Acts 2024 Juan Seo (Oct 13, 2024)

**THE APOSTLE PAUL’S TESTIMONY**

Acts 21:37-22:29

Key Verse 22:7-8

**I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, “Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” I asked. “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,” he replied.**

If you had the opportunity to share the gospel with someone about to die, what would you say? When the apostle Paul was given the only chance to preach the gospel to the Jews who tried to kill him, he shared his testimony. He explained how he encountered Jesus and what calling he received from Him. Paul’s approach was to witness Jesus based on his own experience. In the book of Acts, we find that Paul shares his testimony twice. One is recorded in Acts 22, and the other in Acts 26, where he speaks before King Agrippa. Additionally, Luke records Paul’s conversion story in Acts 9. Therefore, Paul’s conversion story appears three times in Acts. Moreover, Paul often shares his testimony throughout his letters to the churches. This demonstrates that faith is not merely intellectual knowledge but is rooted in life experience. Our testimonies about our personal experiences with Jesus have the power to move the hearts of those who hear them. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, they can bring people to accept Jesus as their Savior. Today, as we listen to a message about Paul’s testimony, let us take some time to reflect on our testimonies.

The apostle Paul was arrested by Roman soldiers and became a prisoner. After receiving the commander’s permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the Jewish crowd. In Aramaic, he began his testimony, saying, ***“Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense.”*** Aramaic was the common language of the eastern Mediterranean region, and the Jews used both Hebrew and Aramaic. When Paul suddenly addressed the crowd in Aramaic, saying, “Brothers and fathers,” the crowd became very quiet. This is where Paul’s testimony begins.

The content of Paul’s testimony is as follows: First, Paul speaks about his birth, upbringing, and educational background. Second, Paul describes his religious background. Third, Paul shares his encounter with Jesus. Fourth, Paul explains God’s purpose in choosing him. Fifth, Paul emphasizes that he was called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. His testimony also served the purpose of defending himself against the accusations made by the Jews. For this reason, he intentionally highlighted certain aspects to support his defense.

The apostle Paul begins by speaking about his birth, upbringing, and educational background. Look at verse 3a. ***“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city.”*** Although Paul preached the gospel to the Gentiles, he made it clear that he himself was a Jew. Being born in Tarsus of Cilicia indicates that he was not a Hebraic Jew born in Judea, but a Hellenistic Jew born in the Gentile world. This could have been seen as a disadvantage in front of the Hebraic Jews. However, Paul emphasizes that he was brought up in Jerusalem, showing that he grew up learning and practicing Jewish traditions, identifying himself as a “Hebrew of Hebrews.” Moreover, Paul highlights that he received the finest education in Jewish law, saying, ***“I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors.”*** Gamaliel was a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish council, and one of the most respected scholars of the law at the time. It was not easy to become a student of such a renowned scholar. The ancient philosopher Plato’s Academy famously had the inscription, “Let no one ignorant of geometry enter here.” Studying under Gamaliel meant that Paul possessed an exceptional knowledge of the law. Importantly, Paul did not give up along the way or merely survived but was thoroughly trained in the law of his ancestors. This emphasizes that Paul’s birth, upbringing, and education were far superior to those of many other Jews.

What was Paul’s religious background? Paul says, ***“I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today.”*** He acknowledges that the Jews persecuting him were doing so out of zeal for God. At the same time, he emphasizes that he was more zealous for God than they were. He then provides specific evidence to support his claim. Paul persecuted the followers of Jesus to their death. He arrested both men and women and threw them into prison. He even obtained letters from the high priest and traveled to Damascus to bring Christians to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished. Paul’s persecution of Jesus’ disciples was carried out with intense brutality. In fact, none of the Jews present at that place had persecuted the followers of Jesus as fervently as Paul had. In this sense, Paul was more zealous for God than any of them. Hearing Paul’s testimony, the Jews would likely have felt overwhelmed by Paul’s zeal for God.

Now, the apostle Paul testifies how he encountered Jesus as his Savior and how that encounter transformed his life. Look at verses 6-7. ***“About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’”*** This event happened while he was on his way to Damascus to arrest followers of Jesus. Suddenly, a bright light from heaven flashed around him, and he fell to the ground. This happened at noon, meaning it wasn’t moonlight or starlight shining in the darkness of night. The light was so powerful that it outshone even the brightness of the sun. As Paul fell to the ground, he heard a voice from heaven saying, ***“Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?”*** The glorious light of the risen Jesus powerfully shone upon Paul, and the living voice of Jesus called out to him, saying, ***“Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?”*** This way of calling his name twice is significant. When God appeared to Moses in the wilderness, He called out, “Moses! Moses!” Similarly, when God called Samuel, He said, “Samuel! Samuel!” If someone calls your name twice, take a moment to reflect and consider if it might be the voice of Jesus calling you.

Instinctively, Paul asked, ***“Who are you, Lord?”*** The voice replied, ***“I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.”*** How shocked and terrified Paul must have been when he heard the voice saying, ***“I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.”*** He likely felt his knees weaken and his heart stop from overwhelming fear. In trembling fear, he asked, ***“What shall I do, Lord?”*** Now, Paul seeks direction for what he should do next. Jesus instructed him to go into Damascus and wait for further direction. Although it is not mentioned in Paul’s testimony, Acts 9 reveals that Paul was blind for three days and did not eat or drink anything. During this time, Paul fasted and prayed, waiting for Jesus to reveal his next step.

At that time, a disciple of Jesus named Ananias came to Paul. Acts 9 records the event from Ananias’s perspective as he obeyed Jesus’ command to find Paul. In contrast, Paul shares the encounter from his perspective in this passage. Paul describes Ananias as ***“a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there.”*** By emphasizing Ananias’s integrity before God, Paul highlights that the witness to his conversion and calling was trustworthy and credible. Ananias stood beside Paul and said, ***“Brother Saul, receive your sight!”*** At that very moment, Paul was able to see again. Ananias then delivered a message from Jesus to Paul. Look at verses 14-15. ***“The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard.”*** When Paul speaks of ***“the God of our ancestors,”*** he is making it clear that the very God the Jews worship is the same God who called him. Ananias explained four reasons why God chose Paul: First, to know His will. Second, to see the Righteous One. Third, to hear words from His mouth. Fourth, to be His witness to all people of what he had seen and heard. “The Righteous One” refers to Jesus, the Son of God. Paul was chosen and called to see Jesus, hear the gospel from Him, and proclaim it to all people. Paul accepted God’s will, was immediately baptized, and became a servant of Jesus.

The apostle Paul also testified that he was specifically called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. We do not know exactly when this event took place. What matters is that while Paul was praying in the temple in Jerusalem, he fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking to him. The Lord said, ***“Quick! Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.”*** At first, Paul hesitated to obey. It seems he wanted to preach the gospel to the Jews in Jerusalem. His love for his people was so deep that he even said, ***“I wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people of Israel.”*** He tried to convince Jesus that the Jews would accept him. However, Jesus’s command was clear and firm: ***“Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.”*** This is how Paul became the apostle to the Gentiles. He did not choose this mission for himself; rather, the Lord called him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul explains that he is simply doing his best to fulfill the mission given to him by the Lord, not because it was his own desire but because it was God’s calling.

When Paul said that God had sent him to bring salvation to the Gentiles, the crowd raised their voices and shouted, ***“Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live.”*** They could not accept God’s will to bring salvation to the entire world through the gospel because they were bound by their pride in being God's chosen people. As the crowd became violent, the Roman commander ordered that Paul be taken to the barracks. This is where Paul’s testimony ends. It seems that Paul’s testimony could not persuade the Jews filled with hatred. However, this does not mean that his testimony was not powerful enough to move their hearts. Instead, it reveals how hardened their hearts were.

As I began this message, I asked, “If you had the opportunity to share the gospel with someone about to die, what would you say?” We can deeply explain the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can also share about God’s great love for the world, demonstrated by giving His one and only Son. However, a theoretical explanation without our personal testimony can feel dry and boring, like a theological lecture. When we share the gospel through testimonies based on our experiences, we can touch the hearts of those who hear and engage in meaningful evangelism.

There is a marketing strategy called ***“testimonial advertising.”*** It builds trust and credibility for a product or brand by using real customer experiences. Take a look at this picture. This man developed impressive muscles in just six months. Don’t you want to build muscles like him? Come to Flushing Fitness Center! Many of us get influenced by such ads and sign up for a gym membership. Earlier this year, I joined a gym and started training, though I haven’t seen significant results yet. We are drawn to these ads because they are based on actual testimonies, making them more convincing.

The fact that we met Jesus and our lives were transformed is not just a theory but something that truly happened in our lives. The Jesus we encounter is not someone imagined in our minds but a real person who actively intervenes in our lives and walks with us. Therefore, it is only natural to share the gospel based on our testimony of encountering the living Jesus. And that gospel will work powerfully in the hearts of those who hear it.

So, what is your testimony of encountering Jesus? How will you share the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ with those in need? Last week, I gave a Sunday message about discerning God’s will. Thankfully, many people were blessed by that sermon. In particular, several people found grace through my testimony of how I came to get married. Through this, I was reminded once again of the importance of sharing testimonies. If I have the opportunity to share the gospel through a testimony, what testimony should I share?

I was born in 1970 in the beautiful port city of Busan, South Korea. During my childhood, my father experienced repeated failures in business. At night, debt collectors would come to my house, loudly arguing with my mother. One of them even came with a knife, threatening to kill us. His fierce and threatening gaze pierced my young heart deeply. When I was in middle school, my father was arrested for fraud, and I had to write a petition to the judge in his defense, attaching my many academic awards. After that, I resolved to become a judge, determined to help those unjustly treated. I studied diligently, hoping to succeed in a dark and unjust world.

In 1989, I was accepted into the law school at Korea University, one of the most prestigious universities in the country. I began college with the dream of passing the bar exam and becoming a judge or lawyer. However, God found me through a UBF shepherd. He would even come to my classroom, persistently pursuing me. In response, I wrote him a long letter titled, “Why I am an Atheist,” and told him not to come looking for me again. But his shepherd heart for me grew stronger after reading my letter. One day, I was invited to attend a GBS at the Anam UBF Center. The atmosphere there was so bright that I felt very uncomfortable. While others laughed and enjoyed studying the Bible, I couldn’t laugh with them. It was at that moment that God’s word entered my heart: ***“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”*** (John 13:34) That night, alone in my room, I knelt before God for the first time in my life, looking at a red cross glowing in the darkness outside my window and prayed: “God, if You truly are love, I want to meet You now.”

During the summer retreat that year, I experienced the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. I could see my true self before God—filled with selfishness, hypocrisy, lust, and pride. Fear of God’s judgment overwhelmed me, and in tears, I repented before Jesus, who was nailed to the cross for my sins, pleading for His forgiveness. At that moment, I heard Jesus’s voice: ***“Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.”*** (John 8:11) My heart became filled with great joy and peace from heaven. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, I was assured that Jesus had forgiven all my sins and saved me. When God poured out His Spirit upon me, I saw a vision of spreading His love throughout the world and discovered the true meaning and purpose of my life. That is why I am here now.

I pray that we may experience Jesus deeply. And I also pray that we may boldly proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ based on our personal encounter with Jesus. Amen.