



SmallGroupTools

OVER THE FENCE: LIVING THE LOVE OF GOD | OPEN UP
FEBRUARY 4 – 5, 2012 | ACTS 9:1-18

BACKGROUND

THEME: OPEN UP

We all have a story to tell about what God has done in and through us in life, but not all of us believe that our stories carry God's power. Our lives are the canvas upon which God's story is painted for others to see. This good news that Jesus came to proclaim sets all people free for abundant, joyful living right here and right now!

WHAT DO WE WANT TO KNOW?

God has a story, and we have a story, and they are woven together.

WHAT DO WE WANT TO DO?

Identify our story and tell it.

COMMUNITY

PRAY TOGETHER

Dear God, you have given each of us a faith story to tell. We pray that you would help us identify and tell that story for you. We pray that our faith story draws others to a better understanding of you and your love for them and their lives. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

There is power in a story. Telling a story can be as simple as recounting a sequence of events from our own lives. We are all "experts" in our own story; it's our story that no one else has.

Before the written word, stories were used not only to educate and enlighten, but also to pass on valuable lessons and information to the next generation. In the late 1800s, Katherine Hankey wrote a song called, "I Love to Tell the Story." Our prayer today is that this would be true for our lives, as well.

ICEBREAKER

What's your favorite story? Is it from a book, a play, a movie, a TV show? What does this story say about you? Are you eager to share it? Why?

What is your favorite story from the Bible? If you don't have a favorite, share one that you remember hearing when you were a child. Why do you like this story, or why has it stuck with you? Does the story, or your reason for remembering it, say anything about you? Are you more or less eager to share this story than the first one? Why?

CONTENT

Saul, a devout Hellenistic Jew and Pharisee from the tribe of Benjamin, goes door to door, persecuting Christians in the name of God. According to Acts 8:3, "Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, [committing] them to prison." No one fought harder against the "the Way" (Christians) than Saul. Saul found them heretical and blasphemous for many reasons, not the least of which was the idea of a crucified Messiah. Impossible! When Stephen proclaimed that the temple was no longer necessary, Saul found it too serious to ignore. He sought their arrest, trial, conviction, punishment, even death.

DISCUSSION Are there viewpoints within Christianity that you find "heretical" or "blasphemous"? Why? Does the story of Saul make you want to re-examine them? Is God hindered when people have conflicting opinions?

Read Acts 9:1-18. Saul's conversion story happens three times in the book of Acts: our reading for today, again in 22:3-21, and in 26:12-18. All three accounts point to the powerful work of God against all odds, the presence of Jesus in Paul's life, and the work of the Holy Spirit. All three times, he tells his story simply and directly, and God used that story – and still does – to impact the lives of others. What a turnaround! The power of God, transforming lives, is an amazing thing.

DISCUSSION How has God transformed your life? Does it matter if your transformation isn't as dramatic as Saul's? Can God change you in small or subtle ways, as well as obvious ways? If someone like Saul can be transformed by God's love, is anyone out of God's reach?



In this section of Acts (8:2 – 12:23), the Jewish Christ-followers are scattering, experiencing a dramatic and terrifying persecution. This is just one example of a part of the God story that can bring you strength and encouragement. These early disciples must have good reason to believe that Jesus Christ is exactly who he says he is, or they wouldn't go through all of this.

DISCUSSION Is there anything in your life that you believe in so strongly that, for its sake, you'd endure the sort of persecution these early Christ-followers face?

We all have a story to tell about what God has done in and through us, but not all of us believe that our story carries God's power. Your life is a canvas upon which God's story is painted for all to see! Get comfortable with your own story; explore your story for a couple of minutes.

Take a blank sheet of paper and draw a horizontal line along the bottom, a few inches up from the edge of the paper. Use it to create a timeline from when you were born until now. Now mark your significant moments along the timeline. Pay attention to joys, struggles and transitions you've been through. If you want, graph them as high and low points of your journey.

DISCUSSION How do you perceive God's presence throughout your timeline? How did you see God at work during the different points of your life?

Reflect on your relationships. God uses relationships as bridges into other peoples' lives, where faith is passed on. Use your timeline to consider the people who have played a part in your life. Do you remember this campfire song?

*It only takes a spark to get a fire going
And soon all those around are warmed up in its glowing.
That's how it is with God's love, once you've experienced it.
You spread his love to everyone,
You want pass it on.*

DISCUSSION Has anyone ever shared a story with you about the presence of God in his or her life? How did that story affect you? Has someone walked alongside you during a significant moment in your life? Are you as eager to share that story as you are to share your favorite book or movie? Why, or why not? Has there been a time when you were a significant presence in someone else's life? Will we always know when this has happened?

GOING DEEPER: 30 SECONDS!

Reflect on God's story. Let's pretend that an alien has come to earth and knows nothing about God or Jesus. This alien turns to you, and asks you to talk about Jesus.

DISCUSSION How would you describe Jesus in 30 seconds or less? Would your first words about Jesus come from your head (historical facts) or your heart (feelings, emotions)? Why?

If you have more than 30 seconds, how do you describe God? Creator, lover, father, spirit, redeemer, mother? Something else?

What do you know about Jesus Christ, and what does Jesus do for you? How would you describe Jesus? Forgiver, healer, teacher, savior, Lord? Something else?

What do you know about God the Holy Spirit? How would you describe the Holy Spirit? Comforter, advocate, living power of God, breath of God? Something else?

Is our faith story shaped primarily by our view of God, and our experience of God? If God has behaved in certain ways in the past, can we expect those patterns to continue into the future?

APPLICATION

We each have a story of faith and life. Some might be dramatic, some might be subtle, but God is working in each of us in different ways. The more we practice telling our story, the more comfortable we'll feel telling it. God wants to use you and your story to help others. When the opportunity arises to share a story of faith from your life, take it. Say a quick, silent prayer, and pass it on.

PRAY TOGETHER

(Take prayer requests.) God, help us to trust that we have a story, and it's connected to your story. Help us to trust that our story has power. Help us to pay attention to the times in our lives when it seems like you are especially present and active, guiding and leading us through what seem like impossible situations. And then, help us to trust you enough to step out in faith and proclaim this story in what we say and what we do. Amen.

