

Acts 26:1–32

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Date: 16 September 2018

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning and welcome to Holy Trinity Church. Generally, I tire when preachers begin to speak about themselves, especially so when they do it from the pulpit.

And believe me, I understand the irony of even stating that. Really. Really, you're going to step behind the lectern and do you?

You? That's all you got? Your life, your wife, your little ones, your dog? It's wearisome.

Almost as wearisome as being an unfortunate member of a congregation that would lap that kind of thing up. Which makes this message a bit challenging because Paul does Paul.

It's actually the second time he has stepped out from behind the lectern to do himself. Earlier in chapter 22, he recounted his own story at length, including his conversion on the road to Damascus.

[1 : 33] And here he is doing it again. And if you include Luke's first rendition of his conversion, this is the third time we've come to church to hear Paul on Paul.

Well, until you take a closer look. He might begin by doing Paul on Paul, but it's going to move to Jesus against Paul, and then that's going to give way to Paul advocating for Jesus.

And then tagged onto the backside of that are two responses that emerged from the congregation on the day that Paul did all that he did on Paul and on Jesus.

Take a look. Paul on Paul, 1 through 11. In verse 4, you have that little phrase, my manner of life. What you see here is the manner of life before coming to Christ. This is what he wanted you to see. Really, only two things.

[2 : 50] They both begin with the letter P. Isn't that nice? The end of verse 5. Before coming to Christ, if you want a word that will encapsulate who I am, it's the word Pharisee.

There it is. Verse 5. Coupled with the word persecuted at the close of verse 11.

These two words on either end of the first movement of his life. Paul 1.0. A Pharisee and a persecutor.

In regard to Judaism, a Pharisee. In regard to Christianity, a persecutor. He was a devoted religionist, and he was an intolerant dogmatist.

He affirmed, as all Pharisees did, something about the resurrection, but he also denied that others ought to follow Jesus.

[4 : 02] What a toxic light concoction for a life. But that was Paul. Paul, all religious, and all rung up.

Must have been an angry man to be around. Like many today, I suppose. He's a classic case of a guy that had too much religion.

In our day, people of religion and irreligion resemble this manner of life.

They believe what they believe, and they want to rob you of your belief, or they don't believe, and therefore want all to not believe.

Thus, the angry world in which we live. Thus, religion against religion, irreligion against religion, and religion against irreligion.

[5 : 07] We embody the manner of life that Paul exuded before he met Christ. The only puzzle in those first 11 verses does not concern his manner of life, but that which he states in verses 6 through 8.

Let me read it. And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise by God to our fathers to which our 12 tribes hope to attain. As they earnestly worship night and day, and for this hope, I am accused by the Jews.

Did you notice? Hope. Threefold. Hope. Hope. Oh, king. Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? That is a puzzle.

If ever there was one. Let me put it together with the way the whole unit on his manner of life is put forward. How is it that a believer in the resurrection, the final resurrection of the dead, as all Pharisees believed?

How is it that a believer in the resurrection, verses 4 and 5, spends his life denigrating and opposing the people of the resurrection, verses 9 through 11, and yet is himself on trial on account of the resurrection?

[6 : 36] simply this. The Pharisees of Jesus' day believed that at the end of the age, all people would one day rise from the ground and give an account to a divine creator of some kind there would be a resurrection of the dead.

That said, Paul vehemently denied that the resurrection of this one Jesus before the end of the age was the fulfillment of all the promises made.

Therefore, he thought there would be a final day when all people were resurrected from the dead, and he disdained the notion that Jesus' resurrection already entered that age in, and therefore required repentance, and therefore, he had at it.

Too much religion. In all the wrong ways. The manner of life before meeting Christ gives way in verse 12 to the moment in life when Paul met Christ.

And just as the manner of life is summarized by two words, Pharisee and persecutor, look at verses 12 to 18. The moment in life when he comes to Christ is likewise summarized by two words, his conversion and his call.

[8 : 40] He comes to Christ in verses 12 to 15, and he receives a call that sends him out in the name of Christ, verses 16 to 18.

Take a look at his conversion. Let me put it to you by way of a question. So how is it that an intolerant religionist, put differently, how is it that nearly anyone today actually becomes a Christian?

Unless you were raised in the church. How does that happen? According to the text, not by any choice of their own.

Nobody's walking that sawdust trail. Have you seen sawdust in any churches lately? No. No. No. No. Right-minded adult who was not raised in faith of Jesus is of their own accord going to become a Christian.

That's what happened to Paul. Take a look. He was blinded by light. Then he was confronted by a voice. And only after that was he open to asking a question that would introduce him to Christ.

[10 : 12] verse 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 then we fell to the ground. This idea of being blinded by a light is a fascinating one in Luke Acts.

Can you give me a minute on it? What happens to Paul here, an adult who had heard about Jesus but didn't believe in him, he moves from physical sight to physical blindness that by way of metaphor would be able to move him from spiritual blindness to spiritual sight.

What happens to Paul here is mirrored by the two on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. Remember the same author is writing Luke and Acts.

[11 : 28] They are kept from recognizing him. They are blinded in order that they might actually come to believe in him.

And those two vignettes, the conversion of the adults on the road to Emmaus and the conversion of Paul in Acts 19 are embedded within a narrative by Luke that at both the beginning of Luke and the end of Acts deal with the same idea.

Remember Jesus, Luke 4, when he starts his ministry, he quotes Isaiah 61 and indicates, I am coming to bring sight to the blind.

And Paul, in just a couple of chapters from now, at the end of Acts, is going to quote Isaiah 6, Jesus and Paul on either ends of that big book.

And he is going to say, I am going to keep preaching even though people see but don't perceive. Because some are actually not seeing and they will see.

[12 : 37] And that then is what it looks like when someone becomes a Christian. When you become a Christian as an adult, the penny drops. Let me put it to you this way. You begin, for the

first time, to see Jesus differently than you once did.

It didn't come easy though. The light wasn't enough. He was confronted by a voice. Verse 14, 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. This is Jesus against Paul. How would anyone here today become a Christian?

Let me tell you how. Jesus is going to walk behind you until he can corral you home. Do you see that little phrase, It is hard for you to kick against the goads?

That little phrase is new information. That little phrase is unique to this speech. It didn't occur when Paul told his story in Acts 22.

[14:03] It didn't occur when Luke wrote of the story in Acts 9. But now we have a more full and complete picture of what happened. A voice confronted Paul and said, It is hard for you to kick against the goads.

Now how is that a, how is that a, a pre-evangelistic line? But that, that's actually the line that converted Paul.

And let me lay it out for you. A goad was a long stick in its roughest form with a pointy edge that a goat herder or, or an oxen puller would actually put on the animal to bring it back in the path. What God, through Jesus, is saying to Saul well into his adult life is, You're struggling with this thing here, aren't you? Because just as a stubborn animal would try to kick back on wherever that goad was coming from, unable to turn around and actually see who it was, so too Paul did on Jesus. In other words, Jesus had been pursuing him for some time. And if you want to know if Jesus is pursuing you, I can tell you how to find out.

[15:31] Start looking at what you're angry at. start looking at what agitates you. Start looking at the influences toward God that you resist.

Because it's only then that Paul is finally willing to say verse 15, Who are you, Lord? Now, I used to think that that line just kind of fell out of the sky.

As if it, if it emerged from the blindness of the light. As if it was like, Oh my gosh, I was on the road to Damascus and who, who are you?

No, it's actually his response to the statement of God through Christ about the goads. In other words, Jesus says, I'm tired of bringing you back in line, but I will continue to do it.

And Paul says, Yeah, who are you? Who are you? To which he says, surprisingly, look, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.

[16:39] Now, what would you, Paul had said he persecuted who? The people of God. Jesus is here saying, no, you're not out there persecuting the people of God, you're persecuting me.

Let me put it to you as clearly as I can because I want to persuade some of you to become a Christian today. Why do you set yourself against Jesus?

You say, I don't set myself against Jesus. Well, why is your face like a flint against his people? To the point where others can see it.

why do you disdain the time that someone requires of you to sit among God's people?

Why do you harden your own heart? and who is it that's really walking behind you agitating your anger?

[17:59] It is hard for you to kick against the goads. Now, let me, let me play the mad men. I know I'm mad.

Let me, I'll be out of my mind here for a moment. I'm going to talk about me. I was 17 going on 18. Had heard about Jesus, known about Jesus, been prodded by Jesus, didn't want Jesus. And man, did I know how to kick against those goats?

But he appeared to me. He didn't appear to me in a vision. There was no bright light. He appeared to me when a friend sat me down at Jake's pizza over a lunch hour and confronted me with the living word word of God, which I could read with my own eyes.

And he said there are two ways in life. One, self-directed, self-deceptive, and catastrophic for you in the end.

[19:25] And the other is to get yourself in line with Jesus. In other words, Jesus' words to Peter, get behind me.

For too long, Paul had run out in front of him. And he had to become a follower. And that's what happened to me. I, with my own eyes, confronted the truths of a word inscripturated, and knew that

everything I was fighting was actually Jesus.

To which I finally just said, that's enough. This is too hard. And some of you need to do the same. Amen. Your problem is not your parents. Your problem is not your pastor, although he may have some problems.

Your problem is not this people. Your problem isn't all the things you're angry about out there. Your problem is Jesus.

[20 : 53] And let me tell you something. He's going to make it hard. until you come home. The conversion of Saul gives way to his call.

Verses 16 through 18. He now has been appointed and will be delivered among persecuted that he can help other people's eyes become opened, that they would turn from darkness to light.

I got to tell you, that's exactly what happened to me, 17 to 18. Someone says, when were you converted? I could tell you the moment when I stopped kicking. I was converted when I quit kicking.

When were you called at the same moment? that was just experientially the way it was for me.

When I came to Christ, I knew I needed to help other people who were blind like I had been.

well, that's it. I'm not going to talk about myself anymore, but hopefully you'll stay with it anyway.

[22 : 22] The manner of life before coming to Christ, the moment in life when he met Christ gives way to the message of life that he delivered after he had come to Christ.

Verses 19 through 23, also marked by two words. What was the message that all of a sudden turned Paul over? It was preaching, and rather than persecuting, he was now the persecuted.

He took up an active role of speaking for Jesus, and the passive role of taking the brunt of other people's opposition to Jesus. Preaching and persecution.

You can see the words there, verse 20, but I declared, verse 22, to this day I've had the help of the Lord that comes from God, so I stand here testifying. Same verse, I am saying, back in verse 23, I am proclaiming.

What Paul began to do then with the rest of his life was to begin telling people about Jesus, about his death, about his resurrection, about that being the fulfillment of the plan, the way of forgiveness, the need of repentance, and an entrance into life.

[23 : 37] Life there and here. That's what he did. What are you supposed to do with your life after you become a Christian? Preach Christ at whatever opportunity he may give you, and be willing to sacrifice the angst of those who have not yet come to Christ.

That's it. Paul on Paul. Jesus against Paul. Paul advocating for Jesus. And then it looks like he was done with his sermon, or actually the congregation entered into his message before he was finished, because we get two responses mid-sentence, and I'll close with these.

verse 24, the first response to this message is by Festus, 24 through 26. The second response is by Agrippa, verses 27 to the end.

Look at the first response by Festus. Paul, you're out of your mind. Your great learning is driving you out of your mind.

What's the response to the preaching of the gospel? That boy's crazy. That's the response. And if you want to know why he's crazy, he's so smart, he's so incredibly smart, he's become foolish.

[25 : 08] Now, we haven't heard that kind of critique in the church for a while, have we? But that was the early church's, that was the early, that was the response against those in the early church.

they were learned, educated, fully orb'd, interested people in multiple disciplines, and people thought they had gotten so schooled that they'd gone crazy.

About 20 years ago, though, it had flipped entirely because the response to Christians at that point was basically, you all are so crazy because you don't know anything.

learning. In other words, because Christians gave up on learning, they were assumed to be out of their mind. Let me tell you what I see happening because I've lived right here in this neighborhood for now over 20 years.

We are shortly returning to the wonderful critique of Festus. Festus. You may not see it coming, but man, I see it.

[26 : 21] I mean, it is coming. The pendulum has already irreversibly swung. There are so many wonderful, bright men, women, younger people, even in this neighborhood who will be studying law, medicine, hard sciences, liberal arts, archaeology, sociology, even the social sciences, the oriental institute, Semitic languages, and guess who they are?

They're Christians. More than I've ever seen. Why? Because Christians are interested in learning, and the day has come, hallelujah, when somebody's going to say to you, you know what? You are so smart. I think that's made you crazy. That's why you're a Christian. We're there, people. We're there. I can't wait for the next 50 years.

The other response, though, is from Agrippa, 27 and following. Unlike Felix, who says, you crazy, this guy says, you trying to convert me?

Agrippa said to Paul, in a short time, would you persuade me to become a Christian? And Paul said, hey man, whether I got to preach to you a short message or a long message, whether you want me for lunch or dinner, whether you want a retreat or just a morning cup of coffee, I wish that you would become a Christian and that everyone who heard me today would become a Christian, except for the fact that I'm still hanging in these chains.

[28 : 01] In other words, Paul is saying persuasion is the aim of my preaching. He didn't want just a message that became part of the conversation, he wanted to win people to Christ through the conversation.

And that's coming too. I'm so glad the days are done when young Christians talk to their non-Christians and like, well, I don't know, I'm a Christian.

No, we're here to persuade people to be Christian. And that's the first response. The second one there is right at the end there, verse 31, this man's doing nothing wrong, doing, deserve prison men or death.

In other words, he not only says, are you trying to convert me? But he likewise says, well, at least I know this, you're no threat to me. Now, we're not there yet in Christianity with the world, but that should be coming too.

We should be able to communicate our beliefs in a way where the world would actually recognize, whatever you got, you're not a threat to me. Whereas right now, they still view the faith as a threat.

[29 : 21] So we've got some work to do on that response. But then the third one is, oh, what a shame that you had appealed to Caesar. In other words, non-Christians are going to hear your message and they're going to say to a fact, in effect, your convictions are so strong, life could have been easier for you if you didn't hold them all.

That's it. What's your response? Jesus is the fulfillment of the ancient prophetic tradition and their proclamations that God would give to Israel through David's seed a king that would rule over all people for all time who in his righteousness would cover your unrighteousness.

and the only way you're going to recognize it is to be blinded by the light and confronted with his voice in a way that you finally recognize enough to ask and who are you who make my life miserable?

That's it. Christians will be made as Jesus makes us miserable. Well, go in the hope of that word. Our Heavenly Father, thank you for this man who stands across the centuries Saul, now Paul, may his life be used even today to end the journey away from you for some and begin life anew in service to your name.

[31 : 39] Please