



**Acts 25:13-26:18**  
**Paul's Big Pivot**

Summary: God is at work calling individuals to change and be a part of His work changing others.

The whole world has gone mad. That's pretty obvious, isn't it? From COVID related issues to ethnic tensions, police violence and anti-police violence, to record-breaking wildfires on the West Coast reminding us of the record-breaking wildfires in Australia back in January when 2020 was just getting started, and then RBG died this week and both sides are digging in for the fight to replace her – the world has gone mad and we haven't even gotten to the elections yet.

Meanwhile, at the center of it all, are people. It's people suffering, people protesting, people rioting, people setting fires, people shooting police, police shooting people, people who are contagious, people who are losing, leaving, and dying, it's all about people. We're not being invaded by aliens. It's not a zombie apocalypse. It's people starting things, people spreading things, people making decisions that you either support or think are stupid.

So, the only way for things to get better is for people to change. Sure we need a vaccine or form of treatment, but will you trust the people who developed it? Will you trust the people who approved it? How will you react if people say you have to receive it? When the election happens, will your people be elected, and if not how will you respond to the people who are? How can we help people feel seen, heard, and cared about so there's no longer a need to protest and riot because they're being treated better as people? How can we encourage people to be better stewards of the environment and reverse the damage we've done with so much of our insatiable consumerism?

Friends, the world will not get better until people get better, and you and I are people. Are we, right now, part of the problem or part of the solution? The answer is complicated, isn't it? There are parts of your life you're proud of, convinced of, areas where you know you're doing well, and things you know you're right about. But, if you're honest, you know there are some parts of your life that are a mess and you sense that you are a part of the problem. "But," we tell ourselves, "no one is perfect..."

Actually, someone is. And He's the reason we're here today. There is someone who came to bring light into the darkness of our world. There is someone who came to help people change. There is someone we can hope in and who will walk with us through the trials and struggles we face. His name is Jesus.

This morning we're going to see how He radically, completely, instantly changed the life of a man named Paul and commissioned him to help bring change in the lives of others. We're going to talk about the darkness of the world and what God has done to offer us light.

We're studying the book of Acts, the history book of the early church. We're at the part where Paul is being held in protective custody by the Romans but made an appeal to have his case heard by Caesar in Rome.

The local governor is new to office and he inherited the issue from the previous administration, so he's working to understand the facts of the case when he's visited by some people who can help. We meet them here and it all leads to Paul telling us the story of how people can change.

**Acts 26:13** And after some days King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus. 14 When they had been there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying: "There is a certain man left a prisoner by Felix, 15 about whom the chief priests and the elders of the Jews informed *me*, when I was in Jerusalem, asking for a judgment against him. 16 To them I answered, 'It is not the custom of the Romans to deliver any man to destruction before the accused meets the accusers face to face, and has opportunity to answer for himself concerning the charge against him.'

In other words, Festus tells the Jews, "No, I can't just hand Paul over to you for execution or punishment, he's a Roman citizen, he has rights; we need to have a trial, but come on down to my headquarters and we'll do that."

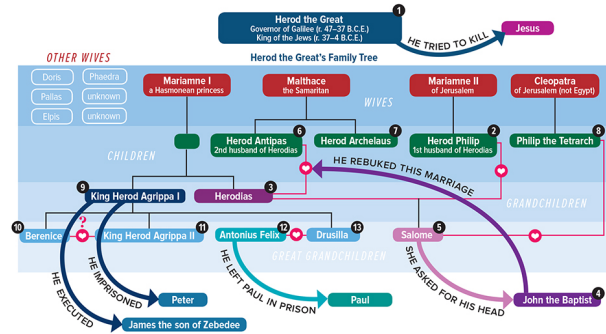
17 Therefore when they had come together, without any delay, the next day I sat on the judgment seat and commanded the man to be brought in. 18 When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, 19 but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive. 20 And because I was uncertain of such questions, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there be judged concerning these matters. 21 But when Paul appealed to be reserved for the decision of Augustus, I commanded him to be kept till I could send him to Caesar."

22 Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I also would like to hear the man myself."  
"Tomorrow," he said, "you shall hear him."

Now, there's a lot of historical context you need to know here, because Agrippa is called a king, and you might think that gives him a higher rank than Festus, but that's not true. Festus is the senior representative of the Roman Empire in the region. Agrippa is a native ruling part of modern-day Lebanon, but it's under the authority and with the permission of Rome.

His title is actually King Herod Agrippa II he's part of the Herodian dynasty – a family from the area of modern-day Jordan who ruled Israel during the time of the Romans.

His great grandfather was Herod the Great who you hear about at Christmas – the wisemen from the east come to him looking for Jesus and he later orders the death of every male child in Bethlehem under two years old in an effort to make sure Jesus is never a threat to Herod’s throne.



That Herod, Herod the Great, had several sons.

<sup>1</sup> One was Herod Antipatas, he killed John the Baptist, Pontius Pilate sent Jesus to be interviewed by him prior to the crucifixion. Another son of Herod the Great was Aristobulus, he had a son King Herod Agrippa I, who killed James the brother of John back in Acts 12 and then died in Acts 13. That was the father of this Herod who’s talking with Festus.

Bernice is his sister, a year younger than he is. She’s going to become the mistress of the Roman General Titus who, in just a few years, will come down to Jerusalem to smash a rebellion and will destroy the city and the temple in the process. Their other sister is Drusilla, who was married to Felix, the guy who was just relieved as governor and now Festus has come to take his place.

So, yeah. Complex tribal politics are really nothing new in the world.

The point is: Agrippa and Bernice know a lot about the region and its history they’re well informed about the issues of the day. When they come to pay a state visit, to meet the incoming administration, Festus realizes they might be able to help him pull together an executive summary of the situation for Caesar when he sends Paul up for trial.

23 So the next day, when Agrippa and Bernice had come with great pomp, and had entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at Festus’ command Paul was brought in. 24 And Festus said: “King Agrippa and all the men who are here present with us, you see this man about whom the whole assembly of the Jews petitioned me, both at Jerusalem and here, crying out that he was not fit to live any longer. 25 But when I found that he had committed nothing deserving of death, and that he himself had appealed to Augustus, I decided to send him. 26 I have nothing certain to write to my lord concerning him. Therefore I have brought him out before you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the examination has taken place I may have something to write. 27 For it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner and not to specify the charges against him.”

Now, actually, Festus didn’t lack charges, he lacked evidence. Plenty of charges had been made against Paul, but none could be substantiated - because they weren’t true.

<sup>1</sup> Genealogy Tree credit: BiblicalArchaeology.Org

And yet, even though he was innocent, no one wanted him to let him go, and plenty of people had the opportunity. There was Lysias the tribune who first took Paul into custody. There was Felix who originally heard his case, and now, there is Festus. Any one of them could have let Paul go, but none were willing to do the right thing because they were afraid the leaders of the Jews would throw a fit and Roman officials would have to appease them. It was easier to just sweep the whole thing under the rug and keep Paul in custody.

Only now refusing to do the right thing has come back to bite Festus – Caesar will want to know why the case has been referred to him and Festus needs something to say.

Do you remember, we said earlier that people are the biggest part of our modern problems and people must be a part of the solution? There are situations in each of our lives where we know the right thing to do, but we just don't *feel* like doing it. In those cases, you can shove things off to the side, you can try to avoid them, but sooner or later you'll have to deal with the issues and often the longer you let them sit, the stickier they become. Maybe you can relate to Festus trying to find a way out of the mess you're in.

**Acts 26:1** Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself: 2 "I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, 3 especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently.

I just want to quickly point out one thing here: Paul is making a logical, rational, case for belief in Christ. He's asking Agrippa, and the others who have assembled, "hear me out. Think about this." He has a reasonable explanation for his faith. The Christian faith is reasonable. It's not fantasy or mythology. There are no Minotaurs or Infinity Stones in Bible. If you will listen to the claims of Christ patiently you will hear something you can understand.

Paul explains it all by pointing to the evidence of his own life. He makes the case that he's a good Jew, he's a local boy at heart, he's not divisive or rebellious, he wants nothing but the best for his people – the people King Agrippa rules over.

4 "My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. 5 They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.

I was a true patriot. I was part of the most traditional, orthodox, party of our people, I took my faith and my identity seriously, I was precise and rigorous in my interpretation of Jewish law.

6 And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers.

The Jews were looking forward to the promise of a Messiah, a Savior, a Deliverer, someone who would lead them into a better relationship with God. They hoped and prayed for the day it would happen.

7 To this *promise* our twelve tribes, earnestly serving *God* night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews.

He says look, I believe what everyone else believes, I hope in what everyone else hopes for, but I've found the answer is Jesus. And yes, He died, but it wasn't a mistake, it wasn't an accident, things didn't get out of control for God, it was on purpose, Jesus died as a sacrifice for all the wrong we have done, all the things we know we're guilty of, all the things we'd love a chance to do over.

And then, because He was completely and totally innocent of any wrongdoing Himself, because it was a sacrificial act of love for us, God raised Jesus from the dead and He ascended to Heaven where He sits at the right hand of God watching over us, guiding and directing us, interceding and praying for us, today.

And if that sounds incredible to you, let me ask: why? Is it because you don't think God *would* do something like that? Well, He told us He would. Do you believe Him?

Or maybe you don't think God *could* do something like that? Well then you've got your own god, we're not talking about the same deity. You've made a god that makes sense to you, one that you could understand, but it's not the God of Scripture. And lots of people do that – we all want a god we can understand. But if you can understand your God, if you can decide everything he, she, it or they would or would not do, then really, your God's no better than you and what do you need them for?

8 Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?

If God is God, if we're talking about the God that made Creation, that gave a promise to Abraham and then grew his tiny family into nation, the God that sent 10 plagues and delivered Israel from Egypt, the God that gave them the land of Israel and drove out armies, that raised up prophets, the God that allowed them to be taken to Babylon and then preserved them and brought them back, if God can do all these things, why can't He raise the dead?

Well, then Paul says, "Look, I get it, I thought these people who followed Jesus were wrong at first too."

9 "Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against *them*. 11 And I punished them often in every synagogue and

compelled *them* to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted *them* even to foreign cities.

I want you to notice this, so please, please, if I've lost you anywhere along the way, come back with me now, I want you to see this: there is a form of religion that thrives by putting other people down. That's what Paul used to do, he thought he was being super righteous, he thought he was a warrior for justice by putting others down, looking for a fight, and taking people out. There's a form of religion that says this is the way.

But it's not the Way of Jesus. And you have to know that. Because there are forces at work in the world today, mainly on the right, but sometimes on the left as well, that want to use religion as a rallying cry for their political or social cause. They want to tell you, those people are the enemy, and if you're good a Christian, you're with us against them. And it can drift into protests, and name-calling, and prejudicial attitudes and statements and opinions that look nothing like Jesus.

Listen: you can't use the name of King Jesus to call people to your side and then encourage them to look at other people like they're the enemy, when Jesus said you're supposed to love your enemies and seek their good.

Let's be clear: yes, we need law and order. We also need equality and justice. Jesus is pro law and order, but Jesus is also pro equality and justice. You can't use Jesus as a weapon or a rallying cry against other people. You can't say let's all gather together against those people and say we're doing it in Jesus' name. You can't do that. But people try. And I'm warning you, I'm asking you, I'm begging you – watch out for yourself and for others and don't let them drag us into it.

Remember Paul thought he was doing a good thing by lashing out against people, standing up against them and their cause, but he was utterly and completely wrong. He was the one on the wrong side of history because he was on the wrong side of Jesus:

12 "While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, 13 at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. 14 And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? *It is hard for you to kick against the goads.*' 15 So I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

Two things to notice here. First, Jesus identifies with His people. We have no evidence that Jesus and Paul ever met before the crucifixion. So, how can Jesus ask: why are you persecuting Me? Answer: because Jesus identifies with His people. Christian, when you are hurt, God knows. When you are mistreated, God knows. When you are slandered, God knows. When they conspire against you, God knows. When they discriminate, God knows. When they gossip, call you names, or spread rumors, God knows. And, He says, they're doing it to Him too.

Christian you need to know that. You need to remember that. Nothing, and I mean nothing bad ever comes your way that doesn't go through Christ. And He takes it personally.

But the second thing to know – God is also at work in the person who is doing you harm. He tells Paul, whose name is also Saul depending on which language you're using – it's hard to kick against the goads. That's a reference to the way you poke a cow or ox or other animal in the rear of the legs to get them moving. Traditionally it's done with a sharp stick, but today we have cattle prods that give an electric shock to get the cow moving in the direction you want them to go.

Jesus says 'Paul, I've been trying to direct you, why do you keep resisting?' Notice the mercy of God – He shows up in our lives and tries repeatedly, to get our attention. I have no doubt that's happening with some of you this morning – you're feeling the poke and prod of God. You may not fully understand it yet, you didn't know why it was happening, but now that you see this in the Bible, now that you know it's one way God works, maybe you need to consider whether that thing that happened, or that's happening now, is God prodding you and whether or not you're kicking against the goads.

God wants your attention, He wants to lead your life and He'll keep coming back until you recognize Him because He wants to make something better of your life. Listen:

16 But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. 17 I will deliver you from the *Jewish* people, as well as *from* the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, 18 to open their eyes, *in order* to turn *them* from darkness to light, and *from* the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.'

Paul's testimony continues on from here, and we'll return to it next week, but for now I need you to see this.

We said earlier that the only way for things to change is for people to change and that Jesus came to make all of that possible. Listen here to God's explanation of what is going on: people need to have their eyes opened, turn from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, receive forgiveness of sins and a place in God's family.

This is God's prescription for how we move forward.

If you feel like we're living in dark days, you're right. We are living in darkness. If you feel like people can't or won't see what's happening, you're right. They're blind. The question is why? God says it's because they're under the influence of Satan instead of the influence of God. So God is calling us to pivot, to turn, to receive forgiveness, and a place to belong.

The Bible says,

**Col 1:13** He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed *us* into the kingdom of the Son of His love, 14 in whom we have redemption

It says,

**1 Pe2:9** ... you *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

And just to make it really clear:

**1 John 1:5** This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

My friends, are you walking in the light, or in the darkness? Is your life producing light or feeding darkness? Are you part of the problems of this world, raging for your righteous agenda like Paul on the way to Damascus, or are you reflecting the light and the love, the hope and encouragement, the sacrifice and courage of Christ?

Or are you somewhere in between trying to figure everything out? God has been poking you, prodding you, goading you, but you didn't realize it was Him. Hopefully this morning has helped you figure things out.

The world is dark, people are blind, the power of Satan to disrupt, decay, and destroy, is real. The hope is not a vaccine, it's not the election, it's not the next Supreme Court nominee, it's not defunding the police or reparations, it's Jesus goading us – changing us, redirecting us, turning us. It's Jesus forgiving us and then giving us a place to belong. It's the Holy Spirit at work in those of us who know Christ, using us for His purposes.

I want to encourage you to do something this week – when you see things that make you mad, when you hear things that fire you up, when you're tempted to anger, frustration, depression, or despair – whether you're tempted to flight or fight – I want you to pray: show me King Jesus, in Your Word or by Your Spirit, show me King Jesus.

Show me how to respond. Show me how to react. Show me where to turn. Show me what to do. Show me your glory. Show me King Jesus. Open my eyes to see, open my ears to hear, and use me, like you used Paul for the glory of God and the good of others.

Let the pivot begin with you, and with me, with us – together as we're sanctified by faith in God.

Let's pray



