

Paul's Gospel Story

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 August 2024

Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] Well, good evening, everyone. Great to see you all here. So I wonder what you actually shared early on about your life story. Where did you begin? How would you tell it apart from just stringing together a series of dates and events?

Like, you know, when you're born, where you were born, who you're related to, or what happened at various stages in your life. A life story is more than just dates and events, isn't it?

It requires a narrative, some overarching theme that brings meaning and coherence to your entire life. So, for example, it could be King Lee Koi, better than royalty.

Or Jeffrey Hull, standing heads and shoulders above giants. Well, many Olympians had a story, didn't they, when they were in Paris, particularly those who won a gold medal.

They were able to see their life's purpose culminating in this climactic moment of their life when they finally won a medal, won the gold medal. And then they were able to describe how, from the moment of birth, the years of dedication and setback, all of it were part of bringing them to that very moment of victory in Paris.

[1 : 32] Well, today, in Acts chapter 26, we hear Paul's life story. Now, remember, we're here because Paul had appealed to Caesar. But before Festus, who is the governor, could send him to Rome, he had to write a report.

And he thinks that King Agrippa can help. So, Acts chapter 25, verse 23, where we heard, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived in Festus' court with great pomp and ceremony.

And so Festus begins, King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man, the whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer.

I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the emperor, I decided to send him to Rome. But I have nothing definite to write to his majesty about him.

Therefore, I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation, I may have something to write. For I think it is unreasonable to send a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him.

[2 : 45] And so to form this view, Agrippa needs to hear from Paul. And so Paul, given permission, tells his story and begins his defense. In verse 2, King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies.

Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently. The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country and also in Jerusalem.

They have known me for a long time and can testify if they are willing that I conform to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee. And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today.

So, as a ruler in Palestine, King Agrippa would be familiar with the story and history of the Jews.

Paul starts, therefore, by situating his own life story with his people.

The Jews were a people of hope. And from very young, Paul had lived his life in pursuit of this hope. This hope for Israel and Paul was founded on what God had promised their ancestors.

[4 : 10] And if you are interested where some of these promises may be found in the Old Testament, well, I have got two examples. The first, in Isaiah 26, verse 19, where it says that, Your dead will live, Lord.

Their bodies will rise. Let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy. Or another, in Daniel 12, verse 2-3, the prophet says, Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, and others to shame and everlasting contempt.

And so, Paul, knowing these verses, lived as a Pharisee, one of the strictest sects in Judaism, in the hope that he might inherit these promises.

And incredulous as it may seem, Paul now says, it is for this very hope, which many others do share as well, that he is on trial today. How can that be?

Well, he explains in verse 7. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled, as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me.

[5 : 22] Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? Now, if you've been looking with us over the last few chapters, this is not a new point, is it?

There has been contention about the hope of the resurrection. The Pharisees, one of the sects, believed that this is in the Old Testament. But not all Jews believed this.

There were the Sadducees, on the other hand, that did not. Yet, only Paul is on trial for this.

Because like other Christians, he also believed that it first occurred, and has already occurred, in the person of Jesus Christ.

We'll get to that point a bit more shortly. But for a while in his life, Paul too had this hope for the resurrection misplaced.

For a time, Paul was opposed vehemently to Jesus. Verse 9. I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

[6 : 26] And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests, I put many of the Lord's people in prison. And when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time, I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme.

I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities. So no one can fault Paul on the strength of his zeal.

But for a time, he saw Jesus as a threat to this hope. Now Paul was suddenly also telling Agrippa that what he did to others is exactly what the Jews are now doing to him.

But the point is, misplaced zeal is still wrong. And in fact, we do see this nowadays, don't we?

There are many causes around that people are championing.

And as you talk to them, or as you hear them, they are utterly sincere in what they're fighting for.

But if it's based on the wrong premise, then no matter how good their intentions, it is still wrong, isn't it?

[7 : 37] And they end up doing what Jesus says Paul did in the next few verses, kicking against the goats. And so we read, On one of these journeys, I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priest.

About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

It is hard for you to kick against the goats. Now, I'm sure some of you will know what the goats are, but if you don't, this is goats, G-O-A-D-S, not G-O-A-T-S.

All right? So if you kick against the goats, the goats will kick you back as well. But have you heard the term to goad someone? That's when you sort of needle or prod someone, right?

To provoke a reaction, to make them react a certain way. Well, in Paul's day, farmers had an implement which they called a goat.

[8 : 43] All right? And they used it, a sharp implement, to prod an ox or a cattle to move in a certain direction. It was a sort of a sharp stick.

And sometimes, to retaliate back or to fight back, an ox will kick against the goat. And that's where the phrase comes from. In the hope of stopping the farmer to stop it, stop pestering me.

All right? But ultimately, it's a self-harming act, isn't it? Because kicking against a sharp object ends up hurting themselves in the end.

It's painful. And so likewise, Paul was doing the same things here, persecuting Christians. The more he did it, the more he was opposing the God he was trying to serve.

It was self-defeating because he was pushing away in Jesus, the very person who alone can fulfill the hope of Israel and his hope.

[9 : 41] Not only that, it was futile because no one can outmaneuver the sovereignty of God. But Jesus, in his kindness, appears to Paul on his way to Damascus.

And so redirects Paul's misguided zeal and brings him to a true knowledge of this hope. Verse 15. And so I asked, Who are you, Lord? And the Lord replied, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. And so what the Lord Jesus does is that instead of snuffing out Paul's wrong-headed zeal, he redirects it by giving Paul a new mission and message.

Verse 16. Now get up and stand on your feet. I appear to you to appoint you as a servant, as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles.

I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

[10:57] And it's at this very point when Paul's life is turned around. And he finally discovers the narrative of his life story.

It's almost like his Olympic gold medal moment, if you like. Because once this occurs, he's able to see everything else in his life from this point or through this lens.

Everything that led up to this point and everything that will then follow from here on in. And so, if you ask, was it a mistake that he became a Pharisee?

No. Because had he belonged to the Sadducees, well, he would have not believed in the hope of the resurrection, would he? Or understood the Old Testament promises in those terms?

Was his fervent zeal bad? No. Because this mission and message that Jesus now has for him requires that same zeal to accomplish.

[11:59] And was his kicking against the goats pointless? Well, to a point, yes, because it amounted to nothing. But no, in the sense that when Jesus finally revealed himself to him, Paul experienced the abundant grace of God.

He knew, within his innermost being, what it really meant for him to be forgiven. That Jesus did not just forgive him, even though he was a persecutor of his disciples, but instead, made him one of his apostles, with a unique role in God's gospel plan to bring the message to the Gentiles.

And so, he becomes actually a key figure in all of church history. And so, often, the church's best evangelists are those who have experienced God's grace for themselves.

This great truth of the gospel. The more someone appreciates just how much they've been forgiven, the more passionate they are, aren't they, of sharing the gospel with others.

It's a bit totally unlike, you know, social media influences, right? Because, in case you didn't know, I'm sure you know, many of them get paid to push the products that they're trying to sell.

[13:24] But no, evangelists aren't paid to share the good news, are they? They themselves have been transformed by the gospel, and that's why they want to share it with others.

And so, likewise for Paul, this transformation is seen not just in him stopping his persecution of believers, but then his own willingness now to suffer for it, to be persecuted.

For spreading the very thing he used to oppose. And so Paul recounts his life from this moment on, verse 19. So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven, first to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem, Judea, and then to the Gentiles.

I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. And that is why some Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. But God has helped me to this very day.

So I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen, that the Messiah would suffer and as a result, the first to rise from the dead would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.

[14:39] At this point, Festus interrupted Paul's defense. You are out of your mind, Paul, shouted Festus. Your great learning is driving you insane. I am not insane, most excellent Festus, Paul replied.

What I am saying is true and reasonable. It's strange, isn't it, how Festus got so uptight with Paul's testimony. You know, what's it to him?

Well, really, I think just like Festus, Felix, sorry, Festus' conscience was being pricked at that moment, wasn't it? And that's why he was reacting the way he did. But Paul, calmly, unshaken, was able to just say, no, what I am preaching is true and reasonable.

But notice as well how Paul summarizes the message. Because he says, firstly, that he is not saying anything that is beyond Moses and the prophets. That is, he is only saying what God has

promised in the Old Testament.

He is not making any of these things up. They can look it up themselves. And secondly, what is promised is that the Messiah, Jesus, would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead, which is exactly what occurred with Jesus.

[15 : 53] And by saying first to rise from the dead, that also means, doesn't it, that others will follow. Jesus is the first, but he is not going to be the last, which is the very hope that Paul had even as a Pharisee.

But lastly, Paul also says that this message is not just for the Jews, his own people, but also for the Gentiles. And again, Paul's own story attests to that because he has been just traveling around the Roman world spreading this very message.

And incidentally, if you think about it and you read, go back and read over the last few chapters, these are the very two points that has gotten Paul into trouble, right?

Firstly, the reality of the resurrection. That's the first point of contention. And secondly, that some of the Jews did not like the fact that God's promises are for the Gentiles as well.

Both of these points, critical to the gospel, are things that the Jews were opposed to and therefore Paul was in trouble for. Now, I've called today's sermon Paul's Gospel Story, not just his life story, but his gospel story because Paul's life story has become intimately tied up, has it not, with the gospel story.

[17 : 19] His life is bound up with God's good news about Jesus. The gospel is what Paul sees everything else in his life through, right?

The lens that makes sense of his entire life. That he began with the hope which his people had, that he pursued based on God's promises to them and then finding fulfillment in the coming of Jesus.

That's the big gospel story, isn't it? God's promises and God's fulfillment all in Christ Jesus. But it's become Paul's story as well when God graciously intervenes and gives to Paul faith in Jesus.

And so what happens is that Paul's life is now caught up, dragged almost, dragged into Jesus' gospel story, God's big plan for salvation.

Paul isn't just preaching about the fulfillment of God's promises because he has become part of that fulfillment too. He's not separate to God's promises now.

[18 : 27] First, because by being saved, God promised that he would call people to himself, including Paul, in Christ Jesus. But secondly, by being raised as God's messenger of this hope, Paul is now also one of God's servants and witnesses and part of the plan of God's gospel proclamation.

And when Paul finally understands the narrative to his life, how his life now is caught up with this gospel story, there is nothing that can move him from it.

There is no doubt, no uncertainty is in his mind as to what his narrative is, what his life's purpose is. And so he's willing to endure suffering, for it. He'll testify to great and small like his is.

And his final words to King Agrippa, he will do it as long as it will take. And so, verse 26, Paul makes a direct appeal to King Agrippa. He says, the king is familiar with these things and I can speak freely to him.

I'm convinced that none of this has escaped his notice because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.

[19 : 46] Then King Agrippa said to Paul, do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian? Paul replied, short time or long, I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am except for these change.

The king rose and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with him. After they left the room they began to say to one another, this man has not done anything that deserves death or punishment.

Agrippa said to Festus, this man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar. And so, even though they've come to the right conclusion in relation to the charges, King Agrippa sadly was unmoved that day.

But Paul says he's not deterred, is he? Because whether short or long, Paul prays to God that all who listen to him will become as he is except for his change.

And so friends, Paul's prayer applies to all of us today as well. You have just listened to Paul's message. And it is my prayer too that everyone listening today to his message will respond to him will respond to this message of hope.

[21 : 07] So, how can we respond? Well, firstly, I think we can put ourselves in King Agrippa's shoes. Having heard Paul's message, do we believe Moses and the prophets?

Or else, what is our life or what is our hope in life fixed on? For God has promised since Moses that there will be a resurrection from the dead.

He has proven by raising his son Jesus from death so that we can have forgiveness of sins. And this is hope not just for the Jews because again in the Old Testament God promised Abraham all the way back in Genesis chapter 12 in the next slide that all peoples on earth will be blessed through you, that is Abraham.

So this message is not just for the Jews but for the whole world. It isn't enough just to have hope is it? For Paul lived his life as a Pharisee full of hope.

But even though he was well intentioned it wasn't enough. I mean he even admitted that he lived a faultless life as a strict Pharisee obedient to the law.

[22 : 19] But it was getting him nowhere was it? In fact he was kicking against the goats. Only in the gospel only in submitting to Jesus did he find assurance that he was headed in the right direction.

Not only purpose for this life but hope secure hope for life beyond death. And so friends just having hope in your life is not enough.

You have to have hope in the right thing. Hope that can give you security and assurance that where you're going is in the right direction. So friends don't say today like King Agrippa said that it is only a short time.

No. You can believe in Jesus today and put your hope in him. So if you have not done that please let me encourage you respond positively to Paul's message.

But secondly for those of us who have already responded by placing our hope hope in Jesus well let us put ourselves then in Paul's shoes and have the same heart and prayer as he did.

[23 : 32] For he said in verse 29 that whether it be long or short he prayed and we should pray that all will become as we are servants of the Lord Jesus and witnesses to the hope that is found in the Lord Jesus.

you see when you believe in Jesus your life story becomes intertwined with the gospel story just like Paul. The good news of what Jesus has done for you and for me now powerfully shapes the narrative in your life and surely it must isn't it because we were once lost and without hope but now thanks to Jesus we have life for eternity we have something that death cannot destroy no adversity no setback nothing in life we are facing now can take that away from us no poverty no cancer no breakups in relationships no we have a secure hope because of Jesus and so if that has gripped you and moved you surely you want to then proclaim that good news to others don't you to others who are searching for

God in their own lives we want to tell them don't we that we have found that hope in Jesus as the prophet Isaiah said in that other reading in chapter 52 how beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news who proclaim peace who bring good tidings who proclaim salvation who say to Zion your God reigns now I'm sure not all of us will be called to do this the same way Paul did in chains and leaving our homes and occupations but whether it's in small ways or large as we meet people who are asking who are curious about the hope we have then let us not be ashamed of testifying to the one who saved us who has given us this hope of life beyond our death so friends I'm going to end by asking you that question at the very start again if you were asked to tell someone your life story what would you say will you have a narrative that includes

Jesus or better yet will you have the gospel of Jesus shaping the entire story of your life that is not just here's my life story oh by the way when I was this or that age I believe in Jesus and then I went back to my life no but that you have from beginning to end a life story that is shaped by the good news of Jesus by what God has been doing from the moment of your birth until your very last breath what a great and wonderful testimony that would be wouldn't it well let's not keep it to ourselves but share it with others let's pray father help us to believe and keep believing in the gospel and in the hope of resurrection from the dead because of what your son our lord the risen savior Jesus has done fix in us this hope that it gives us a zeal to proclaim this message and tell others of him so that more may become as we are servants and witnesses to you our great God in Jesus name we pray amen