

Telling Your Story- pt1- Before

Ryan Abernathy / General Acts 22:1–5; Acts 7:54–8:3; Acts 9:1–2; Romans 5:6–11

We all start wrong. We need to start there. Scripture is clear that from the beginning we all start life in rebellion against God. We may not see it or understand it at first, but that nature is there.

Just ask anyone who has a 3 year old.

I never thought [Genesis 8:21](#) was serious until I looked at this beautiful child losing their mind over a simple request that they were able to understand but unwilling to comply with. I mean we were going to a restaurant. Shoes make sense right?

But it is not just that passage in the OT. The NT says the same thing...[Romans 3:23](#) is pretty clear.

We have all gone wrong. (Explain the word sin...missing the mark...important to pin down to demystify this word)

The other problem with sin- especially for those who know Jesus- is we cultivate a different image once we are in the church. We don't like to talk about what we were like before we met Jesus...or in many cases remember what we were like before we were saved.

And that distance from those memories...and the greatness of our salvation...is a barrier especially in our day and time. Remember so many people, even in Oklahoma, have an incorrect understanding of the Gospel. More and more people associate it with being "good" or being a church goer, or being an American, or affiliated with a certain political movement. Ask someone what the Gospel means and you will get all kinds of answers, and most of the time those answers don't match with what the Bible says about the Gospel- that it is good news.

So in order to share what has happened to us, we need to go back to the beginning. Who were we before we met Jesus or, for some of us, how did knowing about Jesus early affect our lives.

And this is biblical, and the most powerful example we have of this reality is Paul- who openly shared his story on 2 different occasions, and whose journey to Jesus and after Jesus is recorded in detail in the Bible.

So I want to start with his before this morning. Turn with me to [Acts 22:1-5](#) and let's hear it in Paul's own words first.

Paul's early life was defined by some specific lenses that were really important to him:

- He was Jewish
- He was educated
- He was a law follower
- He persecuted Christians and had them killed

His mission in life was the destruction of what he saw as a perversion of his faith and heritage.

Acts His Former Zeal (22:1–5)

“Born, reared, educated” was a fixed biographical formula common in Greek writings. The significance to this is that when Paul referred to his being “brought up” in Jerusalem, the most natural meaning is that he was reared from childhood in Jerusalem, not in Tarsus, as is commonly supposed. His family must have moved to Jerusalem when he was still quite young. This ties in with the later reference to his nephew's being in Jerusalem (23:16). **It underscores the point Paul wanted to make to the Jerusalem crowd: he was no Diaspora maverick but was nurtured from childhood in the holy city itself.**

Acts The Encounter on the Damascus Road (22:6–11)

Paul then described his former days as a persecutor of the Christian movement. Here his own account parallels Luke's earlier description of Paul's days as persecutor of the Christians (8:3; 9:1f.; cf. 26:9–11), and these other texts supplement the present passage. As in 9:2 **Paul referred to Christianity as "the Way," a designation that will recur throughout his defense speeches. It not only serves to link Christianity closely with Judaism but also with Christ. It was "the Way" Christ established; to persecute the Way was to persecute Christ himself**

Paul was most defined, before Jesus, by not being for Jesus.

(look at [Acts 7:54-8:3](#) and [Acts 9:1-2](#))

Acts 4. Stephen's Martyrdom (7:54–8:1a)

Luke introduced Saul for the first time at the stoning of Stephen. He was the young man who watched over the garments of the witnesses as they stoned Stephen (v. 58). There is no indication that Paul himself actually lifted a stone, but **he was in total agreement with the action**

Acts 5. Persecution and Dispersal of the Hellenists (8:1b–3)

Then his consent led to full involvement. **He became the church's worst enemy** (v. 3). Indeed, he is portrayed as the persecution personified. He is described as attempting to "ravage" the church ("destroy"). **The Greek word is *lymainō*, a strong expression that is used in the Septuagint for wild beasts, such as lions, bears, and leopards tearing at raw flesh.** He is said to have gone "from house to house," possibly a reference to his breaking into their "house church" assemblies. In any event, his fury stopped at nothing. He turned against women as well as men, dragging them to court, throwing them in prison

That is our story too.

Now some of you may immediately go to: I am not against Jesus! I was not against Jesus!

But church, that is what sin is remember? It is rebellion against God.

It is flexing and saying that our way is better, our thoughts are higher, and our plan is more complete than His.

That is what Paul did. And it is what we did, before we met Jesus. And we did it naturally, because that is what we were pre-disposed to do by our nature.

What is amazing, is that God SAW us in this state and was willing to come and get us.

Think about these verses in light of what we just learned about Paul: [Romans 5:6-11](#).

Notice how Paul describes himself: **weak**...which given his position and what he was doing from the world's perspective he was not weak...but when he sees himself against the power of God- that was opposed to him that is what he was...he was weak

Romans (1) Peace and Hope (5:1–8)

Not only was it the right time in terms of the sweep of history but it was the right time in the sense that **we were powerless to break the chains of sin**. We were unable to help ourselves. Bound by sin and destined for an eternity apart from God, no amount of struggle could free us from condemnation. It was for us "the right time" for Christ's atoning death.

He also saw himself as an **enemy of God (v10)**...which considering how he saw his mission before he met Jesus is quite a comment. But he saw we are all like that without salvation.

Romans (2) Reconciliation (5:9–11)

The transaction took place while we were in a **state of hostility** toward God (cf. Col 1:21). In 2 Corinthians Paul wrote that God reconciled the world to himself in Christ, yet every person must respond in faith in order for that forgiveness to become effective in his or her case (2 Cor 5:19–20). Reconciliation is a personal relationship; it cannot be a unilateral action on the part of God alone. He has provided forgiveness for all people through the once-for-all death of his Son. Only when that forgiveness is accepted by faith is the compact completed and reconciliation takes place. God's part is finished; our part is a matter of individual decision.

Third, he saw himself as **someone God loved** (v8), despite his condition...God loved him enough to die for him, before Paul was saved.

Romans (1) Peace and Hope (5:1–8)

God is the Father who, having forgiven his prodigal son, watched daily for his return (Luke 15:20). Little wonder that the beloved disciple John exclaimed, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us!" (1 John 3:1). The proof of God's amazing love for us is the gift of his only Son (John 3:16). The cross defines what Scripture means by "love" (1 John 3:16). **Love is the voluntary placing of the welfare of others ahead of one's own. It is action, not sentiment.** Love is the mightiest force in the world. It is the ethical goal of human existence. God is love (1 John 4:16), and that determines the goal toward which all redemptive history moves

That's good news.

And that is a HUGE difference between how so many people understand the Gospel and what the Gospel really is. See our stories of BEFORE help people connect to their now.

We are not celebrating the sin we used to live in, but the salvation that brought us out of it. And that's an act of God that is potentially good news for everyone.

And that is why we tell the beginning of our stories...how God worked on us and for us before we even knew Him, even when we opposed Him. He came for us.