

INTRODUCTION

Wow, I can't believe what I just read. I follow Ted Turner on Twitter and this morning he posted an amazing tweet. In case you didn't know, Ted Turner is a billionaire. He created CNN and owns the Atlanta Braves. In the past, he has been very critical of Christianity. He called it a religion for losers and joked about hell. He once said, "I've had a few drinks and few girlfriends, and if that's going to put me in hell so be it...those of us who go to hell will make it better because hell is supposed to be a mess. Heaven is perfect. Who wants to go to a perfect place? Boring, boring."

That's what makes this tweet amazing: "This morning I have turned from my sins and put my faith in Jesus to save me. I now declare that Jesus is my Lord!"

Wow! Isn't that great? Let's give a clap offering to the Lord for Ted's salvation! I'm going to call him after this service and see if he would be willing to come next Sunday and share his testimony with us. How many of you would like that?

Most of you don't seem to be too excited about this news. I think some of you are even skeptical about his conversion. Well, if you're skeptical, you should be, because I made it all up. I don't even follow Ted Turner on twitter. And as far as I know, Ted Turner still ridicules Christians and rejects Jesus as the only way to heaven.

The reason I did that was to give you an idea of how the early Christians must have reacted when they heard the news that Saul, the infamous chief persecutor of Christians, had suddenly become a follower of Jesus Christ. There were probably many of them who said, "Yeah. Right. I'll believe it when hell freezes over." Instead of Ted Turner, I would have used Osama Ben Laden, since he really was a terrorist. But as you know, Ben Laden has gone on to his reward—or lack thereof. Before he became a Christian, Paul was a terrorist against Christians. He stood by encouraging the stoning of Stephen. He had Christians arrested and thrown into prison. He was the LAST person Christians expected to be saved. But his testimony is a story about how God can change even a terrorist into an evangelist.

Galatians 1:11-24. "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ." For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. Later I went to Syria and Cilicia. I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ.

They only heard the report: 'The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.' And they praised God because of me."

Every Christian has a testimony. A testimony is just recounting what God has done in your life. When a witness is sworn into a court of law, they are asked to testify. All they are expected to do is honestly relate what they saw, heard, or experienced. That's what your testimony is. You just related the story of the difference Jesus has made in your life. There are three parts to every testimony: (1) My life before Jesus Christ. (2) How and when I met Christ. (3) How my life has changed since I met Christ. You should memorize those three points and write your testimony using that outline. People can say they don't believe the Bible, but they can't argue with the fact that your life has been changed! As we examine part of the testimony of the Apostle Paul, there are three things we can learn from his conversion story:

I. GOD CAN RADICALLY CHANGE YOUR LIFE

Paul wrote, "For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it..." (Galatians 1:13) Then in verse 15 Paul says God did three things: He set me apart; He called me; and He was pleased to reveal His Son in me. That's another way to express your testimony. If you're a follower of Jesus, God has done those same three things:

A. He set you apart at birth (life before Christ)

Paul lived the first part of his life learning how to be a good Jew, not knowing that from the beginning of his life, God had other plans. And God has a plan for your life.

Listen to this amazing promise that God gave to Jeremiah. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." (Jeremiah 1:5) From the moment you were born, God set you apart for a special purpose. Your life is wasted until you surrender to God and allow Him to make you into the person He planned from the very start. Have you surrendered your plans so you can discover God's plan for your life?

My friend Jack Taylor used to joke that for years he was afraid to surrender to God's will. He said he was afraid that as soon as he surrendered to God that God would make him marry a cross-eyed fat girl and send him to Africa as a missionary! But God's plan for you is a good plan. Let me give you a great definition of God's Will: God's will is what you would choose for yourself if you had enough sense to choose it!

B. He called you by His grace (how I met Christ)

Acts 9 relates the story of Saul (who later became Paul) on his way to Damascus to arrest more Christians. Suddenly there was a brilliant light from heaven and Jesus said to Saul, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4) Why didn't Jesus ask, "Why are you persecuting my Church?" It's because Jesus identifies with His church, and when you persecute the Church, you are persecuting Jesus.

Saul surrendered to God's grace that day. He deserved to be punished for being an enemy of the cross, but instead God called him and gave him a great mission. That's grace.

I love the fact that there are many times in the Bible when God calls someone by his or her name and offers them grace.

In Luke 19 Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem to die and we read these words, "A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.'" (Luke 19:2-5)

Zacchaeus had to wonder, "How does He know my name?" God knows your name today and He knows your needs, and He's calling you to follow Him.

That's how I was saved. I had heard the gospel story from the time I was a baby, but I was nine years old when I realized for the first time that Jesus had gone to the cross to pay for MY sins. It was as if Jesus said to me in a still small voice, "David, I did this for you, do you believe me?" That night I simply placed my faith in Jesus. I didn't pray a "sinner's prayer." I just believed Him.

C. He reveals Jesus in you (how my life has changed)

Paul used to be a terrorist, but God changed him into an evangelist. Paul understood that the secret to living a successful Christian life was to realize that Jesus lives in each one of us. He wrote, "To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Colossians 1:27)

Later in this series, we're going to study the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5. These are nine personality traits Jesus possessed. These nine "fruits" are also printed above the nine doors that lead into this Worship Center. They are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." The Christian life is NOT me trying to imitate those personality qualities. The Christian life is allowing Jesus to live IN you and allow Him to reveal those nine characteristics in our lives.

We used to sing a hymn that asked the question: "Do others see Jesus in you?" Paul wrote that his life was changed because God was revealing Jesus in his life. That's the only testimony we need, that our lives are different because we are revealing Jesus to others.

Lee Strobel was once an atheist and a newspaper reporter. He lived a profane life of anger. His daughter Allison had lived for five years with a profane and angry dad. He came home one evening and kicked a hole in the living room wall just out of anger. Allison hid from her dad in her room.

Lee Strobel set out to disprove the message of Christianity. But after studying the historical and archeological evidence he gave his life to Christ. Five months later, Allison said to her mother, "Mommy, I want God to do for me what he's done for daddy." She never studied the archeological evidence about the Bible; all she knew was that her old dad had been hard to live with and her dad was nicer and calmer. And Allison later gave her life to Christ.

God may not be calling you to preach in Ephesus, Rome, or China. He may just be calling you to live a Christian life in front of your children or your grandchildren. If so, live in a way that those who observe you will give glory to God!

II. GOD OFTEN SENDS US TO THE DESERT BEFORE HE USES US

Most of us prefer desserts to the desert, but Paul went to the desert. He wrote, "I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem." (Galatians 1:17-18)

When you begin to reconstruct the personal history of Paul, there are some gaps in the Acts account. He meets Jesus on the road to Damascus and goes into the city, and starts giving his testimony. But Paul doesn't immediately go to Jerusalem. When you compare Acts 9 with Galatians 1:17, we learn that Paul left Damascus and went immediately into Arabia and then back to Damascus before going to Jerusalem.

I had the privilege of preaching in Arabia last year—Saudi Arabia. And I can testify that there's only one thing there: Desert. In the cities, they've added water and there is vegetation, but once you get outside the cities there are endless miles of barren desert.

What was Paul doing during those three years in the desert? He was allowing God to prepare his heart for the ministry of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles. Paul was highly educated, so he had access to scrolls containing the Law and the Prophets. I'm sure he studied the Old Testament and spent time in prayer.

This is a pattern we find in the Bible. Before God could use Moses, Moses spent forty years in the desert of Midian. Before God could really use Elijah, He sent him to the desert of Horeb for forty days and forty nights. And of course, we know that after His baptism, Jesus spent forty days and forty nights fasting and praying in the wilderness. Whenever I take groups to Israel, I show them this same wilderness, and they're amazed at how barren it really is.

Have you ever found yourself in a spiritual desert and wondered what God was doing? You were thirsty for the living water and hungry for the bread of the Word, but instead, all you found was more desert? Desert experiences can help you grow.

I had the great honor of returning to Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky this week to speak in Chapel for their annual Heritage Week. I had to be honest with the students and faculty and say that my first three years there in 1975 was a real desert experience for me. Thirty-five years ago some of our Southern Baptist Seminaries had some professors who were teaching

theological liberalism. I had expected seminary to be a time when I would be fed the cool, clear Living Water of God's Word. Instead it was a time where my basic beliefs were threatened. I specifically recall one professor who didn't believe in the miracles of Jesus. He said, "Of course, Jesus didn't walk on water. That was just a miracle story that the early disciples concocted for a miracle-minded audience in the first century." When I heard that I was upset, but then I thought about a little widow, Mrs. Ethel Donaldson, back in my home church in South Alabama. She was a godly woman who tithed her meager income, and her gifts made up the Cooperative Program that was paying this professor's salary. I knew that if she heard someone teaching that garbage that she would have chased him out of the classroom with a rolling pin.

I was already a Bible-believing preacher when I arrived at seminary, and some of the professors tried to make me doubt my faith and doubt the Word of God. For instance, there was a preaching class where each student preached a message in front of the class. The message was videotaped and then the students critiqued and graded the sermon. I preached the best message I could and the class gave me a "C" grade. And the two main points of criticism I received were: (1) I was too animated and passionate about my delivery and (2) I used the Bible too much. Can you believe that? Of course today, I thank God for those "criticisms!"

So, I found a spiritual desert at Southern Seminary in 1975. There were days when I was so discouraged; I seriously contemplated leaving the ministry. Instead, I was forced to get into the Word myself and study even harder to be able to refute some of the liberal ideas I was being taught.

But God had a reason for leading me there. After I graduated with a Masters Degree and later a Doctorate, I was elected to serve as a member of the Board of Trustees of Southern. It was during a time of great transition when our entire denomination was dealing with theological liberalism. Some people were insisting there weren't ANY liberal professors in our six seminaries. I couldn't speak about the other five seminaries, but I knew there were some changes that needed to be made at Southern. And as a trustee in the late 1980s I was able to be a part of a process where new leadership was chosen. Over the past 25 years, our denomination has experienced a Spiritual Renaissance and now all six of our seminaries are committed to teaching the Bible as God's infallible Word. The students are men and women who are passionate about taking the Gospel to the nations.

My desert experience turned out to be a blessing in disguise. And I was blessed beyond description to be able to return to my alma mater this week and find a seminary that is so healthy and Bible-based.

III. GOD LEADS US TO WISE PEOPLE TO HELP US GROW

Next Paul wrote, "I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother." (Galatians 1:18-19)

After three years in the desert, Paul realized he still wasn't ready to launch his ministry. He needed some wise counsel and fellowship with Christians who were wiser than he was. So he

spent fifteen days in the home of Simon Peter. Wouldn't you have loved to have followed those two men around for those two weeks and heard what they had to talk about?

Then Paul spent time with James, the half-brother of Jesus. There were two men named James who were part of the twelve, but this James was the half-brother of Jesus. They had the same mom, Mary, but different dads. James' father was Joseph, and we all know who the father of Jesus was, God Himself! James, who later wrote the epistle bearing his name, became the pastor of the church in Jerusalem.

Every new Christian needs to be mentored by someone or else their growth will be stunted. If you are in my generation, you'll recognize the name B.J. Thomas. He was a singer with some great hits in the 1960s and 1970s like "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on my Head" and "Hooked on a Feeling." Thomas was deeply into drug addiction when he was suddenly "born again" in 1976. He recorded a song about heaven entitled "Home Where I Belong."

Almost overnight, he became a Christian celebrity. But the sad thing about his conversion was that he didn't have anyone to mentor him and instruct him on how to live the Christian life. He was signed to do concerts at Christian venues and after he sang a couple of his Christian songs, he would sing his country and pop songs. This made the fickle Christian audiences angry and they literally booed him off the stage. I remember one concert in Birmingham where he started with 10,000 Christians in the audience, and by the end of the show there were about 300 and many of them were railing on him and telling him they were praying he would repent. Narrow-minded Christians even sent him death threats.

Well, you might imagine the negative impact this had on the immature Christian. His faith floundered and he slid into the New Age religion, where he once said God was like the ocean and there are many rivers that lead to Him.

Because I always liked his music, I was saddened that B.J. Thomas was such a bright star shining for Christ. He went up suddenly like a fireworks shot, but after the initial explosion, there was nothing left except the smoke and echo. Sadly, B.J. Thomas lost his faith and his testimony. It might have been different if he had surrounded himself with some wise Christians to disciple him.

According to a recent interview in the Houston Chronicle, B.J. Thomas is finally back on track for the Lord, but he wasted a lot of productive years because nobody was there to disciple him.

Are you currently mentoring someone to help him or her grow deeper in their walk with Christ? Have you sought out an older, wiser Christian and asked them to mentor you? If not, why not? Ask God right now to show you someone who would profit from your guidance. Seek them out and ask if you can start meeting with them to help them grow in their walk with Christ. Also ask God to lead you to someone who can help you grow deeper in your faith.

CONCLUSION

At the end of every message I share, you and I should ask the question, "So What?" In other words, what's the point? Here's the So What: How does my testimony give glory to God? Paul wrote about what people were saying about him: "'The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.' And they praised God because of me." (Galatians 1:24) What are people saying about your testimony? Is God getting the glory?

You may be thinking, "But, Pastor I don't have a dramatic testimony like Paul, Lee Strobel or B.J. Thomas. My life is too ordinary to be a blessing to others." Listen, if God has saved you and changed you, you DO have a testimony. But because it's ordinary in your mind doesn't mean it's insignificant. God most often uses people and circumstances we think of as plain and ordinary. He only occasionally uses a former terrorist or an atheist.

Lisa Beamer was unwillingly thrust into the spotlight of fame ten years ago. Her husband, Todd Beamer was one of the heroes on United Flight 93 on 9/11. He was one of the men who decided they weren't going to sit by while the terrorists flew their jet into another American symbol. His last words before they stormed the cockpit to subdue the terrorists were, "Let's roll."

Not long after, Lisa wrote a book, Let's Roll, and she went on the speaking circuit. She was one of the most sought-after speakers in the nation. She had over 200 media appearances in the first six months after 9/11.

But have you noticed you haven't heard much from Lisa the last few years? There's a reason for that. A few years ago Lisa made a decision that her place wasn't in the spotlight. Five years ago, she left the speaking circuit and resumed what she calls "an ordinary life." She now devotes her time to her three children and her job with a homeless prevention agency.

Last spring she spoke at the commencement of Wheaton College, her and Todd's alma mater. She spoke a powerful word of encouragement to people who think that just because their lives are "ordinary" they don't really matter to God.

She said told the new graduates "So, as you wake up tomorrow, and begin your new lives, don't be dismayed to find your lives turn ordinary soon enough. When you realize that today is kind of similar to yesterday and a bit like tomorrow, ask yourself who is becoming whole again on your watch, what is being healed through your influence, how is God redeeming His creation by way of your life? Your good answers will surely be the mark of significance even in an ordinary life."

You might not be the widow of a hero, or a former-terrorist, but you have a story of God's grace in your life. Don't ever be ashamed to share your testimony.

The very first time I preached as a 17 year-old teenager, I didn't do a very good job. In fact, I did an awful job. I stood up and said everything I knew about the Bible, God, and Jesus, and after 8 minutes I was finished. One older preacher who was there said, "Son, if I couldn't do any better than that I'd be ashamed of myself." I remember thinking how right he was. I said, "Sir, I am ashamed of myself ... but I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ."

God gave you a testimony; now share it!

OUTLINE

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- B. He called you by His grace (how I met Christ)
- C. He reveals Jesus in you (how my life has changed)

II. GOD OFTEN SENDS US TO THE DESERT BEFORE HE USES US

III. GOD LEADS US TO WISE PEOPLE TO HELP US GROW

So What?

How does my testimony give glory to God?

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David O. Dykes, Pastor
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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes