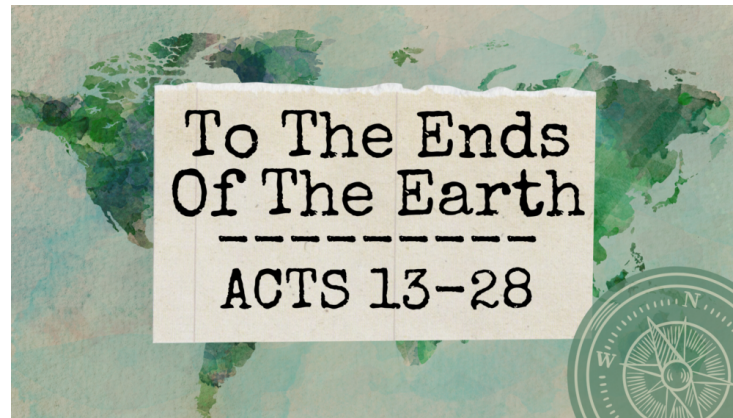


Paul's Story (All Believers Have a Story Too)



Acts 22:22–24

Bro Ricky Cunningham

I don't know if you have ever had a flashback, but this week getting to study, I had a flashback. In the beginning of the week, Sydney asked what I was going to be preaching so she could send out the daily Scripture reading related to the message I was going to be preaching so that you can read the text before I actually preach it. I have been studying for about a day and a half, so when I sent Sydney the Scripture text I fully intended to preach Acts chapters 22 and 23. Now, I know when some of you got that, you thought is he going to try to do two chapters? Go ahead and confess. I see the laugh! I really thought I could do it because I just didn't think there was enough stuff in those two chapters to make a full sermon on it. So, I thought I would just give an overview, and then something happened...ice storm. An ice storm literally took out my Wednesday, it took out my Thursday, and it took out my Friday. So literally, all I did for those three days was read and study, and the next thing you know, there was just more in this than I thought was there.

While I was studying, I had a flashback. I remembered when I first came to Hardin as a 22 year-old kid. Now, what Hardin didn't know was that I was being convicted when I became the pastor here, because I was raised in a belief system that said as Christians we all ought to be witnessing. So at least twice a month at Owens Chapel, I would hammer the church about witnessing. Then it dawned on me that I was telling my church how to witness, but I had never trained them to witness. You know, it's easy to tell somebody how to do something, but sometimes it's a little harder to prepare them to do what you are telling them they ought to be doing. Now, a program came along through the Southern Baptist Convention called CWT, Continuing Witness Training. While I was at Owens Chapel, I made the commitment that I wanted to learn to personally train Christians how to witness. But then something happened...I got a call from the pulpit committee of Hardin Baptist Church. We begin to talk. We had a few meetings and they and I begin to believe that it might be God's will for me to come here to pastor. I preached one of those trial sermons and the majority of the people in the church felt it was God's will and so I came to Hardin. But I had already signed myself up for the CWT witness training program, so I took another church member that was here in a leadership role with me and we went to the conference. We learned how to share our faith more effectively, and not just share our faith more effectively but to teach others how to share their faith too. So, we started this thirteen week training program here in Hardin. We asked the church to give us names of anybody and everybody they knew who lived within our community who did not know Christ, so we literally had hundreds and hundreds of names of people—we wanted to go into their homes and share Christ with them. So I was going to share with the others who wanted to learn how to share their faith. For thirteen weeks in a row, we met together, we prayed for the people we were going to see, we would study about witnessing, and then we would go do it. At the end of those thirteen weeks, thirteen people had accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior—and I am telling you this truthfully—all thirteen got baptized, but all thirteen got baptized in other churches. That did not hurt our feelings a bit, because people were coming to Christ. And so we did it another session and another session, session after session, and pretty soon we would knock on doors and they would

go...*It is you guys again?* By then, literally most of the church knew how to share their faith. We had shared faith with many, many, many people in the community. We had a presentation of the gospel where we talk about God's purpose, our need, God's provision, our response.

Witness: A Personal Testimony

One of the neat things about that training program was there was a part in the training where we were taught that there might be a time when telling your personal story might help you connect to the person you are talking to. We learned how to share our personal story, a personal testimony. That personal testimony (I will never forget it) had three simple points. The first thing we learned to do was talk about our life before we met Christ. Then we learn to talk about how we met Christ. Once we had talked about our life before Christ and how we met Christ, we would finish our story by talking about our life after Christ. Did you catch that? Do you remember what your life before Christ looked like? Do you remember meeting Christ, and what led you to faith in Christ? Do you remember that experience? Then, do you remember how after you came to know Christ your life changed, and you now know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are not who you used to be, and the reason you are not the same is because of Christ?

As I began to read Acts 22, I wondered if the people who wrote the Continuing Witnesses Training program possibly saw the outline of Paul's story. Because in Acts 22, we are going to see his life before Christ, how he met Christ, and then we are going to see his life after Christ. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you have a story. And just as Paul was in a place—whether it was right or wrong for him to be there, you know my opinion—but the point of this story is he was where he was, right or wrong, and God gave him an opportunity to tell his story. God gives us opportunities. Are we telling our story? When is the last time you told your story to someone or to a group of people who did not know Christ? As we listen to Scripture and we analyze Paul's story, I want you to let the Holy Spirit remind you that you have a story. Or, if you don't have a story, you can have a story. But ultimately, your story is not your story, it's God's story, and God wants us telling His story, personally, from our perspective.

See, I thought in the book of Acts going to be kind of boring because we are going to talk about a trial of Paul. But the whole book of Acts is about this—the Holy Spirit is going to fall upon the church, and all of us in the church are going to be powerful witnesses once we receive the Holy Spirit. We see Paul being a witness even at the end of his life.

I pray that is what you are—not just a witness today, but a witness for the rest of your life. Here is my challenge to you. When you go home, write down your story, and just follow this simple outline:

1. What did my life look like before I met Christ?
2. How did I meet Christ?
3. What does my life look like after Christ?

We are going to read the reaction to Paul's story. I hope you don't get this reaction, but you could. Let's read verses 22–24.

Scripture

"Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, 'Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.' And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this."

Look at that first sentence, "Up to this word they listen to him." Now, that means the Jewish crowd that was trying to kill him—now he has their attention and they are listening, up to this final thing. Now, I think that final thing is what he said in verse 21. In other words, when they heard him say what he said in verse 21, "...they raised their voices and said, away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live." Now, what did he say in verse 21 that was so bad? Verse 21 says, "And He [Christ] said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" So, God told a guy to go to the Gentiles, and now all those Jews who knew him think he shouldn't live any longer on the earth. Does that blow your mind? Talk about a prejudice group of people—that is prejudice.

Listen to what they did. Verse 23 says, "And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust in the air, the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging." In other words, they were going to beat him to within an inch of his life to find out what he had done that was so bad that caused this uproar in the temple.

Synopsis of the End of Chapter 21

We didn't completely finish Acts chapter 21 in the last lesson. But basically, when this riot broke out in the temple, the tribune, the Roman authority who was over the fortress of Antonio, sent soldiers into the temple area and they saved Paul's neck. While they were bringing him back to the barracks, back to the fortress of Antonio, he asked permission to speak to the crowd. Instead of being thrilled that he is rescued from the crowd, he wanted to address the crowd, and ultimately, the tribune authority allowed him to speak. He spoke in the Hebrew language and it captured the attention of the crowd. Now, I want to make sure you remember that in Philippians chapter 3, the Apostle Paul mentions that he is a Hebrew of the Hebrews. What that means is he spoke the original Hebrew language. He could take the Old Testament documents and read the original language. He could speak it. By the time of Jesus and biblical New Testament Christianity, the Jewish people did not speak the original Hebrew language. They spoke Aramaic. So when Luke says Paul spoke in the Hebrew language in Acts 21, it's not referring to speaking in the biblical Hebrew; it's referring to speaking in their language, in Aramaic, and somehow that catches their attention. Him being able to talk like they talk identified them with him.

Paul's Defense: His Personal Story

Get this picture as chapter 22 begins. He is standing on the steps addressing a group of people who have literally tried to kill him, and we see what is in his heart. It pains me to say this, but there are times when we are in situation and what is happening to us is not nice, and sometimes those words that come out of our mouths about other people reveal not them but us. Other people revealing their hearts toward you sometimes

lets you reveal your heart towards them, even if you are not talking to them. How did Paul address the crowd? He addressed them as brothers and fathers. He did not let what they were doing to him cause him not to see that they were family. He viewed them as his physical family. Those who are his age, he addressed them as brothers. Those who are older than him, he acknowledged them as his father. I want you to hear the respect that he has toward this crowd who literally has just tried to kill him. He says, "...hear the defense that I now make before you." Now, this English word, defense, is trying to translate a Greek word from which we get our English word, apology, from—so Paul is saying 'hear my apology.'

Now, there are two sides to our word, apology. The side that we normally think of when we think of an apology is wanting someone to apologize. We want them to express remorse or guilt for what they did. But there is another way the word apology is used, and it is where we get the word, apologetics, from. There is actually a discipline in the Christian church called Christian apologetics where we train people how to defend what they believe. So when Paul begins to give his apology, he is not remorseful or regretting what he did; he is going to *defend* what he did. Watch this. He doesn't defend it with philosophy, he doesn't defend it with Bible, he doesn't defend it with culture; he defended with his personal story. He tells what happened to him. Now, my opinion is Paul was wrong to be where he was and he brought it on himself, but he was wise when he realized he was now getting what he was ultimately there for, and that was an opportunity to be a witness. He didn't try to prove them wrong; he just simply told his story. Paul's story is powerful. Your story is powerful. I believe with all my heart, there are times when we don't need to take the Bible and try to show somebody wrong. There is a time when you just open up and let other people see what God has done with you. It's really hard to argue with a changed life. It doesn't means you can't argue with it. We are going to see Paul's changed life. The crowd doesn't repent, but it exposed the prejudice that was in the crowd. Sometimes God may not be using you or me to bring someone to that moment of faith, but He may be using us to expose to them what is in their heart.

Here is Paul's apology. He is going to tell what his life like was before he met Christ in verses 3–5. Then he is going to tell how he met Christ in verses 6–16. In verses 17–21, he is going to talk about his life after Christ. Remember your assignment. Let the Holy Spirit, as we are looking at Paul's story, remind you that you have a story, or if you don't have a story, you can have a story. Just as God gave Paul the opportunity to share his story, He gives us opportunities to share our story. Are we sharing it? What is keeping you from sharing your story with that friend, that loved one, that neighbor that person you work with? What is it? We want to work through that because we are supposed to be witnesses, and when God calls you as a witness, you are supposed to witness. Why are we not witnessing? Even if you have never been trained in CWT, you can tell your story because your story is a witness to what God has done in your life.

Before Paul Met Christ

Listen what Paul says in verse 3, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day." Let's pause right there. Paul is basically telling the crowd there was a time when he was just like them. He is saying I am still like you in this way—I am a Jew—but unlike you, I wasn't born where you were born; I was born in Tarsus, in Cilicia. Now, what this probably means is Paul came from a dad and a granddad who are probably businessmen and their trade took them outside of the Promised Land, and they were doing business. So Paul didn't have the privilege of being born in the Promised Land. He was born outside in the Roman Empire on Gentile soil, but he was born a Jew, and he is a Jew. He said I was zealous for God just like you, except I had the privilege of being raised under Gamaliel when I was brought back to this city. I was not raised on the liberal side of Judaism, but I was raised in a strict conservative manner. Now, hear what Paul is saying...He is letting the Jewish people know that he is not a stranger to Jerusalem. And while he was born over there, he was raised here. So, there was a time in his life, sometime when he was younger, where he decided (or his father decided) to send him back to the homeland most likely to be educated. So he was educated as a Jew in

Jerusalem and he sat at the feet of the distinguished scholar of the day. When it came to understanding Judaism, he was strict in his interpretation. He was legalistic, and he was zealous for God. He is acknowledging that the crowd believes the reason they are doing what they are doing is because they are zealous for God, and Paul is saying he used to be just like them.

I think one of the biggest mistakes you and I have made in the church is that somehow we don't remember that we used to be just like some of the very people that we can't understand why they are doing what they are doing. I wonder if people around us who weren't Christians might soften up a little bit if, from time to time, we would just remind them that we used to do that too...because you did. I mean, your mom and dad didn't know it and your preacher didn't know it, but you knew it, and God knew it, and they knew it. That is what Paul did. He was just identifying. Can I remind you that before you met Christ, you were a sinner? I know you are not anymore, but you used to be. So if anybody can identify with the person we are wanting to share Christ with, it ought to be us!

Paul was admitting that he knew why they were doing what they were doing toward him was because they were zealous for God and he used to be zealous for God just like them! Then Paul goes into his personal story of what he used to do. Verses 4–8 say, "I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished." Paul said there was a time when I was just like you, zealous for God just like you are, strict, legalistic Jew, and I persecuted this Way. This group of people who were called the Way got that designation because Jesus, who they were following said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father but by me." See, all of a sudden, there is this really, really small group of people who believe they know the way, and the way they know is the only way to Him. Have you ever met people like that? How do you feel about them? We have all made the comment, "I can't believe they think they are the only ones going to Heaven!" Yet, that

is what the early church believed. If you didn't know Christ, you didn't know the way, and if you didn't know the way, you couldn't get there.

Paul is saying—*I went after those people. I persecuted them to the point of death. I wasn't a respecter of person. It didn't matter if you were a man or a woman; I went after you.* Can you imagine being a person who believes if someone doesn't believe the way you believe they shouldn't be allowed to live? It blows my mind, yet this was the thought process of Paul. It is what caused him to do what he did in the name of God, to the point he said—*your chief priest and your leaders know that I would come before them, they would give me letters, and I would leave Jerusalem and go into other parts of the Roman Empire. On this day that I am telling you about, I was going to Damascus. I had the authority; I had the arrest warrant! I didn't even have to knock. I had the authority to go into a home, grab a man or a woman, and bring them out of the city they were living in because they were a Jew. If I found them in the synagogue following Christ, I could bring them back to Jerusalem and we would imprison them or beat them, or ultimately kill them.* That was Paul's life before Christ.

How Paul Meets Christ

I want you to watch when he switches to his meeting Christ. Verse 6 says, "As I was on my way..." He is doing his way—I am on my way. *I am doing what I think's right. I had no regard for Christians. They didn't deserve to live if they were Jewish and they found them in the synagogue!* He said he on his way to Damascus in the middle of the day, noon. In that part of the world at noon, it's hot. He said a light shown around me. Have you ever shined a light in the daytime? I am talking about noon, you are outside, sun shining, and you turn your headlights on. No. I mean, you turn your headlights on in the middle of the day when the sun is shining you aren't going to see them on. As a matter of fact, some of you have to be reminded you left your lights on because when you got out of the car, you couldn't tell they were on. Imagine a light so bright that it formed a spotlight in the middle of the day and it shone around Paul (he was called Saul then), and his reaction to it was that it was so bright he was blinded and everybody around him falls to the ground. They hear the sound of the

voice but they can't distinguish what is being said because this light is for Saul. He hears the voice, he hears words, and the words are "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" So, his question is, "Who are you, Lord?" And the answer is, "I am Jesus of Nazareth."

Let me tell you what I see here. I think Paul is saying I was just like you, believing just like you believe. He said I would still be believing it except God shined a spotlight around me, personally spoke to me, asked me a personal question of why am I was persecuting Him and when I said who are you, He said I am Jesus of Nazareth. He is blaming God for the fact that they are doing what they are doing to him, because if God hadn't broke into his life he would still be doing what they were doing. Amen? That is so cool! When is the last time you just blamed God for the fact that you are a Christian? When is the last time you just told somebody if God had just left me alone, I would have never wanted Him? Wow! Is there clearer picture in the Bible of the sovereignty of God in salvation than this? There is no part of Paul that believed him coming to Christ was rooted in him at all. He didn't have the famous desire to come to Christ. And before he loved Christ, he knew Christ loved him. Before he chose Christ, he knew Christ chose him. Before he desired Christ, he knew Christ desired him.

Is that what you believe? No, you didn't get a spotlight in the middle of the day. I know, but you did get that small, small, convicting voice, didn't you? It wasn't the voice of your mother or your father; it was the voice of God. It was what we call conviction of the Holy Spirit. You would be doing certain things and minding your own business, and all of a sudden, you would have the thought that you are not right with God. You weren't seeking that, you weren't wanting that, you were startled by it and it just wouldn't go away. Yeah, it happened a lot at church, but it didn't just happen at church. You could be at school. You could be on a date. You could be getting ready to go to bed and it was as if somebody was pursuing you. See, that is how all of our stories start. It doesn't start with us seeking God. Now, your story may have started by you seeking a home in Heaven and you seeking things that were good for you, but then some of you came to realize later that isn't what salvation is all about. You kind of jumped the gun, so to speak. But praise God, there was that moment in

your life when God clearly stepped into your life and you know that the reason you are now who you are is because you met Christ, and He initiated the whole thing.

I want you to see how Paul is using this. Paul is using this to give reason on why he is doing what he is doing. The reason he is doing what he is doing is not because of what he wants to do, it's because of what God wants him to do because this was God's will for him. The Bible says he is blinded. He can't see. The others aren't blinded and they take him into town. We know from Acts 9, they take him to Straight Street. In verses 12–13, Paul says, "And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well-spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing by me said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him."

Now, I want to say this to you. In your story, there is a really, really good chance when the Holy Spirit was opening your eyes to the truth of the gospel, God brought someone like an Ananias into your life and they shared God's will for you. God put Jesus on the cross in your place and God's will for you is that He wants you to repent and personally confess Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Do you remember who that person was who really influenced you for Christ? I don't mean any disrespect to pastors and preachers, but at 12 years of age as the Holy Spirit began to invade my life, He would come in at times when I wasn't even thinking about Him, and He would remind me that I was lost. Every Sunday at church in Sunday school, it just seemed like every lesson my Sunday school teacher taught was about me and being lost. I could sit through a sermon and think about other things, but in that group of about eight or ten young people, I couldn't. She was instrumental in me coming to faith in Christ. You have someone in your life who God used, most likely, to tell you the story and open your eyes.

Now, notice what God did because God open this door for Paul. This guy, Ananias was devout according to the law, so he wasn't a law breaker, and he had a great reputation among Jews. So, you see what Paul is doing? Paul says this is a good moral man who God brought into my life, and he said to me, receive your sight, and all of a sudden, I could see. Whoa! I

kind of let you believe this guy is probably anointed of God, right, if he can restore Paul's sight? But look what Ananias says to Paul in verses 14–16, "The God of our fathers appointed you to know His will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from His mouth; for you will be a witness for Him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on His name." Wow...Ananias identified God as the God of Israel, the God of our fathers. If you go back and read through the Old Testament after God calls Abraham, many, many times when a prophet would step in, God would say to the prophet—tell Israel, I am the God of your fathers. Paul is saying to this Jewish crowd that Ananias told him that the God who was stepping into his life was the God of their fathers. It's Yahweh. Ananias is even blaming this on Israel's God, except he lets Paul know that God has appointed him. Paul doing what he is doing wasn't what he wanted; it was what God wanted for him, and God is the one who set the appointment. If I can just say this, at some point you are going to have to quit and give in to the sovereignty of God in your salvation. If you continue to come to this church, you are going to hear us say over and over again that the gospel is not man-centered; it's God-centered. We owe our salvation to God.

That is what Ananias is telling Saul—the God of our fathers has appointed you appointed you to know His will to see the Righteous One, Jesus, and to hear His voice. Why did you come to Christ? Because God appointed it! It was His will for you. God He stepped into Saul's life and reminded him of this, and then told him that he would be a witness for Jesus and would tell His story. Do you see what Paul is saying—*the reason I am telling His story is not because I want to tell you His story. I am telling you His story because He wants me to tell you His story! It's the very reason I am who I am, doing what I am doing right now! It's because of Him!* I think most of us would tell our story the way Paul told his story if we really believed that our story is about God and it's a God story. Ananias tells Paul he will witness about everything he has seen and heard. See, to tell your story, you don't have to know every doctrine in the Bible. You don't have to be a Greek scholar. You don't have to defend all the great doctrines. God just wants you to tell your story, the story you know about Him and how He changed your life when He revealed Himself to you.

I love what Ananias says in verse 16. Now, I am going to speak only to us as Baptist (If you are not a Baptist, disregard what I am going to say). He says, "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name." We are hearing Paul in his own words.

Paul has written much of the New Testament and because of those writings, we know that he clearly believed that salvation is by grace through faith alone, not of works, lest any man should boast. Amen? We know in the context of Romans chapter 9, 10, and 11 Paul's heart breaking for the Jews. In chapter 10, he is wanting Israel to be saved and he tells Israel they are this close to being saved, which basically is the distance between the heart and the mouth. He tells them if they confess Jesus is Lord and believe in their hearts that God raised Him from the dead, they would be saved. According to the Apostle Paul, you have to confess Jesus as your Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead and you will be saved. Paul goes on to define how this works, "For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." He goes on to tell us that whoever believes will not be put to shame. Then, he says in Romans 10:13, "For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Whoever appeals to God for salvation shall be saved. He is talking to the Jewish people. They can be saved by appealing to God, by confessing and believing. Then, he says how can they call in whom they have not believed? See, you won't call unless you believe. Well, how can they believe if they haven't heard? And how can they hear without somebody preaching? How can someone preach unless they have been sent?

So, if you take what Paul teaches in his doctrinal letters and then listen to his testimony, here is what Paul is saying and it is right here in verse 16 of Acts chapter 22, even though I understand people misunderstand this verse. "Why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on His name." In this verse, washing away your sins is not attributed to baptism; it's attributed to calling on His name. When you call on the name of the Lord, God cleanses you of your sin! But when you are cleansed of your sin, God wants you to go down into the baptismal waters and identify that your new faith for salvation is not in yourself but it's in the

death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ! God, help us Baptists who believe we can share faith in Christ with somebody, lead him to Christ, and never talk about baptism! How could our churches believe that one person getting saved wasn't worth the effort to go down to the river and baptize that one person—but we had to wait six months until we had ten or twelve together and then it would be enough to go down the river and baptize them? How can we put so much time between believing in Jesus and stepping down into the waters of baptism? Ananias told Saul to step out in faith and identify that you really believe in Jesus. How do you do that? It is not by walking an aisle and standing before of a group of people and telling somebody you said the sinner's prayer. You identify your faith through believer's baptism. It is not my fault that some people misunderstand the doctrine of baptism and believes it washes away sin. It doesn't. This doesn't mean we can separate baptism from faith, and make something else your identity marker. Baptism is our identity marker of meeting Christ. People cannot see what happened on the inside, but we can show them what happened inside us by stepping into that baptismal pool, going completely under the water, coming completely out of the water. By this, you are saying to everybody that your faith is not in yourself, it's in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. When you go under the water and come back out, you are not just believing in Jesus—yes, you are believing in Jesus—but by believing in Jesus, He has transformed you from a sinner to a saint. The sinner is dead and you are now a saint of God. You declare that in your baptism because your baptism declares your faith! Listen to me...don't dare go tell someone about Christ and let them think they can believe inwardly without acknowledging that publicly through the waters of baptism. Ananias told Paul to rise and be baptized. Wash away those sins, calling on the name of the Lord. Whosoever calls upon the name Lord shall be saved, and whoever is saved should be baptized. I understand there may be extreme cases where someone is not, but it should be rare.

Paul's Life After Christ

Now, I am not discrediting this at all, but when Paul talked to the crowd about his life after Christ, he didn't talk about how he read the Bible

differently, how he prayed more, how he went to church, and how he did this and this. Here's what he tells us in verses 17–21, "When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.' And he said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" They listened up to this word, and now they want to kill him again. Do you know what happened in him when he came to know Christ? He realized the Jews who were like him weren't going to listen to him tell them about Jesus. See, in Acts chapter 9, Ananias told Paul he was going to be a messenger to the Gentiles. But Paul went back to Jerusalem as quick as he could and he tried to tell people in Jerusalem about Jesus. And while he went to the temple, still respectful of the temple, he had a vision, a trance, and God said—*Get out of here as quick as you can. You shouldn't be in Jerusalem because they aren't going to listen to you.* Paul started arguing with God in his vision, saying—*God, they know me. They know how I went to synagogues and I persecuted Christians, so, they are going to understand my story is for them. It's going to help them! They are going to remember that when Stephen was stoned they laid the garments at my feet, and I am the one said, kill him. So, you are going to use my story to open their eyes.* And God says—*Uh-uh, they ain't going to listen. Get out of the city and go.* Go where? To the Jews living in other regions? No...to the Gentiles. And when the Jews heard that Paul was saying God, their Father, told him to go to the Gentiles, they didn't think he was worth living. Is that prejudice or is that prejudice?

We should have seen that coming. There is a book in the Bible about a prophet. God told him to go preach to a city called Nineveh that was Gentile. He went down to get his ticket to go to Nineveh...uh, no. He went the opposite direction, going as far away as he could go. God caused a storm, and in the middle of the storm, he confesses the storm was because of him because he is running from God. All of those pagans try to save his neck by throwing all their personal belongings away. They empty the boat

of the cargo. Finally, he says (not God, I am sorry, or God, I will do it) I would rather die as to go to Nineveh, so just throw me overboard—and they pick him up and throw him overboard. Here is a prophet committing suicide. Amen? He would rather die! He had no thought of swimming to shore; he is going to die. Can you imagine look on his face when he sees this big, big fish about to swallow him? The next thing you know, he is in fish's throat and he is going down into the belly, and somewhere in the process, he decides he would rather preach as die. Then, the fish spits him out (the disobedient would make even an animal sick in his stomach, amen?) and guess where he lands? He is where he is supposed to be, Nineveh...and he preaches a simple message. In 40 days, if you don't repent, God is going to destroy you.

Now, I want to make sure you understand. I believe he was walking around with his arms crossed and he wasn't happy to be there, no passion, just words...*Repent. If you don't, God's going to kill you. Repent.* He didn't want to do it. There is no smile on his face; he is not wanting them to repent. He is doing what God wants him to do, but he is doing it for the wrong motivation. How do I know that? Well, when the story ends God spares the city. Now, if a whole city repented at your preaching, wouldn't you be praising God? Not Jonah...he is so mad at God that when the little shade plant that grew over him to give him shade died, he was more upset about that than knowing a whole city of Gentiles was going to die. He had no regard for Gentiles at all.

Can I ask you this question? When the prophets of Israel don't want to go tell the Gentiles the truth, do you understand why the people felt the way they felt? Praise God...He took Paul, and because of his life before and because of him meeting Christ, He broke down his prejudices. But it cost him. This isn't your story. It's God's story. God has the right to do your story any way He wants to do your story, because your story is not about you, it's about Him. It's not about your little world or my little world; it's about a big, big world. In that big, big world, God doesn't just want you and your family to be saved; He wants all the families to be saved. You play a part in this storytelling by accepting your story and telling your story. And when you need to, it's ok to just blame your story on God

because if it weren't for God you would still be drinking, you would still be partying, or whatever it was you were doing. The reason you are not is not because you are better than the people you are talking to, but because God stepped into your life, and by telling that story they might see God has a story for them.