

Acts 22

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Preacher: Bishop Dan Gifford

[0 : 00] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah. It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself?

The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me, actually, to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

We are privileged to have Bishop Dan preach. Welcome. Thank you, George. As we stand, let's pray together. Father, we thank you for the gift of your living Word, and we pray that as we are gathering under your Word, that you will speak to our minds and our hearts, that you will shape us so that we more and more show Jesus to the world that is around us. Strengthen us for this blessed mission that you give to each of us through the grace of our Lord Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen. Please be seated.

Well, first of all, I want to congratulate you for being here today on a very snowy, snowstorm kind of day. You are the true Christians of Messiah Church. No, I don't believe that, but I just think it's fantastic that you came here and you're able to hear God's Word and be here for this great celebration of a confirmation as well. We're together praying for the Holy Spirit to come upon Isabella and Ariana, that they would be faithful in serving him all of their lives and as they publicly stand for the Lord Jesus. So it's a very encouraging and very special time to be together.

I do feel a little bit overdressed when I'm standing next to George over here, but it is a special occasion with the confirmation and I'm very, very glad to be part of it. I want to look at Acts 22.

[2 : 48] So if you can turn in your Bibles or in your phones or whatever you use to see God's Word, it will be helpful. You are all going through the book of Acts right now.

And the book of Acts is a gift to us because what we see right at the very beginning is that Luke, who wrote the Gospel of Luke and Acts, says that he's writing this to actually give an account of what Jesus began to do and say in Luke. And what he implies there is that Jesus continues to do his ministry in the book of Acts. That's how the whole thing starts. So the book of Acts is about Jesus' ministry through his people. And that means all of you are on the hook, in a sense. You are all ministers of the Lord Jesus if you are a believer in him. And Jesus is calling you, if you are not a believer in him, to consider him very carefully. Because there is a work that the God who created all things is doing in the world. And it has to do with bringing the knowledge of Jesus, the living Lord Jesus, into people's lives so that they are blessed forever by knowing him. And if you all, if you are a Christian here, it is because you encountered the living Lord Jesus. Through reading the Bible or through talking to somebody who knows

Jesus and believes that he is alive, risen from the dead, and forgives our sins. And so all of you have a testimony. We had a very small number at 8 a.m. and I was very tempted to ask everybody for their testimony of how they came to know Jesus. But we didn't do those. A few too many. I could almost do it here, too. And the reason I say that is because this reading that we have from Acts 22 is all about testimony. The whole thing is about Paul's testimony of Jesus in his life.

And Luke spends a lot of time giving that testimony. And he only does it, he doesn't only do it once, he does it three times throughout the book of Acts. This is the second time that we hear it.

And in a few weeks, George is going to preach from Acts 26, you're going to hear it again. But that is because the nature of the Christian faith is a living relationship with God. And you and I have a story about that living relationship with God. If you do not know God yet, you are on a journey. You're here because you're thinking about, well, is this true? Is there a living God? Perhaps.

[5 : 53] You are on a journey. There's a story that you have. And we are, we understand more about what the gospel is about through testimony. And we are actually going to probably hear a bit of testimony from Arianna and from Isabella before they are confirmed as well. Because God, for all of you, has come into your life in some way. And this is what we pray for those of our friends and our dear ones, the people that we meet who do not know God yet as well. We pray that they come to that understanding that Jesus is alive. So the context of this, Paul is, as you heard last week from George, he's in a rough situation. You think it was bad coming here through a snowstorm?

He comes to this place of our passage today by being beaten up. He is hurting. He has almost been killed. He's just been saved because he got arrested, basically. And so it's in that context that he says to the tribe, you, and he says, can I say a word here to this mob who has just tried to kill me? Can I say a word to them? And he convinces them to do it. So Paul stands up. He's allowed to. And for some reason, the crowd gets quiet when he stands up. And they must have been very curious. What's this guy going to say? He's all beat up. And they get even quieter when he starts talking to them in Aramaic, in Hebrew, it says in your Bible. You can see there. And what he says, he says, look, you tried to kill me, basically, because you thought I brought a Gentile into the temple, and you didn't respect what it means to be a Jew? He says, I'm telling you, I am the most qualified Jew that there is. In fact, I persecuted the Christian church. I did everything I could to tear down anybody who said they believed that Jesus was alive, that he rose from the dead. And he said, but what happened one day when I was going to Damascus is that I was going to go round up some Christians and destroy their lives and bring them back to Jerusalem. And around noon, a bright, blinding light came onto me, and I heard a voice. And that voice said two words to start out, which ended up changing his life. Those two words were Saul, Saul, his name. And he said, Saul, Saul, it is the Lord Jesus, the living God, who is speaking to you. And the thing that we see from this, which is so important for us, is that the living God who created all things is also the God who speaks to you very, very personally. We see it throughout the Bible. Moses in the Bernie Bush, named by God.

And I'm going to do something in your life here, Moses, that will change everything. Mary didn't know who Jesus was. He says her name, the risen Lord Jesus, right after the resurrection, she's crying. It turned her life completely upside down. My Lord, you are alive. And Peter, Peter, Peter, who denies Jesus. Three times, Jesus, after he rose from the dead, said to Peter, Peter, Peter, feed my sheep. Peter, feed my lambs. Peter, feed my sheep. You see, God's word is for the world, and it is very personal as well. And what I'm amazed by here is that that God speaks to Saul, who became Paul, very, very personally and directly. And here is a guy who is the most opposed to Jesus Christ of anybody in the world. He is the most hardened to the Lord Jesus Christ. He assumes Jesus is dead, and he wants to kill anybody who says otherwise. And yet, here he is encountering the living Lord Jesus in the grace of God, in the most unmistakable way that you can imagine. And I want you to be encouraged by this, because if you are a Christian this morning, you have people in your life that you know that you wish desperately would know that God is alive, and that he forgives our sins, that he brings us into a restored relationship with him. You have people in your life that you are praying for. And I want you to know that there were people praying for Paul. That's why Paul would say afterwards, pray for those who persecute you. Love them.

[10 : 54] And there were people praying for Paul to know the Lord Jesus. There is nobody outside the grace of God. God, continue to pray for those people who are in your lives. Pray that God will personally speak to them and reveal that Jesus is alive as they hear a testimony, as they read God's word.

Jesus asked Paul a question. And when Jesus asked people questions, it's very searching. It's always searching in the Bible. You can think of, you know, Peter being asked those questions, do you love me?

Three times, do you love me? And to Mary, he said, you know, who are you seeking? And here, Paul is being asked this question, why are you persecuting me? That question completely turned Paul's life upside down. Because it's at that point he realized that there was something completely

wrong about his life. So he asked this follow-up question to Jesus in this question.

He says, who are you, Lord, that you're saying I'm persecuting you? And the voice said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. And that turned his life upside down. You know, the one, he had thought Jesus as a blasphemer of somebody who was a liar, who had led people away from the law and the true worship of God.

And all of a sudden, he sees the fact that, oh, he is the living God. He is the one who has truly risen from the dead. And not only that, but this Jesus personally identifies with the people that Paul was trying to destroy. And you can imagine what was happening in his mind. This can't be happening.

[12:50] My life's work is completely wrong. I've been blind to God all my life and what he was doing in the Lord Jesus. I thought I was doing great good, but I was attacking God himself. And you know, that was the defining moment for Paul in his life. Because what happened when he's blinded by that light? It's a sign of what his spiritual life was before that, that it was blind. And he comes out of that by God's grace into the light of Jesus. And it changed everything for him. In fact, he describes his ministry in 2nd Corinthians 4, 6. This is how he says, this is my ministry that God has given me. He said, for God, who said, let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That's what Paul's life was all about. He knew that God had brought him from darkness, spiritually, into light. And that light is all about the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ, in the face of Jesus Christ. Seeing the goodness and the glory of God in Jesus. In the city of Ottawa, we, our city here, and the city I'm from in Toronto, has many, many people who are blind to God. And that blindness takes different forms. Sometimes that blindness is,

I don't know why God is even relevant. I don't need Jesus. I'm able to live a life that's just fine without him. Sometimes it is simply that I've never even really thought of God being somebody that I would consider. Others are, I would say, probably like Paul, sincerely opposing God, seeing that this is actually not a good thing in our culture to have people who are Christians. And then there are others where God is slowly lifting away, like a cataract, the blindness, the spiritual blindness that's happening for them. And these are all forms of being blind to God. But Paul's testimony shows that in a very personal way, God is all about, in every person's unique situation, opening minds and hearts to the knowledge of God in the light of God in the light of Jesus, in the glorious light of Jesus. And that is God's love for us.

That he would be all about his great work in the world, working in people personally, to bring them to know his great forgiveness, his reconciliation with himself, with even people who are enemies of God.

That he is all about bringing the light of God into the spiritual darkness that people experience. To know the healing of our relationship with God that then extends to our healing with other people. The healing within ourselves, the brokenness that is all around us. One of the great difficult questions that people have is, why is there evil in the world? We can't fully answer that, but we can say the gospel is all about Jesus coming into our brokenness, coming into the darkness, invading it with his grace and his goodness and his mercy. That is what is happening in Paul's life. And this is something that shaped Paul's life forever. He knew that whatever he was going through, snowstorms, shipwrecks, beatings, stonings, that all of the things that happened to him, he experienced the joy of God. He's known as the joyful apostle. He speaks about joy all the time. And it doesn't seem like he's got a lot to be joyful about. But he sincerely is, powerfully is. And it's because he knows that nothing can separate him from the love of God in the Lord Jesus Christ. Not even death. And that is the gift of Jesus' gospel. This is the light that Paul experienced. And that news that we have of Jesus

[17:02] Christ in our life is the one great gift for the world. It's the one thing the church has that the world cannot offer. And it's the greatest thing that people need as well. And this is what we are about as a church, carrying this precious gift of the light of Jesus Christ into the world around us.

And that leads us to, you know, it's not just that Paul encountered the living Lord Jesus, and it just completely turned his life around. God also sent Paul. God sent Paul in this reading.

And so his testimony is, not only does God open my eyes, but he sends me to bring that light that I was open to, to other people. What George will preach on chapter 26 is a great, I like that testimony because he also kind of fleshes out a little bit more what that sending was like, what God told him. And here's what he said. Chapter 26, verse 17. He said, Jesus said, I am sending you, this is what he said to Paul personally, I'm sending you to open the eyes of the nations 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. You see, people from all stripes, all cultures, all nations will have the same place as the chosen people of God, the Jewish people, those who are loved and who are close to God, who are at peace with God. And that gospel goes far into the world. I love how Paul responded to that and how Ananias told him. He said, Jesus said to him, rise now, you know, you've been stuck on the, on the road here, fallen off your horse, go to Damascus, you're going to be told all that you're going to do. And when he gets there immediately, a few days later, he gets baptized. And, and Ananias said, what are you waiting for? Get going. He starts preaching the synagogues and then goes to Jerusalem. So that's his, that's his testimony. And he ends his testimony with all of these people who tried to kill him, listening to him. And he ends the testimony in a way that probably from a safety standpoint was not the smartest thing to do. He said this, look at verse 21.

He said that, you know, when I went to Jerusalem back then, God said, Jerusalem's not going to accept you. You need to do something now. Verse 21, go for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.

[19:56] Well, that was like lighting a match where there were gas fumes. They became enraged and there was a riot so that the Romans had to take Paul to the barracks. And the reason there was an explosion was because he was saying, God's own people are going to reject this great gift from God. And Paul's going to go to the Gentiles, to the people who are separated from God, and he's going to share that gift with them. And they didn't like it. Now, I want to close this sermon by saying to you and I, you know, how does this apply to us? How does that testimony that we've just heard from thousands of years ago, how does it affect us? Well, very simply, it shows us that God's agenda in the world is to open the hearts and minds of people to the glory of God in Jesus, to open our minds to the gospel. And that process is called conversion. If you have come to believe in Jesus, you have been converted. Paul's conversion was very dramatic. Mine wasn't so much. Mine was probably similar to what

Isabella and Ariana have, where they grow up with Christian family in a Christian home. And you know about Jesus from the beginning of their life. But I want you to know that in this little testimony, you see a threefold way pattern of the Christian life, of conversion, that all of us experience if you become a Christian. And the first thing is, is that God causes people to encounter the living Jesus. In some way, you encounter the living Jesus, and he speaks to you personally. If you're a follower of Jesus today, God did speak to you through the Bible or through a friend, and God, by his spirit, made you understand that Jesus loves you, that he has died for the forgiveness of your sins to bring you at peace with God, and that he lives as Lord because he rose from the dead, and he is with you every day. He is your shepherd every single day. God, by his spirit, adopts you by that forgiveness so that you belong to him forever. Your eyes are open to that. And secondly, God brings repentance into your life.

Paul was undone. His life was turned upside down by meeting the living Lord Jesus. And in every life that comes to know God, God unravels our lives so that he makes us new, so that the thing that is central in our life is Jesus Christ himself, the living Jesus. And that changes everything about you. And a lot of times it means a complete about-face in things that are most important in your life. There's a conviction in us that says there are ways that I have rebelled against God, and my life needs complete reorientation. I need the new life that God gives. And then thirdly, and finally, God, in this process of conversion, sends you out into the world. And some of you, as I'm looking out in this congregation here, I know that's literally been to the ends of the earth for some of you. But for most of us, it's in our neighborhoods. It's in our families. It's in the people that we love and care for, or it might be somebody, a stranger that you meet. Sometimes it's easiest to share the gospel with somebody you've never met before. But God is one who is sending you into the world as his representative, as his minister in the world. Our job, George and my job as ordained ministers, is simply to equip you as ministers of the gospel to do the work God's given you to do. Because in your conversion, he sends you out. In my own life, I experienced that, all three of those things in my life. Jesus called me by name. When I was very, very little, I knew that God knew me personally. From as far back as I can remember, I knew that Jesus was alive. And I also knew that he was one who forgives sins, as I understood at the time. I knew that God was always, always loving me. And that I, it was good for me to pray to him, and to turn to him. That's what, that's what it means to encounter the Lord Jesus Christ. And I also knew that I needed to

repent as I grew up in my life.

[24 : 56] I think that for me, one of the most important parts of my conversion was at age 16 of realizing is what my parents believe, what I believe, simply because they're my parents? Or do I need to take that on for myself? Do I need to stand up and say, yes, I actually believe this. I want to live my life for this. This is what we're going to be doing in confirmation. And that was incredibly important for me.

But for me, the most dramatic part of my conversion in, in my thinking was that third aspect of being sent up. Because at age 19, the penny dropped, and I realized, you know, Jesus is calling me to serve him in this world. That I, I really had been a very passive person in church, taking things in. And that was kind of it. But I realized by God's grace that I need to live the Christian life more fully. I had to be much more active in following him. And I'll tell you, that was the most rewarding thing, I think, change that happened for me is to see life in that way, of being one who would serve him in whatever situation. And it was then that I joined a Bible study. I became involved in the life of the church. I became involved in campus ministry, in reaching out to refugees in the area. It was, it was actually exercising the faith that God had given to me. And you got to be careful when you do that thing. It can lead you to strange things that led to my ordination one day as well, and being where I am today. But, you know, this is what, this is what God is doing in each of our lives with, with conversion. He is showing you the living Jesus. He is calling you to repentance, the joy of repentance, of turning to him. And he's, he's giving to each of us the joy of being sent out ones, being sent out.

Do you know, in our liturgy that we hear today, God says, God calls us to that conversion every day, in a sense. Because in the service, we hear God speak to us. Like the living, we encounter the Lord, the living Lord Jesus Christ. And you do it through the week when you read, and when you pray, and when you receive communion. We encounter him. We, we are called to repentance as well. Every time we meet together, we repent of our sins. It's one of the great things of the Anglican liturgy. And we ask God to strengthen us in the new life of Jesus. And then at the end of the service, you will notice that you are being sent out to do the works that God has given you to do, and to be a living sacrifice for, for him. Our souls and bodies, a living sacrifice. That's the pattern of the Christian life. That's the testimony that we have to the Lord Jesus. May God fill you personally with his Holy Spirit, to be faithful to him as sent out ones, but also to know the joy of the Lord Jesus as you encounter him in his word, and as you turn to him over and over again for that new life that only he can give, so that you will be a glorious light for the Lord Jesus in this city of Ottawa and far beyond.

May God's Spirit strengthen you so that you can serve him in your home, in your work, at your school, with your friends, so that Jesus and his glorious light is made known. To him belong all praise, glory, and honor forever and ever. Amen.

[28 : 43] Amen.