

INTRODUCTION:

One of the most important elements of any good superhero story, whether it's Superman, Spiderman, Wonder Woman, or the Incredible Hulk, is a good backstory. A backstory tells the history of the person and gives a rounded view of who they were and how they became a "superhero" so that the audience can understand how and why they do what they do today. Their background, experience, and history directly affect their mission.

Batman's parents were murdered by criminals in Gotham, prompting him to crusade for justice and clean up the city. Because of his wealth, he's able to make cool weapons, gadgets, and vehicles to help him fight crime. Because of his pain, he has an especial drive to make sure that others don't need to experience what he did. Because of his connections as a wealthy Gotham socialite, he's able to make connections with politicians, the police departments, and other important persons to get insight into the workings of the city, both good and bad. Because of his position as CEO of Wayne Enterprises, he can also rub elbows with businessmen, board members, and those in his company's employ. Ultimately his background, his profession, his cultural and

social status, and his internal drive to fight crime motivate is mission as a superhero.

Each of us has a backstory. We come from a certain place and have been given a certain heritage from our families, and our past experiences directly affect the way that we live in the present. Our experiences and the way that we view and react to our experiences can have both positive and negative consequences. For example, let's say that you grew up in a household where money was really tight, and your family tended to live paycheck to paycheck. How might these experiences as a child impact the way that you live now as an adult. For some, this might have instilled a constant fear about the loss of money and an urgency to spend it when you get it, so whenever extra money does happen to come in it goes out just as quickly, because you have the experience of never really knowing when there would be money, so why waste an opportunity to use it when it's there? For others, you may have determined that since you grew up in a cash-poor household, you didn't want to live your whole life that way. So once you had a job and were able, you decided to voraciously save all of your money, so that you would never have to feel want again. Two different persons, same backstory, and two very different outcomes. Our experiences shape who we are.

It is the same way, then, when it comes to serving as faithful followers of Jesus. Our backstories inform how we serve, what areas we serve in, why we serve, and to whom we serve. This morning I want to challenge and encourage all of you to search your own experiences and discover how they, in their entirety, including both the good parts and the not-so-good parts, can be formative and informative to your service to others as a Christian.

Biblical Context: The Bible is full of examples of people who embrace their experience and background, both the good of it and the bad of it, as a catalyst for serving others and serving God. Moses, being raised Egyptian and being given immense power, discovered his Hebrew roots and lived into that backstory by leading God's charge to rescue the Israelites out of slavery from the hands of the Egyptians. Daniel, an Israelite held in captivity by the pagan Babylonians, stayed true to his religious views on diet and transformed the health of those serving in the kingdom when they realized that what he was eating made him stronger than what they were eating, so they switched over to a Hebrew eating plan. In Matthew chapter 1, the gospel writer gives the genealogy of Jesus, including several women in the Old Testament who were either oppressed or would've been looked down upon by the elite in their culture: Tamar was the half-sister of Judah and had experienced a

terrible rape, Rahab was a pagan prostitute who helped save Israelite spies from men in the city who wanted to kill them, and Ruth was a foreigner living amongst the Israelite people who married into the Jewish tribe. I wonder if God chose those women to be a part of Jesus' family tree to inform the direction of Jesus' ministry and serve as examples of where God's heart lay?

Transition to Paul: This morning we are going to take a closer look at the life of the Apostle Paul and specifically how his background and experience contributed to his serving God, and as we do so I want you to consider how, in each of the areas we discuss, how your own background and experience might add value to the current way you are serving God or how they might compel you to serve God in new and different ways.

1) Serving From our Backgrounds: First, let's consider what it means to serve from our backgrounds.

So what was Paul's backstory, and how did he use it to serve God? Let's take a look at Paul's speech in Acts 22 and think about how different parts of his backstory inform his Apostolic ministry.

Acts 22:1-29

¹ *"Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense."* ² *When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became*

very quiet. Then Paul said: ³ “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today.”⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison,⁵ as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

- What does Paul say about his backstory in this passage that would help his audience relate to him and his story as well as help us to see the motivation for and direction of his ministry?
 - First, he speaks Aramaic, which would have been the common tongue at the time. It was the language of the people. Paul was an incredibly well-educated man but chose to speak in the local dialect to relate to the people there. Imagine if I started talking about “soda,” “sneakers,” and “Buffalo Wild Wings,” instead of “pop,” “tennis shoes,” and “B-Dubs,” you would know I’m probably not from around these parts. Or if somebody yelled out “OH” and I just looked confused about how to respond (obviously it’s

- “IO”), then you’d know I wasn’t an Ohioan. Paul, first and foremost by his very language, wanted to show the people that he was one of them.
- Secondly, Paul acknowledges that he was born in Tarsus, part of Rome and far away from Israel’s capital and culture, but that he was raised in Jerusalem and therefore had an understanding of and claim on the city.
 - Third Paul is a Jew. To be a Jew was to be counted a part of God’s chosen people. The Jewish people who were stirring up a riot to arrest Paul could, at the very least, hear that he was one of them.
 - Fourth, he was trained in the law under one of the premiere rabbis of that day. Paul was no fool, nor was he half committed to the faith or unfamiliar with the law. He would have been extremely knowledgeable to the law, which to them was the first five books of the Old Testament, so anything he might say in regards to it could be substantiated by his education. This is important to us today. We want to know that we can trust our source of information, that what is being said is credible. If I want to know why my car is making a funny noise, I’ll bring it to Sam. If I want to know if a certain plant is

poisonous, I'll ask Harmon. If I want to know anything about Fortnight, I'll ask Caleb or DJ or Roberta. If you don't know what that is, go ahead and ask them, because I'm the wrong person to ask. Specific knowledge was important then as it is today.

- Fifth, Paul not only was a Jewish Pharisee trained in the law, but he was enthusiastic about persecuting Christians. What would this say to those listening to him, especially those who were seriously against the Christian movement? It would say that Paul was one of them, and it would imply then that as such something serious must have happened to convert him not only away from zealous persecution of the faith but into zealous following of the faith. I'm not a big fan of rollercoasters, but over the years I've managed to get over my fears and ride bigger and bigger coasters. And for me, it's not adrenaline junkies who've never had a problem with heights that can get me to try a new one; it's those people who were scared of rollercoasters, or are still timid about them, who can better understand where I'm coming from, that can ultimately convince me to try something that I'm generally hesitant to do.

Paul very freely uses his background and experiences in the way that he serves, whether it's his Roman heritage while talking to the Roman non-Christian persons at the Areopagus in Acts 17, or writing to Jewish-Christians struggling with living as new believers while also retaining the important parts of their Jewish heritage. He writes in **1 Corinthians 9:19-23** that he leans into who he was in order to be who he is to reach others in different places in life for God.

¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

1) Serving From Our Pain: Second, let's consider what it means to serve from our pain.

What Whitman wrote in his poem “Song of the Open Road”: “Through the laughter, dancing, dining, supping of people, Inside of dresses and ornaments, inside of those wash’d and trimm’d faces, Behold a secret silent loathing and despair.” We all have secret pain, from present or past situations, that we carry around with us. For many, this can be a burden that holds us back from being the most whole persons we can be. For Paul, rather than avoid, keep silent, or run from that pain, he uses it for the benefit of the kingdom of God.

Shortly after Paul’s speech in Acts 22, he is arrested and put in chains. At this point, he could’ve given up, accepted his fate, and felt convinced that God had given up on him. Instead, he chooses to minister from this place, and he writes the letter to the church at Philippi uses his bad experience to encourage their faith and service.

Philippians 1:12-14

¹² Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ And because of my chains, most of

the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

Paul uses his place in prison to share the Gospel with the guards, so that good news of Jesus Christ went into a place that it might not have otherwise.

Then, In **2 Corinthians 1:3-4**, Paul reminds the church that if we are open to it, God will reach out and comfort us in our dark places. Because of that, then, we can comfort others.

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

Sometimes bad thing happen, even when we are doing good. And sometimes bad things happen and we deserve the consequences. The truth is, that everyone has difficult experiences. Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:45 that “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

The question for us, then, is how will we respond or react to these painful experiences? In the book of Genesis, Joseph, the youngest of 11 brothers at the time, was sold into slavery because of their jealousy of him. And yet, because of that he rose in the ranks of Egypt, eventually saving the nation and his family from a bad famine. And his response to the evil that was done to him was captured in **Genesis 50:20**: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

We can sit with our pain, determine that nothing will ever go right for us and the world is out to get us, or we can say like Joseph that what was meant to hurt us God can use for some good. Our painful experiences can give us motivation to help others who are also enduring pain, or motivation to change the world around us so that others don't have to experience the same difficulties we are going through.

What painful experiences could God use through us to minister to others?

Think about your own life? What are those memories, times, occasions that you struggle with the most? job

loss, cancer, death of a parent, financial troubles, physical health/illness, mental illness, trouble with our children, divorce, trauma, crisis; if we can see clearly how God has brought us through those situations, or how God is currently working in those situations, or how God sustains us in those situations, then we have a testimony of hope that we are obligated to share with others.

The wise prophet Rafiki says in the movie “The Lion King”: “Ah, yes, the past can hurt. But the way I see it, you can either run from it...or learn from it.” How can we learn from our past pain and allow God to use that for the service of His kingdom?

Conclusion:

We can see through Paul life and story how God used his background to relate to many different people around him and his pain in order to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with those he might not have ran into otherwise.

So I said at the beginning that I was going to challenge you to search your own experiences and discover how they, in their entirety, including both the good parts and the not-so-good parts, can be formative and informative to your service to others as a Christian. Are you living

into your own backstory, where you are from, who your people are, what your job is, what your interests, skills, hobbies, and education is, to share the good news with your friends, family, neighbors, and community? If you're a farmer, have you related how God has shaped and changed you to your farmer friends at the Liberty Gathering Place on Saturday mornings? If you're a teacher, do the other teachers on your hall know about the hope you've found in Jesus Christ? If you love sports, do the people you sit beside at Tiger football games or at B-Dubs during an Ohio State game, experience the love of Christ through your actions and words?

Additionally, have you allowed God to redeem those painful places in your life in such a way that you can be a shoulder of support and an arm of comfort to others around you? Have you allowed God to work in you during the hard times so that he can work THROUGH you to others experiencing the same things?

We are all called to serve God with our backstories. So what's your particular mission going to be?