

Almost Persuaded

Introduction

If you have your Bibles...

- If you're new here, we've been marching through the book of Acts, verse by verse, chapter by chapter, watching the advance of the gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. We have seen the church birthed in power, we have seen persecuted saints scattering throughout the empire, and end up being seeds of evangelism wherever they land. And we have seen apostles like Peter and Paul turning the world upside down.

Acts 26

So Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense:

2 "I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, 3 especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.

4 "My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. 5 They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. 6 And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 7 to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! 8 Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

9 "I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. 11 And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

12 "In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. 14 And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language,[a] 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' 15 And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 16 But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, 17 delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you 18 to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

19 "Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. 21 For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 22 To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: 23 that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles."

24 And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind." 25 But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. 26 For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe." 28 And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" 29 And Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains."

30 Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. 31 And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment." 32 And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

Context/Story

- Paul has been imprisoned for two years in Caesarea, falsely accused by the Jews of desecrating the temple and stirring sedition. The Roman governor, Festus, inherits this hot potato from Felix and, being new to Jewish affairs, he's stumped. He knows Paul's innocent, but he doesn't want to rile the Jewish leaders. Enter King Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice—royalty with Jewish ties, visiting Festus. Agrippa, intrigued by this notorious prisoner, agrees to hear Paul.
- The Book of Acts is really quite a short book, so it is extraordinary that a book of this length would repeat the same incident three times. We are told three times of the circumstances of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus.
 - You've heard me preach on Paul's dramatic conversion in Acts 9... the blinding light, the voice from heaven, the scales falling from his eyes. And you have heard me preach on Acts 22, where Paul gave his testimony before the hostile Jewish crowd in Jerusalem.

From Darkness to Light

- Paul recounts his journey to Damascus, authorized by the chief priests to hunt Christians. At noon, a light brighter than the sun blasts him and his companions to the ground. The voice speaks "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." Paul asks, "Who are you, Lord?" And Jesus replies, identifying Himself and then commissioning Paul: "I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness... I am sending you to the Gentiles to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."
 - Spiritual Blindness - Paul elaborates on Christ's direct words about his mission to the Gentiles. Jesus gave Paul a divine mandate to rescue people from spiritual blindness. He is to save people from the very thing he suffered from.
 - The language echoes Old Testament prophecies about opening eyes, turning from darkness to light.
 - Isaiah 42:6-7 - I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a

covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

- Isaiah 49:6 - It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.
 - Paul sees himself as fulfilling what the prophets foretold about the Messiah's servant.
- Some of you have children like this. It is not a lack of knowledge. They have heard about the cross. They have heard about the resurrection. They know... But they don't know. Paul saw all the same things that the disciples saw, and yet he did not see anything that they saw.
 - Have you ever had someone in your life like this? "I don't know what to do, it's like he doesn't want to see it." "It's like she can't see what is right in front of her face!" That is exactly what it is like. It is an utter disdain for seeing. A complete refusal to see what is right before their eyes.
 - Why would anyone want to stay in darkness? The answer is found in John
 - John 3:19-20 - And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.
 - But Christians see things that they didn't see before! They see Christ differently. Where suddenly this man whom you once thought was just a good example or a wise teacher. Now he shines with the glory of God himself!

Heeding the Heavenly Call

- Vs 19-23
- When we talk about calling, the majority of the time we are talking about what God wants us to do with our lives. What college, who to marry, where to live, what career path. But when the Bible talks about calling, the majority of the time it is talking about the call God has for all people in all places to repent, believe, and be holy. Now you will never know the directional call of your life without first being obedient to God's general call on your life. Don't expect him to guide you along your way when you have not repented of your sin, believed in Jesus, and are pursuing a life of holiness.
 - God's general call
 - Apparently, Paul was called by God for a long time.
 - Acts 26:14b
 - A goad is a long rod with a sharp metal point used by farmers to prod an animal. Kicking against it does absolutely nothing. God was prodding Saul. He was calling Saul to come to him. Paul's whole life God was prodding

him, and he just kept fighting it. Some of you are doing the same thing. You keep kicking. But when you pick a fight with Jesus, you are not going to win! He has never lost. His win rate is 100%

- For the Non-Christian
 - Hear this: You are in darkness right now, under Satan's sway. But Jesus offers light, forgiveness, and inheritance.
 - I pray that you realize that God is not your enemy. He is not poking at you because he wishes harm against you. He is prodding you toward Christ. It is for your Good. and your kicking has no value.
- God's directional call.
 - For the Christian
 - If you're a believer, Christ has commissioned you too—not as an apostle, but as a witness. Don't kick against the goads; obey the heavenly vision God gives you in His Word.
 - Is God calling you this morning? Do you feel his constant prodding? It is hard to kick against the goads.
- There is a whole spectrum of beliefs on how God speaks in the world today.
 - On one end of the spectrum we have the charismatic thought that God speaks audibly to some people all the time. And the pursuit of that word from "God" has produced all sorts of false prophets and deceivers and snake oil salesmen who deceive and manipulate God's people for profit or influence or fame.
 - But on the other side of the spectrum are those who say that God only speaks through His word. Now that we have the closed cannon of scripture, God never speaks personally, or directly to his children.
 - Both sides of this spectrum are in this room right now. And if you land in either place, you very likely are already thinking about how your side is right.
- I believe that the answer is found somewhere in the tension between the two. Yes God speaks through his word. That is always primary. But I have found that God also speaks to his people through desires and inclinations of the heart. Through growing passions for the things of God. Through opportunities and open doors, through giving talents and spiritual gifts. Through mentors and spiritual leaders.
 - And consider that God's calling doesn't go away. God did not let Paul go until he was obedient.
 - Does God speak audibly? I believe he can. I have never heard it. If he does, do not expect it to happen as a regular occurrence. It didn't even happen to the apostle Paul but a few times in his lifetime.

Persuaded to Follow Christ

- Vs 24-29 - This is a fairly simple sermon. I want to talk to you for a minute about being a christian.
 - Vs 28 - Are you trying to persuade me to be a christian? Notice he doesn't say, "Well I am just sharing my story." Or "Look king, I wouldn't claim to tell you what to believe."
 - Are you trying to persuade me to become a christian? ABSOLUTELY! And everyone else here too! You, festus, Bernice, all within the sound of my voice. "I want you to be a christian" Just as I am, except for these chains.
 - What audacity! Doesn't Paul know who he is talking to?
 - But Agrippa is not his king. Jesus is.
 - Luke 9:26 - Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.
 - Romans 1:16 - For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.
- 3 responses
 - Scoff - Festus interrupts Paul. He shouts, "You are out of your mind!" "Paul, You are nuts!"
 - Let me see, you worship this guy named Jesus who died, but you say he is alive. And the whole world needs to repent and believe in him because they belong to satan, and they need their sins forgiven because otherwise this jesus is going to come back again on the clouds one day, and judge everyone. "Paul, I understand that you are learned, but I'm afraid you have been educated beyond your intelligence. They say there's a thin line between genius and insanity, and I think you've skated over the line, Paul."
 - Paul responds, "these are true and rational words"
 - Sidestep
 - Paul speaks to Agrippa - King, you know that this didn't happen in a corner somewhere. I can show all this from Moses and the prophets. It is prophesied. Agrippa, you know about all of this. Jesus was publicly crucified, he was publicly buried, he was raised, and appeared to hundreds of people. This isn't about some private revelation someone had. It happened out in the open! The veil was torn, the dead came out of their graves, the sky went dark. This was in Jerusalem! You know all about this!
 - Christianity did not begin as a mystery religion with secret rites and rituals. It did not begin like the Mormon religion in Palmyra, New York, when Joseph Smith said he had received special

revelation on golden tablets hidden from others' view. The manifestation of the Son of God was a public matter.

- And Agrippa knows it. But he doesn't want to go there. He knows deep down that Paul is right. But if He follows Jesus, it would turn all of Israel upside down. The ripple effects of converting a king are absolutely massive.
 - (Constantine) Agrippa doesn't want to go there. So he side-steps.
 - Some of you are in the same place. The dots are almost connected in your mind. But just before you get there, you start to distract yourself. "What's on tv? Want to go see a movie? I'm hungry. I wonder what's on facebook."

- Surrender

- Kicking the Goads makes for a hard life. A painful life. A life filled with bitterness, and anger and regret. Each kick produces more pain. And why? So you can be in charge of your fate? Do you really think you will do better with your life than the master will?
- Don't wait like Agrippa. See your sin, and the ways you have been rebelling against Him. and Like Saul, draw near to the throne of the Good King, and join the winning team.

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(Freedom (Conclusion))

- It is too bad that he had appealed to Caesar; otherwise he would have been set free. But the Apostle Paul was not thinking about his freedom. His heart was burdened by their chains, not by his.

Pray/Invitation