

Paul appeared before King Agrippa who had requested to hear his case. The king was helping the governor, Festus, to state the charges for which Paul was to be sent to Rome. In last week's passage, Paul told the king of his miraculous conversion. It was a most amazing turnaround from a persecutor of Christians to a leading proponent of the faith. This sudden turnaround emphasizes the validity of the gospel. How did the apostles go from denying they knew Jesus and hiding behind locked doors to boldly proclaiming in the streets that Jesus had risen? Paul's conversion was even more dramatic. One minute he's hunting down Christians like animals to be caged, and the next he is preaching Christ in the synagogues. In fact, it was so dramatic a change that the apostles had to be convinced by Barnabas that Paul was not faking his conversion to find out where all the leadership lived (Acts 9:26-27ⁱ).

Many attempts have been made to explain away this dramatic change, but they sound even more impossible than the actual account that has come down to us in the Bible. Sometimes skeptics exhibit more faith in their unbelief than we do in our belief.

Paul continued his defense by telling what he did after his conversion on the road to Damascus. 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.* Acts 26:19-20 The heavenly vision was of the resurrected Lord Jesus explaining to Paul that his persecution of Christians was persecuting Him, the Messiah. In this account in Acts 26, Jesus told Paul it was hard for him to "kick against the goads" (see verse 14ⁱⁱ). In other words, Paul was having a tough time doing what he believed was right while his conscience objected. While he believed in his mind that he was stopping a perversion of the true faith, his conscience was bothering him as he saw the godly reaction of those he persecuted. Why didn't they curse him? Why didn't they deny Jesus as the Messiah and escape punishment? His mental conviction was wrestling with his heart's conviction. Has that ever happened to you? When it does, we need to take time to pray and search the Scriptures and find peace in knowing what God's will is. If we seek, we will find (Matthew 7:7ⁱⁱⁱ).

Paul didn't hesitate to obey. The turnaround was instantaneous because all the pieces came together, the prophecies, the testimony of the believers, the guilt in his soul, and the prophecy of Ananias after his conversion (Acts 9:15-17^{iv}). He obeyed right away by preaching in the synagogues of Damascus that Jesus is the Messiah (Acts 9:20-22^v). He didn't tell Agrippa about his three years in Syrian Arabia where He must have been studying the Scriptures and rethinking everything he was taught from his youth and by Rabbi Gamaliel. Then he went to Jerusalem and throughout Judea preaching that Jesus is the Messiah. After that he began going to the Gentiles with this message: *repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.*

That is still our message. We acknowledge that we need God's forgiveness and need to change the way we behave, so we humbly ask for God's forgiveness and help. Turning to God is to turn away from the sinful nature that ruled our lives. We can only find that forgiveness and power to change by receiving what Jesus has done for us on the cross. He bore our sins. Our old nature is crucified with Him and we rise with Him to a new life. Only then can we perform those deeds in keeping with repentance. That is to walk in the Spirit and keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:16^{vi}; 25^{vii}). Only then will our lives have deeds like forgiveness, acts of lovingkindness, self-sacrifice, and humility. These are expressions of the life of Christ in us.

How could anyone complain about Paul's obedience to the vision and him asking Gentiles to get right with God? But the next verse reads, ²¹ *For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.* Acts 26:21 The Jewish doctrine was that if a Gentile wanted to be converted and become a child of Abraham, he had to be circumcised, educated in the law, baptized, and then continue to keep the laws of Moses. Paul was preaching that it was simply by faith in what Jesus did with no need to keep the laws of Moses, for the Spirit would help the new believer to live in a way that is pleasing to God (Romans 8:2-4^{viii}). The new covenant in Christ is the law written in our hearts instead of on stone (Jeremiah 31:33^{ix}). The conflict between Paul and the religious leaders was over the issue of salvation by faith in Jesus. They both believed the same Scriptures. They differed on interpretation.

Differing interpretations are in the church of today as well. As long as we agree on the basics, we can agree to disagree and, in love for one another and God's Word, search the Scriptures together and explain why we have come to our interpretation, while we listen to why they came to theirs. We may seek out a church that has similar convictions on minor issues, but that is not essential. What is essential is to recognize that Jesus is the Savior, and it is his death and resurrection alone that makes it possible throughout the history of the world for anyone to be forgiven by God to have the hope of heaven. The Scriptures urge us to discuss our differences with respect and gentleness (1 Peter 3:15^x; Colossians 3:12-13^{xi}). As followers of Christ we must resist the cultural in which we live that demands things be our way and instead accept the way of Christ, which is love for God and out fellow believers, humbly seeking to be in unity. **Agree to differ, but above all else love the Lord and one another** (Mark 12:29-31^{xii}).

It is easy to tell who was on God's side. Paul did not try to assassinate the high priest. He didn't speak against the temple. Paul simply told of his convictions and let God do the work. The religious leaders on the other hand plotted to end Paul's life. The difference isn't usually so dramatic, but there are similar signs in these major conflicts that threaten the work of God. One side demonstrates the work of the flesh (Galatians 4:29^{xiii}). We don't need to worry, as God can protect His own. We may appear to be outnumbered, but greater is He who is in us than the one who is in the world (1 John 4:4^{xiv}).

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: (Acts 26:22). He sure did have the help that came from God! He survived flogging, imprisonment, riots, stoning, being left for dead, and numerous plots on his life, as well as an attempt to beat him to death on the Temple grounds. He had just found a way out of another plot to assassinate him by appealing to Caesar. That help that comes from God isn't just for apostles. It is for all who are servants of Jesus (Isaiah 41:10^{xv}).

He stood testifying to small and great. That is a great expression of God's inclusiveness. You can't be too small for Jesus. We are all made in God's image. Jesus' death for our salvation makes every soul of infinite value. I think that is why the New Testament places such an emphasis on the outcast, the orphans, and the widows. James rebuked the church for giving preference to the wealthy (James 2:1-5^{xvi}). Nor can you be too great. Paul was speaking to King Agrippa who was raised with emperors and the great-grandson of Herod the Great. The gospel was for him as well, if he would receive it. Agrippa knew the congregations of Christians had slaves and masters and that sometimes the slaves were the elders of the church their master attended. **Everyone is on the same level at the foot of the cross.** Worldly standing means nothing to God, for God sees the heart (Matthew 23:8^{xvii}; Leviticus 19:15^{xviii}; 1 Samuel 16:7^{xix}).

Paul was preaching what Moses and the prophets had predicted. He claimed the correct interpretation, and one in which he had many points in common with the beliefs of his day. However, the oppressive rule of governor Felix had stirred again the desire among Jews for a militant Messiah. If you go back far enough you will find that rabbis believed Isaiah 53 was about the coming Messiah. The scribes told Herod the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:4-6^{xx}). Pre-Christian era Jewish commentaries on many passages were said to be about the Messiah, and sometimes even more than those we claim. Yet today, those passages are no longer read in the synagogues. The liturgical yearly reading of the prophets from the fifth century on skips all the major predictions. They can't skip Deuteronomy 18:15^{xxi}, that God would raise up someone like Moses to whom we must listen, because it is in the Torah. Nor can they skip the many lives that foreshadowed the coming of the Messiah like those of Isaac and Joseph. In fact, some early synagogue liturgies (before AD 400) connected the passage on Joseph with Isaiah 52:10-53:12, not that Joseph was that person, but that he foreshadowed the One who was coming^{xxii}. Joseph was rejected by his brothers, betrayed, innocent but condemned, who went straight to power, was then not recognized as to who he really was, and whose actions saved many lives of not just Jews but Gentiles as well. Those are just some of the parallels with Jesus. (Read about it in Genesis 37-50.)

And this is what Moses and the prophets predicted, *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.*" Acts 26:23 This is the gospel, somewhat hidden in the Old Testament but clearly there if we read it as the Hebrews did. The suffering of Christ is clearly laid out in Psalm 22 and in Isaiah's last suffering servant song (52:10-53:12).

The rejection by his own people is seen in the example of Moses and Joseph. That the Messiah would be the first to rise from the dead is from Isaiah 53:10^{xxiii} and Psalm 16:10-11^{xxiv}. That He would proclaim light, which is to say clarity and truth, to both Jews and Gentiles is seen in Isaiah 42:6^{xxv}; 49:6^{xxvi}; 60:1-3^{xxvii}. That is encapsulated in John 3:16^{xxviii}. God so loved the world that He sent a Savior who died for our sins and rose victorious over death and hell. That is the great news! It should not have been surprising to the Jewish leadership. In fact, many priests did convert to the faith (Acts 6:7^{xxix}).

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." Acts 26:24 "You've had your head in too many books." Not all Romans rulers could read. Some of them relied on others to read for them. They saw Jews as studious bookworms always reciting passages they had memorized. Festus heard Paul speak of all these predictions and the resurrection and the appearance of Jesus on the road to Damascus and thought he'd gone insane.

25 But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words." Acts 26:25 The words of God in Scripture are not only true, but rational as well. Look at the world around us. The most empirically verifiable fact is that mankind has a problem with sin. Call it selfishness or whatever you like, there is evil in the world, and none of us is exempt from temptations and actions that are harmful or at least inconsiderate to others, let alone offensive to God. Who has not neglected things we know we should have done? Creation is so beautiful and complex there must be God who is beautiful, holy, and good. So how are we to be reconciled to such a perfect God? Surely He does not want people like us to be in His presence forever, harming one another and ignoring His standards of goodness. We need someone to take the justice we deserve and transform our hearts and minds. That is the message of the Bible. It is the Gospel. It is true and quite rational.

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. Acts 26:26 The Jesus movement was probably known to the king for by this time (around AD 60) it had become widespread with Christian communities throughout Israel. The news of healings that took place must have spread from town to town. While there was some persecution, by this time it had died down. It would soon pick up again under Nero, but not during the early years of his reign.

27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe." Acts 26:27 Paul knew Agrippa was sympathetic to Jewish traditions. He had heard of the prophets and no doubt heard of the connections with Jesus as the Messiah. Paul must have been inspired to say, "I know that you believe," unless perhaps he had heard something from a fellow believer who had a chance to share the Gospel with the king. I can just imagine that Paul was about to point the king to Isaiah 53 and other passages that

declare salvation in the coming Messiah. And perhaps Agrippa sensed where this was leading and got nervous and decided he didn't want to be confronted with the truth.

²⁸ And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?"

Acts 26:28 Was Agrippa miffed that Paul might think he'd be so easily converted, or was that his way to avoid conviction? On the other hand, he left the door open by saying "in such a short time." Maybe with more lengthy conversations, who knows what might happen.

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." Acts 26:29

This is a powerful statement! It declares the perfect peace Paul had in Christ and how he wished that everyone had the same. This can only be said by the man or woman who has truly found that peace. Can you say that you truly wish everyone had the peace and joy that you have? Do you wish that all people might become as you except for the temporary passing troubles of this life? We can only say that when we are experiencing for ourselves those fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23^{xxx}). Paul evidently was experiencing the peace of Jesus even while being held as a prisoner.

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." Acts 26:30-31 The sincerity of Paul and the power of the Holy Spirit was so evident they felt they had to get up and end the meeting or it might get to them. Apparently, the meeting didn't help to develop any charges, in fact, just the opposite. They couldn't think of anything deserving of death or even imprisonment. I wonder what charge they sent with him to Rome.

³² And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar." Acts 26:32 That would only have happened had Festus not been willing to do the Jews a favor and try Paul in Jerusalem (Acts 25:3^{xxxi}). The appeal to Caesar saved Paul's life from the plot to assassinate him. He might have been freed had Agrippa come earlier, but God had another plan. Paul was on his way to Rome. The adventure picks up as Paul goes from the courtroom to the wild seas in the next chapter. You'll learn of an amazing archeological find that verifies the account.

Questions

- 1 How does Paul's conversion testify to the truth of the gospel?
- 2 How did Paul respond to the heavenly vision?
- 3 Why did the Jews try to kill Paul?
- 4 How can our lives have deeds in keeping with repentance?
- 5 How should we respond to different interpretations?
- 6 What does Paul's message going to small and great testify about God?
- 7 How did Joseph foreshadow the Messiah?
- 8 Where do we see the Gospel in the Old Testament?
- 9 Is the gospel rational? In what way?
- 10 Do you long for people to be as you are?

i Acts 9:26-27 (ESV)

²⁶ And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.

ii Acts 26:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

iii Matthew 7:7 (ESV)

⁷ "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

iv Acts 9:15-17 (ESV)

¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

¹⁶ For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

v Acts 9:20-22 (ESV)

²⁰ And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God."

²¹ And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?"

²² But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

vi Colossians 3:12-13 (ESV)

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,

¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

vii Galatians 5:25 (ESV)

²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

viii Romans 8:2-4 (ESV)

² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

ix Jeremiah 31:33 (ESV)

³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

x 1 Peter 3:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,

xi Colossians 3:12-13 (ESV)

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,

¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

xii Mark 12:29-31 (ESV)

²⁹ Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

³⁰ And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'

³¹ The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

xiii **Galatians 4:29 (ESV)**

²⁹ But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now.

xiv **1 John 4:4 (ESV)**

⁴ Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

xv **Isaiah 41:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

xvi **James 2:1-5 (ESV)**

¹ My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ² For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³ and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," ⁴ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?

xvii **Matthew 23:8 (ESV)**

⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.

xviii **Leviticus 19:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ "You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.

xix **1 Samuel 16:7 (ESV)**

⁷ But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

xx **Matthew 2:4-6 (ESV)**

⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶ "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

xxi **Deuteronomy 18:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—

xxii Ronning, John, *Messianic Hope* (entire book is on this topic of ancients view of Messianic prophecy. For Joseph and Isa. 53 see Tverberg, Lois new book *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus*.)

xxiii **Isaiah 53:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.

xxiv **Psalms 16:10-11 (ESV)**

¹⁰ For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.

¹¹ You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

xxv **Isaiah 42:6 (ESV)**

⁶ "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,

xxvi **Isaiah 49:6 (ESV)**

⁶ he says: "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."

xxvii **Isaiah 60:1-3 (ESV)**

¹ Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

² For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise

upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.

³ And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

^{xxviii} **John 3:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

^{xxix} **Acts 6:7 (ESV)**

⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

^{xxx} **Galatians 5:22-23 (ESV)**

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

^{xxxi} **Acts 25:3 (ESV)**

³ asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way.