

“What About Bob?”

Colossians 4:2-6 and Acts 26:1-29

Series: BELIEVE Week 20: Sharing My Faith

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While Kary Oberbrunner was at the gym, trying to stay focused on his exercise routine, he noticed an elderly man fumbling with an MP3 player and headphones. At first, Kary ignored him. As the man became more frustrated with the technology, Kary reluctantly stopped exercising, introduced himself and asked if he could help. The man replied, “Hi, I’m Bob. I love jazz, but I can’t get it on this dumb player.” When Kary asked Bob if he heard of iTunes, Bob shot back, “I’ what?” It slowly dawned on Kary that God placed Bob in his path for a reason. So Kary offered to stop by and help Bob unravel his MP3 troubles.

At the apartment, Kary learned Bob’s wife died a couple years before. She was their main breadwinner, so when he was unable to make payments, the bank repossessed his house. All Bob’s earthly possessions were crammed into a small apartment. Kary helped Bob transfer his jazz CD collection onto the MP3 player. While importing the music, they talked about life, his wife, and God. Kary and Bob couldn’t be more different.

Bob is 71. I am 32. Bob is black. I am white. Bob doesn’t have much money. I have more than I need. Bob is an ex-convict. I’ve never been to jail. Bob is a widower. I’m married. The weeks following I checked in on Bob often. Kind of funny how two guys who are complete opposites can become the best of friends, all because of an MP3 player.

A short time later Kary invited Bob to church. It took a few invitations, but Bob eventually accepted and sat with Kary and his wife last spring. Then Kary adds,

After the service we knelt near the altar, and Bob told Jesus he wanted to follow him. Bob confessed he wanted to stop trying to control his life and invited Jesus to take over. Bob wept and I noticed the distinct peace that now defined his face. Bob changed my life and the life of my church. I get more joy from him than he’ll ever understand. He wants me to baptize him. I’m saddened that I almost missed Bob simply because I was too engrossed in my own little world.¹

What about Bob? What about the Bob, the Barb, the Mike and the Mary God places in your path? How can you help them find their way back to God? How can you share with them the Good News about Jesus?

Today in the BELIEVE series we arrive at the tenth behavior that helps us act like Jesus: Sharing My Faith. The key idea is “I share my faith with others to fulfill God’s purposes” and the key question is “How do I share my faith with those who don’t know God?” Jesus’ whole mission is to reach us who are far from God, restore our world to how God meant it to be and reproduce that mission in as many people as possible. Jesus came to make it possible for

¹ Kary Oberbrunner, “What About Bob? How That Question Changed My Life,” New Man. eMagazine (4-14-09)

everyone on the planet to find their way back to God, to receive an abundant and eternal relationship with God. Then, before He returned to heaven, He told us to go and do the same. Our mission is not to convince people to be Presbyterians, not to make more members of Woodside and certainly not to say we are right and they are wrong. We point to Jesus, not ourselves. We want everyone to enter a relationship with the One who loves them most and gave everything to get them back.

Now if you are like most Christians, the thought of sharing your faith strikes you with fear. You don't know what to do. You don't know what to say. Guess what: you are in good company. Even the Apostle Paul, the greatest evangelist of all time, was afraid. In our key verse this week in BELIEVE Paul writes,

Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. (Ephesians 6:19-20)

Two times in two verses he asks for people to pray he will be fearless and he will be given the right words when he tells the Good News.

So how do we get past the fear and share our faith? Let me begin by removing this fear: you will not have to go door-to-door, you will not have to preach on street corners, you will not have to bother perfect strangers. In another letter, Paul gives simple directions for how to fearlessly share our faith.

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. (Colossians 4:2-6)

Some years ago we used the acronym B.L.E.S.S. to lay out five practical things we can all do each day to share our faith where we live and work. These verses give us a refresher course on it.

The **B is for Begin with Prayer**. Paul says,

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful (v. 2)

Each day ask God, "Who do You want me to bless today?" Be watchful and alert for ways you can bless others. Pray for God to give your opportunities to bless a friend as Kary blessed Bob.

L is for Listen

And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. (v. 3)

Listen for an open door to the message. There are people you know – family, friends, neighbors, coworkers – who are going through times of tensions, transition, or trial. These times cause us to pause and ask the big questions of life – What am I doing? Where am I going? How do I deal with this? How can I get out of this mess? Where can I find help? These are open doors God gives us to share about His love. We must listen for these opportunities.

E is for Eat

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. (v. 6)

When Paul says “let your conversation be seasoned with salt” he doesn’t mean use “salty language.” He wants us to have gracious, hospitable, enjoyable conversations. The best way to do that is to share a meal and spend time with people. Just as salt brings out the flavor locked inside the food, let your conversations bring out whatever is locked inside your friend’s heart.

The first S is for Serve.

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. (v. 5)

God provides us with opportunities to help others in practical, impactful ways. Too often Christians are viewed as people who want or demand something. Jesus came to serve (Matthew 20:28; Philippians 2:7) and He wants us to do the same. So offer a helping hand.

Finally the last letter in BLESS, the second S is for Story.

Pray that I may proclaim it clearly (v. 4)

God’s Story is the greatest gift of all – abundant and eternal life through Jesus Christ. Like the other four practices in BLESS, telling God’s story is a gift. And the clearest, simplest and best way to tell God’s story is by telling your story – what Jesus has done in your life story. You say, “Well I don’t really know the New Testament.” Friends, I’m not asking you to memorize the New Testament. I want you to tell the YOU Testament – what God has done for you in Jesus Christ. They can debate theology, science, the Bible and the church. But they can’t question the truth of your story. They may say, “Well that’s good for you but not for me.” But they can’t deny the truth of your story. When you give a gift, you give it away and let the other person do with it what they will. The same is true with the gift of your story. Some will trash it. Some will ignore it. Some will stick it on a shelf for later. And some will see it as the greatest treasure of all – the one they’ve waited for their whole lives.

To help you tell your story, I put a very simple outline in the bulletin:

1. What my life was like before Jesus.

2. How you came to know and follow Jesus as Savior and Lord.

3. What my life is like since then.

Let's look at how the Apostle Paul told his story. He is on trial before King Agrippa, his sister Berenice, and the Roman Governor Festus. He is a prisoner wearing chains – something I hope will never happen to you when you tell your story. They just asked Paul to give the reason for the hope within him. He begins with gentleness and respect.

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. (Acts 26:2-3)

Paul then launches into telling his listeners **What Life Was Like Before Jesus.**

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 conformed 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. 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. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? (Acts 26:4-8)

Notice Paul is not an atheist. He was highly religious. Some feel they don't have an impressive story because they weren't dirty rotten sinners. Paul proves you can be an every Sunday church-goer, right near the Light and still be blind and misguided.

I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 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. (Acts 26:9-11)

I've listened to people tell their stories and many say, "I went away to college and got away from God." In a way that's what happened to Paul. He went away to college in Jerusalem and got away from the True God. He was convinced he was doing God's will by putting Jesus' people in jail and voting for their deaths. He was obsessed. He had anger issues. He was out of control.

What was your life like B.C. – Before Christ? Did you wander away from God? Did you become an agnostic or atheist? Did you just not care? Paul chased after influence and power. Did you chase after possessions, power, position, passions, popularity? Did you have anger issues?

Did an obsession take over your life? Did you feel an emptiness, a longing, a hunger for something missing? Write down a few words about what your life was like B.C.

Next, Paul shares **How He Came to Know and Follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.**

On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 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 goads.’ “Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’“ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. ‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and 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.’ (Acts 26:12-18)

This is one of the most dramatic conversion stories in history and, frankly, I think it scares people. It sounds like it should have one of those lists of disclaimers you hear on pharmaceutical commercials. “Taking Jesus has been known to cause blindness, falling down, heart palpitations, loss of appetite, flashing lights, hearing voices, and in a few cases death. Your results may vary.” Don’t assume you must have a dramatic conversion like Paul to be a real Christian.

It’s true that your results will vary. The point when you turn to Jesus, believe in Him as your Savior and follow Him as Lord, will be unique to you. For some it may be as sudden and dramatic as Paul. You can even pinpoint the date. For others, and I think this is most of us, it will be a longer, more gradual process marked by moments of discovery and new insight. You may have come to know God through studying Him with your mind, searching for Him with your heart, soaking Him in through your senses, seeking Him with your spirit.

You may have come to know and believe in Jesus on a retreat, during a worship service, through a conversation with a friend, in a private time of prayer. As I said before it often happens when people go through times of tension, trauma, or transition. Sometimes your foundations need to be shaken before you begin building your life on the Solid Rock of Jesus Christ. Take a moment and write down a few sentences about how you came to know and follow Jesus.

Finally, Paul shares **What Life Is Like Since Then.**

So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts 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 the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles. (Acts 26:19-23)

Paul finishes his story by describing the difference it's made in his life. His anger is gone. His obsession with persecuting others has disappeared. Before Christ, he was prejudiced against all Gentiles. Now He loves them as brothers and sisters. And when his own people seize and try to kill him, he responds with peace and prays for his enemies. He confidently proclaims that God has been by his side through all these troubles to this very day. Most of all, he wants to tell everyone, Jew and Gentile, about the wonderful Good News that Jesus the Messiah died for our sins and rose to give us eternal life. Once consumed with vengeance, he is now filled with grace.

What difference has Jesus made in your life? Has he set you free from hostility, depression or addiction? Has he removed your burdens? Has he calmed your fears? Has he forgiven you and helped you be more forgiving? Has he given you grace and made you more gracious? Has he given you direction and purpose? Has he filled you with faith, hope and love? Write down a few sentences that describe the difference Jesus makes in your life.

Well that's Paul's story. Let's see how well it was received.

At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane."

"I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am 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."

Then 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 chains." (Acts 26:24-29)

So he struck out with these three. Yet King Agrippa and Festus do agree, "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment" (Acts 26:31). The interesting truth is that Paul didn't care whether he was in prison or not. His one hope in life is that all who hear him will come to know and follow the Jesus who loves them.

Is that your hope? It's better than giving someone a place on the soccer team, a part in the play, a college education, a job, a wedding ring or a child. All those things are great. But a loving, saving, ever-living, everlasting relationship with Jesus Christ is the greatest gift, the greatest BLESSing of all time and eternity. If we begin with prayer, listen, eat, and serve people where we live and work, there will be opportunities to share the story of God and Jesus. Ask God

to give you opportunities to share your story. A great way to open the door is to give this invitation to our services during Holy Week and Easter. If you BLESS the people you know, there *will* be times when you can tell your story.

I want you to know I have fear and trembling about sharing my faith just like you. But since I ask you to do it I should lead by example. So like Kary Oberbrunner in the opening story I decided to look for someone like Bob at the gym. I've been going to Planet Fitness for years so I decided to look there. I figured it'll take three or four years to develop a friendship that might open up the opportunity for me to share my faith so I better get started.

I saw this one guy there every day. I didn't want to overwhelm him, turn him off and make him think I was weird. So I played it cool: just say hello, introduce myself and let it go. As we walked out the door together, I put out my hand. "Hey, I see you here every day. My name is Doug." "My name is Don," he replied. That was it. We got in our cars and drove away. I was probably sweating...and not from my work out.

The very next Sunday, I am walking down the center aisle of the Classic service and I see this guy who looks familiar sitting in the pews. I look. I do a double take. Naw it can't be Don. Next Monday morning, I'm at Planet Fitness and Don walks up to me and says, "Hi. Are you Pastor Doug from Woodside?" "Uh yeah." "Well I was at your church yesterday." Wow! It was Don. That was easy! All I have to do is introduce myself and the Holy Spirit grabs them by the collar and gets them to church. Then he said, "My fiancée is Carrie Lane and we are wondering if you would perform our wedding." Okay, so maybe I'm not so good at this. Carrie was the real one who brought him to Woodside. God gave me a gimmee this time.

I did perform Don and Carrie's wedding. In fact, Don joined Woodside the day after his wedding. Don and I have become good friends and brothers in Christ. I invited him to join the Tuesday morning Growth Group at Einsteins and he's found more brothers in Christ. Recently he wrote this email to me:

I want to tell you that I was thinking of you yesterday when I was driving to work after growth group. I thank God for you and your encouragement to grow in my faith. You lead a tremendous church community and it has helped me grow closer to God and strengthened my faith. I feel so blessed.

Let's go out and BLESS some more.