

Let's open our Bibles tonight to Acts 26:19. Getting pretty close to being finished with this book. We've been at it for sixteen months, I believe. So congratulations if you've stuck all the way through that. Lots to learn.

This particular section of the book of Acts began back in chapter 21:17 as Paul arrived in Jerusalem with a lot of elders in tow from various Gentile churches scattered throughout Europe and Asia. They had come to bring gifts from their congregations to the poor in Jerusalem. Paul hoped that somehow he could bridge the gap between the Jewish believer and the Gentile believer; it was a struggle early on. Paul was welcomed with great and open arms by the saints. He met with James and the elders. They were excited about what they heard, but they said, "There're a lot of people here very zealous, too, but we're zealous for the law, and we heard that you're just runnin' around tellin' everybody to ignore it. So you don't have a very good reputation here, Paul. And so here's what we think that you should do. Why don't you take your own money and sponsor four men that are here for the Pentecost Feast that are making Nazirite vows and pay their way and go with them every day there to the altar and there to the Temple. And people will see that what they've heard about you isn't exactly true." Paul, in his desire to bridge the gap, agreed. It was a compromise. He certainly would have been comfortable doing something else.

And it went all right for those seven days until, on the last day, some men from Ephesus who were in town (and where Paul had spent three years planting a church) accused him of bringing a Gentile into a part of the Temple that the Jews would not have permitted; there was a law against it - it was punishable by death. Paul hadn't done it, but they stirred up the crowds. The crowds, in their religious fervor, grabbed Paul, nearly beat him to death. The Romans came - the soldiers led by a fellow named Claudius Lysias - grabbed Paul, saved his neck, carried him up the stairs of the Antonia Fortress, there on the corner of the Temple Mount. And Paul asked if he could speak to the crowd, which he was permitted to do. He spoke in their language. He believed that God had sent him to speak. He always wanted to give the message to those in Jerusalem. He would say to the Romans he would be willing to go to hell if they could go to heaven. I mean, he so loved the Jews. And he thought that they would listen, but they didn't. And all of those prophecies

that had been warning Paul over those last several months as he traveled towards Jerusalem come true fairly quickly. They were incensed, and life was about to get a whole lot harder. They listened to Paul's testimony. They were fine until he said, "The Lord told me to go speak to the Gentiles." And all they had to do was hear that word "Gentiles," and they went nuts. They barely got Paul again out of the crowd. They took him upstairs. Claudius thought about scourging him to get to the bottom of it. Paul told him he was a (Roman) citizen, which would not allow him to be scourged, obviously. The next day, the captain ordered the Sanhedrin to show up with Paul. The division that had been caused - he wanted to address it. Paul looked around and figured, "There's really no way to beat this thing." He'd been a member of the Sanhedrin. Half of them were Sadducees - they didn't even believe in God or life after death; they were really the political wing. Others were Pharisees - they believed in both. And Paul played a pretty good move, I think. He said, "I think I'm being judged because I believe in the resurrection," which got half of the people on his side and the other half goin' nuts. It didn't work out.

Claudius put him back in prison, kind of wanted to hold him under protective custody so he could get to the bottom of it. During that day that he was in lock-up, a little nephew of Paul's heard out on the street a plot to have forty men swear that they wouldn't eat until they had Paul killed and asked the Sanhedrin to request of Lysias to bring Paul down again for another meeting, and, "When they bring him, we'll kill him." And that got made known to, of all things, Paul's little nephew who went and told Paul, who went and told the captain, and the captain decided he'd better get Paul out of Dodge while he could. And so he sent him at night under cover to Caesarea to a fellow named Felix, who was the governor at the time, and also who understood the Jews and a bit about the church. Paul appeared before Felix. He gave him a powerful testimony - you can read about it in chapter 24. Felix refused to hear what Paul had to say. He immediately determined Paul was innocent, but he wouldn't let him go; he hoped that some friends of Paul would bring some bribe money, and Felix could put some cash in his pocket to let Paul go. They didn't. Paul did not follow that opportunity at all. He stayed put. For two years, he languished in jail there in Caesarea.

Felix, violent man, was recalled to Rome, and he was really never heard from again. His wife went shopping near Vesuvius that same year and was killed in the eruption. And Felix was replaced by a fellow named Festus, a 70-year-old guy; had been around a long time. He wanted to make peace with the Jews. It was a tough place to rule for the Romans. He said to Paul, "Hey, could we go to Jerusalem where we

can work this out?" and Paul figured if he had to go back to Jerusalem, he was going to kill him. In fact he said that, and so did Festus; they just wanted him dead. And Paul said, "No, we're not goin' back there. If you don't want to make a decision, then I want to go to Rome and be heard by Nero." And so as a political prisoner, in many ways, and as a pawn in Festus' eyes, anyway, Paul refused. And so Festus, who's really young - not young in age but young in the position - now is in a lurch. He had a guy that was already wanting to go to Rome. It was an official request. He would be embarrassed. He had no charges to lay at Paul's feet. And so he didn't know what to do.

About that time, King Agrippa II and his wife (also his sister) Bernice came to welcome Festus there to Caesarea. They were two people that were frowned upon by the Romans. They ruled in north Lebanon. They weren't very well-liked. They were brother and sister in an incestuous relationship. They had both converted to Judaism; neither one of them practiced it. Both of them were fairly well-versed, though, in Jewish law and in Jewish religion and all. And Festus thought it would be a good thing if he could get these two to hear Paul out and maybe help him formulate some charges before Paul gets sent off to Rome.

And so last week, in chapter 26 - the first eighteen verses or so, Paul was called by Festus before Agrippa and before Bernice, and the Lord gave to Paul a great opportunity for, again, presenting to those in power. Now remember, he's been in jail for several years for no reason at all. But he stands to give a testimony of his conversion and his calling. And we talked last week about how powerful your testimony in the Lord can be and how God can greatly use it, and how often, in the Bible, the personal testimony of others was the leading cause in someone coming to the realization of who God was. And we encouraged you last week if you don't have a testimony written out, you should work on one. Write it out, polish it up, find Scriptures that support what you remember and what you learned and what God taught you. Have a way to be able to share it with people who ask because I think you'll find yourself not only in a great opportunity to talk about the Lord but you'll see a lot of fruit. Because it's certainly that way in the Scriptures. And we pointed out to you how often Paul would just go out of his way just to give his testimony. Even to the Galatians (in chapter 1), he starts writing, and then he goes, "Oh, by the way, I," and then there he goes with his testimony again of how the Lord saved him. So that was last week.

In fact Paul, in his testimony, covered three areas: he covered how he was raised as a strict Pharisee and schooled in the best Jewish school in the neighborhood by the best teachers; he turned from his religious upbringing to his radicalization as a terrorist against the church - a fanatic, a persecutor; but he saved most of his breath and time for the testimony of how the Lord then saved him - the miraculous way that God spoke to him and how He commissioned him to be an apostle and go out on the road. And Paul focused most on the conversion that took place. And so should we. I mean, if you're going to give your testimony, we all know how rotten you can be, but what has the Lord done? That's what we want to share. So, what does your road to Damascus ... what did it do for you when the Lord finally got to you?

Well tonight we want to start in verse 19. It is the end of this sermon. It is also the reaction and the response that we get from Festus, from Agrippa, from Bernice. It is the result of the testimony that Paul gives. Next week, we will start a four-week journey (before we finish the book) to go towards Rome. (We'll have new maps for you. I think we've given them to you before, but we'll make them available again.) So this is really it as far as Paul's time in prison in Caesarea before he heads for Rome, where he's going to be in prison several more years.

So we begin in verse 19. After Paul had talked about his calling and the Lord reappearing and telling him what his ministry was going to be, then he said, in verse 19, " 'Therefore, King Agrippa,' " (this is, like I said, Agrippa II) " 'I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.' " Interesting little Greek phrase, figure of speech, the words "not disobedient." It's kind of an understatement to highlight the opposite. You find it a lot in Greek. Paul was saying, "Far from disobeying the Lord once He saved me, I flung myself wholeheartedly into serving and following Him from the moment I was saved." Paul didn't have a warming-up period, you know, "I got saved and then, three years later, I really got aware of the Lord." No. Paul, from day one. And how could you not? The Lord knocks you down, and you're blind, and in three days you get to look at your life, and you've been a murderer and a persecutor, and here the Lord sends a disciple to pray. And He says to you, "I'm going to send you to the Gentiles. I want you to open the eyes of those that are in darkness and turn them to the light and away from Satan and turn them to God." And Paul goes, "Yeah, I wasn't disobedient to that. The minute that God spoke, I began to move." His eyes were opened to

the error of his ways. He began to serve the Lord - He became the passion of his life. Jesus said, of Mary Magdalene, "To whom much has been forgiven, then there's much love" (Luke 7:47). And Paul, I think, maybe more than anyone realized how much God had wiped off of his slate and what He'd done. You know? I think sometimes people get saved for convenient reasons. "Well, I should go to heaven." Without sorrow, without repentance, without really a knowledge of sin or an awareness of God's holiness. And that's going to take some work - God's going to have to get through all of that. But Paul saw it, I think, from the beginning. From that day on the road to Damascus, he was forever changed. I can't imagine anyone hearing God's voice speak like this and turning away from Him. And Paul was changed from a Christian-killer to a future gospel preacher that God would use so mightily that I don't know if anyone has spoken to that many people, planted that many churches, affected that many lives in their generation than Paul. But God will confront each of us, I think, at some point with the truth of His love for us. And what will we do with it?

If you go back and just look at these little trials that are stuck together in a few chapters here, you can, like Felix, hear the gospel and tremble like Felix did but yet refuse it. It frightened him. He asked a lot of questions, and then he went away. The rich young ruler (Matthew 19, Mark 10, Luke 18) noticed in Jesus something he didn't have but wasn't willing to leave his life that he lived behind, and so he hears the gospel, goes away sad, but still refuses it. Festus will, in a few minutes, say to Paul, "The gospel's a foolish idea." To him, it just didn't line up in his thinking. I mean, here's an old guy (he's an old guy, he's in his seventies now), and he's not willing to listen; he's made up his mind. Agrippa, it seems like the gospel maybe gets too close to his heart and, rather than facing his debauched life, he turns and kind of runs and ends the meeting altogether. Or you can be like Paul. You can just hear what God has to say about you and surrender your life - realize the offer of forgiveness and how much you're needing to be forgiven and how much God is willing to wipe away and then be saved.

And so Paul said to Agrippa, "When I got saved, that was it. When I met the Lord, that was it for me. I was radically converted to Jesus. So I wasn't disobedient, but I began to preach this same message that touched my life to anyone and to everyone who would listen." And that was his testimony before this king. "I sing the same song every day. I've never lost sight of the fact that there is a saving power to God's Word. I share it whenever possible."

Notice, in verse 20, that Paul talks about going to Damascus. We know (from chapter 9 of Acts) that when Paul came to the Lord, he basically left Damascus for Arabia, where he disappeared for about three years into the Arabian Peninsula. The Lord had healed his eyes. He had been baptized by Ananias. But then he just kind of disappears from the scene. And Paul will reference that time and say that no one really taught him but the Lord taught him, and it was really in the Bible school of one. God kind of isolated him away from everyone. He kind of disappeared from the scene, and the Lord taught him in ways that he really doesn't share much of in the Scriptures.

When he came back to Damascus, according to the Scriptures, he sought to speak to the Jews and to go to the synagogue. And to be honest with you, no one cared to hear from Paul. I don't know if it was because they saw this was a traitor who had one day been our champion and now he had actually converted to the enemy's side. But whatever the case may be, they didn't want anything to do with him. In fact, he was in town just for a few days, and he was already on a list to be put to death. The church had to hang him in a bucket from the walls of the city at night, and he just barely got away with his life. He headed down to Jerusalem, again, the Bible tells us, where he stayed for fourteen days. Barnabas was nice enough to be an encourager to try to broker a meeting between him and the apostles who really didn't want to see him either. A couple of the disciples, according to the epistles Paul wrote, did meet with him. Don't know what they said much to each other. It didn't seem to go anywhere - that's for sure. And within two weeks, the church took him down to the docks and put him on a boat to go home. And they literally said, "Could you just leave? You're causing a lot of trouble here." In fact, it says when Paul left, the church had rest in Jerusalem. So he gets saved, with all of that background; he's taught for three years. He tried to be faithful in Damascus, but no one was listening. He did go to Jerusalem, but it didn't go anywhere, and then Paul goes home on a boat several hundred miles north to Tarsus, where he remains in obscurity for over a decade. For you that think that you've just gotten saved, "Why hasn't the Lord given me a church and a pastorate yet?" look how many years Paul spent ministering - quietly, away from everyone. Paul would stay in Tarsus until Barnabas - his old buddy from Jerusalem - would come to Antioch, 300 miles north. The church was growing there. Barnabas didn't feel like he could be the pastor; he was an encourager. But he knew Paul was a good teacher, and he went looking for Paul and talked him into coming back and pastoring the church, where Paul stayed for a year. And from that missionary church in the north, Paul would go out on several long missionary journeys over a fifteen-year period into

uncharted *Gentile* lands - went to Galatia, went to Europe, went to Asia - preaching the same message. Scores of churches were planted. Many disciples were made. But all of this had not been happening for the last few years; he'd been in prison.

So Paul, in looking back, said, "Look, when the Lord saved me, I was obedient to His calling. I went to share wherever God would allow me to go. And I wanted to get this message out." And the message, in verse 20 (at the end), is pretty much the kind of message you want to be sure you have in your message to others. It was a personal call to repentance, it was an encouragement for people to turn to the Lord and then to live the kind of life that would reflect the other two. "I've repented of my ways, I've turned my life to the Lord, and now I'm doing what I didn't used to do before." So mark verse 20 down. Make sure that when you put your testimony together that woven in there is this message: you need to first repent. The word "*metanoia*," in Greek, literally means to be about face or to put it in reverse or to turn around. It literally, when it is a reference to you in your relationship with God, is the call that you reject the way that you've been going, and you begin to embrace His. It literally is, "I'm not going this way, my way."

I think last week, in verse 9, in Paul's testimony we pointed out that he said, "Indeed, I thought I should do many things contrary to the name of Jesus." And we said most religion is like that; it is people who think they know what God wants. "Indeed, I thought." But Paul ended up saying, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" and that was the big conversion. Right? So everybody has a philosophy that they adhere to and live by, but man's ways to God are always the wrong way. It always leads to judgment. So the first thing anybody has to do to be saved is to repent. They've got to be willing to say, "I'm not on the road to life here. This isn't the way that I should go." Like Paul, each of us is called by God to turn from our own ways. Proverbs 16:25 says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." In Romans 6:23, Paul said, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." So, often when you call people to repent, they get angry. And usually it is because we all like to be right. No one likes to be challenged about their position. I can't begin to tell you how many times I've shared the Lord with somebody, and they say to me something to the extent of, "Who do you think you are telling me who to believe in?" Or, "Are you perfect?" And I went, "No! But I know somebody who is, and you should know Him, too." It is always that we want to be right and not challenged. And so it's difficult when you call people to repentance, and that's, I think, where a lot of the battle goes for us sharing - what we like to avoid. But I was thinking about it.

Noah didn't stand on the steps of the ark and yell out to the public, "Hey, something good is about to happen to you!" They hated him because of what he was preaching. Amos was not threatened with death by the priests for preaching a message, "I'm okay, you're okay." He was threatened because he was preaching the Word of God. Jeremiah wasn't thrown into a dungeon because he was talking to the people about the possibility and the power of possibility thinking. He was thrown into a dungeon because he was crying out that man had sinned and needed to be forgiven. Daniel wasn't thrown to the lions for saying, "Jesus loves you. Smile." He was thrown to the lions because he stood his ground biblically and did what the LORD asked him to do. John the Baptist was not beheaded for having a "Honk if you love Jesus" sticker on his chariot. He was in trouble because he spoke out against sin and represented the things of the Lord. So whether it's Daniel or Noah or Jeremiah or Amos or John the Baptist or Paul or Jesus, when you call men to repent, it's often where the battle ensues because no one wants to be told that somehow they're not in the place that they should be. When Jeremiah wrote, in chapter 8:6, to the children of Israel, he said, "I listened and heard, but they do not speak aright. No man repented of his wickedness, saying, 'What have I done?' " In fact, he said, "Everyone turned to his own course, as the horse rushes into the battle." So stubborn that the response to a call for repentance was one of almost a natural kind of instinct to run away from it.

Paul said, "Ever since I've been saved, I went to preach to Jews and Gentiles the world over, and this is my message: first, repent; first, repent." Remember what we read in Matthew 11:20 where it says, "He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent." That's what the word is. They wouldn't repent. They'd seen enough to repent. They should have known enough to repent. But they don't. And so they stand their ground. So, for Paul, the message of testimony and of outreach has to include the word "repent." But that hardly changes the will of God. If you won't turn to the Lord, He won't change; you're going to have to change. Jesus said (Mark 1:15), "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel." That's our message, isn't it? That should be your message to your neighbors, your family, your friends, co-workers. We've got to turn to the Lord. We've got to turn back. "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Right? That's His will. So that was Paul's message first. Repentance tells us who think that we have it all together that we don't. Repentance tells those who feel they're okay, they're not.

And those who think that they're going to get to heaven on their own that they cannot. The first and foremost step of salvation is always turning around. Giving up your plan, giving up your "I thought" has to be first.

Second of all notice, in verse 20, that Paul says then "turn to God." It's not enough to just turn away from you. You have to turn towards the One that can give you life. And the first step is to turn from your own ways; the second step is to turn to God's ways. If you're an alcoholic, and you go, "Man, I gave that up, I'm doin' transcendental meditation now," not exactly a move in the right direction. You've turned away from your own ways, maybe, but you're turning to something that can't give you life. I talked to a Mormon yesterday who used to be a Jehovah Witness; not good. Paul calls men to turn from their ways to Jesus. In fact, the word "turn" is the word for convert or transform. Sometimes it is translated switch, if that would make it any easier for you. "For if you return to the LORD," that's what we read in 2 Chronicles 30:9. "If you return to the LORD" (if you'll come back to the LORD), "the LORD will meet you with grace and mercy." It's that, "I give up on my ways, and then I turn to His ways." Repentance turns you from your own ways - whatever you are, whatever you think - reverses your direction. Biblical repentance always turns to Jesus.

And then the third, and maybe the application, portion is it should show. There should be works, there should be fruit, there should be a life that's been changed. If you believe you don't know the way, but He does, if you're not the Savior, but He is, if there's no life with you, but there's life with Him, then that should show. There's no way to hide God's presence in your life. It should show. And the frustration, sometimes, for us is people say, "I love the Lord," and you go, "Yeah, I don't see it. If you hadn't have told that to me, I wouldn't know that at all. I would not pick you out of a crowd. I wouldn't point you out as the one who loves Jesus. I don't see anything in your life that would convince me of that." Paul said that part of the message of the gospel is you should bring forth fruit that is equivalent to or that is a cause for or that is befitting, that lines up with a life that has been turned over to the Lord. Fruit and works are consistent with turning from my own ways and turning to the Lord. So, if you love Jesus, we ought to know that by what you say, by what you do, by what you value, how you respond, by how you live, by what you pursue, what you say louder than anything else. It is doctrine, then deeds. It is belief, then behavior. It is principle and then practice. It is faith and then fruit. It has to come out. And I think sometimes the frustration is you hear people make lots of claims, but they don't seem to have changed. Paul turned from

"Indeed, I thought" to (just a few verses later) "God, what would You have me to do?" And that had been Paul's message, "I have been faithful since the day I was saved to preach the gospel message."

In fact he says, in verse 21, " 'For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come - that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.' " Paul said, "Because I preached Christ, that's why - two years ago - they tried to grab me. It wasn't because I brought a guy into the Temple area; it didn't happen. It wasn't because they were mistaken; that didn't happen. They wanted me dead because of the message that I was preaching. Their motivation was a resistance to the gospel." And notice, in verse 21 and in verse 22, that Paul saw the Lord's help or hand in delivering him. It was the Roman captain that came to his help - he and a bunch of well-armed soldiers that broke through the crowds and saved Paul's life. But Paul didn't see it that way.

Paul said, "The Lord saved me. Thank you, Claudius. But, hey, it was the Lord. I give you high-five, but I give Him my life. He's the One who saves. He's the One who delivered." And I think it's an important lesson because Paul gave credit to God's oversight, and he saw it with a spiritual eye. I think sometimes we only believe God is working if things are supernatural. If the hair stands up on the back of your head, if the lights go on automatically, "It's a miracle." But that God would work in the natural ways of life and that we would credit Him and acknowledge Him and recognize it - "That was the Lord!" - that's somethin' else. Then life becomes really exciting because God is at work around us. We only look for the out-of-the-ordinary stuff, and then we can say, "Well, that was the Lord." But He rarely, even in the Bible, works that way. More often than not it is in the very if you didn't read the Bible and say, "Well, and the Lord spoke and did this," you'd go, "Where was the Lord in all that?" Had you stood by and watched, you'd have never come to that conclusion. But the Bible tells you very clearly that the Lord is with you, that He doesn't leave you, that He's not going to forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). I always remember that story of that farmer who was on his roof in a flood, and the Sheriff boat came by and said, "Get down there, and let me help you." And he goes, "No, no, no. I'm all right." And then the Highway Patrol came back an hour later, and then the Coast Guard came a couple hours later. And the guy was just real stubborn - he didn't get off. Finally, he drowned. And when he went to

heaven, he said to the Lord, "Why didn't You save me?" The Lord said, "All right. Let me check the records. Well, at 10:00, I sent the Sheriff, and at noon the Highway Patrol, and at 2:00 the Coast Guard came." We would rather God be more obvious, I guess, more divine in His actions.

And I just point that out because Paul, in giving his testimony, didn't go, "Hey, Lysias was quite a tough dude." He said, "The Lord helped me. I'd be dead right now if the Lord hadn't intervened. He saw through it all. Elijah (1 Kings 19) looked for the LORD through a great earthquake; didn't find Him. Looked for the LORD in a raging fire; didn't find Him. Looked for the LORD in a howling wind; didn't find Him. Where did he find Him? A still small voice. Not at all very supernatural. And I think that, more often than not, the only people that see God at work are those who have spiritual eyes to see and recognize God's hand and His promises to be with us, who are spiritually sensitive. And then life becomes pretty exciting. You've got to be careful that you're not ascribing everything to, "Oh, that's the Lord. Oh, that's the devil." But at the same time, God is actively involved in our lives, and we should be aware of it, be thankful to Him. God uses human instruments and circumstances, but the Lord is the One that we should honor. You might have heard the story of the little boy slipping off the roof, crying for God's help, and he slides to the end, and his pants get hooked on a nail. And he says to the Lord, "Never mind, Lord. The nail got it." (Laughing) Ah, you missed the boat. You didn't quite get to see it. So, Christians are in God's care, and the words "Boy, was I lucky" have no place in my life. Because He takes care of me and you, and we're glad that He does, aren't we?

So notice that Paul goes out of his way to say to Agrippa, "By the help of God, I'm still here today. I'm still teaching. I'm still sharing. But," he adds, "I'm only teaching and sharing what the Bible says." In other words, "My whole dependency, my whole message, my whole way of life is rooted in the Scriptures." Which he summarizes in verse 23, "that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead," preeminence, "*prototokos*" is the word, "and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles. That's the message. It came from the Old Testament, it came from Moses, it came from the prophets. I'm telling everyone who will listen, small and great, the same thing. I'm preaching a gospel message." Paul was intent, focused, intentional to broadcast Jesus everywhere he went. Are you? Do you? Can you? Would you? You should. As much as we can. You have a testimony. God's saved you. Now don't sit on it. Go proclaim it.

I love the fact that our witnessing should biblically-based and not our opinions, our feelings, our private ideas. Paul was able to say to this king, "I'm just sharing what the Bible says." That's important. Mark that down. Paul limited himself to the things he could biblically support. There are certainly lots of churches today that are not teaching the Bible, that spiritualize the text even when the text doesn't call for it. And when you begin to spiritualize the text, you can go anywhere you want. You can do that with Little Red Riding Hood, though, "Well, I'll tell you what that means," and you're off to the races. God wants man to know Him. His Word can set men free. Paul held it out for all to see. He says, in Philippians 2:16, "I'm holding fast the word of life." "That's what I offer to people - the word of life."

It is the spiritualization of the text that led the nation of Israel, in one sense, to miss Jesus entirely. They took Scriptures about the Messiah suffering, and they took away the fact that it could actually be the Messiah suffering, and they reinterpreted it to say the nation would go through it, and, "We, as Israel, have suffered at the hands of all men." And so you get to Isaiah 53, and you read about His suffering, and their response is, "Yeah, that's about us." No, it's not about you. It's written in the singular tense. It's written about an individual. It's written very specifically - like Psalm 22 and Psalm 69 and Psalm 16 and the book of Isaiah, the last twenty-seven chapters. It's all about the death and the salvation that God would bring through His Son. You've got to stick with the Scriptures. You've got to rightly divide it, let it interpret itself, take it literally unless you're told to do so otherwise. And I would say this to you - if you happen to be visiting here tonight, and you're looking for a church, we'd love to have you stay. But let me give you this advice - if you walk into a church that doesn't have a Bible to use, run. Just stay out of there. I don't care if it's right next door to your house, go somewhere else. Because that is not a place you're going to grow or do well. It will ruin you.

Paul said the gospel he preached was not a new, novel kind of idea; it was based entirely on the Word of God. I think when they asked Luther about his contemporary norms, and they questioned the way that he was sharing, he said, "Look, all I'm doing is repeating old things which the apostles taught us beforehand." I think that's where we can stay there and believe in that. So, "This is all that I've done. This is why I was grabbed. This is why I'm on trial. This is why I'm spending my third year in jail."

Verse 24, "Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, 'Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!' " Rudely interrupted by

this man who had no charges and wanted help, who had had enough of the visions at noontime and the discussions with God, and the talk of raising the dead, Looney tunes to him, 70-year-old guy, "You spent too much time in the library, Paul. You've lost your mind." He stops Paul (and he's only spoken for three minutes), and Paul answers, verse 25, " 'I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe.' " Paul, with great respect, says to Governor Festus, "I'm not nuts. What I'm telling you is truth, and it's reasonable. I have my faculties. I have my sensibilities." But Paul leaves Festus go because Festus has pretty much said, "I don't want anything to do with this," and he focuses on Agrippa, whom the Lord has brought there for Paul to speak to.

When Paul spoke to him last week, he started with, "I'm glad it's you." He wasn't buttering him up. He just knew this guy had a background in Jewish thought. So he turns his full gaze to this fellow, King Agrippa II, and he says, "I know that you know what's going on in the area. Festus, I know that you're new to the area, but King Agrippa will tell you. He's been around here for a long time. Let him tell you about the 3½ years Jesus spent traveling from the Galilee down to Jerusalem and the impact He had. Have him tell you about how the crowds were electrified with remarkable powers that He carried, and healings and deliverances. Even the dead were raised! Tell him about the illegal trial Jesus suffered, the crucifixion that was so unfair, how He laid in the tomb of one of the wealthiest and most influential Jewish men in the neighborhood, and three days later He was raised from the dead, seen by hundreds - five hundred at once. I know that you know, King Agrippa. You've been around a long time. You're part of that whole Agrippa descendancy. I'm not at all, Festus, crazy. I've not lost my mind. King Agrippa will bear it out. He knows the Old Testament promise. You know it, don't you? You believe it, don't you?" I like Paul. Now who's on trial? Not the prisoner, it sounds like to me. "How 'bout it, Agrippa? Do you believe the prophets? I know you do. You're a corrupt man, you live a corrupt life, but you've studied world religions, you've converted to Judaism. You need Jesus in your life, don't you buddy?" And I bet you there was a really eerie kind of silence.

Verse 28, "Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'You almost persuade me to become a Christian.' " It is one of the most difficult verses in the New Testament to discern the tone. It just depends what you hope to find here, I think, in which this

statement was made. If he is scoffing, he literally says to Paul, "Do you really think you can convert me so quickly?" If he is trembling, and it really is true that it got under his skin, we're going to find (in a few minutes) that he, to save face with his peers, just kind of walks out. We're not sure.....I have no idea. Again, I can show you twenty Bible commentators who have an idea. But I don't think it's the point. The point is God's Word goes out and accomplishes what He wants it to do (Isaiah 55:11). I don't know what the result, in Agrippa's life, was. When he walks out, and he walks away, we have no record in the Bible of him having another chance to believe.....at all. This might very well have been his last hurrah, his last opportunity. But we don't know. Paul knew better than anyone else, though, how long you could live rejecting the truth while your conscience was being overwhelmed and where personal conviction just wouldn't let you be. So why not this king? And I think Paul had an eternal hope for people getting saved. He wouldn't give up on anyone because he remembered what he was like. So Agrippa may now decide, while his conscience was under siege. What is he going to do with the Lord? Where is he going to turn? Where is he going to go?

A classic place of tone, and I think it's important that you try to learn the tone before you conclude completely about something that you read, is the story of Jacob. You remember Jacob's wrestling with the Angel of the LORD? (Genesis 32) And he's at it all night. Right? He's about to meet his brother. He knows he's under great duress. He's broken his family into groups so that he thinks his brother is coming to kill him because he kind of worked him over years earlier. So he's just worried, and he's trying to get some sleep, and the LORD won't let him sleep. And the Angel of the LORD wrestles with him. He finally touches the hollow of his thigh and leaves him crippled. When you go to the book of Genesis, you read that the Angel says to Jacob, "Let Me go, for the day breaks." And Jacob says, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" And you almost come away saying, "Jacob's kind of a tough guy. He's even tellin' Angels what to do!" Right? And you read into the story, "Atta boy. I need God's blessing. I'm not lettin' go!" He's always been stubborn. He's still stubborn, now with God. But if you go to Hosea 12:4 (which there's a description of Jacob's battle with the Angel), you read these words, "Yes, he struggled with the Angel and prevailed; he wept, and sought favor from Him." And you realize Jacob wasn't this loudmouth, "I'm gonna have what I want before You let me go." Jacob was a broken man, in tears, unable to let go because he didn't have any other hope. But if you don't get the whole picture, then the tone can certainly set you off. And I don't know what the tone means here. I'm not sure. Either way, the lesson, I think, is the same. If he is callous, then this might

be his last chance, and it might be too late - he's dead in his heart. If he's convicted, he seems to walk away without response. Either one of them dangerous for all of us. We don't know if he had another chance.

So we read, " 'You almost persuade me to become a Christian.' " Verse 29, "And Paul said, 'I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except' " (as he holds up his hands) " 'for these chains.' " I don't know how Paul read what he said, but he said, "Almost, and I don't want to just have you come along almost. I would like you to come along altogether. And not just you - everybody in the room. Not just almost because almost is not enough, King Agrippa. Almost doesn't save." And he holds up his hands to show, "I want you all like me. Not almost but completely." It's pretty important. The worst place you can be is to almost respond to God's Word, to almost respond to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, to almost give in to the hunger for forgiveness, to almost follow your heart and look for peace with God. So close and yet so far. And Paul says, "I wish it wasn't an almost. I wish it was an altogether for you and for everyone in this room, King. That's what I want." That's Paul's prayer. That should be ours.

Verse 30 tells us, "When he had said these things....." So this ministry, this message (it's from verse 19 to verse 23), and then there's an interruption and Paul's response - that's it, that's it; short and powerful. "The king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them; and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, 'This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains.' Then Agrippa said to Festus, 'This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.' " "I don't have anything to charge him with either." So Agrippa ends the meeting by getting up to leave. Instead of grabbing for Jesus, he grabs for his sister and for his power. And by the way, every time King Agrippa II is mentioned in the Bible, so is Bernice. It's like his prevailing sin in his life. As Felix, here Festus, King Agrippa II, Bernice - all might have been cleansed at the foot of the cross, had all been preached to by a powerful preacher, and there is not one indication in the narrative of Acts that any of them responded. You could say Paul failed every time. Or did he? Because God doesn't call you to save anyone. He calls you to testify. Right? In other words, your job is to tell; His job is to save. And if you're countin' heads or marks on your Bible, you've got it all wrong. God wants us to be faithful to tell others. What they do with what they hear is up to them. And you can follow these godly men - Jeremiah's a great example, Isaiah as well, Ezekiel as well - who spent their lives preaching to what

seemed to be lost causes. And it's easy to get discouraged because most people don't want to hear about God at all. Until they're in the hospital sick. Then they'd like you to come and pray for them right away. Then they want faith. Then they believe God for the moment.

Paul had not been successful. Paul had stood and been imprisoned and been neglected and had been set aside, had been assaulted and plotted against. After years of faithfulness, after tons and tons of churches planted, and thousands of people got saved, and the reward seems to be, "You're just failing as you get older, towards the end." But he wasn't failing. He was faithful in his witness. And I want to just point out to you - that's what God's looking for. Fruit is His department. Sharing and planting and watering is your department. Right? God gives the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). So don't take that pressure. Just be clear with what you share and what you know. Share it from the heart. Walk with God.

Next week Paul is going to be sent to Rome where he'll get some sailing lessons from the S.S. Minnow. (Laughing) I thought about reading this book of Acts for so many months now that if you hung out with Paul, you'd just go prematurely gray. He seems to be just a really dangerous guy to hang out with. I read the other day about an eagle who in fact a guy saw it, he was describing how an eagle had swooped down to grab a rat to eat. And he had grabbed it and then swept up into the sky, and as he was flying away with the rat in his talons, the eagle went like this (Pastor Jack moves his hands in a spiraling-down motion) and crashed to the ground. And the guy went up to look, and he said, "You know, the rat was in his talons, but the rat's teeth were in his chest." And he said, "What the eagle was grabbing and grasping so tightly actually killed him." And I thought that's a pretty good example of sin. We grab ahold of sin like, "Hey, we're free to do what we want." But it's killin' us because we won't turn to the things of God, and we won't allow the Lord to be the Lord.

So, look, if you don't know Him, you can come to Him. He'll take you just the way you are. He won't even ask you to clean up. Mom would make me clean up just to come to dinner. The Lord won't even make you clean up to come to heaven. He'll clean you up Himself. But it's going to take these things - you're going to have to turn away from your own ideas of how God should behave, how God should treat you, about how God should react; you have to own up to your sin and your sinfulness and your inability to save yourself. All of that has to fall on your shoulders. And you then have to believe the remedy that He has provided through His Son. Turn

to Jesus. And then He'll produce in you fruit. Because if He moves in, He takes over. He doesn't want the back room; He wants the whole house. If He gets in the car, He's drivin'. You're now in the passenger seat. You can have shotgun if you want.....as long as He's got the steering wheel. I learned that from Carrie Underwood. "He's Got the Steering Wheel" song. (Laughing) There you go.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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