told "Bible answers." However, they are interested in personal stories and relationships. Since we are to share the good news, we can use our testimonies as the primary tool for evangelism.

We have taken this text quite practically: Share your story. Keep in mind this is not a biography that follows every breath and turn. Rather, it is "nutshell" of your spiritual autobiography, written by you and God. Eventually, that "nutshell" needs to be cracked open and discovered.

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