

The Message, the Method, and the Madness (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

A. Remember, Paul is now in Jerusalem . . .

1. And the city has come out against him particularly because of his association with and teaching regarding the Gentiles.
2. The Jews were set in an uproar, so much so that the Roman authorities had to get involved—attempting to quell the violence and reestablish some semblance of peace.
3. They quickly realize, however, that the only way they’re going to have a chance at that is if they get Paul out and away from the angry throng and back into their barracks, the headquarters of the Roman troops there in Jerusalem.

B. So that’s where they’re carrying Paul. But, just before he’s about to go in, he requests permission to turn back and address the crowd. And that’s where we pick it up in [Acts 22:1](#) . . .

¹ “Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.” ² And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said: ³ “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. ⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, ⁵ as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶ “As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. ⁷ And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ ⁸ And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’ ⁹ Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. ¹⁰ And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.’ ¹¹ And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.

¹² “And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³ came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. ¹⁴ And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; ¹⁵ for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

¹⁷ “When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸ and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your

testimony about me.’¹⁹ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you.’²⁰ And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.’²¹ And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

²² Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.” (Acts 22:1-22)

Two Weeks

A. We’re going to look at this text this week and next, expanding the boundary a little more next time, going all the way down to [v. 29](#).

1. And we’re going to consider three things in particular: (1) The Message—what is it that Paul says?; (2) The Method—how does he say it, how does he go about trying to get his message across to these folks?; and (3) The Madness—how does the crowd respond?

B. This week we’re only going to look at the first part of this: The Message.

1. As Paul is sharing his testimony here he’s really sharing the gospel with this antagonistic Jewish crowd. But what exactly is his message?
 - a. I think if you look closely you’ll see we can really divide it up into two main movements: (1) Law; and (2) Grace. So those will be our two main headings for this morning.

Movement #1: Law

The Resumé Mentality

A. I’m assuming most of us have had to write out a resumé at one point or another, when we’re looking for work, or changing jobs.

1. It’s a bit of a strange process. We’re essentially trying to list all the reasons why we think they should choose us over the “other guy/gal” who may also be applying.

- a. Here’s why we think we have what it takes. Here’s why we’re better. Here’s why we’re worth it.
- b. I’ve trained here. I’ve trained there. I’ve done this. I’ve done that.

- i. Clearly I’m the person for the job. Pick me.

2. As weird as this may feel, it’s understandable that we’d have to do something like this when applying for jobs and things. Our potential employers have every right to know who they’re hiring and what they’re getting into. It makes sense.

B. But the problem is: we can take this same “resumé mentality” with us into our relationship with God. We start thinking that this is how we get noticed by him, loved by him, saved by him.

1. This throng of Jews surrounding Paul here clearly have fallen into this idea.
2. And Paul, in the opening of his address to them, makes it plain: he was once right there with them—building out his resumé, thinking that is what made him something special in the eyes of YHWH, that’s what proved his worth, got him right.

Paul’s List

A. So he gives us a bit of his list here in [Acts 22:3-5](#), did you notice?

B. Item #1: “[I am a Jew . . .](#)” (v. 3).

1. That’s a great place to start. I’m not a Gentile. I’m not one of those dogs or pigs out there. I’m one of God’s chosen people, right from the start.
 - a. You remember from a couple weeks ago, this was the essential issue these Jews had with Paul when he came in talking about the gospel for the Gentiles.
 - i. If they are going to be made right with God, they have to first become Jews.
 - ii. You’re saying they can remain Gentiles and get right with God thru faith in Jesus alone?
 - (1) That’s an offense to our people, our law, our place (cf. [Acts 21:28](#))—and, ultimately, to our God.
 - b. So Paul starts off here. I used to think just like you. That was the first item on my resumé: “[I am a Jew](#)”—not one of those inferior “others.”
2. I wonder: do you have something similar with your resumé? Here’s how I know I’m better: look at the family I come from, look at the network I’m a part of, look at the circle I run in . . . I’m not like “them.”

C. But Paul continues—Item #2: I was “[born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city . . .](#)” (v. 3).

1. Even though I was born elsewhere, my family quickly made our way back to this holy city, Jerusalem, and this is where I was raised. This was home.
 - a. I wasn’t out there with the Jews in the Diaspora, among the Gentile nations.
 - b. I was right here in the motherland, the promised land.
 - i. It was a point of pride, of course. It marked him off as a Jew of Jews. It was another notch on his belt, another line on his resumé.
2. I would imagine living here in Silicon Valley could be a point of pride for many of us. After all, it’s the “tech mecca” of the world.
 - a. So you have these online meetings with others in your company—they’re sprawled all over the globe, but you’re here in the motherland.

- i. You're at the center of the action. You're something special. You're in Jerusalem. Put that on your resumé.

- D. But Paul goes on—Item #3: I was “educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers . . .” (v. 3).
 - 1. Gamaliel was a Pharisee, “a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people,” Luke tells us in Acts 5:34. He was a famous Jewish scholar, the most prominent rabbi of his day.
 - a. So it was quite a mark to have been educated by him. It really set Paul apart as someone to look at.

 - 2. Don't we do this? Where did you go to school?
 - a. Oh community college, I'm sorry. I went to Stanford.
 - b. You did some public UC or CSU school, I went to an Ivy League, educated at the feet of our culture's most brilliant minds.
 - i. So what does that say about me?

- E. But Paul's still going—Item #4: I was so “zealous for God as all of you are this day” (v. 3).
 - 1. I was passionate about God and his law. I assumed my “stellar” performance in matters of the law would commend me to him.
 - a. But how do you measure this zeal? How do you prove just how zealous you are for God? Well, that's where Paul goes next in his list . . .

- F. Item #5: “I persecuted this Way to the death . . .” (v. 4).
 - 1. For Paul, his persecution of Christians wasn't a mark against him, it was evidence of his devotion to and zeal for God.
 - a. He saw the followers of this little errant sect as blasphemers.
 - b. And he likely saw himself as someone like Phinehas in the OT (Num. 25). Do you remember the story? It's brutal.
 - i. There was compromise in the camp, and everyone was suffering under the judgment of God for it.
 - ii. But Phinehas, in his zeal for God, sees some of this compromise going on, and he pursues the people and runs a stake right through them. And the plague was averted.
 - (1) And he was not reprimanded by God for it, but commended.
 - (2) So Paul is thinking: that's me!

The Law as Ladder

- A. I wonder: Do you have a list?
1. Are you trying to build out your resumé—to catch the attention of God (or others); to prove you're good, right, smart, holy, worthy?
 2. Do you use the Law like Paul once did? Like a set of rungs in a ladder that you've got to climb up bit-by-bit to get right with God?
 - a. The ten commandments, okay, they're like ten rungs, here we go: "You shall have no other gods" . . . "don't murder" . . . "don't cheat" . . . "don't steal" . . . "don't lie" . . . "don't covet."
- B. Let me tell you, if you approach God like this, if you use the Law like this, like some ladder you need to make your way up to prove you're good—ironically, it will only make you worse.
1. You'll be thinking you're getting all cleaned up and holy (and maybe you are a little prettier on the outside)
 2. —but on the inside you'll be making an even bigger mess.
- C. You know, it's funny, I have one of those old-school Roombas, the type where they don't have any real direction-control, they just bump around the room and you hope maybe, if you let it bump around long enough it will find some dirt to vacuum up.
1. Sometimes it works.
 2. But other times it makes it worse.
 - a. In fact, just the other day I let it loose in the house to do its thing. And when I came back, I was thinking the floor would be a little cleaner.
 - b. Instead, I found that it had bumped its way back to my bedroom and there was one of those electric pencil sharpeners on the ground, with its canister filled to the brim with old shavings. And my trusty Roomba had bumped that thing right off the stair in our room. Out goes the canister, and out goes all the shavings. Then of course the Roomba just bumps somewhere else and gets stuck and it's done.
 - i. It's supposed to be cleaning things. It just made a bigger mess.
 - ii. So I had to get a real vacuum to clean up the mess this robot vacuum made.
- D. When we try to use the law of God as a means of justifying ourselves before him, this is what happens with us.
1. We think we're getting all clean,
 2. when really we're just knocking stuff over onto the carpet of our souls—making a bigger mess that Jesus is going to have to come in later and clean up.
- E. This is why, in the Gospels, I'm sure you've noticed it, Jesus is always locking horns with the people we'd least expect.

1. We'd think he'd come in hottest when he's calling out the red-letter sinners, you know—the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the people who seem to have scorned God and his law.
2. But that's not what we see, is it? No. Instead, he gets most worked up with the religious people—with the scribes and the Pharisees, and people like that—the people who are trusting in their own righteousness to curry favor with God.
 - a. Those are the people who get Jesus all fired up. Why?
 - i. Because they've got the law all wrong.

The Law as Muzzle

- A. The law was not meant to be a ladder for us to show off our muscles, it was meant to be a muzzle to shut up our mouths—to silence us before a holy God . . . so we come out at the end of it saying: “I can't do it, I can't get there. I need you!”
- B. That's what Paul says in [Rom. 3](#): “¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (vv. 19-20).
 1. The law was brought in by God through Moses not to heal my sin, but to reveal it; not to give me a ground for boasting, but to shut my mouth once and for all.
 2. It's not a ladder for my muscle but a muzzle for my mouth.
- C. But here's what happens . . .
 1. If you're approaching the law like a ladder, it's really discouraging when you don't measure up to God and his standards, when you fall short. That's hard on your ego.
 2. So instead of facing that and letting the law have its intended effect on your soul, do you know what you start to do?
 - a. You start comparing yourself to those who are trying to climb alongside you.
 - b. You can feel a little better about yourself then, because there's always someone a little further down beneath you, someone a little worse off.
- D. You start looking at the people climbing next to you instead of the God you're supposedly climbing towards.
 1. The law is supposed to show us this vast gulf that extends between us and God, that we're not going to be enough, not going to have enough, our resumé isn't impressive. We fall far short.
 2. But instead of letting this land on us, we prefer to take comfort in the fact that at least we're better than that guy or that girl, still a few rungs down, or maybe way back at the beginning. They keep falling, they keep stumbling. Look at us up here.

- a. We congratulate ourselves with this horizontal comparison,
 - b. when really the whole point of the law is to push us vertical and confront us with the holiness and the righteousness of God.
- E. As a result of all this, we no longer see ourselves rightly because, ironically, we no longer see God rightly.
 - 1. I say “ironically,” because that’s supposedly what we’re doing with all this law-keeping—running hard after God. Like Paul.
 - 2. But really we’re just making a mess. We’re becoming less like God even as we’re claiming to be more. We’re blind to who we really are and who he really is.

A Glorious Confrontation

- A. When your kids aren’t getting along, when you can hear them all fighting and arguing down the hall—sometimes the best thing Daddy can do is just throw open the door and put everyone back in their place.
 - 1. “Hey, let go of your sister’s hair, put down that nerf gun, drop the light saber, where did you get that bag of chocolate—it’s 10 in the morning, man, no wonder you’re acting like a pack of hyenas, give me that.”
 - a. You’ve just got to come in and get things back in order.
- B. That’s what Jesus does here with Paul. That’s what the Damascus road is all about. It’s as if Jesus just goes nuclear option. I love it.
 - 1. It was “[about noon](#)” Paul tells us in [v. 6](#)—the time when the sun would be highest in the sky, at full strength.
 - 2. And yet the glory of Jesus unveiled in that moment made the glory of the sun look something like a lighting bug before a lightning bolt, like a candle before a conflagration!
 - a. So he falls to the ground. He is literally knocked off his high horse.
 - b. And reality confronts him. “You, Lord, are holy and righteous. And I am not. I’m a sinner. And I’ve been blind.”
- C. Sometimes God has to strike us blind to help us see.
 - 1. That’s what he does with Paul here.
 - 2. I remember that’s what he did with my own story.
 - a. I think I’m awesome. I think I can do whatever I put my mind to. I don’t need God.
 - b. Then he puts my face in the dirt. It all goes wrong. I realize, I don’t got it. I can’t do it. I need help from outside.
 - i. I need grace. You need grace. We need grace . . .

Movement #2: Grace

The Call of Grace

- A. What is Jesus after with this Damascus confrontation?
1. Well, I'll tell you one thing: it wasn't to condemn Paul;
 2. it was to save him.
- B. One of the ways this comes out here is in how Jesus addresses Paul. Did you notice? He says his name twice there: *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"* (v. 7). Grammatically, it's called a double vocative, and, in the Scriptures, it's a common way of expressing more intense emotion.
1. In other words, Jesus' heart is involved in this. There's affection. There's compassion. He's not so much scolding Paul as much as he's calling out to him.
 - a. You might think of how he wept over Jerusalem just days before he was to face the agony of the cross: *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"* (Matt. 23:37).
 2. Don't you see? There's tenderness in his voice. There's a warmth. A longing: *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"* (v. 7). "I don't want it to be this way any longer!"
 - a. His heart is gushing with affection for this man who had breathing out threats and murder against him. It's astounding.
- C. But I do have to wonder if Jesus might be calling like this over some of us here today. "Why are you going there? Why are you doing that? Why are you resisting? Why are you running? Why are you acting like you're going to find your joy and satisfaction in all this other stuff, when I'm right here?!"

Three Effects

- A. It's the call of grace. And this grace extended to and received by Paul here has at least three effects on him . . .

Effect #1: He Sees the Righteous One

- A. As Paul recounts, Ananias comes a few days later and says to him there in v. 14: *"The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One . . ."*
1. That's the fundamental point in all of this: that you stop thinking of yourself as so righteous and you come to see *"the Righteous One"* (cf. Acts 3:14; 7:52)—the only one who has ever truly been righteous according to the strict standards of God's holy law. He's him.
- B. Listen to how Paul talks about this shift that took place for him before and then after his conversion there on Damascus road in Phil. 3:4-9:

1. “⁴If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. [Sounds a lot like another resumé, right? But here comes the shift . . .]”⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith”
 - a. I thought I was righteous, but then I saw “the Righteous One”—and I realized, all this stuff is as good as trash.
 - i. How foolish of me to think that my resumé could ever commend me to a holy God. Oh sure, it may look impressive to other men. But not to him.
 - ii. No. There is only one resumé that could commend me to God and it’s not mine, it’s Christ’s!
 - b. I want to know Christ. I want to gain Christ. I want to be found in Christ.
 - i. I want that righteousness that comes, not by my own works of the law, but by grace through faith in him!
- C. I wonder: have you likewise caught sight of the Righteous One, given up on your own resumé, and laid hold of his by faith? Or are you still trying to climb that ladder?
- D. But there is more . . .

Effect #2: He Washes Away His Sins

- A. Notice what Ananias says to him down in v. 16: “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.”
 1. If you had told Paul he needed to do this prior to Damascus he would have likely spit in your face.
 - a. He doesn’t need to be washed, he’s as clean as they come.
 - b. He doesn’t need to call on the name of Jesus for help.
 - i. He’s doing just fine climbing the rungs of that ladder.
 2. But after Damascus, I imagine he couldn’t have gotten to the baptismal waters fast enough. It’s good news.
 - a. He knows, his sin runs deeper than his skin.

- i. He may be clean on the outside, but there's a whole root system of pride and depravity on the inside.
 - ii. The light exposed it. There are stains in the carpet of his heart he can't get out. He needs to be washed. He knows nothing short of the blood of Jesus can do it.
 - b. So, yeah, he's ready to call on his name!
- B. I wonder if you have any of that in your heart? Stains. Filth that no soap or scrub can get at.
 - 1. You ever feel like Lady Macbeth washing her knuckles raw: "Out, damned spot, out, I say!" She couldn't get the guilt off her hands.
 - 2. Oh, the blood of Jesus can wash you clean—not just on the outside, but from the inside out.
- C. There's this incredible prophecy given to us in [Zech. 12-13](#).
 - 1. The prophet is looking ahead and talking about what's going to come with Jesus and the cross. And God says through him: "[On that day] I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn" (Zech. 12:10).
 - a. John clearly connects this to Jesus at Calvary, referencing this very text in [John 19:37](#). Jesus is pierced.
 - 2. Why? Well, the prophet goes on: "On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness" (Zech. 13:1).
 - a. When Jesus is being thrust through with nails and spears, no doubt, the Jews, like Paul, were thinking of themselves as a modern day Phinehas.
 - i. They imagined themselves to be defending God's honor, ridding the world of a blasphemer, making their Father proud by doing away with this messianic pretender, named Jesus.
 - b. But do you want to know what was really happening? God was opening a fountain for their cleansing.
 - i. They were killing God.
 - ii. He was saving them. And us.
 - c. "[H]e was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed" (Isa. 53:5).
- D. All this leads to the third and final effect grace has on Paul (and on us really) . . .

Effect #3: He Goes to the Gentiles!

- A. So in v. 21 Paul recounts how Jesus said to him: “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.” You’re going to be a “witness” for me to them (v. 15).
- B. Here’s the thing: when you’re saved by grace and not by works, it means this salvation is for anyone who would receive it—because it’s not based on your resumé, but on Christ’s. It’s not based on your ability to climb the ladder, but on his ability to carry you.
 - 1. Don’t you see: on the one hand, the Jews, with all their religiosity and tradition, are yet still no better;
 - 2. and, on the other hand, the Gentiles, with all their pagan deviations, or in fact no worse.
 - a. The ground is level at the foot of the cross.
 - i. As Peter, in Acts 15, would stand up and say to that Jerusalem Council regarding the Gentiles: “[W]e believe that we [Jews] will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they [Gentiles] will” (v. 11). There is no distinction.
- C. That’s what is so offensive about grace.
 - 1. That’s why these guys are so furious when Paul mentions God sending him to the Gentiles.
 - 2. Salvation by grace means there’s nothing inherently special about you that makes you more commendable to God than any other.
 - a. “⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).
- D. But, at the same time, that’s what makes grace so attractive!
 - 1. You are no better than another, but neither are you any worse, any further gone.
 - 2. Some of us may be experiencing the “imposter syndrome” just sitting here in this room this morning.
 - a. You feel like, there’s no way I belong here. I’m such a screw up. I’m such a sinner. If these people only knew who I was, what I’m really like, they would take me up by my collar and toss me right out that door. God couldn’t love me, could he?
 - b. Again, salvation by grace says you’re not superior to another, but it also says you’re no worse off: “²³ [F]or all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:23-25).

- E. There is no reason for pride, but neither is there reason for despair. The gospel simultaneously lowers us to hell and lifts us to heaven.
 - 1. On the one hand, Jesus gets the terrible penalty I deserve for my sin, and that humbles me to the dirt (no boasting!).
 - 2. But, on the other hand, I get the eternal reward he deserves for his righteousness and that lifts me to the sky.
 - a. And these two things come together at the same time.

- F. When I get that, no longer am I so prone to set my eyes on myself or on you as climb up that ladder next to me, comparing, competing. No, my eyes are set on Jesus and the glory of his grace! That's the point.
 - 1. Now, I'm not trying to get ahead of you, I'm trying to get to you.
 - 2. I'm not trying to compete with you, I'm trying to reach you with his grace.
 - a. "Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles."

- G. So who is God sending you to? Go!
 - 1. And know: no matter how far from God they may seem, in Jesus, his grace can reach further still!