

# How to Develop and Share Your Story

Forty Days of Friendship, Week 6

Acts 26:4-23

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 9 April 2006

## Introduction

Today we're finishing the series *Forty Days of Friendship*. For forty days – six weeks – we've been exploring the question of how to share our faith with our friends. After the service last week someone sent me an email explaining that his son has been working at his current place of employment for two or three years. During that time he's been trying to live out his faith consistently. He's been trying to build friendships with his colleagues. It just so happens that his boss is a prominent New Zealander, an ex-All Black captain who most of you would know. A little while back this man – this ex-All Black captain – said to him, "I can see that you're obviously really into God and Christianity. You've got twenty minutes. Convince me." If ever there was an open door that was it.

If you were given an opportunity like that, what would you say? Would you quote some Scriptures from Romans? You could do that. That's one way. From last week, would you draw a picture of a bridge? That might be appropriate. Looking at Scripture, my recommendation would be this: As often as you can, whenever there's an open door, just tell your story. The story of what Jesus has done in your life. Because whenever you do that, you're just revealing something about yourself that will probably serve to further build the friendship. And you'll be revealing something about God and his character in an indirect kind of way that the Holy Spirit can use. The question is, could you tell your story intelligently, humbly, briefly and clearly? Do you know it that well? Have you thought about it, worked on it, practiced it, so that when the door opens, you could walk right through it?

## How *not* to tell your story

I can't speak for you, but I think that telling your story effectively is much harder than most of us probably think. Bill Hybels, who wrote the best seller, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, says that over the years he has often asked different Christians, "Tell me your story. Free shot." He's heard literally hundreds of testimonies. And he says, to be honest, it's often depressing. He lists four common criticisms of the way most people tell their story.

### 1. They're too long

First of all, he says, most stories are just too long. He says, "I'm standing there expecting a three-minute story and I've grown a beard waiting for them to finish. When they started telling their story my clothes were in fashion, but not when they finished." If someone asks you why you're into God, 99% of the time they just want the *Readers' Digest* version. Just enough to enable them to ask a follow up question.

### 2. They're not clear

A second criticism is that a lot of stories are just not clear. It's bad enough that they're too long, but when they're fuzzy and incoherent as well... I've heard people tell their story, and they're weaving about half a dozen plotlines. They're talking about books they've read, aisles they've walked down, dead relatives they've talked to in the middle of the night. And I'm thinking to myself, "I don't need to hear all this. I just want to know the core, the central theme." Keep it simple and coherent.

### 3. They sound weird

A third criticism, according to Hybels, is that some stories just sound weird. "I accepted Jesus as my personal Lord and Saviour." What does that mean? We need to expunge all this kind of religious jargon when telling our story. That takes a lot of work.

### 4. They feel judgmental

Finally, the way some people tell their stories just feels judgmental. I've had people come up to me in town – complete strangers – and start talking to me about their faith. But they were just preaching at me. They were telling me that they had their act together and I didn't. There is nothing attractive about that.

## How to tell your story *briefly and clearly*

So how do you do tell your story briefly, clearly, intelligently and humbly? What's the secret? What does the Bible say?

In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul says this: "Those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!" This is what he's saying. (a) There's an old you. (b) There's the cross, where you met Jesus. (c) And there's a new you. When you tell your story, about all your friend wants to know is this: Does knowing Jesus make a difference in a person's life? How has coming into a relationship with Jesus changed you? If a friend comes up to you all excited about some new diet they're on, all you want to know is did it make a difference? How much body fat have you lost? If someone says they've been to see a counselor or a therapist and it's really helped them, what do you want to know? What were the issues that brought you to see a counselor? And how were those issues resolved? It's the same with our faith. When someone says "Why are you so into God?" just give them the basics: Here's what happened before I came into a relationship with Jesus, and here's what's been going on since.

You see a great example of this in Acts 26. The apostle Paul has been imprisoned for two years awaiting trial. At last he is offered a chance to present his defense before no less a dignitary than the king, King Agrippa. What does Paul do? He tells his story, briefly, clearly, intelligently, and humbly. **Let's read it.** You'll see that Paul's story or testimony basically breaks down into three clear sections.

### **The person he *was* (Acts 26:4-11)**

In the first section (vv 4-11) Paul says, in effect, "This is the person I once was." I was raised, educated and lived as a member of the Pharisees. Now the Pharisees – their name means literally "the separated ones" – were the strictest sect of first century Judaism. They were determined to please God by separating themselves from those who weren't close to God. This meant obeying the Law of Moses as carefully and rigorously as they could. They went to extraordinarily lengths. For example, to ensure that they kept the command to not work on the Sabbath, they said, "You're not allowed to cut your fingernails on the Sabbath, or pluck a hair from your beard, or wear sandals with iron nails" (sandals that had been woven together were allowed, but if they had nails in them each time you raised your foot it would count as being a burden and therefore work). Paul says, "That was me. I went to extraordinary lengths to please God, even to the point of persecuting the church, because these followers of Jesus didn't seem to be committed to God in the way that I thought they should be."

### **The person he *met* (Acts 26:12-18)**

But then Paul says in verses 12-18, "One day on a Damascus road, I met Jesus. He appeared to me and spoke to me. And I realized for the first time that God's forgiveness and favour – membership in his family – can't be earned by good behaviour. They're a free gift given to everyone who puts their faith in Jesus (v 18).

### **The person he *became* (Acts 26:19-23)**

And so Paul goes on in verses 19-23 to say, "This is the person I became." My life's purpose now is to tell people far from God that they can receive new life – eternal life – through faith in Jesus. It's pretty simple really. (a) This is who I was. (b) I met Jesus. (c) This is who I am now.

A few weeks back we looked at the story in John 9 of the blind man who Jesus healed. When people ask him what happened, do you remember what he said? John 9:25: "I was blind. But then I met Jesus. Now I can see." Does it really need to be a lot more complicated than that?

What about the woman in John 8 who was caught in the very act of adultery? She's dragged into public and is about to be stoned. But Jesus confronts the self-righteousness of the religious leaders and then turns to this woman and says, "I don't condemn you. But go and sin no more. Live a new life." What story would she tell? "I reached a low point in my life and I was filled with such shame it was overwhelming. But then I met Jesus. And he gave me a new start. He didn't condemn me. He showed me grace."

Or what about Zacchaeus? He was tax collector, like Matthew, just living for money. But one day Jesus goes to his house for dinner. And after dinner, Zacchaeus stands up and says, "I'm going to pay back everything I ever extorted from anyone, and I'm going to give half of my net worth to the poor." How would he tell his story? He'd probably say, "My whole life used to just be about money. It had a grip on me. It distorted

every relationship in my life. But then I met Jesus at a dinner one night. He set me free from the tyranny of greed, and set me free to really care about people.”

What about my story? Somehow growing up I got the idea that my worth or value as a person depended on my performance, winning the praise of people. So my life was all about trying to impress people. Image-management. But in my teenage years I met Jesus. And I discovered that God loves me unconditionally. I don't have to do anything to earn his love, or prove my worth. I still struggle, but there's a growing sense of peace and hope and a freedom to serve others.

### **What's your story?**

In the seat pockets there's a sheet marked "BC" and "AD". Would you take one and find a pen. What is the key concept that describes your life before you met Jesus? Bob Buford, author of the book, *Half-Time*, he says when giving his story, "I was a bored rich guy. But then I met Christ, and he's moving me from success to significance. I'm discovering a purpose for my life worth living for." Chuck Colson, after the Watergate scandal, winds up in a prison cell. He's filled with regret and guilt. From the Whitehouse to a prison cell. But he meets Christ and he finds grace. That's his story. For some people their life was all about fear. They were afraid of everything. Then they met Christ. And he's given them a confidence they never had. For other people it's a plaguing sense of aloneness. They just felt isolated. But then they met Jesus. They discover the tremendous sense of belonging that comes with being a member of God's family. Search your heart. What's the key concept on the front side of the cross for you? Think about it until you've nailed it down. And then write down the key concept describing your life after you had met Jesus. That's how to build your story, so that you can tell it briefly and clearly without any religious clichés or any sense of superiority. Because, let's be honest: We're not altogether yet – far from it! – but Jesus is making a difference in our lives.

When I was in my first year at university in 1989 I spent a lot of time hanging out with a guy called Gareth. I knew him from school, and we struck up a kind of friendship. We spent hours between classes talking about stuff, mostly girls, but occasionally God. I told him my story. Nothing flash. Nothing dramatic. It was just my story. It was just true. But it sparked an interest in him. One thing led to another. He came along to church. Before long, he decided to give his life to Jesus. Many of you know him. He's a pastor today. Telling your story can have an incredible impact on others if you tell it right. So it's worth working on, thinking through, writing out, and then getting on your knees every day and saying to God, "If there's an opportunity today to tell my little story, if the door opens, help me to walk through it." If the door doesn't open, don't try to walk through it. But when it does, tell your story humbly, intelligently, briefly and coherently. To help you with this, why don't you this week take the time to write out your story in a hundred words or less. Then email it to me or send it to the church office. I've got someone who's going to help me with this. If your story needs work, we'll tell you. Because this is worth getting right. Your friends need to hear how Jesus has made a difference in your life.

### **Questions**

1. Looking back over this series, Forty Days of Friendship, what "seeds" have taken deepest root in your life? What has been most helpful?
2. If there was an open door to telling your story to a friend, could you tell it intelligently, humbly, briefly and clearly? Do you know it that well?
3. To test yourself, try telling your story in two minutes or less to a Christian friend. How did it go?
4. What do you think are the most common pitfalls in sharing a testimony?
5. Read Acts 26. What impacts you most about this story?
6. Paul tells recounts his story by comparing the person he was before he met Jesus with the person he became afterwards. Can you think of a better way to tell your story?
7. Spend some time praying for your friends and neighbors, maybe someone who you would like to invite to the Alpha dinner on 10 May.