

10 January 2016

Paul's Story
Acts 26:1-29

We read from Acts 26:1-18, where Paul, charged with religious crimes by his fellow Jews, is brought before the Roman governor, Festus, and King Herod Agrippa, to make his defense.

Agrippa said to Paul, 'You have permission to speak for yourself.' Then Paul stretched out his hand and began to defend himself: 'I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am to make my defence today against all the accusations of the Jews, because you are especially familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews; therefore I beg of you to listen to me patiently. All the Jews know my way of life from my youth, a life spent from the beginning among my own people and in Jerusalem. They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I have belonged to the strictest sect of our religion and lived as a Pharisee. And now I stand here on trial on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors, a promise that our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship day and night. It is for this hope, your Excellency, that I am accused by Jews! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

'Indeed, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is what I did in Jerusalem; with authority received from the chief priests, I not only locked up many of the saints in prison, but I also cast my vote against them when they were being condemned to death. By punishing them often in all the synagogues I tried to force them to blaspheme; and since I was so furiously enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities.

'With this in mind, I was travelling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, when at midday along the road, your Excellency, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. 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 hurts you to kick against the goads." I asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The Lord answered, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

So, in jail in Caesarea – the Roman capital of Judea – Paul makes his defense. This is nothing new to Paul. In every town he's been to through at least three missionary journeys, the first thing he's done is to go to the local Jewish synagogue and explain to them how the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is exactly what the Hebrew Bible foretells for the Christ. He knows how to present his case, knows by heart all the scriptures that he needs. This was a man trained in Jewish law and Rabbinical argument by the greatest Rabbi of his generation – Gamaliel. Paul could probably defend his faith in his sleep. And even asleep he'd still sound like what he was, the smartest man in the room. He's standing before a learned audience, King Agrippa, who is also well-versed in the Hebrew scriptures. It is a perfect time for Paul to present his case, his defense

– and he doesn't do make a defense. He doesn't quote scripture, doesn't make the theological arguments he is so capable of making.

He just tells his own story. “You know I used to hate the Christians, went around persecuting them, throwing them in prison, rejoicing when they were executed. But let me tell what happened to me. I was on the road to Damascus to persecution Christians there, and I met Jesus. It went like this.” And he tells his story, how Jesus met him, blinded him with his glory – *and changed him*. Saul the persecutor became Paul the Apostle. We continue the story with verses 19-29:

‘After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. To this day I have had help from God, and so I stand here, testifying to both small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place: that the Messiah must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.’

While he was making this defence, Festus exclaimed, ‘You are out of your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!’ But Paul said, ‘I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking the sober truth. Indeed the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely; for I am certain that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.’ Agrippa said to Paul, ‘Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?’ Paul replied, ‘Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains.’

Last week I talked about proclaiming the gospel, and I pointed out that actually telling good news is more than just “presenting a plan of salvation.” I said that the truest good news that we can tell is the good news that we ourselves have been transformed, made into something more than we would have been otherwise. That's the most authentic gospel we have. Jesus changes lives: see? And Paul, the brilliant scholar, the skilled debater, the Pharisee of Pharisees knows this. The best thing he can do is tell his story. “This is who I used to be; it wasn't pretty. I hated everyone who disagreed with me. But Jesus met me and sent me to proclaim to strangers that they were loved. Because Jesus rose from the dead, I too have been given new life.”

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Paul's story has become a sort of a prototype story of Christian conversion – so much that we often refer to such stories as “Damascus Road Experiences.” It is the story of a man or woman who appeared to be firmly set on one direction and then, upon encountering Christ, suddenly turned around and became just as focused on following Christ.

Take Augustine of Hippo, for instance. You may know him by his first name – Saint – but when he was a young man, he was not called that, nor did he give anyone reason to. Like Paul, Augustine was a brilliant scholar and utterly opposed to Christianity. Paul's opposition

took the form of active persecution; Augustine's was expressed more in intellectual scorn and sneering dismissal. He had no use for the simple prose of the Bible; it could not compare, he said, with the majesty of Cicero's Latin. Meanwhile, as he pursued his brilliant academic career, Augustine also pursued women – a lot. I'll let you read the details of his young life yourself, as recorded in his book *The Confessions*.

But also in that book, we read how he went to study with a famous scholar in Milan named Ambrose. Among other things, Ambrose was a devout Christian. Augustine had never met a Christian whose intellect matched his own, and he felt his prejudices shaken. More than that, Ambrose's life of simple purity and compassion stood out in stark contrast to Augustine's own frantic search for ever greater gratification. It was . . . disturbing. One day, as Augustine wandered alone in a garden, he heard a child's voice from the other side of the wall calling out what sounded like: "Take up and read." He looked at a bench, and there was a Bible.

Opening the Bible at random, he read from Romans 13: *Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof.* Maybe not the most inspirational verse to everyone, but definitely spot on for Augustine. From that day, he became a changed man. Like Paul, he turned all his rhetorical training and skill to serving Christ. Because Christ rose from the dead, Augustine too was given new life.

A Prayer of St. Augustine

*O thou, from whom to be turned is to fall,
to whom to be turned is to rise,
and in whom to stand is to abide forever;*

*Grant us in all our duties thy help,
in all our perplexities thy guidance,
in all our dangers thy protection,
and in all our sorrows thy peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*

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Giovanni di Bernardone was born in Italy 1181, but his father, a wealthy silk merchant loved France, so he called him Francesco, or Francis. As a young man, Francis lived a life of wealth, ease, indulgence, and drunkenness, earning for himself the nickname "master of revels." When he tired of carousing, he decided to seek fame and glory, and joined the army. It didn't work. He spent a year as a prisoner of war, and when he was released he returned to his home city, Assisi, very ill.

Now the medieval world had a solution to times of hardship: go on pilgrimage to earn credit with God. So young Francis went to Rome, where he was appalled to find himself surrounded by beggars in rags, all seeking alms from pilgrims. Even in his years in the army, Francis had never seen such misery and squalor. On impulse, he climbed down from his horse,

gave away all his money, exchanged clothes with a beggar, and spent the rest of his pilgrimage begging for bread in the streets of Rome.

It was unsettling pilgrimage. Afterwards, as Francis wandered Italy, he found his way into a dilapidated old church. Kneeling to pray, he heard a voice saying: "My house is being destroyed: go and fix it." Eventually he realized the voice wasn't talking about just that building.

And so the pampered playboy became the wandering beggar Francis of Assisi, living joyously without possessions and having more than he'd ever dreamed of. Beginning with a few followers, he changed the world. Because Christ rose from the dead, Francis too was given new life.

A Prayer of St. Francis

*Lord, make us instruments of thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is discord, union;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;
for thy mercy and for thy truth's sake. Amen*

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One more story. John Newton was born in London, the son of a sailor, and by the time he was ten had sailed six times in the British fleets. Over the following years, he sailed in the Royal Navy, in the Merchant Marine, and on board slave ships. Eventually he rose to become the captain of one of these slavers, transporting West African captives across the Atlantic in filthy conditions to sell in the sugar plantations of Jamaica or the cotton fields of America.

But you don't know John Newton for his crimes against humanity. You know him because he changed. He encountered Christ and step-by-step Christ changed his life. He gave up the slave trade, became an Anglican deacon, finally was ordained a priest. He was transformed. Once the captain of a slaver, he now fought to abolish slavery, writing a tract, *Thoughts Upon the Slave Trade*, in which he confessed in full detail the conditions he himself had inflicted on other human beings. Because Christ rose from the dead, Newton too was given new life.

He also wrote this . . . Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see.