



If I Told You My Story... (Acts 26)



[Play Video: Big Daddy Weave “My Story”]



My Story

- I grew up in church. Regular involvement. It’s just what we did.
 - (Dad = choir; Mom = Sunday School...every week)
 - But I was more proud of my “goodness” than excited about Jesus.
- So, when my sister decided to get baptized, it was a given that I would, too...
 - 4th grade, grandparents visiting...
 - In the shark-infested waters of our church baptistry (Jeff Nielsen)
 - ...but what changed?! Not much.
 - I knew lots of stuff, but it was just head knowledge. I deserved salvation and anyone who questioned that was wrong or stupid.
- It wasn’t until later that God pulled me inexplicably toward ministry and started opening doors.
 - Church camp (examples like Wade Russell, Jeff Aenk solidified the truth)
- It all clicked. Everything I had learned about Jesus started to fall into place.
 - He’s not just a religious fact to know; he’s a person HERE with me
 - He’s not content with a good person...and I wasn’t that good anyway; he died on the cross to destroy the old me and its selfish ways...and he rose from the dead to bring me new life.
- Jesus began the long process of changing me and conforming to his image...all while I was trying to be obedient to the call to ministry.
 - I look back now, and I’m embarrassed at some of the things I still thought and did.
 - But Jesus has been shaping me, molding me, making my life more into something that reflects Him more clearly. Still a long way to go, but ...I’m excited to be here in the process of what He is doing!!!!

That’s my story. What’s yours?



Snippets vs Stories

The Difference

We all have stories, and we're pretty good at telling them when the situation calls for it. But most of the time they're just snippets or anecdotes...not a full-fledged STORY. What's the difference?

SNIPPETS

A snippet is a one-time incident that illustrates a point or gets a laugh. It's the kind of thing we share all the time.

At TCC, Kent Magnussen may be the King of the Snippets. He is ready - anytime! - to tell you about the time when he was in high school... or when he was hunting geese... or while he was transporting a prisoner from Norton to Leavenworth... It may or may not be a great snippet, but he's ready to tell it on the spot!

Snippets are fun and easy tales to tell.

STORIES

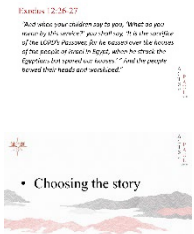
But today I'm talking about stories. Stories are bigger. They are narratives that fit within a pattern of larger meaning.

- The *snippet* is "the time we crossed the Platte River in a covered wagon." The *story* is about the westward expansion of America on the Oregon Trail.
- The *snippet* is "Frodo Baggins meets Bilbo in Rivendell." The *story* is about a journey to save what is good from the overwhelming forces of evil.

Snippets may be part of the story, but they aren't THE story. We may tell snippets, but they belong in the bigger story.

A biblical example might be the story of Passover in the book of Exodus. God had miraculously rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and in the process, he initiated the feast of Passover – a ritual meal that the Hebrews are supposed to commemorate annually. As the meal is celebrated, kids might ask about elements of the feast (aka snippets), and God says tell them to remember their rescue (aka story).

"And when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.' "
And the people bowed their heads and worshiped." (Exodus 12:26–27, ESV)



Choosing the Story

We're part of a story, but which story do we tell?

There was a television show in the 1980s and 90s (rebooted last year) called Quantum Leap. In the show, a physicist gets mixed up in an experiment with time travel and begins leapfrogging his way through time. Whenever he leaps to a new time, he temporarily takes the place of a person (he's in their body, living their life). Part of the show's appeal was the mystery of discovering what story Dr. Sam Beckett was leaping into. Was this episode a romance? A political thriller? A buddy comedy? A military saga? Each person...and each show...inhabited a different story.

Every one of us is part of a story. And the story we choose to tell about ourselves (the metanarrative) shapes our experience.

I saw this in action at a gas station near The Legends, filling up my vehicle at the pump. I'm standing there, waiting and people-watching.

On my right pulls up a sedan and out steps a little old lady who is clearly on her way home from a church event! She is dressed in her Sunday finest, Bible verse license plate, ready to greet anyone who comes within 10 feet of her car.

On my left pulls up a sedan that's riding lower, with fancy rims and a stereo that is pumping out bass you could hear from several blocks away. As he steps out, the inappropriate rap lyrics become more audible...and as he starts to fill up, he keeps his eyes open and looking around, ready to fend off anyone who comes within 10 feet of his car.

Same gas station. Same time. Same residents of Kansas. Same ethnic background. Different stories.

We all choose the story - we select a narrative about our life that informs our actions.

- Your narrative might be that you're "pursuing the American Dream," trying to accumulate enough now so you can retire and relax in style.
- Your narrative might be that you're "keepin' it country," and you're enjoying a salt-of-the-earth existence doing good ol' boy stuff with a YETI cooler out on the lake.
- Your narrative might be that you're "the odd one," and you'll never fit in with the cool kids. So you choose to live outside the mainstream in fashion or haircuts. You pick obscure music to listen to and obscure movies to quote and laugh when you're misunderstood.

The story you choose *filters* what you notice. It *dictates* what you emphasize. It *prioritizes* your actions. It *influences* your choice of friends. It *affects* how you evaluate your day.

But the story you tell about yourself is a **choice**. You must choose which one dominates and explains the events of your days. The choice can pivot drastically, like Arnold Schwarzenegger trading Hollywood for the governor's mansion, or Darius Rucker leaving *Hootie and the Blowfish* to be a country singer...but it is still a choice.

We have a choice of what story we tell about ourselves. And whatever story you choose to tell, it will only be a *snippet* unless you figure out where it fits in the BIG story of what God is doing!

HIS story...including His story about you... is the only story that truly matters!

We need to choose *that* story!!! We need to *share* that story as our own story. Because it's a great story! It's worth listening to, worth saying, and worth choosing!

Previously, in Acts...

I was thinking about this as I was reading Acts 26 to prepare for today's sermon. In Acts 26, we have a continuation from last week's look at Acts 25. Paul (in prison because of his faith) has been called before the Roman Governor Festus and his political ally, King Agrippa (and Agrippa's wife, Bernice). They want to review his case and get a more precise description of Paul's supposed crimes before sending him to Rome for the Emperor to judge.

Acts 26:1-3

So Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense: "I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.

Paul is primed and ready to give his defense. And (**SPOILER ALERT**) his defense is just a chance for him to tell his own story. But the story isn't just Paul's... it is God's story!

This is the third time in the book of Acts that Paul's conversion tale is told. We heard it back in Acts 9, then again in Acts 22. (*Fun fact: This is the third time I've preached on it!!!*). There are so many different angles we could take as we examine this presentation. But today, I just want you to consider it for what it is: a STORY.

We need to share this same STORY as our own - yes, trading Paul's details for our own details, but sharing the same narrative regarding the larger meaning.

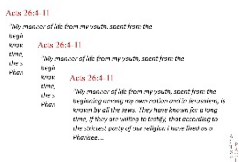
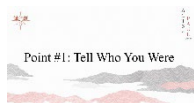
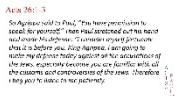
What story should we tell? Paul gives us a template.

Point #1: Tell Who You Were (Acts 26:4-11)

Paul opens with a look back at his life.

Acts 26:4-11

"My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they



earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? "I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

We've talked at length in this series about Paul's background - his education, his status as a Pharisee, his zealous persecution of Christians.



Past Tense

Today I just want you to see the PAST TENSE. This is the "BC" him (Before Christ). For Paul, it was an intense past of misguided religious violence. This is who he WAS.

And it is compelling, because dramatic stories of violence, abuse, addiction, and immorality make for some exciting "BC" stories!

In the back of a magazine I sometimes read (Christianity Today), there is a feature where they share a modern-day conversion story. The headlines work hard to show a dramatic past. Here are some sample headlines:

- "I Untied My Noose and Took Up My Cross"
- "I Wanted to Die for Allah. Now I Live for Jesus."
- "God Wanted Me When the Foster-Care System Didn't"
- "The Booze-Filled Business Trip That Made Me a Christian"

These headlines are exciting, having all the subtlety of a heavy metal concert!

But sin is sin, whether it is dramatic or pedestrian. And sinners need a Savior.

Tip: *When you tell your "BC" story, don't feel pressure to make your past worse or better than it was. Just share it, without hyperbole and without shame. Recognize some of the key actions or attitudes that were putting a barrier between you and God, and own them.*

Paul's story is compelling because it is true, not because it is hyped up. It has power as a "before" statement because it isn't manipulative...it's just who Paul was.

And he views it all through the lens of the bigger STORY. Notice a couple of details.

- He acknowledges the people he persecuted as "saints" (v. 10) - they were the holy ones, not Paul, because they had been transformed by Jesus.
- He says he tried to make them "blaspheme" (v. 11) - in other words, he tried to make them renounce their beliefs and proclamations about Jesus. He tried to make the Son of God merely human...which he now recognizes as wrong!

Paul's portrayal of his past fits with his statements in other places:

"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." (1 Timothy 1:15, ESV)

These details show that Paul's testimony is rooted in the right story!

Point #2: Tell Who You Are (Acts 26:19-23)

There is the before...and there is the after. Let's jump ahead and catch some of this transformation in Paul's testimony.

Acts 26:19–23

"Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: 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."

We've spent a ton of time talking about the transformation in Paul's life. Instead of persecuting Christians, he preaches Christ! He is obedient to God, tirelessly working to share the gospel.

Present Tense

Notice the PRESENT TENSE. This is the "AD" (After Death...to self) version of Paul. That was who he was; this is who he IS. Elsewhere, Paul sums it up this way

"... formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." (1 Timothy 1:13–14, ESV)

Like the presentation of his past, Paul's presentation of the present in Acts is exciting! He obeys a heavenly vision, he travels internationally, he is wrapped up in literal life-and-death circumstances!

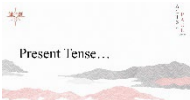
But salvation is salvation, whether the results are dramatic or nuanced.

Tip: *When you tell your "AD" story, make sure you aren't the hero. It's a story that involves you, but it isn't about you. Your role in the story is to show the results. In a fitness program brochure, you are the before and after photo...changed only because of someone else's program, equipment, or supplement. In your faith, you should look different. Just don't take the credit. More on that in a minute...*

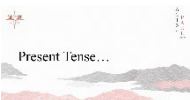
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Paul doesn't take the credit. As he recounts his role in the bigger STORY, he includes some details that point away from himself.

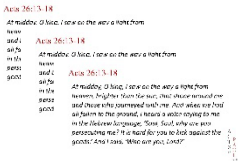
- He claims that he did it with God's help (v. 22a)
- His words aren't his own - he's just passing along God's message from the prophets and Moses (v. 22b)

These details show that Paul remains rooted in the right story!



Point #3: Tell Who Made the Difference (Acts 26:13-18)

So who should get the credit? In between his before and after (the “what I was” vs. the “what I am”), Paul shares about the One who made the difference. We need to tell who made the difference!



Acts 26:13–18

At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

In the reading, define “goad” - the phrase is akin to “You’re swimming against the current!”

You’ve heard Paul’s story before, and you know it is about Jesus. Jesus is the one who makes the change possible.



The STORY

This is the STORY! This is the narrative that should define us!

Paul expands on what he shares in previous accounts of the Damascus Road experience. In this telling, Jesus says more....but what Jesus says is what Festus and Agrippa and Bernice need to hear! It is the STORY! (v. 18)

- Jesus turns people from darkness to light (spiritual blindness to spiritual life)
- Jesus turns people from Satan to God (Father of Lies to the Author of Truth)
- Jesus provides forgiveness for sins (anything we think, say or do that breaks God's heart)
- Jesus provides hope and a future for those who are forgiven (we are being made better and more pleasing to God in the process)

Tip: Your telling should not emphasize your own role in the process, as if you did something to make salvation possible. Just acknowledge how you met Jesus and what he has been changing. Use some concrete examples where possible and keep it simple!

Paul does all these things. He shows that he is rooted in the right story. It's not a tale about his own amazing spiritual insight...nor is it a tale of being worthy of selection...nor is it focused on the benefits to Paul's life. It's just Paul trying to show that he is living in GOD'S story.

"O, to tell you my story is to tell of Him!!!!"

Who to Tell?

I hope that you will choose to see yourself in THIS story as your primary narrative. Everything else can be a snippet, but this is your STORY!

Paul's speech in Acts 26 is a great example of telling the right story. And stories are meant to be told...so we need to ask now last question: whom do we tell?

Paul's audience was interesting, and they had some interesting responses.

The Roman Governor Festus heard it and replied in Acts 26:24 *"And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.""*

King Agrippa, as Paul challenges him more directly, asks in Acts 26:28 *"And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?""*

Yet Paul wasn't just speaking to them. Verse 29 shows his mindset.

Acts 26:29

And Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains."

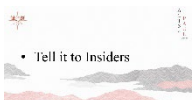
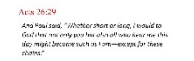
Paul wanted to tell the story to everyone! So as we wrap up, let me encourage you in your storytelling with a couple tips about who to tell.

Tell it to Insiders

As brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to share the STORY with each other often. Our words need to reflect the narrative that we live. By telling the BIG story of Jesus to each other and reminding each other that this is our shared narrative, we strengthen the church. We can do this through sermons and songs...but also through daily conversations, prompts for prayer, speaking Scripture to one another, and more!

So...

1. Ask to hear someone else's story – their "testimony"
2. Volunteer your own story - your "testimony"



3. Give some thought to the way you present your story (see books like *Just Walk Across the Room* or *God Space* for tips).
4. Get comfortable saying the name Jesus
5. Discuss current events in light of God's plan and story

If we do this and more, we'll strengthen each other and share the right story as a church.

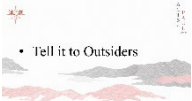
Tell it to Outsiders

But also remember to share it with outsiders – not just as evangelism, or apologetics...but as a counterpoint to the false stories they've been telling themselves. We have a better story to tell! It's a STORY with purpose, with hope, and with dignity. It may not fit the narratives others have established, but we need to be willing to speak it and help them discover meaning in God's plan.

So...

1. Listen before you talk, to learn what story they really believe. Ask questions!
2. Use everyday language as you talk, so it's not confusing.
3. Make Jesus the hero – he's the one who made the change, not you
4. Care enough about the person to broach the topic
5. Do it in the context of relationships

That's the story we need to tell! I look forward to hearing more of yours the next time we talk!



Prayer

Invitation

SERMON NOTES

Snippets vs Stories

Choosing the Story (Exodus 12:26-27)

Previously, in Acts... (Acts 26:1-3)

Point #1: Tell Who You Were (Acts 26:4-11)

Past Tense (1 Timothy 1:15)

Point #2: Tell Who You Are (Acts 26:19-23)

Present Tense (1 Timothy 1:13-14)

Point #3: Tell Who Made the Difference (Acts 26:13-18)

The STORY

Who to Tell? (Acts 26:29)

Tell it to Insiders

Tell it to Outsiders

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Fellowship

- Share the story of how you got to this point in your spiritual life. Who influenced you? What changed in your life? How has Jesus made a difference?

Exploration

- What is your favorite story in Scripture? Have you ever thought about how it fits into God's overall story? What is the connection?
- Are "snippets" (i.e. daily anecdotes) easier to tell, or "stories" (i.e. the big narrative about life)? When are you more likely to share "snippets"? To share "stories"?
- Who is in the audience as Paul shares this story? Why are they there? Look back to Acts 25:23-27
- How does Paul's conversion story compare to the telling in Acts 9 and Acts 22? What details are included here that aren't elsewhere?
- What does Paul say about his past? Summarize it with a word or phrase.
- What does Paul say about his present? Summarize it with a word or phrase.
- How does Paul show that Jesus is responsible for the change? Do you give Jesus enough credit for your own conversion story? Why or why not?
- Why is it important to talk about our stories with other Christians? How does it strengthen the church?
- Who is the last person outside of church that you spoke to about Jesus? How did it go? What challenges or obstacles did you face in the conversation? What can you learn for next time?

Prayer

- Pray for opportunities to share your story. Ask God to help you tell it, and to help you keep the focus on Him!

