

Changing Experiences of Life!

When my kids were little we had this whole ritual at bedtime. When they became teenagers the ritual changed to one of us yelling, "Turn off the TV and go to bed!" But when they were little we did this whole thing with prayers, songs and, of course - what children always ask for - a story.

I would read from books or make up stories or tell family stories. Sometimes I'd read from the Bible, but you have to be careful with that. Like the story of David and Goliath. I don't know if you remember exactly how it ends, but the verse is "*Then David cut off Goliath's head and claimed victory for the Lord.*" ...Good night sweetheart! Sweet dreams!

Even as adults we like stories. That's why we watch TV, go to the movies or buy books. Everyone loves stories and stories can be meaningful and powerful. So here's one thing I want you to walk out of here with today. I want you to leave with the recognition that you, personally, have a powerful story. You may not recognize the potential influence of it, but you have a story to share and that story can be inspiring to people, simply because it's real and it's yours.

Another thing I want you to walk out of here with is knowing that someone out there needs to hear your story. Someone needs the hope, encouragement, help, healing and direction from God that only your story will communicate. Many of us are sitting on important stories we don't realize are important. People who are hurting, lonely, in trouble or in pain could feel better if someone would share with them. You might not think it's all that big a deal because you live with your story all the time. But God uses people to influence other people.

Since people's stories are so beneficial, it makes you wonder why people don't share them more? There are three reasons I can think of: They're either selfish and don't like to share or they're frightened for some reason or they're unaware their story can make a difference. Regardless of the reason, my hope is you'll leave here challenged to share.

Stories, in general, are very powerful. Jesus used them much more than teaching directly from the scriptures and more than we modern preachers do. If we used that many stories, we'd be criticized! But God knows how to change lives; how to influence, teach and inspire people and Jesus' primary way for doing that was telling stories. Matthew 13:34 says, "*Jesus always used stories and illustrations like these when speaking to the crowds. In fact, he never spoke to them without using such parables.*" Jesus used stories to connect God's kingdom to human experience - stories of ordinary people – fishermen, farmers, tax collectors. Just ordinary folk.

As a human being, God has wired you to respond to stories. God built you that way. Think about how you respond. Why do people cry over things in movies? They know it's not real! They know that even the acting they're seeing happened months or years ago, so it's not even real-time! It's just lights projected on a screen! We're wired to respond to stories and they have a powerful influence. We're wired to respond to heroes and villains, to the flow of the story, the conflict and resolution. That's why people flock to movies like *Star Wars* with stories of good and evil, redemption and forgiveness.

Once you recognize the power of a story the thing to do is discover how to express your story and how you experienced life-change because of God. Take your general feelings and impressions and put specific words to them. Write out your story. My guess is more than ninety percent of us here have never done this. I'm challenging you to write it out. Because when you do it becomes a tool that God can use.

What I'm talking about is your encounter with God, your experience of God's touch, God's presence; how God has changed your life. There are two theological terms for that: Theophany or epiphany. *Epiphany* means "an experience of sudden or striking realization." It's from the Greek, *epiphaneia*, meaning to manifestation or become apparent. Theophany means an appearance of God to humans. If you've had a life-changing encounter with God, and you must have if you've become a believer, then you have a spiritual story – a theophany – that's what I'm asking you to write out.

At funerals, special worship services or conferences, sometimes people end up sharing stories. At Pastor Fred's service, Jerome told a wonderful story about his experiences with Fred. At the Cross Connections banquet a couple weeks ago, the guest speaker was a star of the movie, "War Room." She shared her story of growing up with alcoholic and drug addicted parents and how she came to Christ, and it was powerful. It made her words about caring for young people much more meaningful. Sometimes I'm blown away by people's stories. The depth of them, the pain, the joys, the experiences, the highs, the lows, the life lessons. Sometimes people tell a story and I feel like yelling, "That's a story you have to tell to the world! There's someone hurting who needs a little bit of

hope and your story could give that. They could feel like they're not alone." Your story doesn't need to be incredibly dramatic, but when your story is meaningful, people will want to know the source of your inspiration. That's when you can point them to God.

There are a variety of themes for stories that tend to be both meaningful and let you point people toward God. To begin to get at what you may be able to offer, let's look at stories from the gospels. After all, the Bible is basically a record of people's encounters with God and changed lives! The Gospels, in particular, are filled with these stories.

The first variety of encounters are, **1. Spiritual Experiences** - In John chapter 4 there's a spiritual encounter where Jesus meets a woman at a well. Jesus says, "Go get your husband." She says, "I don't have a husband." He says, "You're right you don't have a husband. You've had five and the one you're living with right now is not your husband." Can you imagine her, this guy knows her life! Talk about an encounter! John 4:28 says, "*The woman left her water jar beside the well and ran back to the village, telling everyone, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did! Could he possibly be the Messiah?'* So the people came streaming from the village to see him." The woman has an experience beyond what she can explain in normal terms. She went into town to tell people and they come to see. She had a spiritual encounter with Jesus and simply shared the story with people in town. She didn't have to understand everything theologically or be a great speaker. Her story worked because it had happened to her. People weren't interested because she was important, but because she was an ordinary person who had an experience beyond their own experience.

You know, people have no hesitation relating their good experiences about most things. You have a good experience at a movie and you tell people about it. More people go to a movie because of word of mouth than any other reason. You have a good experience at a restaurant and you tell people. They rely on good word of mouth. Don't hesitate to share spiritual experiences - they're certainly more important than any movie or restaurant could ever be.

Another type of experience is **2. Healing Experiences**. In John 9 there's a blind guy and Jesus healed him in an unusual way. Here's the story: "*[Jesus] spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and spread the mud over the blind man's eyes. He told him, 'Go wash yourself in the pool of Siloam'. So the man went and washed and came back seeing!*" When Jesus heard what had happened, he found the man and asked, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' The man answered, 'Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him.' 'You have seen him,' Jesus said, 'and he is speaking to you!' 'Yes, Lord, I believe!' the man said. And he worshiped Jesus. Then Jesus told him, 'I entered this world to render judgment - to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind.' Some Pharisees who were standing nearby heard him and asked, 'Are you saying we're blind?' 'If you were blind, you wouldn't be guilty,' Jesus replied. 'But you remain guilty because you claim you can see.'" So this guy had a healing experience that caused him to believe. Can you imagine what that story could accomplish in helping others believe? Notice there were people who didn't like the story; even resented it. But that didn't make it any less important. And even for the people who rejected it, it became an opportunity for God to try to teach something.

Not everyone will accept our stories of faith - even those that seem obvious and dramatic, like this story of healing. That's OK - the healing is still real and the story will be important to someone else, so don't get discouraged.

Beyond that, our stories don't have to be as dramatic as this one. Sure drama has power, but simple stories fit better into conversations and don't seem so overwhelming. People can relate to them. Some people haul out the dramatic story for every occasion when a simpler story is more appropriate. Many stories Jesus told weren't that dramatic, but were right for the situation and stand the test of time - we still hear them.

The next type are, **3. Redeeming Experiences** - In John 8 a woman is caught in the act of adultery. She's brought out in to be condemned and stoned to death. They had rocks ready. And Jesus spoke up. He said, if you've never done anything wrong, you can throw a stone. And it says "*One by one they dropped their rocks and walked away.*" Then it says "*Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, 'Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?'* 'No, Lord,' she said. And Jesus said, 'Neither do I. Go and sin no more.'" The woman's life is redeemed.

Many people have their lives redeemed from something. It may be from a habit, even a truly serious one like alcohol or another drug dependency. Or maybe it's from something you did that Christ has forgiven you for. Maybe it's from an attitude or way of looking at things or way you treated people or how others treated you. Whatever it is, you experienced something in God that freed you from something that was hurting you.

There are a lot of people out there who need to feel that kind of freedom; people struggling with shame, addiction, condemnation or guilt. Your story could help them understand they can experience forgiveness and freedom in their life.

Then there are **4. Growing Experiences** - times when you had insight or inspiration. These are among the most important. They don't have the flare of many spiritual, healing or redeeming experiences, but often accomplish more.

The Gospels are stories of people growing, learning and having new realizations. In stories Jesus told, the Prodigal Son became a story of redemption, but it's main focus was the realization the son had. He learned and grew and that made a difference. It's a story of a growing experience.

There's a story in Luke 10 about a friend of Jesus who treasures these experiences. It says, "*As Jesus and the disciples continued on their way to Jerusalem, they came to a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. Her sister, Mary, sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he taught.*" Mary was a good listener, she wanted to learn. Did that make a difference in her life? Was this a growing experience? John's gospel says, "*This is the Mary who later poured the expensive perfume on the Lord's feet and wiped them with her hair...*" This same woman testified by her actions about how important Jesus was to her.

Probably the best examples of growing experiences are the gospel writers themselves. The stories and words that they wrote down and conveyed record what they found meaningful. Aside from Luke, these weren't scholars and even Luke tells us he collected the stories from ordinary people who experienced what Christ had to say.

Experiences of growth can be exceptionally useful. Our moments of realization can help others to realize what God might have for them as well.

All of these types of experiences can teach us about God's character and point us to God. So let me ask: What's your experience of God? What's it been like? Have you recorded it? Before you share it, it's good to think through the details. When you think it through and share it, what you're doing is honoring God for that life changing experience.

You may be thinking, "Yeah, Rob, but maybe ninety percent of us haven't done that is because our story's a bit boring." Some people's stories are dramatic... some are not some much. A lot of my own story is pretty simple. I've listened to other people's story and thought, "What if I had a story like that? I could really wow people! If I'd taken addictive drugs and been in a gang, then I'd really have a story!"

But I've learned my story doesn't have to be intense to have impact. You don't need an extremely painful past to recognize you were empty without Jesus or live as an atheist for years to understand what doubt is all about. You don't have to murder someone to know what it is like to live with darkness or be kidnapped to know what it's like to live in fear.

So once you've thought through your story, what do you do? I'm going to suggest three things:

1. Listen for Opportunities - Listen for story sharing opportunities. Some of you may be thinking, "Oh, is this the share your faith pitch, the evangelism part?" And maybe this is where you feel guilty because you don't feel comfortable doing that. You think, I can't be an evangelist because the same as being obnoxious. I can't memorize the four happy hops to heaven and go accost complete strangers as they walk out of Wal-Mart. You think, "That's not me. I'm not comfortable with it. I'm not sure I can do it and be effective."

What I'd like you to do is set aside that stereotype for a few minutes. That kind of sharing is the least effective and is something that drives more people away from faith than toward it. Instead of manufacturing situations, I want to encourage you to simply listen for story sharing opportunities. The key word there is "listen." If you listen and care you can make a difference when you share. If you listen and really care about people. I'm not talking about forcing it. If someone says, "What are you doing tonight for dinner?" Don't get all weird and say, "What are you doing after you die?" That's too deep, too fast and too weird. If you're walking your dog and someone says, "Nice dog!" Don't say, "You know 'dog' spelled backwards is God. And he too can be your best friend!"

Don't do that! Just listen to people. In this fast paced culture, someone who actually listens, cares and pays attention is refreshing. Don't force it. Just listen. There's no formula to memorize. It's learning how to sincerely listen and care for people and then you make the most of that opportunity. Colossians 4 says, "*Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity.*" Your job as a follower of Christ is to be sensitive to God's Spirit, to genuinely care for people, to listen for opportunities to plant seeds and then trust God to

do His work. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3, *"I planted the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God who made it grow."* What's your job? Your job is to plant the seed.

You plant the seed, then other people water it with acts of Christian kindness. We all share our stories and water the seeds with Christian acts of kindness and we leave the responsibility of life change to God. We just do our part.

I want to look at a story in Acts. Peter and John are walking to the temple and on their way into the temple there's a beggar. The beggar, the Bible says, has been lame since birth. The beggar asks for money and in Acts 3:6-10, 12 it says, *"Peter said, 'I don't have any silver or gold for you. But I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk!' Then Peter took the lame man by the right hand and helped him up. And as he did, the man's feet and ankles were instantly healed and strengthened. He jumped up, stood on his feet, and began to walk! Then, walking, leaping, and praising God, he went into the Temple with them. All the people saw him walking and heard him praising God. When they realized he was the lame beggar they had seen so often at the Beautiful Gate, they were absolutely astounded! Peter saw his opportunity and addressed the crowd..."* It drew this crowd and everyone stood there in awe of the wonderful thing that had happened. Peter saw his opportunity. What he said in verse 12 and 13 is important, *"...why stare at us as though we had made this man walk by our own power or godliness? For it is the... God of all our ancestors—who has brought glory to his servant Jesus by doing this."* He goes on to describe who Jesus was and what happened and that he rose from the dead. And it says over five thousand people believed that day.

As this is happening the religious leaders got upset with them. They arrest them and put them in jail. The next morning they bring them out and they say, "What are you doing? What are you talking about?" Peter then responded to their question and told them again all about Jesus.

I shared that because I wanted you to notice what Peter and John did at every opportunity. When the moment came they responded. They responded to the beggar. They responded to the crowd that surrounded them. They responded to the religious leaders. They didn't force their way in. They just responded.

I'm not asking you to leave here today and write a list of ten potential converts, have their names silk screened on a shirt and wear it around town and yell out "Hey Billy Bob! You're number four. I'm after you." I'm not asking you to do that.

You listen for opportunities to share. You listen to their story, share your story and shed a little light on God's story.

Also, **2. Deal with Your Fears** - You need to define and defeat your fears. Get them out in the open. When it comes to sharing your story, what makes you afraid? Is it fear of intimidation, embarrassment, judgment, laughter, not knowing all the answers. Fear of rejection is the number one fear people have. I understand that. I fear rejection too, but no one was more rejected than the early disciples. Look at how Peter and John responded. Acts 4 says, *"So they called the apostles back in and commanded them never again to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, 'Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? We cannot stop telling about everything we have seen and heard.'"* They weren't living for a human audience. They were living for God. And what they did is simply tell people about the things they had seen and heard.

What about you? What audience do you live for? Do you live for the approval of people? Or do you live for God? If it's rejection you fear, get that realization out in the open and you're halfway there, because if you stop to think you realize God's opinion and a relationship with God is more important.

Maybe you fear you won't have the answers to questions people have. That's a normal fear. Someone might say, "Hey what is the eschatological natural of human suffering as it pertains to having a sovereign deity while still being rooted in free will?" Ah.... *No hablo english.*

A couple things about a fear of not having answers: First of all, most people won't ask you anything you can't answer, and if they do, there's nothing wrong with saying, I'm not sure how to answer that, I'll have to check it out. If somebody asks you a question about doctrine or theology and you don't know the answer, you can say, "That's a great, great question. I'm going to try to find an answer for it because my guess is in 2000 years of Christianity someone's asked that question before and there's an answer and I'm going to find it.

Second, if what you're sharing is your own story, most people are not going to question your personal story. They may not like it, but it's YOUR story. If it's something great that happened in your life, that's evidence that's hard to dispute.

In Acts 4 the leaders are discussing Peter and John: *"What should we do with these men?" they asked each other. "We can't deny that they have performed a miraculous sign, and everybody in Jerusalem knows about it."* They may not have liked Peter's message about Jesus' resurrection but the lame guy is over there dancing so it's hard to argue with them.

Don't let fear make you sit on your story. There are hurting people who need your experience: people in pain that need to know that they're not alone in this world; people who are lonely and need to hear how you found community in a small group; people who have lived without a relationship with God and need to hear about someone who has a relationship with God that's changed their life; people in darkness who need to hear the story of someone who has found the light.

Then, **3. The Most Important Element Is: Be Prepared** - I'm not talking about having it all together with your life perfect and with a whole plan of salvation memorize to share. One myth is that if you want to help other people or point people to Jesus you have to have it all together. You don't. God uses ordinary people like you and me. As a matter of fact, look at Acts 4:13 *"The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men who had had no special training. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus."* The fact that they had no special training, weren't perfect, were ordinary people actually got them MORE attention and gave them MORE credibility in the situation.

Let me ask you: How many of you can identify with the terms: ordinary, with no special training. Guess what? God uses people like that. What's the difference in Peter and John? It says, they had been with Jesus. I'd love at my funeral for people to say that about me. He was an ordinary guy. But he had been with Jesus.

It's not too late to share your story. Remember that the most important story isn't your story - it's God's story. God's the one who changes lives. Our story points people to God's story. That's why it's important that we not only share our story but we also attempt to live out our story.

In Matthew 5, Jesus says this: *"You are the light of the world – like a city on a mountain, glowing in the night for all to see. Don't hide your light under a basket! Instead, put it on a stand and let it shine for all. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father."* Don't hide your story. Let people hear it. Let them see it in your life. Let's pray.