

A Treasure for all people

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Date: 30 September 2021

Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] Back in 1984, a Christian pastor in Iran was imprisoned on charges of apostasy in that country.

Such charges, if found guilty, would mean that he would be executed. And he spent nine years in prison before he finally got a chance to answer these charges in court. And so on the 3rd of December 1993, he wrote his defense to the court of justice. And as part of that defense, he summarized his life in these words. He says, I am a Christian. As a sinner, I believe Jesus has died for my sins on the cross and by his resurrection and victory over death, he has made me righteous in the presence of the Holy God. In response to his kindness, he has asked me to deny myself and to be his fully surrendered follower and not to fear people, even if they would kill my body. Life for me is an opportunity to serve him and death is a better opportunity to be with Christ. Therefore, I am not only satisfied to be in prison for the honor of his holy name, but am ready to give my life for the sake of Jesus, my Lord, and enter his kingdom sooner, the place where the elect of God enters everlasting life. Now, whatever your perspective on life of religion, philosophy of life is, I got to say this, hardly a person in the world that does not want to be able to face trials, hardship, difficulty, in fact, even daily life itself, like that man in that moment. To face life with boldness and contentment and poise with satisfaction, settledness, security. In fact, to even face death with so much life.

In Acts 26, Paul is giving an account of his life in Jesus Christ before King Agrippa II. His life, like that Iranian pastor, has been turned inside out and upside down by Jesus Christ. That is, like the Iranian pastor who followed him centuries later, he has discovered a treasure that truly satisfied, a treasure in life that truly satisfies. It is the gospel treasure that is to be known and experienced by all people that, in fact, has driven the entire agenda of the book of Acts as we've been discovering it again and again. It is this gospel treasure that is the heartbeat of this church at St. Paul's and it's my goal for us today that we grasp a little bit more of it.

[3 : 21] So I've got really three points and if you got the St. Paul's app, it'd be great if you could open it up and there's three things. A treasure for all people, a treasure that makes sense and a treasure that truly satisfies. So the first point, a treasure for all people. King Agrippa II, his great-grandfather, was King Herod who ordered the murder of all the male infants in the vicinity of Bethlehem because he feared that Jesus was the challenger to his throne. That was how insecure Herod was on the inside.

His great-uncle had John the Baptist executed and his father, Agrippa I, had executed James, the brother of Jesus and imprisoned the apostle Peter. And so now we have Agrippa II, the latest in the line of a morally bankrupt and insecure family. Acts 25 verse 23, we are told that Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with high-ranking military officers and the prominent men of the city. Now the phrase there, great pomp, comes from a word that means fantasy. That is, if you saw the picture of Agrippa entering this audience room, it looks like a scene from a fantasy movie. This is a big show of importance, of self-importance. It is designed to show power, significance. It is designed to intimidate Paul. But despite the outward appearances of wealth and power and prestige, what we have here with Agrippa is an inner bankruptcy, an inner insecurity.

Bernice, who is accompanying Agrippa in this moment, is Agrippa's younger sister. She was once engaged to the nephew of the philosopher Philo, but instead she married her uncle. But now, having moved away from that, she is living incestuously with her brother Agrippa. This woman had a notorious reputation, even in the days of the Roman Empire. And so here we have Agrippa and Bernice.

They're a sick, sin-infested couple, and yet on the outside, it's fantasy. It's pomp. They dressed up nicely.

Rome considered Agrippa as an authority on the Jewish religion because his family had lived in Judea and oversaw the Jewish religion in the area for several generations. And so he's brought in to bring some expert advice for Festus because he didn't know what to do with his prisoner of Paul and the dispute that he was happening with the Jewish leadership. And so Festus is hoping Agrippa is going to write him a report that he can hand on to Caesar. And so Agrippa calls Paul to speak. And Paul shares his testimony of Jesus' work in his life. And then eventually Agrippa catches on to what's actually happening in this moment. Do you think, this is Agrippa, do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to become a Christian? By a short time along, I pray to God that not only you, but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains. So Agrippa hearing Paul's testimony, hang on a minute.

[7 : 39] Paul, are you trying to convert me? And Paul, without mincing his words in any way, oh, absolutely, Agrippa. You and everyone here, in fact. That is Paul's goal of this whole chapter, this whole speech. That is his aim, that everyone would become followers of Jesus Christ and discover the hope and the treasure that he has. From the religious to the secular, from the upright to the immoral, from the Jew to the Gentile, from the pompous to the pompous to the pompous, all would come and be followers of Jesus Christ.

And that's, in fact, what we've seen right through the book of Acts. That's exactly what has happened right through the book of Acts. This gospel, this treasure has penetrated all kinds of cultures and people groups and classes of people and cities, for the major cities, for the little villages, for the Jew to the Gentile, and it still does across the globe 2,000 years later. And so the question for you, the question for Agrippa in this moment, having been confronted with the fact that Paul wants him to become a Christian, why would Agrippa want to do that? Why would anyone want to do that? Well, that brings us to the thrust of Paul's message.

It's because the core message of the Christian faith, the gospel, this treasure, makes sense.

Agrippa says to Paul, do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian? And Paul is trying here, obviously, to persuade Agrippa that the Christian faith makes sense. Firstly, that the Christian faith makes rational sense. Paul says he met the resurrected Jesus Christ on the Damascus road. In verse 22, he says the Messiah would suffer and as the first to rise from the dead would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles. This is when Festus interrupts Paul in verse 24. When he hears Paul talking about the resurrection, he just can't hold it.

He just jumps in and says, you are out of your mind, Paul. Your great learning is driving you insane. It sort of sounds like he's being partly polite, but it's actually pretty derogatory. It's like, Paul, you've got all these PhDs, but you're mad. You're crazy. That's the sense of it.

But Paul comes back respectfully in verse 25. I am not insane, most excellent Festus. Paul replied, what I am saying is true and reasonable. True and reasonable.

[11 : 01] And verse 26 is Paul's appeal to the true and reasonable. He at this moment turns to Agrippa and says that this king, Agrippa, is familiar with these things and I can speak freely to him.

I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice because, and this is a pregnant statement, it was not done in a corner. Not done in a corner. In other words, Festus, I understand you may not be familiar with the story of Jesus Christ or the resurrection. You know, you're not an expert in Judea. You haven't lived there. I understand that. But Agrippa's different.

Family dynasty have lived in Judea for generations and the events surrounding Jesus Christ was so significant that anyone living in the area around Judea in the past 20 years could not laugh off as insane the events of the resurrection of Jesus Christ as you yourself, Festus, have just done.

There is way too much evidence. Agrippa couldn't escape it. The events were all public.

You see, in the New Testament accounts, there were dozens of miracles performed by Jesus, let alone the ones that are not recorded. And those miracles were witnessed by thousands of people.

[12 : 44] Public, obvious, brilliant, spectacular miracles over three years. You can't just laugh it off. You can't just laugh it off. You can imagine workers building roads or something, sitting down at smoke-o time, drinking their coffee.

And someone says, these Christians. I mean, what a joke. I mean, come on. The other bloke goes, yeah, I don't agree with it. I as well. But then again, we did go to Lazarus's funeral, didn't we?

And there's no denying he did stink. Like, he really stank. He was dead for four days. His body was decomposing. We all went to his funeral. Now he's back at work.

I mean, I don't know how that happened, but there he is. How do you explain it? Thousands of people saw it.

They may not believe it or be able to explain it, but it wasn't done in a corner. And then there's the empty tomb. Hundreds and hundreds of people said that they saw Jesus alive.

[14:10] Not a fuzzy, out-of-focus photo of Jesus. Not a piece of toast with a burnt bit that sort of looks like Jesus. Actually alive.

Talking, eating, walking, fishing, touching. Alive. And so many of these people had lived transformed lives because of seeing Jesus alive.

And many of those people died because of their trust in the resurrected Jesus. I mean, who dies for a hoax? Who does that?

Paul says to Agrippa, you know all about this, don't you? It wasn't done in a corner. You know this stuff. In fact, these conversations would have been conversations you had in the palace.

Of course, there's the public thing that you set out to everyone, the written scripts, the speeches you gave. But behind, you and your dad must have been talking. I don't know what happened. I'm not sure how to explain it.

[15:13] You know, Agrippa, that I'm not crazy. You know that there's lots of evidence for what I'm talking about. You may not believe it, understand that, but you cannot ignore the fact that this is public evidence.

Agrippa here does not say, with Festus, you're mad, Paul. You're a lunatic, Paul.

Notice that he doesn't argue with Paul. He jumps straight to a diversion, a concession. Are you trying to persuade me to become a Christian too?

And what's more, in the last two verses of this chapter, Agrippa and others declare Paul, as he has been declared three times previously in the book of Acts, innocent of all charges.

Agrippa is dodging the real issue because he doesn't want to submit to the evidence. He certainly isn't saying that Paul has got the facts wrong.

[16:31] It makes rational sense. There's way more evidence, obviously, but Christianity claims to be fact. It claims historical evidence that can be tested.

Jesus Christ rose from the dead. That's the heart of it. Christianity makes a whole lot of rational sense. But, like Agrippa, no one comes to or rejects the Christian faith purely on the grounds of rational evidence.

We're more complex than that as people. And so, secondly, Christianity makes personal sense. Now, in verses 4 to 12, Paul is really kind of making one basic point.

He says, I was a committed Pharisee, a strict Jew, who lived to honour the law of God. In other words, my whole life was to honour God with the law code.

My whole goal in life, my whole vision in life, was to obey the law. That's my passion, was to please God by being obedient to the law. All of my zeal in persecuting the Christians was because, as far as I was concerned, they were lawbreakers, and they had to be persecuted for breaking the law.

[17:55] But at some point, before he became a Christian, Paul realised he couldn't obey the law.

He couldn't achieve the very thing that his heart was driving him to do, desperately trying to achieve. And he writes about this in Romans chapter 7.

The commandment not to covet came home to him, and he writes there that, I read the commandment and it killed me.

It slew me. It put me to death. I died. It's like he's sitting in bed at the end of the day with his 10 commandment checklist, patting himself on the back as he ticks off each one.

Obedied, obeyed, obeyed, obeyed. Does it every day. Goes through his diary, obeyed all the 10 commandments. God must be so pleased with me. Haven't committed adultery, haven't murdered anyone today.

[19:00] Fantastic. Then he gets to number 10, do not covet. And he goes, coveting cannot be understood behaviorally.

Coveting has to do with the motivation of the heart. And the law that he was driven to obey helped him to see that he in fact couldn't obey it.

He was never, ever got to the point where he was content with what he had achieved. Ever content with his zeal for God.

He needed more. He was never sure that his law obedience was enough. And in the inside, he coveted more and more and more and more and more. The law helped him to see that he had a

heart problem.

No matter how much law obedience, it was never enough. He was never content. He was never satisfied. On the outside, he was confident, law abiding, fiercely religious, persecuted the Christians.

[20 : 13] But on the inside, he was unsettled. On the outside, he was superior, condescending, self-righteous. And on the inside, he was inferior.

Fear, guilt, shame. Which normally happens in life, day by day. The people who are the more verbose, self-confident, a brash kind of person, tends to be really, really insecure on the inside. And that's Paul. So you can see here how Paul is trying to sort of get under a grip of skin and into his heart. All the pomp and the fantasy and the power and confidence.

And yet what is obvious to all is the sin, the shame, the guilt, the brokenness on the inside, the insecurity. Most scholars agree that God started to get in to Paul's heart, started to target Paul's heart, when Paul stood there in all of his religious zeal, giving his assent to the execution of Stephen.

Paul had never seen anyone in his life so content as Stephen. So not needing more.

[21 : 41] So content in God, in fact. Someone with poise and respect and boldness, even in the face of death. Someone who loved and prayed for his enemies.

And while Paul went on to persecute the Christians, God was working on the inside, in his heart. And then finally on the Damascus road, Paul met Jesus.

Now this is the third time in Acts, that Paul recounts his testimony of meeting Jesus. But this is the only time, that he tells his testimony, and he includes these words in verse 14.

It is hard for you to kick against the goads. Now a goad was a sharp stick, that shepherds used to get sheep to go on the right direction.

We always have these views, and the shepherds are, they just spend their time cuddling their sheep. But in actual fact, they had sticks, and they whacked their sheep as well. And God had been poking and prodding Paul on the inside, unsettling him on the inside.

[22 : 52] And kicking against the goads was an expression in Paul's time, that means you cannot keep resisting the deity. There is a God who is poking in your heart, Paul.

Paul had been driven to please God, as his passion in life, and that drivenness caused him to persecute Jesus.

And then this Jesus, who Paul immediately calls my Lord, before he knows it is, my Lord, my Lord, and then discovers that in actual fact, it's Jesus.

The one he'd been persecuting, in his zeal for God, he discovers was in fact, God himself. And then Jesus makes all the difference to Paul.

In particular, the gospel message. We get a glimpse of the gospel in verse 23, that the Messiah would suffer, and as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people, and to the Gentiles.

[24 : 02] Paul needed the gospel light, in his dark heart. Now the gospel is the good news of the Messiah, the Christ, the King of Kings.

Jesus of Nazareth, though innocent, would suffer and rise again, for the salvation of humanity. Jesus Christ, is the only one, who totally lived, a perfect life.

Paul had strived, all of his life, to do that, in order to please God, and yet he couldn't. And Jesus lived, the life that Paul, should have lived, and that we, should live.

And he died the death of Paul, and we should die, because we failed to live, the life that we should live. And so, the gospel, helped Paul, understand, why he was so, eaten up inside, but it also provided, the solution for him.

The gospel explained, why he was guilty, and it resolved his guilt. Christian faith, makes rational sense, but it also makes personal sense.

[25 : 20] It is only in Jesus, any of us, will ever get the thing, that we have been striving for, all of our lives, whatever it might be. It might be significance, it might be love, it might be acceptance, it might be justice, it might be beauty, it might be eternal life, it might be a clear conscience.

Only Jesus, can give us, the thing that drives our hearts. The thing that we covet, but we will never achieve.

It will never be enough. Only Jesus, fills our hearts. You see, the gospel of Jesus Christ, doesn't just make rational sense, it makes personal sense, it fills up our hearts.

You see, we are complex beings. When it comes to persuading, we're complex. It's not just rational evidence, there's a lot more things. We are persuaded, something is true and right, partly because it's facts, but also relationships, and emotions, and all these things, have got a part to play in us being convinced.

For instance, if you're a boss employing a new staff member, your goal is to be absolutely, completely certain that this is the right person before you hire them.

[26 : 42] You want that. You want to make sure this person is absolutely the right person for the gig. You want watertight proof that this person is the right person for this role before I hire them.

If that's the case, you will never hire a single person. You can use reason to get you to the place of probability that this person might be the right person.

reason can get you to the point of probability, but it can never transfer you to the point of certainty.

How do you make that transition from probability to certainty?

You have to hire them. You have to take a risk. You have to jump in. You have to make a commitment. Time and a commitment to the person will either make you certain or make you uncertain.

You need to use reason to get you to the point of probability, but reason is not enough for certainty.

You must commit your whole self to get certainty.

[27 : 55] You must jump in reasonably. And so to the skeptics tuning in here now, what if God did not give you a watertight argument about his existence and about the truth of Christianity?

What if he didn't do that? You might be searching for that now, but what if he didn't do that for you?

What instead he gave you a watertight person against whom there is no argument?

What if he did that? And so I challenge you to read the gospel of Mark in the New Testament or John and engage with the person of Jesus.

Do it with someone else. I mean, make contact with us here at Supports. We would love to do that with you. You see, when you look at the claims of Jesus and the character of Jesus and the activities of Jesus, it is so hard to dismiss him as being anything else but what he says and who he says he is.

You just can't explain him away. So lastly, when you finally do come to Jesus, you discover a treasure that truly satisfies.

[29 : 28] The good news of Christianity is for everyone. It makes sense and are truly satisfied. And Paul, what we notice here, is just so incredibly bold with a gripper.

And yet, at the same time, he's not arrogant. He's respectful and he's poised, but he's not afraid.

Verse 18 is the source of Paul's contentment and boldness.

Jesus mentions the fruit of the gospel in our lives, the fruit of this treasure being worked out in our lives. And he says, that they may receive the forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

Those who put their faith in Jesus Christ, it says, receive. That means it's a gift. You don't work for it. Paul has spent all his life trying to get this and he says, I receive it.

I don't achieve it. we receive forgiveness of sins and a place. Paul had been working for that to achieve it, but he couldn't.

[30 : 35] And Jesus offers it to him a gift. The word place there means a home. It's a place where you belong. It's a place where you fit. It's a place where you finally rest, content, satisfied.

When you become a Christian, you're not just forgiven of sin, which is a negative thing, but you're also given a place. You are adopted.

You are brought into the family of God. You are loved. You're accepted. You've got a place. You've got a place where you go, where you rest, where you're satisfied, where you're content.

That's the good news of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ left his place in heaven. He lived amongst us and while he lived amongst us, he said, I've got no place to lay my head.

This is not my home so that we could have an eternal place of rest and contentment and satisfaction in him. He told his disciples, I'm about to depart to prepare a place for you where you would dwell in his presence forever, a place where you belong, a place where you are loved.

[31 : 50] And as Paul stands before Agrippa, he knows that he has in that moment the delight, the regard, the affirmation of the king of kings, the king of the universe in Jesus.

As he stands before king Agrippa, he's got the love and the affirmation of the king of kings. Paul had seen this kind of boldness in Stephen before he himself was a Christian and it got under his

skin.

If you want to be persuasive, then you need to be persuaded by the truth of the good news of Jesus Christ.

That's for you, Christian. If you want to be persuasive, you need to be persuaded. You need to be contented and rest in Jesus. To the degree that you are is the degree to which you'll have the same kind of security and boldness and poise and freedom and contentment in life, whatever your circumstances.

Thirteen weeks into a lockdown, do you want that sort of contentment, boldness now, satisfaction in life now because with the treasure of the gospel, you have everything.

[33 : 16] Do you want that? I want that. Let's pray. Gracious God, we are, with all the complexity of this life that you've made as complex beings, we are so grateful that in Jesus you offer us everything.

I pray that you would help us, first of all, for those who don't know you, to come to grasp this treasure that is the gospel. For those of us who do know you, I pray that this treasure will grow and increase in our hearts more and more and more and all other earthly treasures will be put in their proper place.

Give us this poise, this contentment, this satisfaction, this boldness in life that only you can give us because we have rest in you, eternal rest in you.

Amen.