



Christians On Trial – Part 6

The Role of Your Testimony

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Well after I went through college and got out on my own, got my own apartment and car, obviously, I found that at every Christmas and birthday my father would gift me tools for gifts. Often not wrapped but just handed me a tool. Some dads do that and, you know, my dad I knew he had a garage full of tools. And some tools he gave me I knew exactly what it was and I knew I needed it and I knew how I'd use it. It was great. But every now and then I get a tool, strange looking tool and I would shrug my shoulders and think, well, I've no idea what this is for. What is this? And one thing I knew if it came from my dad that it was an important tool and it was a useful tool. I just needed to figure out when to use it, what to use it for. That's how that works. I think for us as Christians, if you're a Christian here today, it's not dissimilar to the fact that God gives you something. In particular I'm thinking about something that you have that every single Christian in this room has. And, I would venture to say you probably don't use it as effectively or efficiently or as well as God would want you to. There's a learning curve as it relates to this and I find that many Christians, even if they've been Christians for decades, sometimes don't utilize this tool the way God would have you utilize it.

Thankfully, we're in Acts Chapter 26 verses 1 through 12 as we continue our study through the book and in this particular section Paul utilizes this gift because, of course, as a Christian, he has this gift as well. He has a tool that God has given him and he is going to employ it. It's not what you might expect him pulling out in this particular situation. He is here before King Agrippa in Caesarea. The king has authority to release him. And, instead of engaging with the king in arguments, as we learn in this discussion, he knows the Old Testament Scriptures, but instead of quoting Scripture, instead of talking theology, instead of dealing with issues that might relate to him like he did in Acts 17 with the Athenians and quoting some authorities that the Athenians knew he could have quoted some Roman statesman that Agrippa could relate to. But instead of doing any of that, he starts giving his testimony. And I think, well, that's a strange choice. And I thought as I prepared for this weekend how often we just avoid utilizing our testimony when in fact we should. We should probably use it a lot more than we do. We should understand how to wield our testimony because some of us, unfortunately, are tempted to make adjustments to our testimony that we need not make. Some of us embellish our testimonies. You shouldn't do that. But God has given you a testimony. If you're a genuine Christian here today, you've put your trust in Christ. Your Lord is Jesus the King. Then I know you have a testimony and I think you need to know why that is so important and how you might use that. So a little different message here today but I want to spend some time looking at Paul's testimony. And if you look at your text here you'll see we're going to cut it off right here in the middle between verses 12 and 13. We're going to get a focus on his pre-Christian days.

But imagine if you had a chance to sit here and respond to the accusations against you and instead of going immediately into a defensive argument you just start telling your story. And that's what Paul does here. So let's look at it as it unfolds. King Agrippa gives him permission in verse 1 to speak. He says, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Acts 26 verse 1,

"So Paul stretched out his hand and he made his defense." That's the word again that we get the word apologetics from. So apologetics, you would think, well, let's go to substantial things like doctrinal things, historic things like the resurrection of Christ. Well you're going to touch on the resurrection but it's sandwiched in a long discussion about his past before he became a Christian. First, pleasantries that are appropriate for the respectful response that he should give to the leader here, the king who was sent across the Mediterranean from Rome to lead this area of Israel. He said, "I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, that I'm 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."

Now, here he goes. He's going to start in verse 4. "My manner of life from my youth," from my childhood, "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 were willing to testify," which we found out last time they weren't, "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 12 tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. For this hope I am accused by the 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. 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 the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities. In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priest." And then we have the discussion, beginning in verse 13, of his conversion, the supernatural conversion to Christ.

But here he's reciting his pre-Christian days. Any testimony really starts with our pre-Christian days. And if you have come to the place of repentance and faith, you have a discussion that I hope that you engage in a dialog, sometimes as you have people interact with your story, about how you lived before you came to faith in Christ, how Christ got a hold of your life and then what your life has been like since. And we hear it at every baptism. And, I hope that that's just the beginning of a lifelong process of talking about our story. Now, I used to downplay this quite a bit. Being a young, zealous Christian I used to go on college campuses and try and convince people about the truthfulness of Scripture, and I would often focus on all the facts of the gospel. I wanted to stick with things like God is Creator, he's holy. He's just. He's loving. We're sinners. We fall short of his glory. Christ has been sent to live in our place and die in our place and he rose as an authentication of that. And he calls us now, all of us, to repent and put our trust in him. And I thought, well, that's where we ought to be. We ought to be on those empirical, those historic, those external realities that are not subject to our subjectivity. And I often downplayed the role of the testimony.

But this is the third time that Luke here, the author of Acts, has decided to employ Paul's testimony. Acts 9, Acts 22, now Acts 26. Again, we have another record of Paul telling his story and I think we should really take note of that, if nothing else, in the book of Acts. And we



can see plenty of testimonies elsewhere outside of the book of Acts where people tell their story. We even see Jesus telling people to go tell their story. So we want to say, okay, why and when and how and for what purpose should we tell our story, particularly the focus on our pre-Christian days? And so let's take a look at that. And if I could step out from this text just to think about kind of a primer on the importance of your testimony, let's just start with this heading, number one, thinking about all the things that Paul could have done as he's ramping into this discussion in verse 4. All the things that you would think, I'm going to do this if I want to get out of this mess. But instead he goes to tell his story. Number one, you need to "See the Importance of Your Testimony." Your testimony is important. Is it subjective? I understand it's subjective, but it's all about your subjective response to the objective reality of Christianity and that is important. It is important for several reasons. Let me give you five. Okay?

Turn to Colossians, if you would. Colossians, I'll give you one example here in Chapter 3, which I think should be no surprise to you because we see often in the Bible God's expansive mission in the New Covenant age, in the New Testament age to bring people from every nation, every tribe, every language, every people. He's going to bring them all to faith in Christ. And in the sense in which we all sit here unified in Christ and that we're all forgiven by the finished work of Christ, we've all come through the portal, if you will, of repenting of our sins and putting our trust in Christ instead of ourselves. Really, all of that is our unifying experience but our backgrounds are varied and different. Look at verse 11 in this passage it says, "There is here not any Greek or Jew." Greek and Jew, think about that. To be a Greek in the first century a wholly different background than growing up as a Jew like Paul did in Israel, "circumcised and uncircumcised." To some that was hugely important, right? And to others in the Greco-Roman world not important. "Barbarian and Scythian" makes a big contrast there being a barbarian you can imagine. Or how about this: the distinction between "slave and free." Talking about a different background, a different experience, right? Being enslaved or being a free man, that's a huge distinction. And yet it says, "Christ is all, and in all."

Now we can focus on our unity because we are unified in Christ. But everyone, even in our little subset of Western culture in the 21st century, and our even sub-subset of that is American Californian Christians, we are still very diverse in this room in that everyone's background is a little bit different. And in some cases it's wildly different. And that is something that shows something very important. Letter "A," it "Shows the Breadth of God's Reach" into this world, which is what he promised to do to take people from all over the world and bring them to faith in Christ. Now it's much more evident on the mission field. If you ever get a chance to go and visit various places where there are followers of Christ, you ought to do it because it is enlightening. And I'll never forget one of the trips that I took with one of our missionaries to show us some success stories out in the middle of nowhere. Literally to me it was in the middle of nowhere. I got on a plane, made my way to Sydney and at Sydney I got on a plane and I went over to Papua New Guinea. And there in Papua New Guinea, I landed at something that looked nothing like the Orange County Airport, let's just put it that way. And I got on another plane and then got on this plane, this little plane, I got in this plane with my backpack, and I went all the way into the deepest, darkest jungles of Papua New Guinea. I



got on a canoe with my backpack and I went up the Sepik River. I saw all the crocodiles there threatening my life as I'm going up. I get off at the shore. I go into this little village.

In the village here the missionary is taking me there. And in this place are people who have come to faith in Christ. They've seen their sin. They've repented of their sin. They've trusted in Christ. And I will never forget one of the most profound experiences of understanding unity in the diversity of God pulling people from every corner of the planet. And I sat in the stilts of this little hut in the evening, eating things after a week in the jungle, I never thought I would eat. If you know me and my palate was stunted in the seventh grade. I didn't like it at 12. I don't like it now. But after a week of being in Papua New Guinea, I started to eat things I never thought I would eat. So I was starting to enculturation there in Papua New Guinea. But I remember sitting there across from this guy, it's sweltering, it's hot, it's in the summer, and I'm sitting cross-legged on the floor of his hut. He's sitting across from me. His face had been partially mutilated from the things they did in their pagan life before Christianity. And of course he didn't look like me. His skin was a different color than mine. Here he was there shirtless asking me questions about Christianity as a scorpion scurries between us. And I thought to myself, so riveted by what he was saying that this is a really bizarre experience for me. Because the questions he was asking me about how to lead this church that he was so sold out to in this village were the kinds of questions, topically and theologically, that I get sitting with people who are up and coming in ministry here in Orange County. I thought these are the kinds of questions I get in my mentoring group that meet in my office every week. Now, this is crazy. Here we are talking about the same things. We want to please God. We want to understand the Scripture rightly. We want to interpret it accurately. We want to live for God. We want to structure the church the right way. And I thought, this guy and I have nothing in common except we have everything in common because as this text says in Christ, "Christ is in all, and he is all." And for me, I looked at him and I thought this is the amazing work of God, the international reach of God around the world bringing people to Christ.

Now, in your small group it won't be that dramatic but I guarantee you there are all kinds of distinctions when you sit around and you talk about your past before coming to Christ. We all come through the portal of repentance and faith. But the diversity, even within our circle of friends at church, right? We become unified coming onto this campus and getting into our church buildings and getting into our classrooms and going to home fellowship groups throughout the week. We're all united in understanding the word of life and trying to apply it to our lives, but our backgrounds are varied. Everyone grew up very differently. There are a whole lot of different kinds of experiences in your pre-Christian life. And that speaks to the reality of what God has said he will do. He's going to pluck people out from every tribe, every people, every language, and every nation.

Second Corinthians Chapter 5 verse 17 reminds us that all of this unified Christianity, our hearts, our minds are unified because of God's new creative work. "If anyone is in Christ," remember this passage, "he is a new creation. The old has passed away; and behold, the new has come." The old as varied as it was. People living for different reasons, different purposes, with different goals. Right now we all have the same goal and it's because of something that takes place from the inside out. As Jesus talked to Nicodemus in John



Chapter 3 you couldn't say it in any more dramatic way. It's like you need to start over, you need new birth, you need to be born again. It has such rich theological overtones from the Old Testament, in particular the book of Jeremiah and the book of Ezekiel. But the idea in that statement really couldn't communicate more clearly you've got to start over. It's as though you become a new person. And Paul picks up on that language in his letters and talks about becoming a new person, a new creation. He says he's a new man in Christ, and that takes place from the inside. And everyone coming from all these different, disparate backgrounds now says I have been made new. And the Bible says he's taken our heart that's a heart of stone and he makes it now a heart of flesh and he moves us to want to keep God's law. That's an amazing concept that God takes us and then changes us. And now we're like brothers and sisters, having the same devotion and the same passion to please our Father.

Letter "B" really, that "Testifies to God's Transforming Power." No matter what you lived for before you came to Christ, God has rewired your heart to want to beat in sync with God's Spirit, and he wants to move you from the inside out to keep his law. That's just an amazing concept, and it's one that we should say everybody who tells their testimony really is testifying to the fact that my particular background is moving me now through the portal of repentance and faith into the new creation, the new birth that God says he's going to give us. And it's just like your new birth, and just like your new birth, and just like your new birth. And God's Spirit brings that about in our lives. It doesn't matter if you were in prison, it doesn't matter if you were a gangbanger, it doesn't matter if you were, you know, a Sunday school graduate, as I like to put it. We all come through this portal and God works this thing in our lives called repentance and faith. And we come out the other side transformed, born again. That's an amazing truth. And the varied testimonies that are represented in your small group and your sub-congregation or right here in this room, speak to God's transforming power, no matter your background.

Look at our text here. Drop down to verse 28. Paul is telling his testimony, and then we have the king break in and say this. He says, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" An interesting statement. I have to think about the objective truths of the gospel persuading people. But here in the midst of him telling his story, which of course is rooted in the propositional statements of Scripture, the king says, it's the pressure I'm feeling here. It's like you're persuading me to become a Christian. That's interesting because you couldn't have backgrounds that were more different, at least in the worlds that are colliding in Caesarea at this particular point. Here we have a politician. He may have some background in Judaism, but he's climbed the ladder in Rome and now he's been dispatched to give Roman leadership over the people of Judea. And you have Paul, who was a Pharisee from a Jewish background, raised from his youth in Judaism. And here, as he tells his story about being raised in Judaism, all of a sudden now Agrippa feels the pressure and the persuasion, even based on Paul's story, for Agrippa to say, hey, are you trying to persuade me to be a Christian here? He's feeling it, right? This is a confession that there's some persuasive effect that takes place in a testimony. And I will say this: I think the reason, just to try and dissect this a little bit, is when I tell my story about my background and how all of that was placed aside so that I might embrace Christ, using Philippians 3 language, think about this now, I'm



helping someone else flesh out these theological truths and they're starting to be able to see themselves in my human shoes and they start to envision their own conversion.

Let's just put it that way. The persuasive aspect of testimonies is this, Letter "C," "It Helps Non-Christians Envision their Conversion." They start thinking about how if you were persuaded and if God's got a hold of you, perhaps, you know, God will get a hold of me. There's this sense of, I see how God has worked out his work in your life and perhaps that's maybe what God has planned for me. I mean, just sociologically, if you will. There's kind of a connection people have to stories. You go to the movies, you see a story. You listen to someone tell their harrowing experience in something, it moves us in certain ways. And I think our testimonies, they kind of en flesh the theoretical truths of the gospel and people can start to see that perhaps even they might become followers of Christ. "And Paul says," of course, verse 29, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you, but all who hear me." And he's telling a story that hear me, hear my story, "This day might become such as I am," as God took my background and brought me to submission to Christ. I hope that will happen to you, King Agrippa. I hope that will happen to everyone standing here.

I've already mentioned this is the third time Acts 9, Acts 22, Acts 26, where Luke enlists the story of Paul's conversion. And I would remind you that the Acts of the Apostles, at least primarily, were given as material to be understood by Christians to look at the background of the Church and the birth of the Church. I want to study the book of Acts because as a Christian I want to see how the Church started. And we're all part of the Church now. So we as Christians study this book. And I think, okay, a lot of times the testimonies are not just given evangelistically. They're not just tools that are utilized to persuade people to become Christians. They are, like embedded in this book, they're tools that God uses, just as it does when we read Christian biographies that embolden us and strengthen us as Christians. Let's put it down that way. Letter "D," it "Strengthens and Emboldens Christians." If I set you all on your small groups this week to go and say, okay, let's just take five minutes for each person to give the five-minute version of their testimony, I guarantee you what it would do. The effect within a Christian circle is to strengthen and embolden people that God is at work in people's lives. He's drawing people to himself. He's bringing people to a place of repenting and trusting in Christ. This is a good thing. It's a helpful thing to see how God has been at work in bringing you to faith in Christ. Your testimony should be utilized not only in non-Christian situations like Paul is using here in Acts 26, but also it should be the kind of thing that is shared among Christians. It should be the first thing we say, as it often is in my experience, every time I sit down as I did this week with some new folks I had never talked to in any great length of time, the first thing we did is we tell our testimonies. We talk about how we came to faith in Christ. It strengthens and emboldens us, not only unifies us.

Turn to this one, if you would, John Chapter 6 verse 44 for our fifth point here, Letter "E." I am a Christian and because I'm a Christian that means my hope is in Christ that the Risen One will one day reverse the problem of death for me. Like he says there at Lazarus' funeral, "I'm the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, even if you die, yet shall you live." So I'm trusting in Christ to free me from condemnation so I'm not separated from God or all of his blessings. I'm trusting in him to be raised from the dead, my biological life, reunified with my



spirit, and to live in a perfect place, "a world in which righteousness dwells," to quote Second Peter 3. That's my hope. And here's what Jesus has to say about that. John Chapter 6 verse 44, "No one can come to me," Jesus said, "unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day." So anyone who has got the hope of being raised up on the last day, according to this text, I've got to be associated with Christ. As John 14 says, "No one's going to come to the Father except through Christ," and this text adds one other layer to it. I didn't get there without the Father bringing me there. I got a lot more to say about this in the second half, but let's just start by capping off the first half with this simple understanding of us telling our testimonies, the testimonies we give we can't help but highlight and emphasize this. It certainly gives credit to God. God is saving us. God is the subject of saving us. He is the one who's bringing us to faith and repentance. He's the one who's exposing sin. His Spirit is convicting us of sin and righteousness and judgment and our stories they're going to highlight that. And so all of this ultimately is not about us aggrandizing our past and people have done it. I get that. They aggrandize their past and they merchandise their past, some of them, in their very dramatic testimonies. But testimonies aren't about making much of the person giving his testimony. The testimony is ultimately about making much of Christ bringing us, going after the lost sheep and bringing us to the fold. That's what testimonies are all about.

So just quickly, there are five things that show the breadth of God's reach as we all start sharing our testimony more often, it testifies to God's transforming power no matter what background you came from. It helps non-Christians evangelistically as they start to envision how they might put their trust in Christ. It has a persuasive effect. It also strengthens and emboldens Christians to stand up for the gospel that does transform. And here's another story of how God has transformed, and ultimately because it is God transforming none of this happens without God working in us, and all of our testimonies certainly should give credit to God. That's why your testimony is important. And who knows what exactly Paul's reason might have been but he saw it fit in this particular situation as he is addressing the King, a very unique situation to address King Agrippa the Second. And instead of going into theological discussions, quoting Scripture, talking about, you know, Greco-Roman statesman or whatever he might have utilized as a tool to argue his case, he starts by giving his testimony.

Now, let's analyze his testimony verses 4 through 12 and see if we can learn a few things about how we are supposed to give our testimony. And again, my focus in this particular section of the text is his pre-Christian days. So what can we learn? What are we testifying to as we talk about our pre-Christian days? Let's put a heading up here this way. Then we'll break it down into three parts. Number two, let's "Testify to Theological Truths." If your testimony is just a story and you do not raise to the surface in your story theological truths in particular these three theological truths that Paul highlights, then I don't think we're giving our testimony the right way. You got a tool there that God can use to strengthen Christians and to convict non-Christians and you're not using it right if we don't highlight theological truths. Now let's look at the three theological truths that he highlights. Verse 4, "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 were willing to testify, that according to the



strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee." Now this is in conjunction with all the things he's going to say about how he was missing the point, how he was rejecting Christ, how he wasn't getting what he was apparently hoping to get by being involved in religion all the way to the place of being a Pharisee, a fastidious, careful Pharisee.

So his background here is really talking about what he did, but the whole context is what he did miss the point, what he did miss the point. And if you're thinking about the first century, I just want you to think about the first century, we don't have the 27 books in the New Testament that Paul could have said, well, here's the part I was overlooking. He had the 39 books of the Old Testament and as he studied those they all spoke of the coming Messiah. But in reading all those and studying all of that he had missed the arrival of the Messiah. And instead he goes on to testify in great detail that he had opposed the Messiah. So he was involved in something that you would think, just like anybody else reading the Old Testament, would have primed you to embrace Jesus when he arrived. But instead, he rejected Jesus because the context in which he was raised, even though it was close, did not make him a Christian. And here's the thing about your background. Regardless of whether you were in prison or whether or not you were in Sunday school, the bottom line is no matter what context you were in, you were not in the fold of Christianity because no one was born a Christian. So when you start your testimony with, as many of you do, I was raised in the Christian church do you not think that when you say, I was raised in the church, a good, godly home, that somehow that means you were kind of like halfway there because you weren't halfway there, right?

There was nothing about your past that just allows Christ to come in and just give you just a little bit more and then you're there. Because without Christ, and we're all without Christ when we're born. I mean, isn't that clear? The Bible is clear. And the word that we've used earlier in this series, which I think I want to stick with here as we think about our testimonies, we need to think about the theological truth that all of us, like sheep, have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way even if we were embedded in an evangelical gospel-preaching church. None of us are born with our hearts in sync with God. All of us are born with "hearts of stone" to use the words of Ezekiel. We are all in a place where our hearts are not right with God and what we need is conversion. Everyone is born a sinner. There is no one without sin. We are all, let's use this word, Letter "A," wayward. Let's talk about "Waywardness." You need to highlight theologically no matter what background you grew up with that you were wayward from the inside, even though the externals might have been conformed to some kind of evangelical standard. Because if you think about the Apostle Paul as a kid, he grew up worshiping and praying to the real God, the God who is, the God of Israel. We worship the God of Israel. That's our God. The problem is Paul did not embrace Christ and none of us were born embracing Christ even if our parents kept talking to you about embracing Christ. No one in this room is born a Christian. No one. We're all lost. We're all born to use the words of Psalm 51, "We are all conceived in iniquity." Or as he says later, the psalmist says, "We all go astray from birth."

Waywardness is true for all of us, even if you conform, even if you conform. I externally conformed. I went to church from the time I was a tiny little kid. I did all the things I was



supposed to do externally. I even became the president of the youth group of an evangelical church in Long Beach, California. That was my testimony. But in reality what I got to make clear to people is even in that I was wayward, I was wandering and I was not submitted to the chief shepherd, the shepherd of my soul. Now I am. But then I wasn't. And that's hard for some people to understand. Just like this particular testimony is hard for some people to understand. It's easier for you to see the contrasted testimony in John 4 of the Samaritan woman when Jesus says, "Go call your husband." And she says, "I don't have a husband." He goes you're darn right about that, right? "You've had five husbands and the guy you're living with now is not your husband." And we say, well, there's a woman who has got a testimony that's ready to go, right? There's a good testimony right there. She comes to faith in Christ, as that passage says she does, and she can tell her story. And here's one of the problems with testimonies. We often think that the more dramatically sinful we were in the eyes of the culture the more powerful that testimony is. And let me just say, just as a side note, the waywardness should not be embellished because the real waywardness that counts is not the external waywardness. There are ramifications and there's sowing and reaping for that, but it's the inward waywardness that matters. And every time you tell your story you need to make clear as you tell people your testimony I was wayward and here's how I was wayward.

Let me just drive this home a little bit further. Paul, as he writes to the Philippians, reiterates his testimony in Philippians 3. Let's go there real quick and just see how he says this, because some of you think if I were a Satanist, for instance, well, then God would have to do a lot of work on me, man. But I grew up in church, right? I went to Awana. I learned all the verse so he didn't have to do a lot of work on me. The Apostle Paul, just to elaborate on this particular statement that Luke records about what he says to Agrippa about him being a Pharisee, I just want to show you what he thinks of all that when he comes to real faith in Christ. Philippians Chapter 3. Look at verse 4. He says, "I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also." Some people have confidence in their lives. I did the right things. So I do. "If anyone else thinks he has reasons for confidence in the flesh," well, I have far more and, "I have more. I was circumcised on the eighth day." Now he had nothing to do with that. He was eight days old, but he was in the right family. The family is trying to do godly things. He did all the right stuff because he was in the right context. Right? So like a lot of you, I grew up in church. Great. Fantastic.

"Of the people of Israel," I was in the right group, God's covenant people. "I was of the tribe of Benjamin," which was a haughty thing, it was a valued tribe, the fighting tribe. "A Hebrew of Hebrews." I was like in the upper tier of this. "As to the law," man, I was fastidious and careful, I was very meticulous about the law, I was "a Pharisee; as to zeal," how much did I want to protect Old Testament godliness? Well, I was "a persecutor of," Christianity, I persecuted, "the Church; as to righteousness under the law," the kinds of things that people do and looking at their resumes, I was "blameless." And you could say, someone in this room who says I grew up in church, never smoked, never drank, never got a girl pregnant, never messed around the back seat of a car, I was blameless, you can say that. That's great. Then you know what you need? Only 20% of Jesus because you were pretty blameless, right? Look at this text. "But whatever gain I had," better than the next guy, I knew more Bible than



the next guy, I stayed out of more trouble than the next guy, "I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

Now I want to be right with God. Paul wants to be right with God. So we try to do what's right and you probably grew up, if you grew up in a church, trying to do what's right. And so you think, okay, I'm good. No. You need Christ. How much of Christ do you need? Well, you need to exchange the totality of your rightness with the complete totality of rightness in Christ. "For his sake I've suffered the loss of all things, and I count them," look at verse 8, "as rubbish." That's the strong word "Skybalon." That's the stuff you flushed down the toilet. That's what the word means, skybalon. "In order that I might gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from keeping the law" No. "But that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith," that's what I wanted, "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection." Here's the idea: I want to have a life after this life where God takes my body and reacquaints that with my spirit and puts me in a place where it's perfected and glorified where I'm right with my God, my living God. Right? That's what I want. And to get that, I can't say, well, here was my testimony but I was born in sync with God. No one was born in sync with God. No one, all of us are wayward from our youth.

You might have been in a context where you were doing stuff that God might agree with. You might have been avoiding things that God says are an abomination. Congratulations. That's good. But when you reach the place of repentance and faith you have to take the totality of your testimony and throw it out. Flush it to use the words here or at least the imagery here. Flush it, modern imagery. And you have to now say I'm going to embrace Christ. And in that sense, you could be the worst, you can have the most salacious testimony of anyone in the room. You have the same exchange that every church kid has. You have to take all of your righteousness and say none of that matters. What matters is Christ. I need Christ's righteousness. And some of you aren't willing to do that. Some of you tell your testimony all wrong because you think, well, I was, you know, born in a church, raised in a good, godly home and so, you know, it's pretty easy for me, I just took another step. It was no big deal, right? I had Christ kind of supplement my righteousness. Here's how the Old Testament puts it, "Your righteousness is as filthy rags," which I can't even explain the Hebrew technicality of what that means in mixed company here on a Sunday morning. This is the most rejectable thing. Your righteousness does not measure up. Your sins before God are rejectable. The totality of who you are needs to be replaced with the totality of Christ.

That is the picture and therefore it does you no good to play up your testimony. I understand why we do it. I understand before Sweet Comfort Band played at Downey, we had a guy get up there who was the drug addict or the pimp or whatever he was. It was an amazing testimony. Or Mike Warnke is going to sell all these books, *The Satan Seller*. Remember that book anybody old-timers? You know, because this is the most dramatic thing, Warnke said God took me from being this, you know, this Satan worshiper and pushing Satan to now I'm a Christian. Well, Warnke, for instance, was outed later for embellishing all that and lying about a lot of his testimony, if not all of it. Why, why, why? Because there's a market, and this is

where I need to say there should be no market for this. It doesn't matter how bad your past was, right? It's not like you have a good testimony, I don't really have a testimony. I've had people start their testimony that way. "I don't really have much of a testimony." Everyone's got a testimony because everyone was wayward and you have to focus on how you were wayward. I can talk about my waywardness. I had all kinds of idols in my life. I served myself in my sin even though I stayed away from all the things that would make my Sunday school teachers or my deacon father think that I was missing the point. I wanted everybody on the outside to think I was making the grade here, when in reality in my heart I was just like every other sinner in this world. I'm not saying we're all equally sinful as it relates to the standards of Scripture or the world but we all have to have our resume fully replaced.

Verse 6. Back to our text here. Acts 26:6, "I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers." Now what is that hope? The hope ultimately, as it has come into sharp view even before the Sanhedrin is the hope of resurrection. Why is resurrection a concern? Because, as I've already alluded to, I want things to be made right. What's wrong? Everything's wrong. Romans Chapter 8 says everything is "subject to futility" and everything in this world is messed up. It's not quite how it ought to be, which as Plantinga says on the back of our worksheet, the book on sin, *A Breviary of Sin*, he calls it, is all about how things aren't the way they ought to be. And that's a good definition of sin. And everything in this world is subject to corruption and futility. And because of that what we want is we want it to be made right. We want it to be made right and he had the hope of that "to which our 12 tribes they hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I'm accused by the Jews, O king! And why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?" And he's shifting it in the middle of this to the fact that Christ, of course, is the one whose resurrection matters the most. The archetype of all resurrections. That he is raised from the dead as the first fruits of those of us trusting in Christ are going to be raised from the dead.

What's the picture? The picture is that he even like those who were worshipping on the Temple Mount night and day wanted to have things made right. Now, I know you believe highly in the doctrine of depravity and I'm with you on that. I believe in that and I understand the study of sin and I get it. But what you need to realize is even depraved people don't like the world the way it is. And frankly, a lot of times they don't like themselves the way they are. And let's just be honest about the three-dimensional view people have, even as non-Christians. They can even listen to *Fresh Air* on NPR, they can be the most liberal blue-haired person you've ever met. They might be sitting here talking about how Christianity is dumb. They may be atheists. They may be saying it's so silly that you believe in that fabled book. They can be all of that. But in the end, they've got their, you know, their calendar up on the wall with Mount Hood on it, or the forest or the Northern California Big Sur. They have all these. Why? Because the beauty of that, that's what they want. And they're against the, you know, the pollution and they're against the global warming. And they don't want things messed up. And they're all about seals and kittens and whales and all the things they want to see happen. Why? Because they don't like the things of this world that are wrong, and they don't like the things in their lives that are wrong.



There is a hope that God has implanted in all of us. Even to put it in Solomon's terms, he's planted eternity in our hearts. He set it there to where we all want the transcendent realities, even in our depraved state. That's why I say you may believe in depravity, and so do I. And I understand the depth of the problem of sin. But "God has not left himself without testimony," as we've previously seen that phrase in the book of Acts, the idea that God has given us this thing within us, this ache for something real that is transcendent, something that is the way it ought to be, not the way that it is. Right? They still, your most ardent non-Christians, still enjoy a beautiful sunset, or the smell of a great meal laid out on a table. They like beauty, they like truth. They like the things that even though they reject the ultimate truth and the ultimate beauty, they want the effects of it all. They want the benefits of it all. And so in that all I'm saying is that "God has not left himself without testimony" even within the conscience of human beings. As Romans 2 says, he's written "his law on their hearts," and that law is supposed to lead them to Christ. God has left himself with billboards even as it says in Romans Chapter 1 that "his invisible attributes and his eternal power ... are clearly seen ... through the things that are made." Why do you think they love nature? Why do you think they love the beauty of a horse or a whale? Why? Because they see something transcendent in that. And you need to understand that you did too as a non-Christian. At some place in your heart while you were rejecting God's final solution to truth and beauty, you were somehow attracted to truth and beauty in your distorted way. You had that hope and you were trying to attain it in some way, or at least you knew it.

And as he said, there they were missing the point of Christ "earnestly worshiping night and day," and it could have been in some bad philosophy, it could have been in some political movement. You could have been chasing God in some cult group, I don't know. But we have this longing made in the image of God to worship and to achieve and to attain the transcendent realities that we don't have on this earth because sin is everywhere, and ultimately we don't like the world and even ourselves, subject to corruption and futility. And they still look at death it's interesting how weird they get without Christ and trying to still conquer the problem of death. You need to understand that in your testimony you need to highlight, Letter "B," that reality of "Being Drawn" by God's work. If you don't highlight that we've missed a lot in our testimony. You better highlight your waywardness no matter if you were a murderer in prison or whether you were a Sunday School graduate, and you ought to highlight how God was bringing you along and drawing you, as we saw there in the gospel of John 6:44, he has to draw you to himself and he does that.

Let me give you some more specifics here from Acts 17. Acts 17, and I know, probably without even working on considering and analyzing your testimony you probably include some of these things. And that is how did God get you to repentance and faith? You probably got into the details of how he did that. And that is not a problem. That is a God thing. Just highlight that it was a God thing. Look at it, verse 26. "God made from one man every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth, having determined the allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that," purpose clause, "they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him." See, what God was doing in drawing you as he was pulling you to himself, getting you to the place of repentance and faith. As I often say here, when it comes to the allotted periods, that's the time in which you were born, and the boundaries of your



dwelling place all the way down to your parents. Your parents may be a part of your testimony. Or in my life it was my college roommate, a very key figure in my testimony. Well, who put that person there? I'm going to give God credit for drawing me to himself through the providential circumstances of life. And I'm going to say I came to repentance and faith and here were the things that God used in the realities and circumstances of life. But all I'm trying to get you to do is recite your testimony, highlight the waywardness of your sin, and highlight the fact that God worked not only inside of you, not only even your desires to see things made right, not only in your quest to find some kind of transcendent reality or transcendent joy. You could have done it in all the wrong ways. But you also should say that God then brought in people. He brought in circumstance. He put me in a bad situation. He put me in a place where I had nowhere else to go but to him. Those are God actions according to Acts 17. God does that, providential prompts to draw you to himself. Highlight your waywardness, highlight your being drawn. And Paul speaks of that in our passage here about people wanting the promise of God. And the promise of God is to fix the problem of the Garden in Genesis 3.

Look at verse 9 now. He gets into some details. It's very uncomfortable. He says, "I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth." Now Jesus of Nazareth, even the word Nazareth, where he was from, is embedded in the predictions and the prophecies of the Old Testament. I mean, this is the Christ. They should have known. They should have known when he arrived, Daniel Chapter 9, they should have known where he was born, Micah 5:2, they should have known that he would even be called a Nazarene. Through that little word "Nazr" in Hebrew and how it's utilized in the prophecies regarding the Christ. There's a lot they should have known and yet he still opposed Christ. He still as he's about to kick against the goads of God moving him toward the truth. He fought it. "I opposed the name of Jesus. And I did so in Jerusalem, not only that I locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priest," I had people behind me pushing me and giving me allowance to do this, "and when they were put to death," man, I was cheering on the death of Christians, people who were trusting in Jesus. That's crazy. Terrible. "And I punish them often in all the synagogues. I even try to make them blaspheme." Now blasphemy we think about, and I've defined it this way for you many times, but blasphemy is taking something transcendent and great and naming it as common or worse than common. So this tearing down of something great Paul would never want them to blaspheme God the Father. Never. Right? He is a Pharisee. They revere God. I mean, that was the whole point. We put God in the highest place, at least theoretically they do.

So he's not making them blaspheme God the Father. He's making them blaspheme God the Son. Think about what kind of guilt would come with that. Here you are now praying in the name of Jesus every day, Paul. You're here writing letters in the name of Jesus. You serve and worship Jesus and you are making people in your pre-Christian days blaspheme Jesus. There's a lot you might regret about creating martyrs and giving the thumbs up to Steven being killed. But it's another thing to take people and force them with threat of violence to say something disparaging about Jesus. That just had to be a horrific kind of sin for him to nurse in his memory. That's why he says, "I was the worst of all sinners" as he writes to Timothy and even "persecuted them to foreign cities." Verse 12, "In connection I journeyed to



Damascus with the authority and permission of the chief priest." And then on the rest of the story goes.

But these are very specific sins, sins now that obviously he's going to say are absolutely wrong, he says them with great pain. Letter "C," we better certainly highlight this theological truth that the spirit was sent into the world to convict the world of sin, Letter "C." Your "Conviction of Sin" better be a part of your pre-Christian testimony. Here's where I started to feel the weight of my sin and here are some of the things I did. I mean, that's a hard thing for us to do, to confess our sins to one another. But particularly as it relates to our testimony saying here is how I lived my life. And again, I don't want you to embellish. I don't want you to be tempted to embellish. I just want you to say it like it is because to God, sin is sin. And when you talk about the fact that as a pre-Christian, as a non-Christian, here's the way I was wayward, here's how God was drawing me, and here's how I suppressed the truth in unrighteousness. Here are the ways I did that. That's the kind of thing we say not to glorify or aggrandize our non-Christian life but to be able to say here's the grace of God that saved a wretch like me. Here's why I was wretched. Here's my sin.

And for some of us who grew up in the church, it may not be the kind of sin that's going to earn a rap sheet at the police department. But it is something that certainly earns a moral rap sheet before God. And all of us have a lot to confess when it comes to here were the things I did. The ways you suppress the truth. Particular sins that you committed. And again, I just think some of you aren't sold so far on what I've been trying to say pretty firmly and that is that everyone in this room was born a non-Christian, everyone had to have a radical heart transplant. And if you think just because you recited verses and your mommy said do you want to go to hell or do you want to go to heaven? And you said, just reflexively, I want to go to heaven. And you think, well, see, that's why I've always been a Christian. You haven't always been a Christian. Matter of fact, let's look at this text. The last text I'll turn you to is Ephesians Chapter 2. You ought to see yourself in the superlatives of this particular text. It's true of all of us. And when we think about the conviction of sin we need to be so convicted of the truth of what's being said here that we can say this was my life. Paul includes himself with first-person plural pronouns, possessive pronouns. This is what I was like. This is what I did. I own this.

Verse 1, Ephesians Chapter 2. He says, "And you," he's about to make it us, but "you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked," the way you live, "following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, and the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all," Paul says, "once lived." Think about that. In the pharisaical bands studying the 39 books of canonized Scripture at that point, think about it. He says, Satan was at work in me. I walked in a course that was rejecting Jesus of Nazareth, and that was something that even though I might have given lip service like you and I might have in evangelical churches in the 21st century or the 20th century in my case, you think about the realities of that, that you were still fighting on the interior of your life the lordship of Christ. You thought somehow you can save yourself at least 80% you can contribute. Whatever it was the affront to Christ we've got to admit this is Satan's work within us. "Among whom we all live," verse 3, "in the passions of our flesh." You can have a passion



of the flesh, wanting to serve yourself and please yourself even though you are in a religious context, a Christian context. "Carrying out the desires of the body and of the mind, and we were by nature," we were by nature, "children of wrath, like the rest of mankind," everyone by nature.

Some of you think you're by nature a Christian, that you were born in a Christian family and you're naturally just kind of just slipped right into this. This is a crisis for all of us to come to the place to know we all fall short of the glory of God. And if you're not like that Samaritan woman, or you're not like Mary Magdalene in whom these seven demons were cast out, it might be easy for you to say I don't think that way at all. Well, there's some advantage in that. Just like we saw the advantage in Luke 18 of the tax collector who knew he was a sell out, he wouldn't even look up to God says, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." The Pharisee was the one who had a problem because he looked at himself, he trusted in his own resume. He didn't see that his good works were skybalon, filthy rags that needed to be replaced with the righteousness of Christ. When you tell your story, particularly that part of your story that is your pre-Christian days highlight the theological truth that we're all wayward. Highlight the theological truth that God has to draw us. Highlight the theological truth that the Spirit was sent into the world to convict us of sin. Talk about that conviction.

Martin Lloyd-Jones, that famous English preacher physician turned pastor, once asked the question why are Christians less ashamed than others to talk about their sinful past? Why, he asked, are they so free to speak about it? Because that's what testimonies are. Talk about our sin. Talk about our pre-Christian days. Talk about how we did not please God. Well, he rightly answered his own question when he said because they know, Christians know, that their past is gone and it no longer counts. Theologically so true, right? "Though our sins are like scarlet, they're now white as snow." They're gone. He separates us from our sins "as far as the east is from the west," it says there in Psalm 103. God removes it all. It doesn't count in my relationship with God. I'll tell you what, though, the story still counts and it counts in the way that you utilize it. As long as you're highlighting theological truths and you're bringing to the surface the things from your story that comport with what the Bible said would happen, that you were wayward, that God in his grace has drawn you, and that you were convicted of sin to the place of repentance and faith. I mean, those are the keys that we celebrate.

And "though our sins are as scarlet," that's an interesting word because the word scarlet, crimson, that's the blood color, right? Blood becomes the key factor in this because the death of Christ was the thing that paid for the penalty of our sin. And Jesus set up a pattern for the Church where we would practice the Lord's Supper, which is typifies the blood of Christ by the fruit of the vine and the bread as though it is the flesh of Christ. And these images are to remind us and to prompt us to say this is how we all get tied together in Christ. And speaking of tied together, let's pictur it as a bow tie. Everyone in this room, we don't have to bring people from Papua New Guinea to see this diversity in our backgrounds. All of us come together through faith in Christ. It ties us together with Christ. We're united in Christ. And then like a bow tie, we all spread into the body of Christ with all different kinds of passions and gifts and fruit is born in all different corners. We all have different roles to play. The diversity of our



usefulness for the kingdom in different ways, a lot like our diversity of sin before we come to Christ, but in the center of it all is the death of Christ to satisfy the justice of God.

And that's why it's appropriate for us to end our time here today talking about your testimony, celebrating the Lord's Supper. I ask the ushers to come down. If you're a Christian and you have a testimony. Right? What I'd like you to do is to take the elements of the Lord's Supper. I'd like you to hang on to those. I'd like you to think about your testimony. I'd like you to think about that bow tie. And think about the fact that God has brought you through your background to the place of trusting him. Just redouble that trust, that rest in the finished work of Christ. If you're not a Christian, I was going to say let the plates pass but why not get it right today? Get it right right now. It takes a second for you to be done with your fighting and kicking against the goads and to say, you're right, I am a sinner. I have been wayward. I'm going to return right now to the shepherd of my soul, the chief Shepherd. I'm going to submit to him. I'm going to trust him and not myself. He doesn't supplement your salvation. He doesn't help you give you an extra 33% to get you into heaven. He's got to be the totality of your trust. Put your trust in Christ today. Go ahead and take those elements, because you'll take communion with us for the first time knowing what these elements represent. They represent the finished work of Christ. If you're stubborn in your heart, you're not right with God, just let the plate pass by. We'll be done in just a second. But you spend time talking to God as Joseph and the team play just a little bit. You silently speak to God. I'll come back up in a few minutes and we will take these elements together.

It could be the selfish reliance on our religious past. It could be our selfish indulgence and rebellious activity. But whatever it was that we were trusting in, the reason the Lord's Supper is a great reminder of the equalizer that brings us all on the same footing before the cross is that he has paid the penalty completely for your sin and he has lived the life completely for your righteousness. So my life morally before I came to Christ is irrelevant. Even though you can be sure that it was sinful because the Bible says we are all sinful regardless of how we manifest that sin. And so we trust in Christ and the great freedom we have in celebrating the Lord's Supper as we proclaim his death until he comes, that's how Paul put it to the Corinthians, we are celebrating the fact that it has completely dealt with sin. The prophet in Isaiah 38 put it well, I think it's verse 17 when he said that "you have delivered me from the pit of destruction, for you have cast my sins behind your back." This is a great way to put it. This concept of our sin that should be the disqualifying feature of your life and mine, he's taken it and thrown it behind his back. That's how the prophet puts it. God puts it in Isaiah 43 when he says, yes, "I am the Lord who blots out your transgressions." That's a better phrase, right? Blots it out. God can't even look back at it, he's blots out our sin. Because of that we look at these elements we say that the blood and body of Christ, the death of Christ that these represent, that's our only hope. And it's a sure hope because God said it is legitimate. It is acceptable. Jesus said, "It is finished!" Right? The exclamation point on it all was the resurrection of Christ. More on the fact that it should not be strange to us at all that God can raise the dead as Paul said in his testimony there. We'll carry on with that theme next time. But the idea for us today is to know that whatever past we recite in our own minds as I preach about your testimony is all covered by the death of Christ. So if you're trusting in him for your salvation, I would invite you to eat this bread and drink this cup in remembrance of him.



Pray with me. God, we are grateful and not as grateful and profoundly grateful as we ought to be. So make us more grateful for the fact that our sin and even our righteousness, relatively speaking, is of no account when it comes to our salvation. We count it all loss for the sake of knowing your Son, our salvation, the only means of knowing you and having your blessing which we have guaranteed now because of what Christ has done for us. Thank you for working repentance and faith in our lives from all of our diverse backgrounds and not just us, but we think about Christians around the world from all different sorts of cultures and socioeconomic strata, as we are so grateful that we are all coming through the same doorway of repentance and faith to experience the forgiveness that we right now imagine and think about that you take our sins and remove it from us. We're so grateful, so relieved for that. We're thankful that it's not just for us, but it's for our brothers and sisters around the world and through time. God, let us leave now with a joyful heart, a heart of the freedom that we have from our sin.

In Jesus name. Amen.