

Let's open our Bibles tonight. We're going to continue through the study of the book of Acts, chapter 26. We will be finishing up the book of Acts here in a couple of, four or five, weeks. We're going to have Don Stewart come out one Wednesday night and answer questions, Bible questions, "stump-the-man" questions. So plan ahead for that. And then he's going to share the following Wednesday - we'll still be here, but we're going to have him come and do some updates on Bible prophecy and the news of the day, especially through the Middle East. So I think you'll enjoy that. And then we'll be gone for a couple weeks in Israel with ninety of our closest friends and then be back, and we'll start on the book of Ruth and go forward from there.

But tonight we're in my favorite book of the Bible, chapter 26. This particular section began back in chapter 21:17 as Paul was really desiring to go to Jerusalem. It is something he had desired for a long time. He brought a bunch of Gentile congregational elders with him, carrying different offerings from these different churches throughout Europe and Asia with the intent of helping the poor in Jerusalem. But Paul saw it as a conciliatory way to reach out to Jewish believers because early on in the church there was a strife between can you just get saved directly or do you have to go and become a Jew first, especially for the Gentiles. And it was a big stink, to be honest with you; it caused a lot of grief. So Paul hoped that he could maybe solve some of that.

As he traveled the hundreds of miles towards Jerusalem, though, every place he stopped there was a warning that there was trouble waiting for him. He was willing to die, he said, for the sake of the brethren, and I think he meant that. But what the Lord told him in warning certainly came to pass. He got to Jerusalem. The saints welcomed him with open arms. James, who was the pastor of the church in Jerusalem, was far more terse as were the elders with him. They recognized Paul's work. They applauded the work of God amongst the Gentiles but quickly got to the matter at hand. They said, "We have a lot of zealous people here, too, but they're zealous for the law." They're not so excited about Jesus, but they love the performance, ritual, ceremonies, sacramental things. And they suggested to Paul that if he wanted to lose his bad reputation amongst the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, maybe he could spring for the bill for four men that were in town that

were making a Nazirite vow, a vow of a week of fasting and dedication to the Temple and all. And they said, "That way, Paul, people won't think that you're a proponent just of grace over the law," which Paul actually was. The very thing he was being accused of was true, in that regard. Paul - loving the people, having prayed so long for this issue - compromised a bit, supported these men.

It seemed to go well through the week until the end of the week, where somebody from Ephesus (where he had just spent three years planting a church) was in town. They accused him of bringing a Gentile into a part of the Temple where they weren't allowed. A riot broke out. This was a religious week, and there were a lot of religious zealot fanatics in town. They, in the name of the Lord, about beat him to death. The Romans came in and saved him at the last minute. A fellow named Claudius Lysias jumped in with some of his soldiers and rescued Paul. Paul said, "Hey, could I just speak to the crowd?" and, standing on the steps of the Antonia Fortress, going up to be held in protective custody, the captain said, "Sure." And Paul thought this was it. "This is the time I'm going to share with the people my heart." And he spoke to them about his testimony - where he had gotten saved, what the Lord had done with him.

Everything seemed good until he got to the part where he said, "The Lord told me to go far away from this place, that He was going to send me to the Gentiles." And, oh, man. Couldn't have said a worse word. And the riot broke out again and they had to carry (the soldiers) him on their shoulders to get him out of trouble. They were going to scourge him, but Paul said, "Hey, I'm a Roman citizen," so they decided not to do that; that would have been a really bad idea. But the next morning Claudius called the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leadership, with Paul together and wanted to work it out, wanted to get to the bottom of it. Paul realized he was in a pretty difficult place, looked around. He had been on this panel before, knew half of them were Pharisees - they believed in the resurrection. The rest were Sadducees - they didn't believe in any life after death. And so Paul said, "I guess I'm on trial here today because I believe in the resurrection," which brought half of the people onto his side; the other people went nuts. And again, another riot. And the captain said, "I can't let you go. They're going to tear you limb from limb." So they kept Paul in prison till he could figure out a way to get to the bottom of it.

While he was in prison, a little nephew of his out in the street heard there were at least forty men who had vowed a vow that they weren't going to eat till they killed Paul. And maybe they could invite Paul to come back down to the meeting place,

and, "We'll lay in wait." And this poor little boy found out about it, went and told his uncle, who encouraged him to go tell the captain, who took it seriously. And God spared Paul, and he got taken down 65 miles to Caesarea, under heavy guard, to answer to a fellow named Felix, who was the governor of the area in the political capital of Rome. And so Paul ends up there. They come to accuse him there. It isn't long before Felix figures out that everything's fine. He hasn't done anything wrong. Felix was a man who knew about the gospel, he knew about the Jews. He was pretty close to getting saved, it seems like from all that we read. He trembled at God's Word. He went back to talk to Paul often. But he didn't let him go. He didn't let him go - politically it wouldn't be expedient. He didn't let him go because he was hoping that Paul's friends would kick in some bribe money, and he'd get some money out of the thing. Left him there for two years in jail for no reason, without charges, and then he was called back to Rome because he was a brutal guy; he had to answer for his brutality in breaking up some riots. And he disappears from the historical scene. His wife, that year, goes by Pompeii for shopping (right under Vesuvius), and the day that she's there, the volcano erupts, and she dies in the eruption of the volcano. Meanwhile, Paul's still in jail.

A fellow named Festus comes to the throne; he's an old guy. We studied about him last week, if you were here. He's a self-serving guy, he's a man who rules by fear of others. He knows to do the right thing; he doesn't do it. He asked Paul, "Can I take you to Jerusalem? These guys are pretty upset with you, and you could have a trial there." And Paul said, "Not a chance. Those decks are stacked against me. So if you want to do that, and you don't want to make a decision on my case, then I'd rather talk to Caesar and appeal to Caesar," which was his legal right as a Roman. And so Festus is kind of in a bad spot. He's been in town for a couple of weeks, and already he's got a prisoner wanting to talk to the big shot in Rome, and that isn't going to look too good for him, the new governor in town. And so he's kind of stuck. He doesn't know how to charge him, what to send. He knows Paul's innocent - says so in a couple of different places.

About the time that he is wondering what to do, King Agrippa II and Bernice come into town, and they want to greet the new governor, and so he entertains them. And they were two people that were frowned upon by the Romans. They ruled in northern Lebanon. They were brother and sister, living in an incestuous relationship. Both of them had converted to Judaism. None of them practiced it, but they were good at knowing about things and entertaining the thought that they had an insight and all. And so Festus, after a couple of weeks, said to them,

"Would you mind interviewing this prisoner? I've got to send him to Caesar. I have nothing to accuse him of." And he said, "Well, yeah, I'll hear him and listen to him." And so that's where we are tonight. That's where we come to tonight - chapter 26 - as Paul's appearance before Festus or, if you will, Festus' examination before Paul. Because Paul is now in his third year of incarceration. He is now headed for Rome unless somebody does the right thing. King Agrippa II was the last of the Herods, and Paul will bring a witness before him and reference things that he understood.

Chapter 26 is two sections. The first eighteen verses are Paul's testimony of his conversion and of his calling and the things that he thought this guy needed to hear to maybe get saved. Verse 19 through verse 32, which we'll do next week, is the application to the audience and their response.

But we're going to talk about (tonight) Paul's personal story. The lesson is very simple, I think, and it certainly repeats itself towards the end of the book of Acts, because that's God's interest; and that is that His people go out and share what God has done in their life. It literally boils down to - you have a testimony. I don't know what it is, but you have one. It may be spectacular; Paul's was pretty spectacular. Hard to say, "The Lord knocked me to the ground and talked to me, and I went blind, and then I could see, and have been runnin' around for twenty years preachin', and people get saved, and there're miracles." You might just say, "I grew up in a Christian home, and I gave my life to Christ at nine years old." It's just as powerful, but yet you have to share it. So, here's what I would say to you about testimonies - write yours out. Write it out. Outline it. Start with the basics. Fill in the things that matter and things that'll be helpful to others. Put verses in there. And carry it with you wherever you go. Work on it whenever you get time. And if you get a chance to share, just get up and share it. People want to hear what God has done. It's the way the Lord used Paul for several years in front of really big-shot guys and influenced a whole society from one place, from house arrest. So polish your testimony, have the words that you can share.

Well, let's go back to verse 23 of last week, chapter 25, just to kind of get our context right. It says, "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. 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. But when I found that he had committed nothing deserving of death, and that he himself had appealed to Augustus,' " (Caesar) " 'I decided to send him. 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. For it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner and not to specify the charges against him.' Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'You are permitted to speak for yourself.' So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself: '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.' " Paul had a tremendous respect for constituted authority, even if the one that's sitting on the throne was this guy, this King Agrippa II. He was a terrible man, a wicked man. So was Festus. For that matter, so was Felix. But Paul showed great respect for those in authority. You don't find any insolence towards authority in Paul's life. You don't find any civil disobedience in Paul's life as, somehow, an arm of the work of God. I think we covered it in several places, but biblically civil disobedience is only authorized by the Lord for His people when a) you are told you cannot do what God commands you to do and b) you're forced to do something God has commanded you not to do. In both of those situations, the Bible would teach that civil disobedience is probably a worthwhile move on your part. And even then, when you do that, the examples that we have in the Bible of people that are willing to pay the price for their civil disobedience, and they will stand against in defiance but still with great respect. You don't find any of that in Paul's life when it comes to those in authority. The Bible's pretty clear that we should pray for and respect the offices God has established. And you live in America - you know about praying for politicians. We need as much prayer as we can get.

As I mentioned to you, King Agrippa II was a student of Jewish law and customs, and he had extensively studied the Old Testament. Notice that Paul says to him, in verse 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.' " Paul calls him an "expert." The word "*gnosis*" is a Greek word that means to know by experience. It isn't just a knowledge that is filling your head, but it is a knowledge that comes through experience. Of all of the Roman officials that we have in the Bible, he is the most versed in the Jewish hope for the Messiah. He was well aware of what Christians were all about and what they believed. He knew that they were not some fanatic kind of fringe group that was just causing trouble, those of the Way. They weren't some obscure cult; they were students of the Word. He

was a smart guy in that sense, historically. With all of his insights, he wasn't saved. For a guy that had a lot of information, it certainly didn't move him. In fact, ten years from now he will join the Roman legion and Titus in their assault on Jerusalem that killed, in one day, one million Jews. So, he joined the Roman cause. With all of this interaction with the greatest preacher of the 1st century, nothing really sunk in. But notice that Paul begins with a compliment; not to butter the guy up because you don't see that in Paul's life, but just to say, "I'm so glad I'm talking to somebody who knows what I'm facing and what I'm going through, and I thank the Lord that it's you," even though he's a wicked guy. And so, "Have patience with me," and then he quickly turns to, like I said, his testimony. It is a powerful way in which God brings the Word to people, and Paul had his prepared. You read verse 3, and you go, "Oh, no, is he gonna go really long?" "Have patience with me. I might not be short. I'm gonna lay it all out there." But I think that Paul's desire, as you read through this short chapter, he really hoped he could win this guy to Christ. I'm sure that he got in front of this king - in for a visit, hated by even his own people - he wanted to lead him to Jesus, and so he figured he'd give him the full picture. But I want you to notice something. Paul is more interested in the salvation of a wicked king than he is getting himself off the hook after two years of being in prison for nothing. That's a pretty good barometer of value to you and me. Right? I mean, how much would you be willing to lose so that someone could get saved? How much would you be willing to deny yourself so that someone else could hear the gospel? Because Paul did that. He doesn't spend his time begging for a way out and say, (Pastor Jack whining), "I want to get out of jail. I hate the food here. I don't belong here. I'm innocent." I can see that happening. But that's not Paul's issue. Paul doesn't want to secure his own release as much as he wants to be sure that this man has a good opportunity to hear the things of God, even though he's been in jail for two years without formal charges.

So Paul just launches right in, "Please be patient with me." Verse 4, " 'My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. 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.' " Now we know that Paul was born in Tarsus. It's a long way from Jerusalem. But at his Bar Mitzvah that Paul, as a man, had been sent to the rabbinical school in Jerusalem where he grew up as a young Jewish man who was an entirely smart guy who apparently came from a fairly wealthy family. He had quite a reputation for scholarship, according to what we can read. His family was influential. He got into the best school with the greatest teacher of his day, a fellow named Gamaliel. It

was the finest education money could buy. He was a blessed kid, if you will, growing up in a very strict place. Paul showed great promise. He was a bright kid. He writes to the Galatians (1:14) that he "excelled in Judaism beyond all of his contemporaries. There was no one that got grades like I got, who could memorize Scripture, who knew things. No one more zealous for the traditions of my fathers than I." That's what Paul said about himself. And so this is the story that he's telling this guy. All knew about his wisdom, his convictions, how far he would go to pursue them. Paul had a reputation in town since he was a kid. It wasn't like he just kind of popped in, and they didn't know who he was. Eventually Paul became a Pharisee. His dad, according to chapter 23:6, was also a Pharisee; he followed his dad's footsteps. It was the most orthodox traditional religious group of any of the Jewish sects. Paul fit right in. I mean, that was his life. This is the guy that we're dealing with. "Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning righteousness which is in the law, blameless." That was his own testimony (Philippians 3:5-6) of how he saw himself as a young man. I don't think any of us would have liked him very well. He would have been a hard guy to hang around with. But that was his background.

Jesus clearly described the 1st-century Pharisee in Matthew 23. If you've not read it before, it starts with, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" And then the Lord began to make a list of all of these extremely religious folks who were not godly at all. They're religious, not very godly. "Binding grievous burdens on people, doing works to be seen of men, loving the uppermost seats in the synagogue, being called 'Rabbi' in the marketplace, shutting up the kingdom of heaven while people sought to get in there, devouring widows' houses, making a pretense with long prayers, looking like whited sepulchers - painted on the outside, dead bones within, religion without, death within." That was Jesus' description of what Paul was.....in the same time.

So Paul says, before these accusers and before this king and this ruler, this governor, "Everyone in town knows how religious I was. The smartest guy in the school, toughest guy on the block. Would have done anything for my religious ways." Not saved, not even a godly man, but he was a religious guy from the inside out.

Verse 6 says, " 'And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. 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.' " And then he said, " 'Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?' " Paul makes the case that he was a good Jew, more devout than everyone out there accusing him, and then says, "I am now on trial today because I believed in the hope that God gave a promise to us as a nation," (the twelve tribes, by the way, in Greek, is a singular term here; it just means we, as a nation), "our hope that distinguishes us from other nations. To us was given the promise of a Messiah to come, One who would deliver His own," the promise that started way back in chapter 3 in the Garden of Eden where the LORD promised to "put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; and He will bruise your head, and you will bruise His heel." That started way back in the book of Genesis. It was reiterated to Abraham. It was later narrowed to the tribe of Judah at the end of the book of Genesis. It was later on told to us that it came through the seed of David. Paul said, "I'm on trial because I believe not only in the promise of what God said He would do in sending One but that I know who He is. I'm on trial because I believe in Jesus, who was raised from the dead." That was the amazing thing. "He's the Redeemer who came to deliver me, to rule, one hope that He would save the world. The hope that has possessed our people for generations to this hour, and I'm here for believing in Jesus, for He's the fulfillment of the prophecies or the promises of the Old Testament."

So why did they refuse it? Why do people today refuse to believe in Jesus? And especially these folks who grew up in the strict valuation of being the only people that worshipped only one God, that had hundreds of years and thousands of years of history to point to prophets and prophecies that had indeed all come to pass. Why did they miss it? And the answer, throughout the Scriptures, tends to be that the concept of God that people hold is too deep for them to fathom. Notice what Paul says in verse 8 to the king, "Why is it such a problem, King Agrippa, for people that they just don't believe that God could raise the dead?" That their understanding of God is, "That's impossible!" and so the resurrection seems to get by them. When Peter stood there at the Temple at the healing of that lame man (in Acts 3), the people began to run, like, "Oh, my gosh! We know this guy. He's been sitting at the gate for years." Peter stopped them and said, "Men of Israel, why is this such a marvel to you, and why do you look at me as if somehow I did this by my own power? But the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, the God of our Fathers, who glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up in the presence of Pilate, and he determined to let Him go, He did this. He's alive. He gives life!" And Peter challenged the Jews at the Temple that their concept of

God was way too small. So, "Why marvel? We serve a God who does miracles. He has a history of doing miracles." And I would say the same thing to you. You know, sometimes I'm amazed at watching Christians who pray, and then God answers their prayers, and they come to tell me with such a fascination that you have to believe they've never seen that before! "Oh, man! We prayed and God answered!" Yeah, that's what He does. "No! You don't understand! He answered my prayer!!!!" Yeah, I get it. He's got a history of doin' that.

Paul was intent on preaching Jesus to them by focusing on the resurrection, on the miracle of God sending His son, and the concept of God. I think it was J.B. Phillips who has a really good translation of the New Testament if you can ever get your hands on it. I'm pretty sure it's out of print, but if you can find a Phillips translation, I think it's really worth having on your shelf. But he wrote in his commentary, "For most men, God is much too small. They hold an anthropomorphic view of God, which literally means they equate God's abilities with man at his finest." In other words, if man can't do it, how can God do it? So we'll transfer to God the best but only limit Him by what man could pull off. So when you get to the parting of the Red Sea, they shake their head. Or Jonah being swallowed by the great fish. "Ah, that can't be true." Or the multiplication of the loaves or the raising of the dead. And because man can't do it, God must not be able to do it. And so they balk at the gospel. "Do you really believe that?" "Well, yeah, I do." "How is that possible? Explain how that works." And you want to just go, "Well, He's God! It makes Him smarter than you."

God begins the Bible, as we start to read it (if you started again in January), not to defend His existence - which you might want to find at the beginning, "I'm God. I'm going to give you a good defense for who I am." He doesn't begin with an explanation of His power. He just begins with a declaration of His actions. "In the beginning, God created." And He doesn't care if you believe it or not. He's just tellin' you this is what happened. In fact, I think Pastor Chuck used to say it a lot, but he used to say, "If you can get by chapter 1:1 of Genesis, the rest of the Bible is easy. 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' All right. Everything else is easy." Right? It shouldn't then be a big issue that He could raise the dead.

So he says, in verse 8, "Why is it such an incredible thought to you, King Agrippa, to think that God could raise the dead? It's God!" The difficulty of a task is always determined by measuring it against someone who's attempting to do it. If

you say to me you can walk on a wire from building to building, I'd say that's impossible for me. You might be able to do it. I know I can't. Trying to understand God while you're a finite being who has limitations is futile. You're left to just conclude, "God's bigger than I am, smarter than I am. His ways are beyond my finding out." It's a great place to be, actually. You don't have all the answers; He does. So I can just look at Him with awe and commit myself to Him. To listen to the scientists tell me that there are a hundred billion stars in our galaxy and that there may be a hundred billion galaxies in the universe, all flying through space, and then I open my Bible, and it says the LORD measures the universe from His thumb to His little finger. He goes, "Yeah, it's about that size" (Pastor Jack holds his hand up and spreads his thumb from his forefinger, about 3"). And we're like Hubble telescope and lightyears, and we don't know what to think, and He goes, "Yeah, it's about like that." It's a big God, isn't it? He's doin' like this, you're goin' like this, He's doin' like this. It's good to know your God. But if you have a bad concept of God, the gospel's gotta just be difficult because there're too many miracles involved. We serve a big God. "Who has measured the waters with the hollow of His hand, measured heaven with a span and calculated the dust of the earth in a measure? Weighed the mountains in His scales," all in the book of Isaiah (40:12) so that we might know how big God is. Go the other direction, God has created a miniature planetary system, the atom, that is so small that it takes a million of them squeezed tightly together to equal the thickness of one human hair. You need a microscope to see this kind of stuff. Our body contains about sixty trillion cells. When God's the Agent, any talk of difficulty, though, is absurd. He created the universe and the intricacy of the atom. He can certainly raise the dead and heal your body and answer your prayer. "Oh, He answered my prayer!" Yeah, He's God. It's amazing - the God that we serve. But I think we limit Him an awful lot by just not having a proper concept of God.

It is no more incredible that you can live again than you can be alive at all. So when Paul writes to the Ephesians (3:20), "Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think," that's a good concept of God. He's gonna do more than you can come up with. We do the same thing with praying. "Oh, you have cancer? I'll pray. Oh, God.....I don't think there's hope." "I have a headache." "Oh, let me just pray for you right now.....Lord, just heal the headache." As if somehow He might be able to handle the headache but the cancer, oh, He can't handle that. He can handle that. He's God. I serve a big God. But I don't always see that. So, we see the power of God but wonder if He'll use it for our benefit. Somehow, "Gosh, will He do it for me? I know that He can, but

will He?" I always like Romans 8:32 which says, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" In other words, there's an open door to come and ask and seek Him.

So Paul is before the powers that be. He's got a guy who's a wicked pervert in power, not even liked by his own government, who now is going to have to come up with charges. He's got Festus over here who won't make a decision. He's got Felix, probably killed on his way to Rome, who'll never come back; just left him there. And Paul just went, "I want to reach this guy. I want to reach him." So he talks about his reputation in Jerusalem but turns immediately to the fact that his trial and his difficulty were because he believes in the promises that God made to Israel of a Messiah and then said, "Hey, what's holdin' people up? Is it the resurrection? What kind of concept of God do you have?" That's his approach.

He says, in verse 9, " 'Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.' " I want you to notice these words, "Indeed, I myself thought," because it seems to me that those words - and I've underlined them in my Bible - summarize the testimony of every religious unsaved person in history. "Here's what I thought I should do." Religion is just like that. "I honestly thought this is what I should do." Man, at his best, seeking to lay out what God should be like, what God should want, how things should go, "I thought." You ask people, "Are you going to go to heaven?" they say, "Yes," and you say, "Why?" and they'll tell you what they think. "This is what I think." Now it doesn't mean it's true, but it drives the behaviors of men. Naaman, the leper who came to Israel at the suggestion of a Jewish slave that worked in his house, used this very expression when he was told that his potential healing was not going to involve his works, his ability, his power, his pride or his wealth. "You're really not going to be of much help to me in terms of your healing." And when he went away and was told by the prophet to go dip seven times in the Jordan, he walked away; and this is what he said (it's in 2 Kings 5:11), "I thought he'll surely come out and wave his hand over me and call upon the name of his God, and then I'll be healed. I thought that's what would happen. Now he wants me to go dunk myself in this dirty river. We've got cleaner rivers at home. Is he nuts?!" But you see, he was confronted with the, "I thought." And Paul says the same thing here to the king, "I thought that this is the way that I should go." Now, Naaman begrudgingly goes and obeys the prophet of God. We don't have a lot of explanation about him dunking and, "One," and, "See? Nothin'. Two. This is just stupid. I'm gettin' out of here. Three. I'm gonna kill that guy when I get out of here. Four." And then he gets to five, and he's

clean. I mean, completely clean. And he came back to the prophet, and he ran into his servant, but he said to him, "I know that there's no other God in the earth except the God of Israel. I want to give a gift to your servant. I want to give a reward to the fellow who sent me to obey the LORD." But he came back, "I thought, but now I know." It isn't anymore, "I thought."

Coming to Jesus involves me being delivered from "I think" or "I thought" or "I hope." You've got to get to "I know." There's no doubt that folks that are religious are sincere. But notice that Paul said, "I wanted to do things contrary to the name of Jesus. My idea was to go a different route." If you tell people how to get saved, there're a lot of people that will respond, "Well, here's what I think you should do. I'm just gonna do the best that I can. I'm gonna be holier than most people. I'm going to church on Christmas and Easter. I'm gonna go twice. I'll be a CEO - Christmas and Easter only." (Laughing) "I'm gonna be one of those." Right? "But God's gonna be happy with me because I don't lie much, I don't drink too much. When I get drunk, I'm a nice person. I don't yell and scream. I give the poor food. I'm a happy guy. I'm ready to go because I think this is the way it should work." The problem is God doesn't really care what you think about that. He has a plan.

But Paul said the same thing, "I thought in all of my religion I was doing the right thing, but everything I was doing was contrary to what Jesus wanted. I found myself to be on the other end of things." And Paul gives some examples of "I thought" activities in the Lord prior to salvation. He said, in verse 10, " 'This I also did in Jerusalem' " (being contrary to Jesus) " '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. 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 thought this was the way to go." He had been the Sanhedrin's best weapon against the spread of Christianity. He was ruthless, he was heartless, he was thorough. "Lock them up to shut them up, or else they die." That was his motto. I think he had a shirt that said that, "Lock them up or shut them up." Because that was his goal. Put 'em in jail or make 'em blaspheme. In Paul's day, the Christians were still meeting in the synagogues. It was easy to find them, easy to have accomplices with you, if you will, and easy to persecute them. So, with authority from the high priest, he arrested and tried and convicted and punished believers in Jesus. He forced them to renounce their faith. He demanded that they blaspheme. Imagine what Paul

had to live with, knowing all of this about yourself. And Paul gave his voice, being a Sanhedrin member, against them.

Now, this bothered Paul tremendously. In fact, if you read through the epistles, you will find Paul time and again just saying (1 Corinthians 15:9 & 1 Timothy 1:13), "I'm the least of the apostles. I persecuted the church. I did it in unbelief. I wasn't aware how wicked I was, but this is the life that I lived." And Paul found himself suffering tremendously with guilt and all, but he's the epitome of "there's a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Proverbs 14:12). Now he's testifying to this. Remember I said you should give your testimony. He was writing in there, "Here's the horrible way I lived." Now he doesn't spend a lot of time with it, but he references all of it. So driven, so wrong, he even was so excited that he didn't settle for Jerusalem; he went off to foreign cities.

Verse 12, " 'While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, 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. 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." So I said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." ' ' " For Paul it was business as usual on the day that he would come to know the Lord. He wanted to make town by sunset. He was driven by a religious rage to go hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem. He had a contingency with him. It was the middle of the day at noon when the unexpected happened and the churning began in Paul's heart; and God addressed Paul in a big way. We read, in verse 13, that it was "at midday," when the sun was brightest, that a dazzling light shone about him. This was no private vision. Everyone saw the light. Everyone hit the deck. We will read that everyone heard a noise even though Paul was the only one that understood the language or the words that the Lord was speaking to him; this was God showing up to deal with Paul. (You can read that in chapter 22, back a few chapters.) Jesus knew Paul's heart. Disguised it as he might have - in his rage, in his accomplishments, in his religious fervor - something was going on in Paul's heart that no one could see but Paul and the Lord; and that was Paul hated himself for what he was doing. He couldn't get any rest; he was under great conviction. And since the day of Stephen's death and the way that Stephen had preached and the way that he had died, and the face of the angel and, "Father, forgive them, don't blame any of them for me getting him killed," Paul couldn't live with it. And yet he was driven by this

blindness. It haunted Paul for years. He'd done some major damage. But this was the day that Jesus came to Paul, and Paul was ready. And it may not have looked like it on the outward. I find a lot of times people get saved in our church, people that I've met and maybe they're not saved, and then one day they get saved, and they're the least-likely people, from my perspective, to get saved. They've been bitter and angry and always on the defensive, and then they get broken. And Paul finds himself that way as well. And he realizes, notice, that the Person he's been fighting against all along was God, and not only God, was His Son, Jesus. "It's been hard for you to kick against the goads." It's a well-known proverb in the culture, if you will. A goad was a stick with a sharp point on it in several different directions; they usually put it at the back of the oxen pulling the plow so they don't kick back. It encouraged them to follow directions, if you will. Paul had been on this path to long resist the conviction of God's Spirit. There was a lot of goading. There was a lot of pain. And obviously, though he was zealous outwardly, he was doubting within. But I love the picture of God just not giving up on someone. We view them on the outward, and we think, "Well, they'll never get saved." In fact, when I got saved out of high school, and I went to my ten-year anniversary out of high school, and I was already a pastor, everyone came to me that was a Christian and said, "Well, you'd be the last guy we thought would get saved." Which I don't think was a compliment (Laughing) but they hadn't seen me in ten years; maybe they were nicer than I thought. But it was such a weird thing, you know? You look at people, and you go, "They're not gonna make it." Here's Paul. It's so good to know that God doesn't give up. And when Paul said, "Who are You, Lord? Whoever You are, You're the Lord," He said, "I'm Jesus." And Paul's whole world unraveled in a moment. All of his training, his traditions, his religion, his beliefs - they all kind of crumbled around him. "Jesus is alive? Even though He was crucified?" To touch His people is to touch Him. "Why are you messin' with My people? Why are you persecuting Me?" Remember that the next time you go after one of God's kids. They belong to Him. And I don't know too many fathers who will just stand around and watch you hurt their children. And God's no exception.

So the Lord says to Paul, verse 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. I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, 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.' " "Get up. I've come

for you for a reason. I've saved you to use you." And in much the same way that the Old Testament prophets were called, God called Paul, calls us, called Isaiah and called Jeremiah. In all of them you'll find something similar - they're all at the feet of Jesus before they can stand up before others. They have to bow down before Him. Right? If God's gonna use you, it's because you're on your face before Him. If He breaks you, then He can use you. And Paul, I don't think it took much breaking. I mean, the kind of horrible things that he did - imagine being a testimony, "Yeah, I killed a lot of Christians because I wanted to serve God." You'd go, "Man, I don't even want to talk to that guy." But God used Paul. Paul's testimony is valuable to us because we've been called by the Lord to do the same thing he's been called to do - in our generation. It's a clear calling. None of you get off the hook. It isn't like, "Well, that's the pastor's job." That's wrong. It's not. "Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1). So we have a calling, and we're to reach the world.

Read these few verses, and you say to yourself, "What did God want Paul to be?" and the answer was He wanted him to be a "minister." The word "minister" here is the Greek word for under-rower. It refers to someone down in the galley of the ship where they would just row; they didn't know where they were going, necessarily, but they labored along with others for the sake of whoever the captain was of the ship. He was a subordinate who labored under the direction of another. It was a servant without applause, without notice, accomplishing the will of the captain. "That's what I want you to be, Paul. I want you to go to work, and I've got works for you to do."

The word "witness" in Greek is the word "*martus*." It is where we get our word martyr, and we think immediately of someone that dies. But that's not what the word means biblically. It usually means (and most often is used to be) someone that has a witness or knows or saw what they can testify to. You're not the lawyer arguing the case, you're not the judge deciding it, you're just someone who saw something, and you testify to it. "Here's what God did in my life. Here's what the Lord did for me. Here's how God answered my question." "Paul, I want to save you to be an under-rower and a mouthpiece. You've got things you can share now. You're gonna have more stuff later when I show you other things that you don't know now. But you can get busy now. You can get busy beginning to pass along what you've heard and what you believe and what you understand." And what did God want Paul to be? A "minister" and a "witness" and be that one who will share.

And then notice, verse 17, He says, "I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you." "This job's not easy. It's a hard road. I'll save you, rescue you," if you will, "but the job has to be done." And in verses 17 and 18, what does God want Paul to do? He wanted him, verse 17, to go to the Gentiles. "Go to the Gentiles, open their eyes, turn them from darkness to light, turn them from the power of Satan to God." It is all literally a very short declaration for what the gospel is all about. Right? People are sitting in darkness tonight. You share the gospel with them, and the light goes on. That's how I got saved. I went to a house in Bellflower to pick up two kilos of pot. It was supposed to be there; I don't know what happened. Instead, I walked into a Bible study, (Laughing) and my dealer friend, smiling at me like the Cheshire Cat, "Sit over there." And by the time the pastor was done, I got saved. And I left that day with eternal life and no two kilos. I don't know. God met me. I had no plans to get saved that day at all. I don't think Paul had any plans to get saved this day, either.

So we are spiritually blind. Right? "If the gospel is veiled," Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:3, "it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this world has blinded, lest the light of the gospel of Jesus shine into their eyes," they get saved, they can see. That's really our calling. Why do you give your testimony? So you can tell people and give people the light of God's Word and what He's able to do. "I want to turn them from darkness to light, from Satan's power to God's power." Sin leaves us blinded to our need for Jesus and blind to who He really is. "So, tell them Paul. Satan blinds, but Jesus will open the eyes of the blind." And Paul learned that well that first week when he sat around blind for a few days. We're often so slow to believe His assessment of us. I don't know if we really believe that we should be saved, and then when we get saved, "I don't really believe that He can use me," and then "I don't really believe that testimonies are powerful or that God's Word changes lives." But it's all true. Isn't it? It's all true.

I remember reading a story (I thought about that this morning going through these verses) of a wife that called her husband at work, and she said, "Hey, the car won't start. There's water in the carburetor." And he said, "That's impossible. I'll come home right now. Where's the car?" And she said, "At the bottom of the pool." (Laughing) I always like the story.

So God's diagnosis of us is, "You're dead in sin." "That's impossible." "No. You're dead in your sin, and you need forgiveness, and I can breathe new life into you. I can forgive you. Just come to My Son." That's the truth.

So why are we so afraid to share that? Because we don't believe it ourselves? We're not so sure it's so powerful? Paul was convinced. His life had been at such horrible depths of decay that when he got saved, he was in debt to the Lord for the rest of his life. "I'm going to send you to the Gentiles. I'm going to have you open their eyes in order that they can turn. Once their eyes are opened, they can go from darkness to light, from Satan's power to God's power. They can find forgiveness for their sins and a future and an inheritance that is given to everyone set apart by faith in Christ. That's your job, Paul. Preach the gospel."

You know, there are only two kingdoms. There're only two spheres of government. In the beginning, there was only one. In the end, there'll only be one. But in the middle, there're two. Right? There's God's kingdom, and there's the enemy. I had a guy a while back (I was sharing with) say to me, "Well I don't believe in Jesus, but I'm certainly no follower of Satan either. I'm my own man." And I thought, "Well, you know, the Bible says maybe God will grant you repentance to know the truth; you could escape the snare of the devil; you've been taken captive by him at his will" (2 Timothy 2:25). I mean, you can say of yourself what you want, but if you're not willing to turn to Christ, you're in trouble. "If you abide in my word, my words abide in you, you can have truth. The truth will set you free." That's what He said (John 8:31). So you want to come to Jesus, you're going to have to have your sins forgiven. He'll do that. Want to have a hope for the future? He'll give you that. Set free, eyes open, slate clean, into the family. That's a long way from verse 9 which says, "I thought that killing people in Damascus would have been a great way to please God." Now he's on his face goin', "Lord, what do You want me to do?" He was to go and tell others, and the lies of the enemy and the truth of God would be made clear.

I remember reading in Spurgeon's book "Lectures to My Students." He told a story of a young man who came to class and said to Spurgeon, "How do I defend my Bible against the skeptics?" And I don't know if you know anything about Spurgeon, but Spurgeon was like a cigar-smokin', 300-pound dude. He was just a big round guy. And he was really funny to listen to. His stories were legendary. But he laughed at the kid, and he said, "Well, I guess that's like trying to defend a caged lion." He said, "Just let him out, and he'll defend himself." And he said, "That's kind of what the Lord said to Paul, 'I want you to go out and let out the truth. And a light'll come on, and the devil will flee, and people will turn, and lives'll be changed, and there'll be forgiveness.'" Man's greatest need is God's greatest deed. We need forgiveness, we find it with Jesus.

I may have told you this story before (but it reminded me today) of a father in Madrid who had a son named Paco, and he had been alienated from him for many years. And the dad got saved. And so he took out a half-page ad in the Madrid Sun-Times, and it just said, "Paco, come home. I'm sorry. I love you. I'll meet you at the park across from the newspaper office at 10:00 tomorrow morning." When the dad showed up that morning, 800 Pacos showed up, (Laughing) hoping it was their dad. Apparently a true story. I have no way of checking it, but the guy said it was a true story. Until I prove otherwise.....let's just say there were only 400 Pacos.

But in Christ we get called by the Lord to come home and back to Him. And He's willing if we are.

Notice that, in verse 19, Paul then changes the narrative and turns it around from "Here's what happened to me" and then says to Agrippa, "What's gonna happen to you as a result? What will God be able to do in your life?" And he says, " 'Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but I went to declare," and then he lists the gospel that he declares and what happened; in verse 24, Festus' response to Paul "with a loud voice." And verse 27 he says to Agrippa, " 'Do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe.' " And Agrippa said to Paul, " 'You almost persuade me to become a Christian.' " And Paul says, " 'I would to God not only you, but also all who hear me today, listening.' " I mean, that's where Paul's heart was.

So there's something to be said for taking what God's done in your life and telling somebody else. Maybe you go, "Well, I don't know about that. I don't know the Bible so well. I've got a lot" That's why you're here. Right? You're learning it every week, hopefully, a little better. I learned it every week, too. So let's put into practice what we know. Somebody needs to hear how you got saved, and no one's gonna tell the story like you do. And no one's gonna listen to you like the people that love you and care for you. I remember sharing with my dad about how I got saved, and he just thought I'd wasted his money sending me to Catholic school, and I was a disappointment to him in the worst way. He just, "You broke your mother's heart," and then for three years they didn't talk to me at all. No Christmas. No visiting the kids. No comin' over on the birthday. I mean, I didn't get a call from my dad for three years. But eight years later, he got saved. So go tell somebody. God works. And now my dad dies, and he goes to heaven. If I hadn't had that assurance, that's a lot harder than to know where he is and how he

got there. So it'd be worth you.....how many of you have a testimony that you could share right now? I'll call you up here. (Laughing) Oh, what happened?! There're only a couple of dozen of you that raised your hands, though, and there're four or five hundred of you here. So what's wrong? Go to work on a testimony. All right? Have one available. Tell everyone that asks. Doll it up. Get a cute story. Make it sound exciting. I mean, it's gonna be powerful. You know? Put it in a beautiful frame. "Here's what God's done in my life."

And next week we'll go and we'll find out how the response went, and is it really the response that should move us or the love for the Lord that we have?

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
January 13, 2019