

## **CONTAGIOUS STORIES**

Real-life stories can be powerful. They can change minds, touch hearts, and impact lives. They can even reshape societies and redirect history.

Take, for example, the story of the hard-living, liquor-slogging, vulgarity-spewing captain of a slave ship in the 1700s who in the midst of a terrible storm cried out to God for deliverance from the wind and waves—and mercifully received it. His name was John Newton, and he later told of how that experience was used by God to dramatically reorient his entire life and perspective, including his views on slavery. His story and experiences became key influences in the life of William Wilberforce who, decades later, succeeded in abolishing the slave trade in the entire British Empire.

And here's one you might not know about that also happened in the 1950s, though you've certainly heard about some of the results. A young missionary named Bob Pierce felt such compassion for a young Chinese girl whose widowed mother could not afford to send her to a mission school that he gave all he had to help: fifteen dollars. That was enough to enroll her in the school—and he committed to sending money every month for her continued support. When he later went back to America and began to tell others about the needs he had seen in Asia and the story of what he had done to help this girl, the concept of child sponsorship caught on and began to grow. Today the organization he started, World Vision, has over 500,000 people sponsoring children every month, supporting 100 million people in 99 countries, and it has become one of the largest relief agencies on the planet!

See why I say that stories can be so powerful? Just these two alone helped to stop slavery in the Western world, and provide food and support to needy people around the world!

And guess what? When it comes to the theme of our series, “Developing a Contagious Faith,” stories can have a huge impact as well! That’s why the Bible is so adamant in 1 Peter 3:15 about our need to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”

All of us, if we’re genuine followers of Jesus, have an important story to tell. Not just those of us with dramatic details, but all of us with ordinary stories of life-change can have a dramatic affect on those we talk to. Our testimonies can be absolutely contagious in their influence and impact! As Chuck Swindoll said in his book, *Come Before Winter*: “The skeptic may deny your doctrine or attack your church, but he cannot honestly ignore the fact that your life has been changed.” **No one can argue with YOUR story!**

So let’s look at Acts 26 and a great example of how God used one man’s story. In this passage the apostle Paul is in prison for his faith, and he’s given the opportunity to speak in his own defense before King Agrippa. He tells his story in a clear and powerful way—one I’m confident we can all learn from. I’ll read it, and you can follow along in your Bible. We’ll start in verse one, and read most of the chapter.

*1Then 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, 3and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.*

*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. 5They 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. 6And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. 7This 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. 8Why 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. 10And 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.*

*11Many 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.*

*12“On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13About 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. 14We 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. 17I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them 18to 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.’*

*19“So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. 20First 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.*

*21That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. 22But 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—23that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”*

*24At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.”*

*25“I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. 26The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. 27King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”*

*28Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”*

*29Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”*

Pretty exciting drama, don't you think? Paul was obviously very effective in his communications here—and the way he went about telling his story left some great clues for all of us to benefit from. So for the rest of our time together we're going to look at five principles we can learn from Paul's example in order to help us all be more ready to tell our own stories whenever opportunities arise.

We've built these around an acrostic of the word “S.T.O.R.Y.” Let's begin with the “S.”

### **The “S” in STORY: Start with the Other Person**

It’s tempting to take the stance that says, in effect, “This is *my* story, so it’s gonna be all about ME!” Many Christians have taken that approach in the past—and lost the interest of their listeners from the very start!

Notice that Paul didn’t do that. Look back at verses 2–3 and you’ll see that he actually focused his attention and opening words directly on his listener, King Agrippa. More than just being polite or introducing a topic he wanted to talk about, he was very careful to establish areas of common ground that they had with each other on an ordinary, human level. They were both Jewish, even if King Agrippa was not observant in his Judaism. They were both well educated and aware of the details and nuances of the Jewish faith. And Paul spoke to him with great respect, even if he didn’t respect his values or lifestyle. Paul was establishing rapport, which earned him the right to ask at the end of verse 3 that the king patiently listen to what he had to say.

How about you? Most of us as Christians struggle with either not talking about our faith at all, or going to the other extreme and talking only about OUR faith and experience. But don’t fall into that latter trap of self-centered spirituality. Put the other person first. Ask questions and really listen. Get to know them and understand where they’re coming from. Then, based on what you learn, relate your story to their experience and situation. You’ll be much more effective and much more useful in God’s hands.

### **The “T” in STORY: Talk with Confidence and Clarity**

Think about the situation. Paul was a prisoner, and he was actually brought into the room wearing heavy chains. It was a humiliating situation, standing in shackles before this king and

his sister who, we are told in Acts 25, had come into the room with great pomp. Paul was seemingly at a huge psychological disadvantage in this interchange.

Yet it's obvious that he was not intimidated or hesitant. As soon as he was given the opportunity to talk, he waved his hand to silence the crowd and then began to speak boldly. He talked about being "fortunate" to be speaking to the king. He laid out his facts clearly and concisely. He confidently appealed to the knowledge of his Jewish listeners at one point, and to that of the king himself at another. And he stood up to Festus when Festus called him insane, and asserted calmly that he was not crazy, and that in fact everything he said was completely "true and reasonable."

Where did Paul get such poise and confidence when the odds were so stacked against him? Let me suggest a couple reasons for his boldness:

*First, he knew who God was.* Paul had long since learned about and experienced the truth about God and his Messiah, Jesus. He had carefully looked into all of the claims and evidence, and talked personally to some of the people Jesus had walked with. So Paul was able to exclaim in one of his letters, "I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day" (2 Timothy 1:12).

*Second, he knew who he was:* He knew he was a favored son of the King of Kings—so he wasn't going to let a mere human king intimidate him.

Knowing the truth about God and about himself gave Paul courage and strength even in the most difficult of circumstances. And guess what? The same can be true for all of us! I think some of us get timid about our faith because we've never bothered to read the right books, or come to the right classes, or do the homework necessary to really gain confidence in our knowledge of God and our standing in God's family. And so we end up being, as Paul put it in

Ephesians 4:14, “tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching.”

That’s why we as a church work so hard to provide high-quality teaching [highlight any examples or upcoming opportunities] and to point you to great books that will reinforce your faith. We want all of us to be grounded in the truth, clear in our knowledge of God, and confident in our standing as his sons and daughters—knowing it’ll make us stronger in our daily lives and bolder in our witness for him.

### **The “O” in STORY: Organize Your Story Chronologically**

You may have noticed that Paul didn’t ramble around in a random fashion when he told King Agrippa his story. He had obviously thought it through ahead of time and had organized his thoughts—in keeping with what Peter said in 1 Peter 3:15 about “being prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks.”

What he did was clearly and concisely relay his experience in the order it actually happened. Check him out starting in verse 4, where he talks about his experience growing up, before knowing Christ. He said, “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,” and he continued in that vein through verse 11. We refer to that as the “B.C.,” or “Before Christ” part of his story.

But then in verse 12 he shifts into talking about his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, and he elaborates on that experience through verse 18. This is the middle part of his story, which we’ll refer to as the M.C. part, meaning “Met Christ.”

Then in verse 19, he goes on to the “A.D.” part of his story, which is what happened after he met Christ. He says, “So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven ...” and he goes on from there.

Notice how the whole account feels so natural? That same approach works well today too. We’re all used to seeing before-and-after testimonials that illustrate how buying a product, or taking a medication, or getting on an exercise routine can make a difference in our lives. Only, in this instance, the difference is a deep, real, and lasting change that goes right to our very heart and soul—and lasts for all eternity!

You have, if you’re a committed follower of Christ, a B.C., M.C., A.D. story. And that story can have a huge impact on the people around you, even if it might seem kind of bland and unexciting to you. If knowing Jesus has changed your life, then a whole lot of people out there could benefit from hearing about it.

### **The “R” in STORY: Relate Your Experience to the Other Person’s Life**

I love this one—and can’t overemphasize its importance. Let me start with a few illustrations:

One of the greatest mistakes a leader can make is to talk about what is needed in an organization, but then fail to ask people to make the changes necessary to actually make that need actually happen.

And one of the most common errors that salespeople commit is to present all of the details about their product, but then shy away from asking their potential customer for the order.

And didn’t we all hate it when a schoolteacher would talk about the importance of a subject, but then leave us fuzzy about what we needed to know to be ready for the test?

If all you do is tell the story of your personal encounter with God and leave it there, you'll be like that ineffective leader, salesperson, or teacher. You'll be an *almost-Contagious Christian!* You'll have told some interesting spiritual autobiographical information, but you'll likely not persuade your listeners to follow Christ.

But look at what Paul did in verses 26 and 27. He courageously said, "The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do."

In effect he's saying: "You've heard my story, you've got the information, you know it's all true—NOW *DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT!*" We need to follow Paul's example, and not just tell others about our experience with Christ, but also apply what that can mean to them, and encourage them to act on that knowledge by seeking and following Jesus.

### **The "Y" in STORY: Your Mission: Point People to Christ**

The reason Paul was so bold, so clear, and so persuasive was because he knew he was on a mission. His top concern was not to defend and preserve his own life—it was to save the lives and eternities of the people who were listening to him!

He knew this was not about mere spiritual autobiography—it was about evangelism! It was about being contagious with the wonderful message that Jesus Christ can change a life. He had changed Paul's life, and Paul wanted the same for everyone listening to him, including those who were acting as his enemies. What a love-driven and inspiring example Paul was for all of us!

And notice that his hearers got the point. In verse 28 Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” Agrippa was feeling the challenge. He knew that Paul was on a mission, and that mission was *him*!

And notice, too, that Paul didn’t back down even an inch. He didn’t say what many people who claim to be Christians today would say:

“Well, I don’t want to try to change anyone’s mind. I mean, I’m just saying that the Jesus approach works for me. But you may have a different perspective—you know, your own truth. It would be presumptuous for me to try to tell you my way is right and your way is wrong. I’ll just pray that one way or another God will lead you in the right direction, whatever that might be, and let’s try not to offend each other—okay?”

Can you imagine?

No, Paul scanned the room from left to right, then looked King Agrippa in the eye, and, throwing caution and political correctness to the wind, said boldly: “Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am,” and then he winsomely added, “except for these chains.”

In other words he was declaring that, yes, he really was trying to persuade the king and everyone else within earshot to move everything that was getting in their way in order to know and follow Jesus as their forgiver and leader!

Paul may have started on the defense, but he had quickly and decisively moved to the offense. The prisoner was passionately trying to take captives for Christ! The king felt the heat, and really had two choices: get right with God or get away from Paul! If you look at the passage, you’ll see that he unfortunately got up and left the room. I hope and pray that any spiritual onlookers here today will make a better choice than Agrippa did.

And I trust that all of us who name Christ as our leader will capture some of Paul's tenacious spirit and get on the offense with the people around us who are dying to know the real Jesus.

Listen, you've got a story to tell, and God can really use it, so please remember:

- Start with the other person
- Talk with confidence and clarity
- Organize it naturally
- Relate it to the other person. And remember:
- Your mission is to point them to Christ, so they can begin their *own* story!

We live in a culture that relates best to stories. People want to know not just if Christianity is true, but whether it *works*. Your story powerfully illustrates that God is alive in your life and makes a marked difference in how you think, what you value, and how you live. This also reminds us why it's so important, as we said in message one, to live an authentic Christian life—it's our best argument for why others should follow Christ!

Please be sure to be back next week, when we're going to talk about the vitally important subject of "A Contagious Message."

I began this message by mentioning the story of John Newton, the former slave trader who called out to God from his ship in the middle of a storm and became a committed follower of Christ. He not only spoke and wrote often about his story, he also put it into a song—one that has become a favorite to millions for hundreds of years. Listen to the words of that song. It's his powerful story, and it's yours and mine, too:

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound*

*That saved a wretch like me!*

*I once was lost, but now am found*

*Was blind, but now I see!*