Acts: “From Darkness to Light”

As we return to our journey through Acts, Paul is in Caesarea, surrounded by the top brass including King Agrippa II: his royal sister, Berenice; the Roman provincial governor, Festus; the Roman military leaders; and prominent officials from that region. Paul is not on trial, per se, because he has already appealed to be judged by Caesar himself. So…what follows next is what we might call a “hearing” for the lack of a better word. Paul is presenting the case for Christ because King Agrippa has requested a “hearing” and all of the others have been invited to attend as well.

The hearing begins with an opening statement from Governor Festus, so that is where we will begin. Festus sets the stage with these words beginning with Acts 25:24:

“King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. But I found that he had done nothing deserving death. And as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him. But I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore, I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write. For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him.”

Once again, from the perspective of the Roman authorities, Paul has broken no law, so the irony of this hearing is already evident. Festus needs a charge to attach to Paul before he sends him to Caesar, but after three different trials by three different Roman judges, there is yet a charge that justifies why Paul is a prisoner, not to mention why he should be executed. So this hearing is fortuitous for Festus. He is assuming that King Agrippa, a man of authority who is familiar with Jewish law and custom, will be able to provide some insight as to what charge should be attached to Paul’s case before Paul is shipped to Rome.

King Agrippa acknowledges that he is in the driver seat in 26:1 and instructs Paul to “speak for himself.” So, with no further ado, let’s dig into Paul’s defense beginning with vs. 1:

Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense: 2 “I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.

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

Paul begins by stretching out his hand as a form of greeting to the king, and he addresses the king directly. He states plainly that he will make his defense against all the accusations of the Jews precisely because Agrippa is not pagan…he is Jewish, so Paul is suggesting that Agrippa will understand the real issues here. Notice how Paul has already learned that in many cases, he never gets to finish his defense because people begin shouting, or he is slapped in the mouth, so he asks the king to listen patiently so that he can finish his defense. Paul’s greeting was that
which would have been expected in a Roman courtroom…it was referred to as a *captatio benevolentiae*. Paul is clearly schooled in the art of Grego-Roman public speaking, so the rest of his speech will proceed according to typical rhetorical form as we will see in our text this morning. First will be his *exoridium* (prologue); then his *narratio* (narration); then his *confirmatio* (confirmation); followed by his *refutatio* (refutation); and then finally his *peroratio* (concluding appeal).

We just read Paul’s prologue that begins with a synopsis of his past. Paul points to the well-known fact that he is a Jew, has always been a Jew, and that he was actually a “high level” Jew because he lived as a Pharisee. Paul points out that he is on trial not because he has failed to be Jewish or broken away from the Jewish tradition. On the contrary, Paul states that he is on trial because he actually believes and is living out the promises made by God to “our fathers.”

This point is worthy of our consideration for just a moment. For much of the world, and even in our religion courses in college, Christianity is considered to be something altogether different than Judaism. Many of us may even consider our faith to be something completely other than Judaism. However, please note that the Apostle Paul never sees his faith in Jesus as anything other than Jewish. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Jewish law. Jesus is the fulfillment of all the promises made by God through the prophets…promises that serve as the hope for all twelve tribes of Israel. And what is that hope? Resurrection.

Paul is on trial because he believes in the resurrection, particularly that Jesus of Nazareth arose as the firstborn among many brothers…providing a pathway for resurrection and eternal life for all who repent and believe. For Paul, the true Jew must become a Christian in order to remain a Jew. Such is why Paul actually sees himself as MORE JEWISH than the Jews who have accused him of not being Jewish enough.

Now, Paul did not always see things the way he sees them now. There was a time when Paul, like his Jewish accusers, resisted Jesus as the Messiah and even persecuted those who proclaimed Jesus as Lord. That is part of his story, so Paul will transition from his prologue into his “narration” beginning in vs. 9: “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”

Paul begins his story by speaking of his life and attitude towards Jesus prior to his conversion experience. This is classic “testimony” methodology that continues to be effective for us today: 1) we share first of our lives prior to meeting Jesus; 2) then we share our story of encountering Jesus; and 3) then we bear witness to how our lives have changed since meeting Jesus.

In Paul’s case, he was not only opposed to the claim that Jesus was Lord, he was also an active persecutor of those who followed Jesus. Why? Because Paul was “convinced that he ought to.” Behavior follows conviction. Paul’s mind was made up regarding who Jesus was, so he felt
justified in locking up the Christians, and even casting his vote that they be put to death. Now notice, Paul is on thin ice here. The Jews actually had no authority to put anyone to death…only the Romans could sentence people to death. So, when Paul acknowledges that he was part of a movement that put Christians to death, he is potentially admitting that he participated in illegal activities (like stoning Stephen) in front of the Roman governor, Festus. Notice the brilliance of Paul here…he’s stating in no certain terms that when he was in the camp of his current accusers, he was ACTUALLY guilty of breaking the Roman law. Now that he is a Christian, he is no longer participating in illegal stonings or unjust behavior. Clever, right?

Now, how Paul’s perspective regarding the Christians change so dramatically? How did he go from being a persecutor of Christians to a teacher and champion of Christianity? Paul explains his conversion experience beginning with vs. 12: "In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

Paul tells his story of encountering Jesus on his way to persecute Christians in Damascus. As we’ve seen previously in Acts, the presence of the risen Lord Jesus confronts the travelers with a brilliant light. Note that this event was not just a personal vision that Paul received; instead, this was an external event that affected his whole travelling party. The light was seen by all of them…they all fell to the ground…but only Paul could make out what was being said. Each time we read this story in Acts we learn a little more about that day, and this time Paul includes a bit more about what Jesus said to him. Not only does Jesus ask “Why are you persecuting me?” Jesus also states, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”

As we’ve noted before, Jesus identifies with His church. When the Christians are being persecuted, Jesus is being persecuted. Remember that Jesus identified with his church previously in Matthew 25 when he says, “I tell you, as you have done to one of the least of these my brothers, you have done also to me.” So Jesus doesn’t ask, “Why are you persecuting those who follow me?” He asks, “Why are you persecuting ME?” Jesus also makes a comment that demonstrates his care and concern for Paul when he states, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” If you recall, a “goad” (show pic http://tentstakeministries.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/images-11.jpg ) was a spiked stick that farmers used to prompt and prod cattle that were pulling the ancient plows. The goad wasn’t meant to hurt the animals…it was designed to prick the animal just enough to make it move or change direction. However, if the ox or bull got annoyed with the goad, they would kick at it, and sometimes the goad would puncture the beast’s leg, causing significant pain and discomfort.
When Jesus refers to this imagery, He is essentially telling Paul, “You are needlessly hurting yourself with your stubborn and resistant behavior. Quit resisting the prompting and correction I have been sending you…change your mind and turn from the direction you are going.”

Paul then asks a question, “Who are you, Lord?” I suspect Paul knew exactly who was speaking to him, but his stubborn will needed absolute clarity and confirmation. Jesus will now provide Paul’s “confirmatio”…his confirmation. Jesus replies, “I am Jesus who you are persecuting.”

And there you have it King Agrippa…Jesus is not dead; He is very much alive! Paul describes his confrontation with the Truth, face to face, and the Truth has a name…His name is Jesus. Paul the persecutor is confronted with his wrong thinking and his wrong behavior…He has been persecuting the Truth and the followers of Truth. In any other context of religious lore, should the angry “god” confront you regarding your treason and hostility, it would surely mean that you were about to be destroyed. Paul may have been thinking that very thought there on the road to Damascus. He deserves to be destroyed…He deserves punishment for persecuting the Messiah of God. But He’s not punished. He’s not destroyed. Instead…He is forgiven, He is empowered, He is restored, and He is sent.

Jesus says to Paul, “But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and a witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—

Note the irony of this confrontation: “Paul the Persecutor of Jesus” is to become “Paul the Appointed Messenger of Jesus” who will need the power of God to protect him from people like…HIM…zealous Jewish persecutors, because like Paul before his conversion, they have wrong convictions that lead them to hurtful behavior. Not only will Paul need God’s power to protect him from the Jews, he will also need the Holy Spirit to protect him from the Gentiles. Paul will be hated by all who operate under misguided convictions regarding Jesus. Note the messaging that Paul is sending to both Agrippa…the king of the Jews, as well as Festus, the Roman governor. God has already promised to deliver Paul out of their hands. The only reason that Paul is in chains before them is because Jesus has arranged for Paul to be His servant and His witness. Paul now stands before them for THEIR benefit, just as Jesus said, “…to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

Church…take note of what Paul is saying as you think about your own lives and your own circumstances. Remember, what Jesus said to Paul at his conversion is not all that unique…He clearly would say the same to all of us as well. When Jesus saved you, Christian, He clearly was saying, “I am saving you (_________ fill in your name!) and appointing you to be my servant and my witness. I will deliver you from those who oppose you…so do not fear. But know this: I’m sending you in…I’m arranging the rest of your life in such a way that you will bear witness to those who are perishing…that through you—through your testimony—through your love—
through your friendship—through your sacrifice and generosity—their eyes will be opened, and they will turn from darkness to light—they, too, will turn from the power of Satan to the power of God—so that they, too, will receive forgiveness of sins and a place in HEAVEN…a place among those who are sanctified by FAITH IN ME!

Church…does any of that sound familiar? That’s our mission, right!!! Did you hear it? To be the light of Christ in a hurting culture so that lost people are found, the broken are made whole, the fatherless find hope, and our city is blessed…it’s all right there in what Jesus just said to Paul.

Christians…meditate upon the words of Jesus to the Apostle Paul here in Acts 26, and assume that your salvation…that your appointment…that your mission…is no different than our brother’s from 2000 years ago. There is no difference…Paul’s mission is our mission…Paul’s fight is our fight…Jesus’s intentions for Paul’s life is exactly Jesus’ intentions for our lives. Mediate upon these words of Jesus, and never again ask, “What is my purpose in life?” Now you know…if you are one who has been saved by the blood of Jesus, your purpose is clear: be His servant, be his witness…BE THE LIGHT of Jesus in the hurting places of this world where people walk in darkness. Amen?

Now, Paul has completed his story…his narratio…so he turns his attention back to the matter at hand…his “hearing” before the king who sits in a seat of judgment…and he makes his refutatio—where he will refute the charges made against him. Beginning with vs. 19, Paul states:

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

Paul tells King Agrippa, “I was NOT disobedient to the heavenly vision.” That’s the understatement of the century! Paul’s obedience is legendary, and he now speaks as one who answers only to the One True King…the King of Glory. He makes it clear: true JUSTICE comes when we are obedient to GOD, regardless of the judgments of men. How could Paul NOT obey the LORD who appeared to him in a brilliant light with such power, compassion, and glory?!! Paul points to the obvious, undeniable change in his life as the FRUIT that bears witness to the truth of his encounter with Jesus. He was immediately…immediately transformed from a persecutor of the faith to a proclaimer of the faith. Beginning right there in Damascus where he intended to persecute Christians, Paul first proclaimed the gospel! And then he proclaimed the gospel in Jerusalem, throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles in Asia Minor! Agrippa may have had doubts about Paul’s “Damascus Road Story,” but who could question the transformation and fruit that occurred in Paul’s life? The change was undeniable, as was the evidence of Paul’s faith in Jesus.
OK. We’re going to stop here and pick up the end of Paul’s hearing and the response of his listeners next Sunday. I will wrap up my message this morning by addressing something that our text makes perfectly clear…and I hope you will have open hearts and open minds to consider what I feel the Lord has placed on my heart to say to you this morning. Please know that I will likely offend you in the next few minutes…so prepare yourselves, and please know that should I offend you, I’m doing so out of love for you and obedience to my King.

Here’s the deal: I lose sleep at night thinking that many of us in this church who call ourselves Christians are actually those who are self-deceived and remain unforgiven. To be perfectly blunt, I suspect that if several of us in this room were to die today, our eternity would be hell. And what horrifies me the most is that we would be shocked…we would be totally blindsided, because “no one ever told us the truth.” We would be in hell because we deceived ourselves into thinking that we were saved, and no one ever bothered to challenge our deception. Every moment of every day I feel responsible for souls such as these because I am doubly accountable as your Pastor…so please allow me to offend you, to challenge your assumptions, and please know I do so out of love and fear for my own soul should I fail to love you with a love that risks offense.

So here it goes: if you tell me you are a Christian…in theory, I should not believe you until you show me. And, in theory, it shouldn’t bother you that I should demand to see some evidence…it certainly would not have bothered Paul, right? When Paul is put on the spot…when his faith is being examined and he is called to give an account for his life…he points to the evidence. He points to his life before his conversion and everything that came after his conversion…he points to the transformation in his life and the fruit of his ministry as evidence that his heart belongs to Jesus.

Such is why…if you tell me you are a Christian, I should not believe that you are a Jesus follower until I see the fruit of your repentance. If you are not repentant, you are not a Christian…period. In other words, I should not believe that you are a Christian until you show me how your encounter with Jesus led you from walking in one direction to walking in the opposite direction. If you have not turned…if you have not turned in the way you think and you have not tried to make amends, if you are not doing the work hard of changing your behavior, I can tell you that you are likely unredeemed…because repentance always includes both a change of mind and a change of behavior…repentance is action…it’s not a feeling. If you tell me you are a Christian, I should not believe you until you show me how you are regularly functioning as a servant and a witness for Jesus. If you are not serving Jesus and His bride…if you are not bearing witness…I sincerely doubt that your heart has been transformed by the blood of Jesus. Jesus said in John 15:8, When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.” If you tell me that you are a Christian, I should not believe you until you show me who has benefited from your faithfulness. Why? Because if you are one who has encountered Jesus and been saved, if you are acting upon His call to be a servant and a witness, there should be a line of people who would say of your life and influence: “She showed me Jesus…he brought me into the light…she is the reason that I no longer serve Satan…he is the guy who helped me receive forgiveness from God and extend forgiveness to those who hurt
me…she walked with me through the hardest time of my life and prayed for me…she never gave up on me.” In other words, if you are saved in Jesus Christ, there should be fruit…it will be evident in the way you are…it will be evident in the things you do…it will be evident in the lives you influence…if you are a Christian, there should be obvious evidence that I, and anyone else, could observe that would authenticate your testimony that you “follow Jesus.”

Church, some of you would be very offended and upset should I ask you to prove that you are a Christian…but before you shoot the messenger, I would simply point you to Matthew 25 and the great judgment scene that Jesus provides there, and I’ll just remind you that PROOF of our repentance…the PROOF of our faith in Jesus…will be required of us all. In Matthew 25, Jesus judges the nations on the proof…the evidence of what they actually did…not on the doctrines that they believed. Our deeds don’t save us and our doctrines don’t save us…we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ…but our deeds and our doctrine will reveal if our hearts were ever transformed by grace…what we do will reveal if we ever placed our faith in Jesus. The scriptures are clear: those who have repented will bear fruit keeping with repentance. That’s exactly what Paul just said, it’s what John the Baptist said, it’s what Jesus said. Our repentance may be long and hard work, and God will help us with that work, but true repentance and faith always leads to fruit that brings glory to God…always.

Now…why would I ask you to prove your salvation to me? Why would I risk offending you like that? Why are we even having this awkward conversation? I’ll tell you why. Just over a week ago our Youth Ministry hosted a pool party for a bunch of middle school boys. The assumption of our Summer Staff was this: if you show up to a pool party, you know how to swim. That’s a reasonable assumption, right? Wrong…it’s a dangerous assumption. It seems logical, but it’s a potentially deadly and devastating assumption to assume that everyone who shows up to a pool party knows how to swim. Just nine days ago, we learned that lesson the hard way when a 13 year old boy ended up on the bottom of the pool, unconscious, with his lungs full of water. He was seconds away from dying, and you want to know why? Because he thought he was “good to go”, and the people in charge assumed he was “good to go”; but once in the water, the evidences was obvious…the boy couldn’t swim, and he drowned. Thanks to the quick work of a Summer Staffer who employed CPR, the young man was brought back to life and is now doing well, but that story could have ended differently…that young man was very fortunate. He was fortunate that his self-deception and our unfounded assumption did not end his life at the tender age of 13.

That near-death episode in the pool last week will change the way we think and behave as church leaders when it comes to swim parties. From now on, if we haven’t seen you swim, we won’t believe you can swim until you show us. When we apply that lesson to our eternal status before God, I think it ought to change our behavior as church leaders when it comes to those who show up on a Sunday as well. I shouldn’t believe you are a Jesus follower until you show me the evidence, because just like swimming, telling yourself that you are a born-again, redeemed child of God when you are not a born-again, redeemed child of God is dangerous…and for me to assume that you are saved and going to heaven because you are sitting here at church is also dangerous…far more dangerous than drowning. Listen to the words of Jesus in Matthew 7, and
let these words sink in to your heart...let them offend you and give you pause: 21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ 22 And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

Those words have haunted me like no other words ever spoken. How do we know if we are truly saved? How do we know if our hearts belong to Jesus? Our Lord made it perfectly clear: “Only the one who does the will of the Father who is in heaven.” What is the will of the Father? It’s right here in the text and throughout the New Testament: 1) Repent—change the way you think, the way you behave, and turn from Satan to God; 2) Receive forgiveness and forgive others...Jesus says in Matthew 6:15, “If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” 3) Serve and bear witness...like Paul, we too were saved to serve and to be the Light of Christ for those who walk in darkness. From what we can see in scripture, that’s a basic summary of what it means to do the will of the Father. That’s what we have seen in our text this morning, and it’s the MOST IMPORTANT thing you could possibly be thinking about at this moment in your lives.

Listen, 100 years from now not one of us will likely be walking on this earth, nor will those whom we love. Each one of us will have finished our time on this earth, and each one of us will be examined before the judgment seat of God. At that time, there will only be two possible outcomes: we will be those who repented and are saved through the blood of Jesus Christ as evidenced by our actions that were in accordance with God’s will; or we will be those who remained unrepentant and unforgiven as evidenced by our actions that were contrary to God’s will. Those who are forgiven in Christ will inherit eternal life with the Father where there will be no more tears, no more sin, and no more death. But those who remain unrepentant and unforgiven will be cast out into the outer darkness where there will be an eternity without God...an eternity without hope.

Jesus became flesh and endured a Roman cross so that no one would “drown” in the sea of eternal darkness. He has rescued us, and He has rescued us so that we might bring hope and salvation to the world in His name. Church...examine yourselves...search your heart...examine the evidence—the fruit of your lives: are you deceiving yourselves? Are you assuming you can swim? Is everyone else assuming you can swim? A time will soon come when that assumption will be put to the test. Remember: it’s one thing to think you can swim...it’s quite another thing to jump into the pool.

If you are in doubt about your salvation...if you are in doubt as to whether you have actually been saved through the blood of Jesus, I beg you today...right now...repent and surrender your whole life to Jesus Christ. Turn from the power of Satan to the power of God. Turn from the ways of darkness and set your face upon the light of the Son who died for you. He will save you...He will change you...He will empower you...He will appoint you...He will send you...and when you breathe your last, He will welcome you into His arms and show you to the
room that He has prepared just for you. Friends…now is the time, turn—before it is too late. Will you pray with me?