

Kicking against the goads

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[0 : 00] Let's turn back to the passage that we read in Luke of Acts and chapter 26.

Let's read again verse 13. At midday, O King, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun shining round about me, and them which journeyed with me.

And when we were fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It's hard for thee to kick against the prince.

It was in 1986, towards the end of that year, that I began my journey that intended to leave God behind.

The church, as far as I was concerned, was arrogant. The religion I knew, irrelevant. And the questions that I had were unanswered.

[1 : 32] But then it happened. A sudden compulsion to open my Bible and to read. And I stumbled across the promise that said, Ask and you shall receive.

Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. There followed a prayer. Lord, if you are there, show me.

And before I knew it, I was on my knees. And the only thing I could say was, I love you, Lord Jesus.

Into the light. And it came out of the blue. Or so it seemed. For there followed the realization that, for the previous 13 years, every single detail and event of my life, had been governed and guided by a God who truly is the Hound of Heaven.

There was nothing out of the blue in my going into the light. But rather what there was, was this patient build-up of the work of grace that resulted in breaking this rebel's resistance.

[3 : 13] So it is with each one of us. We read here of the testimony of the Apostle Paul.

And the Apostle Paul truly, in his pre-converted days, was a rebel with stiff resistance.

To try and understand what kind of man Saul of Tarsus was, I think I would need to present to you perhaps three kind of individuals or pictures that come from our own time, our own day.

The first would be that of a well-known figure nowadays, the name of Richard Dawkins. He is the writer of several books, most famously, *The God Delusion* and *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

He is acclaimed as being the third most intelligent man in the world. How they assess that, I do not know, but clearly the top two are in the pulpit up here and he comes third.

[4 : 30] He is aggressive in his attacks against Christianity. And what he uses is an academic aggression.

He uses the might of intellect to try and persuade people to turn away from the belief in God.

Indeed, he is scathing against any who think that it is a reasonable thing to believe in God. This is what he says.

Faith is the great cop-out. The great excuse to evade the need to think and to evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of or even perhaps because of the lack of evidence.

He says there may be fairies at the bottom of your garden, but there is no evidence for it. You can't prove that they are there, so shouldn't we be agnostic with respect to fairies?

[5 : 43] And then he goes on to argue that it should be the same thing with God. That because intellectually you cannot prove that he is there, that we should be at the very least agnostic with respect to God.

Hence, he is the one who backed the campaign that was in a number of the London buses and so on, the big posters that said probably there is no God.

It is an academic aggression against a belief in a divine being. Join to that another face, that of Philip Pullman.

Philip Pullman is a well-known writer, especially perhaps amongst the younger folk. He is the one that wrote the trilogy entitled His Dark Materials, in which he says that Christianity is a very powerful and convincing mistake.

In an interview with Pullman when he was being probed as to why he was so antagonistic against the church, this was his reply. It comes from history.

[7 : 07] It comes from the record of the Inquisition, persecuting heretics and torturing Jews and all that sort of stuff. It comes from the other side too, from the Protestants burning the Catholics.

It comes from the incessant pursuit of innocent and crazy old women and from the Puritans in America burning and hanging the witches. And it comes not only from the Christian church but also from the Taliban.

In his mind, Christianity and Taliban terrorism is all one and the same thing. But what does he do to try and undermine the teachings of the church and the belief in Jesus?

Well, he attacks by stealth. It is subtle, but it is effective. And the last book that he wrote was this one here.

It's called The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ. Christ. And the frightening thing about a book like this is when you read through it, much of it reads as if it were scripture itself.

[8 : 12] In fact, much of it is scripture itself, but it's got a twist to it. It speaks of Jesus and his brother Christ. And it ends up there is all sorts of twists and turns that result in the story of the gospel.

And on the back of the book there is this very simple statement. It says this is a story. And the idea is that when you read this book that reads so like your Bible that when you pick up your Bible and start to read it, you will think this is a story.

And nothing more than a story. It is an attack by self seeking to undermine the truth of the gospel, to undermine the truth of the scriptures.

Add to that one other picture. It is that of the physical persecution against the church of Christ that is so prevalent in our own day.

The kind of attack that perhaps you would associate with the kind of Al-Qaeda terrorists. Do you know there was a report I think just last week that I read it, I think it was in the Guardian or one of these papers where it was a report on the persecution against religion across the world.

[9 : 41] And it claimed that over 75% of all persecution against religious bodies and groups, over 75% of it was directed to Christians.

That should not surprise us. but it is still a frightening figure. Well if you take these three things, the academic aggression against Christian teaching, the stealth attacks against Christian beliefs, and the physical persecution against Christian believers, then you have the picture of Saul of Tarsus.

Jesus, he was a man who employed all these things in his attempt to destroy the church of Jesus Christ.

And that is why it was such big news when Saul of Tarsus, persecutor of the church, became Paul the apostle, preacher of the gospel of grace.

Can you imagine what it would have been like if a few weeks ago when your minister was giving intimation of this communion, that if instead of him saying that the communion were going to have Roddy John Campbell on Thursday and Friday and Donnie G on Saturday and Sunday, he said, well, for the preparatory services we are going to have Philip Coleman, and for the Sunday services we are going to have Richard Dawkins.

[11 : 21] And they're going to preach about Jesus Christ, and in the fellowship meeting afterward they're going to tell you about how they came to know the Lord. You can imagine that that would not be news that would be confined to point, that would be national, international news.

This would be on the front page of every newspaper, this would be the headlines of every news item on television, that men like this had come to know Jesus.

Well, that's exactly what happened when Saul of Tarsus became the apostle Paul. And how did it happen? Well, he was on his way to Damascus, and he says that suddenly, if you go back to Acts chapter 9, it says suddenly this light came from heaven, and a voice spoke to him.

And it was the voice of Jesus, and Jesus is saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? He is stopped in his tracks, and in that moment of time, he comes into the light, and it is so out of the blue.

And this is why even to this day we talk about people having a Damascus road experience, not just when we're speaking of religious things, but when there's a sudden turnaround in their lives, or when there is a change of mind, or a change of heart, that happens very quickly, we speak about them having a Damascus road experience.

[12 : 59] But for Paul, his journey into the light was not out of the blue. And we see this when we look at the word of Christ to him, as he recalls in his own testimony.

he says that Jesus said to him in the Hebrew term, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

It's hard for thee to kick against the prince. It is hard for thee to kick against the goads.

Jesus is here taking us, I suppose, into a farm or into a field. And in the farm or in the field, there is a man perhaps ploughing with his oxen.

And the oxen are stubborn. They don't want to move. But he has this long pole. At the end of the pole, there is a kind of shovel like thing, and on the other end there is a font.

[14 : 10] The shovel like thing is there to clear the earth from the plough when it gets clogged up with turf and earth and so on. But the point at the other side has another purpose.

It's when the oxen are stubborn and don't want to move forward. And the point would be used to prod and to poke them. And to keep prodding and poking until they moved forward, until they responded.

Well, here what Jesus is saying to Saul of Tarzis, the persecutor of the Christ, he's saying it's difficult for you, isn't it, Saul? Because up until now, you have felt this poking, this prodding that has come from heaven, and you've been fighting and struggling against it, and it's not been easy.

Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me when you're finding it so difficult to fight against the prodding that's coming from heaven?

I want us to ask, what were these proddings that the apostle, or I should say the persecutor, Saul, was feeling?

[15 : 24] What were the poking that he was feeling in his own heart and soul? I want to suggest to you just three things.

The first thing is that he was prodded by what he knew. He was prodded by what he knew. Saul was an expert in the Jewish religion.

He was taught by one of the best, a man by the name of Gamaliel. He sat at the Gamaliel's feet, and he was taught the scriptures, he was taught the religion and the rituals of Judaism.

For Saul was being groomed to be a future leader within Judaism. And because of this, he was very familiar with all the teachings of the prophets, he was familiar with all the ceremonies of the law, he knew these things inside out.

but because of this position he was given, he would also be kept well informed about any of these innovations or developments that were taking place within Judaism.

[16 : 43] I think it's fair to assume that he would have been well informed about this young rabbi from Nazareth by the name of Jesus, who had gathered quite a following.

He would have known all about the miracles of Jesus, he would have been told all about the teachings of Jesus, and even he would have known all about the crucifixion of Jesus, he would have heard all the reports about the resurrection of Jesus.

He was very familiar, he was very knowledgeable about the Christianity that he was persecuting. You see, Saul was consciously rejecting Christ as the Messiah, and yet there was few that were more equipped to recognise Christ as the Messiah, because of all the knowledge and teaching that he possessed.

And I think that becomes very evident when after Saul is converted, you see him going into the synagogues, and from the Old Testament scriptures, he is able to persuade others that Jesus is the Christ.

You see, it was all up there, he knew it all, but he was rejecting it, he was resisting it, and it wasn't easy. He didn't rest easy within his own heart and soul.

[18 : 12] And many would argue that perhaps his fanatical persecution of the church was a revelation of the fact that he was just scared to face up to the truth.

That his persecution of the church is what really reveals how uneasy he was with not accepting Jesus Christ as his own Lord and Messiah.

He found it hard to resist the goadings of what he knew in his head and in his heart. Tonight, you know the truth. You know the truth.

You know the truth about God. He is there. You cannot live in this island and deny the truth of God. You cannot look outside and see the creation around you and deny the existence of God.

And on top of all these things, there are so many other evidences that would show to you the reality of God, but you know in your own heart and soul that he is there.

[19 : 19] You know the truth about Jesus. I'm sure most, if not all of you here, have been taught about Jesus from when you were so young. Probably you were taught about Jesus before you could even begin to even say the word Jesus.

You have been brought up to know about him and who he is and what he has done and what he is like and you know the gospel of Jesus Christ. You know about sin.

You know about the problem of sin. You know what it is. You know what a problem it creates between yourself and God. You have been taught these things. You know about heaven and you know about hell.

You have been taught these things. You know about the gospel of grace. You have heard it over and over again. maybe I'm being perhaps a wee bit presumptuous here thinking that there is probably nobody here who has never heard the gospel before.

You have heard it perhaps many many many times. There is nothing new that I could tell you tonight about the gospel of Jesus Christ. You know it. And you know about your own responsibility.

[20 : 32] Your own responsibility to act and to respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ. And you may try and hide. You may try and hide behind the doctrine of election or anything else.

But the truth is you cannot rest easy because you know too much. You're unsettled with your knowledge. You know you should let your life be changed by it but you resist it and you resist it and you resist it but it isn't resting easy with you.

Just now in my car I have in the dashboard as many of you have various lights and things like that there. I will reveal my ignorance when it comes to cars very quickly but in my car there is one wee light at the moment it's the light that shows a spanner and it's been there for the last couple of weeks and that wee spanner light is apparently telling me that I should get the car to the garage.

It needs a service or there's a problem or something like that. But I've been putting it off and putting it off and putting it off until that spanner light appeared. I used to really enjoy driving the car but since that spanner light appeared I'm just not comfortable driving.

And all the time I'm thinking I must book the car in. I must get it seen to but I still haven't done it. And in my head I'm thinking I must do it when I go back home tomorrow.

[22 : 02] because I can't rest easy until that problem is being sorted out. Is it not like that perhaps in your own life? There is some kind of warning light there before you telling you that things are not right.

Telling you not that you need to go to the garage but you need to go to Christ. And you're putting it off and you're putting it off but you can't rest easy. You can't enjoy the drive because all the time there is something there in your head and in your heart saying you need to do something and the ducking and the diving and the fighting and the resisting it's hard for you because you're being prodded.

You're being poked by what you know to be true. The second thing you see with the apostle here is that before he was converted he was prodded by what he had seen.

Saul had seen amazing things. It is possible that he even saw the Lord Jesus Christ. It is possible that he may have witnessed maybe something of his ministry as miracles we don't really know but he certainly saw many converted to Christianity.

I find it hard to believe that Paul wouldn't have been in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost when 3,000 souls came to know the Lord. He would have been there or thereabouts when these events took place.

[23 : 32] And even if not after that he certainly witnessed the evangelistic seal of the Christians. He saw how they went out with such passion and excitement and enthusiasm to tell others about Jesus Christ.

And this must have affected him, he must have wondered. There was often a kind of indifference, a coldness, a ritual about his own religion but here is something that seemed so vibrant and alive and real and folk are going out and telling about this man Jesus and who he is and what he had done and how he had been raised again from the dead.

Saul saw how these Christians reacted to his persecution. When he tried to make them blaspheme the name of Jesus, they refused. No matter how hard he tried, no matter what torture he took them through, they would not deny this name that for them was above every name.

Go back to Acts chapter 6, 7, 8, you will see there also how Paul was the one who stood by and gave his concern even to the stoning of godly Stephen, as he did to the martyrdom of other Christians as well.

What did Saul see on that occasion? He saw the man whose face was like the face of an angel. He saw this incredible faith of a man when surrounded by a crowd that were gnashing their teeth at them and running at them in order to destroy him.

[25 : 05] He saw something of the graciousness of this man when he was being stoned and he was offering a prayer to God saying Lord please don't hold this to their account.

And he saw this man as he entered into glory in all his beauty looking up into the sky and saying that he saw the son of man waiting for him ready to receive him and we're told of how Stephen falls asleep.

I believe this really really marked Saul of Tarsus. It's why I think in his epistles later on he often will describe the believer's death as falling asleep because that's the way it appeared when he saw Stephen being martyred.

He'd just died peacefully and went to be with his Lord. You see Saul was witness to Christian love and life.

He was witness to Christian evangelism and Christian prayer and it was something that really did affect him and it was gnawing away at him, it was prodding and poking at him and as he tried to destroy the Christian church he wasn't easy with it because he had seen this marvellous Christian witness before him.

[26 : 24] Many of us here no doubt have had bad experiences of church, maybe bad experiences of professed Christians, but is it not also the case that we have been privileged to have contact with lovely Christian men and women.

People who showed to us something of Christian love and life. People whose concern for us made them speak to us about the Christian gospel.

People who we know we were subject of their prayers to the Lord Jesus. Even as I speak I have faces flashing before my mind's eye of people that I had contact with when I was young.

Sunday school teachers, the old elder at the door, the minister that was in the pulpit, another hope that would be anonymous to everyone else. And as they spoke to you, as they spent time with you, the one thing you knew was that they loved your soul and had a concern for your soul and you admired them.

And there was part of you that wanted to be like them. There was part of you that was really attracted to them because you could see that their faith was real, that their Christ was real, that their Christianity was something that was meaningful to them and their witness, what we saw in them, hope and prodded in our own conscience.

[27 : 56] Is it not hard for you to fight against this? In your own minds, I, conjure up those faces. I'm not talking about the faces that sometimes would put you off religion.

I'm talking about the ones where you have seen the reality of Jesus. For you too, it may have been your Sunday school teacher, it may be someone in your own home, it could be your husband, your wife, it could be your father, your mother, it could be your grandparents, it could have been an old elder in the church, it could be a young elder in the church, it could have been a child that you met but they have seen something of the reality of Christ in their life and you know that it's real.

And perhaps deep down, if you have been truthful to yourself, you want it. You want it. You're prodded, poked by what you have seen.

And then you see, finally, that Saul was also prodded by what he felt. Saul was a confident person, very well arrogant, perhaps.

And certainly before he was converted, he really was very spiritually arrogant. He thought he was alright, very religious.

[29 : 16] He kept the law and that was enough. In his testimony, he makes that clear. He is in no way even seeking to deny it.

He says to Agrafta here, he says, you know that I followed the greatest sect of our religion. I lived a Pharisee. In Philippians chapter 3, he expands to them.

And you know how he goes, he's saying, well, do you know what, when it came to the law, I was blameless. You really couldn't get better than me. I was very confident, very assured about my own religiosity.

I was extreme in the extreme in keeping all the rules and regulations of my religion. And so I should have felt okay. But he says, I wasn't totally happy with my position.

In Romans chapter 7, he is talking about the law. And he was saying that in the whole, he was quite comfortable in the presence of the law. But there was one law that really kind of troubled him.

[30 : 27] He says, there was that law that said, do not covet. And he knew that the other laws, yes, he could keep outwardly. He could honour his father and mother. He could not kill somebody.

He could not commit adultery. He could not steal. But this one, do not covet. Do not have any jealous or greedy or envious thoughts in your own head or desires in your own heart.

While suddenly the law really becomes alive and he realises that he is a law breaker before God. He is suffering from a guilty conscience.

No matter how much religion he had, in his own conscience he still felt that he was not right with God. And no matter how often and how hard he tried to tell himself everything was okay, he was being prodded by this guilty conscience.

That's what was happening to him. And maybe that's what's happening to you too. Perhaps we try to pretend that our attendance at church, well it's got to count for something.

[31 : 38] The odd reading of the Bible, the saying of prayers, the decent, the moral life, the respectability, the religiosity, surely it counts for something.

But no matter how much we try and tell ourselves this, there is something eating up inside. Something telling us it's not enough.

Something telling us that we're not right with God. Something telling us that there is a problem that we need to sort out. That we really are falling short of the glory of God because we are sinners.

And that a good reference is not impressive to God. that we are not making the grade and we are feeling the guilt that is prodding away in our hearts.

And the thing about that guilt, and we must remember this, is that that guilt that's prodding away is not there to make us feel bad.

[32 : 43] It's there to prod us in the direction of Jesus Christ, who deals with the guilty conscience, who takes away our sins, and who makes us right before God.

Tonight I'm asking you, if what you know is prodding you, if what you have seen is prodding you, if what you feel is prodding you in the direction of Jesus.

Tonight I'm asking you, how long has it been that you have felt these prods, and how long has it been that you have been resisting them?

You know, sometimes I think it is harder to resist Christ than it is to yield to him. Sometimes it takes more effort to keep on rejecting Jesus than it takes to actually accept him.

Is it not hard for you to kick against the ghosts? There's one man I knew very well, who came to faith a few years ago.

[34 : 02] When I asked him what happened, his response was quite simply this, I got tired running. I got tired running.

running. Are you getting tired running? It makes no sense. It makes no sense, and with this we'll conclude.

It makes no sense for two reasons. First of all, because Jesus is Lord. Jesus is Lord.

We forget this. this morning we observed the Lord's Supper. And as we observed the Lord's Supper, those of you here will perhaps remember, I said it was important because of who commanded it.

It was the Lord on the same night he was betrayed and took bread and said, do this in remembrance of me. And as believers we must do what the Lord commands us to do.

[35 : 09] But Jesus is not just the Lord of the church. He is not just the Lord of those who believe in him. He is Lord of all.

He is the Lord of lords and the king of kings. And because he is Lord, you have no right to resist Jesus. No man, woman, or child has the right to refuse Jesus when he says, come, follow me.

No man, woman, or child has the right to demand, the right to refuse the Lord of lords, his or her heart.

But there is another reason why your resistance doesn't make sense. Because he is Lord, you have no right to resist. But because Jesus is love, you have no reason to resist.

No reason. What kind of Christ is it that is calling to you in the gospel? What kind of Jesus is it that says, follow me, give me your heart?

[36 : 30] It is the Jesus who so loved you that he gave himself for you on the cross of Calvary. It is a Jesus whose love is so high, so deep, so wide, we can't even begin to fathom or understand it.

That is the Jesus that is calling you to himself. And that's why it makes no sense to resist him.

It is the lie of Satan. If you think that Jesus is calling you into a cold and heartless religion, it is the lie of Satan if you think that if this night you were to abandon your life to Jesus that you would go out of this building absolutely miserable in the bondage of the chains of the church and of religion.

It is the lie of Satan if you think that this night, that if you were to give your life to Jesus that you have then confined yourself into a lifetime of sadness and of boredom.

It's the very opposite. We find our purpose, our meaning, our joy, our peace, our everything in Jesus Christ. And it's because he loves you that he through the preaching of the word pleads with you, son, daughter, give me your heart.

[38 : 08] Are you tired, running? It's hard for you to kick against the goals. And I would tweet with you this night that if you haven't already done so, stop running, stop fighting, stop resisting.

Hear the gentleness of the loving and gracious voice of Jesus and simply give him your heart. Let's pray.

God, we acknowledge that you are the sovereign God.

We acknowledge that you are a gracious God. We acknowledge that you are our God. God, we pray that this very night that you would come among us by your power and that in your sovereign mercy and grace that you would touch the lives, the hearts, the souls of men.

we pray, Lord God, that this night that those who are resisting would lay down their arms against you and that this night they would be rejoicing both in heaven and here on earth over sinners repenting.

[39 : 52] Lord God, in the quietness of this moment, we pray that you would exalt Jesus in the salvation of souls.

For his glory we ask. Amen.