

GOD'S STORY AND PAUL'S STORY

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I stand here on trial on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors.

SESSION PREPARATION

OVERVIEW

Paul, originally known as Saul, came from Tarsus, a busy city on the northeast shore of the Mediterranean. Growing up in a busy port city, he learned language skills, a good trade, and the Jewish faith of his people. In this session we'll see how Paul's early life prepares him for the missionary journeys he takes after coming to trust in Jesus as God's Messiah.

Scenes in This Session

A Roman Citizen (Acts 22:1-5)

A Faithful Jew (Philippians 3:4b-6; Acts 24:14-15)

Eager to Learn and Serve (Acts 22:3; 26:4-5)

Promises, Promises (Acts 26:6)

What's the Story?

Paul's story comes to light in bits and pieces in the New Testament. Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, gives us lots of information but puts his story together many years after Paul's death (which he does not mention!). Like most storytellers, Luke heightens the drama of the story as he writes, perhaps adding details here and there for just the right emphasis. Paul himself says little about his life. He writes letters to communities of believers, with a wide variety of issues on his agenda—different ones for each community. As his own experience seems pertinent, he mentions it to strengthen his points and convictions. Neither Luke nor Paul tries to write an objective and complete story of Paul's life.

Materials for this session available on the Leader Reference CD:

- Bible History Timeline (CHART)
- The Early Church and Key Locations in Acts (MAP)

STORY KEYS

- Paul grew up in a sophisticated city, speaking at least Greek very well.
- Paul was born and raised as a Jew and was educated in his faith.
- Paul was deeply immersed in Scripture (our Old Testament).
- Paul put strong hope and trust in God's promises for a future of peace for the world.

To develop our picture of Paul's story in this course, then, we will take all we can learn from Luke and Paul, and put that together with all we can know about the ancient world and its peoples, beliefs, and customs. All this is not only part of Paul's story but part of God's great story of love for all people and all creation.

What's the Message?

In the story of Paul's life, we confront two realities that seem to be at odds, yet both are true. On one hand, Paul was a man happy with his faith and unlikely to change. From his love of God, devotion to being part of God's people, and his hope for God's new world to arrive some day, we see that he was a devoted Jew. He had everything he needed for a productive life: citizenship, a good trade, a strong community, and deep faith. He was at home with God and the world.

On the other hand, when God calls Paul, his faith and formerly predictable life change in ways he never would have foreseen. Instead of living a satisfying and settled Jewish life, Paul is sent on a constant journey around the Mediterranean. His citizenship, trade, language skills, and deep faith make him just the person to carry the good news that God's future now includes Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles).

God often surprises people and uses their strengths to unsettle them and bring changes into the world. For example, Moses grew up in the Egyptian pharaoh's household. God later called him to speak to the pharaoh and lead the people out of Egypt. God called Mary, a young woman of faith, to be the mother of Jesus. It is hard to hear or read stories of people like Paul, Moses, and Mary without wondering how God might now be surprising and using us.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Extra study Bibles
- Participant books
- Computer or DVD player; projector and screen or TV monitor
- Course DVD
- Reference materials
- Creative Corner materials (optional)
- Name tags
- Refreshments (optional)

PREPARE

1. Review chapter 1 in the participant book.
2. Review the Overview and Session Plan for session 1 in the leader guide.
3. Watch the DVD segment for session 1.
4. Have equipment for projecting or viewing the DVD set up and ready to go.
5. Consider distributing handouts or projecting images of reference materials (see list on p. 21) in the session. You might want to do this during Telling the Story or while discussing the Background Files.
6. If you are having the group do the Creative Corner activity, gather any materials suggested.

7. Pray for the members of your group and for God's presence and guidance as you gather in God's Word.

LEADER PRAYER

God of surprises, be with me and prepare me to lead this first session. Prepare the hearts and minds of participants to be open and receptive to Paul's story and your story of love for all people and all creation. Amen.

CORE SESSION PLAN

GATHERING (10 MINUTES)

Welcome and Check-In

Provide name tags as you welcome participants to the session. If you are serving refreshments, have them set out ahead of time. Consider having participants briefly share their names and their responses to this question: What is your favorite story? (There are no "right" answers to this. Favorite stories might be from a children's book, novel, movie, the Bible, and so on.) Before you begin, let the group know that it is always okay to "pass" on personal sharing.

Scripture and Prayer

Begin your first time together with the greeting Paul uses in many of his letters to groups of believers: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Invite the group to join you in prayer:

Gracious God, today we begin a journey into the life of Paul and into your great story of love for us and all creation. Be with us in every step and draw us closer to you and to one another as we travel, in Jesus' name. Amen.

TELLING THE STORY (15 MINUTES)

You or your designated storyteller should now turn to telling the portion of the story that is highlighted in session 1. You may want to incorporate Background Files (participant book, p. 10), Leader Reference CD material (p. 21), and/or Story Keys (p. 21).

The Core Session Plan is designed for use in one 60-minute period. The Core Session Plan can be extended 45–60 minutes by incorporating the group-reflection time called Our Story, found at the end of the Core Session Plan. Suggestions for alternative settings and schedules are provided on page 13 of this guide.

See the storytelling tips on page 10 of this guide.

Use one of the following three options for telling the story, or devise your own.

1. Summarize and comment on the story as provided in the participant book.
2. Retell the story in your own words.
3. Post or project a large map of the Roman Empire so everyone can see it, and tell about Paul's birthplace in Tarsus, his work with canvas, Roman citizenship, background in the Jewish faith, and additional study in Jerusalem.

Story Theme Activity

In addition to or in place of the storytelling options above, consider using the following activity to introduce the key themes of the story.

On the wall in your meeting space, post five large sheets of paper, each with one part of Paul's "resumé":

- Citizenship: Roman
- Background: Born and raised a Jew in Tarsus; further Scripture study in Jerusalem
- Experience: Working in canvas
- Languages: Greek and Hebrew
- Interests: Serving the one true God

Distribute small red and green tabs or sticky notes to participants. Have participants place the red slips near anything in Paul's resumé that might raise a red flag for a Jew or for a Roman official. With the green slips, have participants mark anything that might make it easier for Paul to travel around the Mediterranean Sea. (If your group is large, form smaller groups for this. Have each group discuss Paul's resumé, and select one person to place the red and green tabs or sticky notes.) Discuss the results together.

PICTURING THE STORY (20 MINUTES)

Briefly introduce the reflection questions listed in this section in the participant book (p. 10). Then play the segment called God's Story and Paul's Story (session 1) on the course DVD. Encourage participants to watch the story unfold as artist Joe Castillo depicts it. Participants may be invited to write down their own questions.

When the segment is done, address the questions together, or form smaller groups for discussion. Invite participants to share their own questions or observations. What difference did it make to see the story in this way?

SINGING THE STORY (10 MINUTES)

In the early part of his life, Paul was waiting for God to keep promises made to the people of Israel. Later he would travel around the Mediterranean sharing the news that God kept those promises through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” shows the longing of waiting and the joy of promises fulfilled. Sing or pray the words of this song together.

LOOKING AHEAD (5 MINUTES)

Mark It

Encourage participants to read and mark one or more of the passages listed in this section during the week ahead. Let the group know that at the start of next week’s session you will ask volunteers to share insights they have from this exercise.

You are encouraged to do the “Mark It” exercise as well.

Next Time

You and your group are encouraged to use the suggested readings listed in the participant book to prepare for session 2 and to review session 1.

You may find it helpful to take some notes or highlight items in the readings to share next week as part of Telling the Story.

OUR STORY

WELCOME

Whether done consecutively along with the Core Session Plan or planned for a separate time or location, consider providing hospitality in the form of refreshments.

Ideas for optional settings and schedules for this time are provided in the introduction on page 13 of this leader guide.

- Arrange the room comfortably for small-group discussion.
- Introduce newcomers.
- Begin with prayer, using the session prayer on page 23 or another prayer of your choice. Ask volunteers to provide prayers if they feel comfortable doing so.
- You may wish to begin by asking if anyone has a particular question or thought to share from the large-group session. As an alternative to discussing those questions, simply note them or write them down on newsprint. Small groups may decide to discuss further.

See the tips for leading and participating in small-group discussion on page 17 of this guide. Make available to all participants copies of the reproducible Guidelines for Small-Group Discussion.

CONVERSATION

The reflection questions are intended to help participants connect their own stories to the key themes of the greatest story. These questions do not require a certain amount of prior knowledge in order to respond. They can be used for personal reflection while reading or used to guide group discussion. It is unlikely a group could discuss all the questions in one discussion period. Don't be concerned about this. Here are some options for approaching the questions:

1. As leader, you may choose to focus on certain questions from the list.
2. Ask participants to suggest questions to discuss.
3. Divide the groups into smaller teams, assign the teams a designated number of questions to discuss, and then have each group report back to the large group.
4. If you have a group that has the time and interest, you could assign each participant a question or two to think about and prepare a response during the week. These responses could be shared as discussion starters when the group meets for Our Story discussion time.

Note that responses to many questions will vary according to individual insights and context. Even so, a few guiding thoughts are provided below for some of the questions.

Questions and Responses

- *How would you describe yourself in a conversation with a stranger? What does this say about what is important to you?*
- *How has your birthplace or hometown contributed to your becoming the person you are?*
- *What conflicts, if any, do you experience between being a person of faith and living in a particular area? What conflicts might others experience?*

Your group might reflect on refugee communities whose faith seems at odds with the dominant faith in their host country, or on Amish communities, who practice their faith without accepting the surrounding culture.

Questions and Responses (continued)

- *As a young person, what did you want to be when you “grew up”? How does that compare with your life now?*
- *Paul studied Scripture and his faith deeply and carefully. What have you studied in this way, and why did you do this?*
- *Where did you begin to learn about God? What do you remember most about this?*
- *What do you think God’s new age might be like? What kinds of images come to mind for you?*

Is it easy for your group to come up with images of an end time? If so, what are they? If not, what does this say about our expectations for the future? Consider asking the group to describe some end-time images from the media, including video games, TV, movies, and novels.

Creative Corner

Depending on how your schedule is organized, you may wish to assign this activity for individuals or small groups.

The first option for this session requires less time than the second, so plan accordingly. Whichever activity you choose, consider adding to it throughout the course.

Create a map of the Mediterranean world. Start with a large printout of an existing map (see *The Greatest Story Reference CD* or online sources of maps). Circle some of the cities Paul visits and other significant places in his life. Ask for a couple of volunteers to do an online search and bring in photos of some of the remains from cities Paul visited (Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, Galatia, and Rome) to add to the map.

Create a timeline with three parallel lines to show Paul’s life and related events. Have participants form three small groups. Ask the first group to find some major dates for world events between 4 and 100 c.e. (Common Era), the second group to look for approximate dates of major events in Jesus’ life, and the third group to fill in some dates in Paul’s life. Refer to the Bible History Timeline on *The Greatest Story Reference CD* as needed.

Provide study Bibles, large sheets of paper, colored markers, reference books, or other materials that may be used to complete this creative assignment.