

“A Grand Purpose”
Acts 26:12-29
October 19, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

This is the third time Luke has recorded the account of Paul’s conversion to faith in Christ. The first time was the narration of the event as it happened (Acts 9). The second time was in chapter 22, when Luke records Paul’s defense before his Jewish accusers in Jerusalem. This final account of his conversion appears again in the context of a legal defense, this one before King Agrippa, king of Israel. Before looking at Paul’s testimony of his conversion, let’s back up a little and try to understand this context a little better.

The political situation in Israel at this time can be a little confusing. Because it was part of the Roman Empire, the real power resided with the Roman governor, a man named Festus at the time of these events. Rome would let the nations they occupied govern themselves as much as possible, provided certain conditions were met, principally that of refraining from rebellion and the continued paying of taxes to Rome. Israel had a tradition of kings, so Rome let them keep a king. Agrippa was one of the Herodian kings. The founder of the Herodian dynasty was Agrippa’s great grandfather, Herod the Great. He was the king who killed all the babies in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill Jesus. His son, Antipas, was the one who beheaded John the Baptist and was given the title “fox” by Jesus. Herod the Great’s grandson, Agrippa I, was next in line. He was the one who beheaded the apostle James and whose demise from being eaten by worms Luke records back in chapter 12. Paul is now standing before his son, Agrippa II. John Stott describes the dramatic scene like this:

Agrippa and Bernice would have on their purple robes of royalty and the gold circlet of the crown on their brows. Doubtless Festus, to do honour to the occasion, had donned the scarlet robe which a governor wore on state occasions... When they had taken their seats, *at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in* (23). According to tradition, he was only a little fellow and unprepossessing in appearance, balding, with beetle brows, hooked nose and bandy legs, yet ‘full of grace’. Wearing neither crown nor gown, but only handcuffs and perhaps a plain prisoner’s tunic, he nevertheless dominated the court with his quiet, Christ-like dignity and confidence (p. 369).

What is striking to me about this scene is the boldness of Paul. He shares the story of his conversion and then boldly asks the king a question: **“King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe”** (v. 27). Agrippa responds, **“In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?”** Paul never lost his sense of purpose in life. The uniqueness of this third telling of his conversion story is that it contains more information than the other two concerning Paul’s call from Jesus. Paul had a deep sense of purpose because

Jesus had met with him and called him. Jesus has called his church, too. Our purpose is the same as Paul's. So let us look at this purpose from the words of Jesus. I notice three components of Paul's call, which are the same for all who follow Christ.

I. The Problem We Are Sent to Solve – Blindness

Jesus told Paul that he was being sent both to the Jews and the Gentiles, **“to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God”** (v. 18). Notice that this verse teaches that those apart from Christ have three significant problems: blindness, living in darkness and being under Satan's power. But the problem is that the blindness is so complete that they don't know that this is their condition. All the powerful people gathered before Paul—Agrippa and Bernice, the Roman governor Festus and the many other powerful people that always accompany such luminaries—all are blind and groping in the dark, under the power of Satan and not even aware of it.

Illustration: John Piper talks about a houseguest he and his wife once had in their small apartment when they lived in Germany. Their guest was totally blind and stayed with them for several days. One night John Piper walked into the hallway, where he heard their guest at the end of the hallway entering their bathroom. But the hallway was completely dark, because the light switch had not been turned on. He started to speak to tell his guest where the switch could be found and then caught himself. She was blind, and blind people never turn on light switches. The point is that blind people will never treat the darkness as something strange until their eyes are opened. And those who are apart from Christ are in the darkness and under Satan's power, and completely unaware of it because of their spiritual blindness.

Let's consider this area of blindness for a moment. You're at the Galleria Mall and you notice a mother with her four-year old son who is screaming at the top of his lungs. They are standing near the bakery that makes those delicious smelling cinnamon sticks, whose aroma wafts out over the mall to entice customers to come and make a purchase. The four-year old wants one, but his mother says “No”. As people begin to stare, the mother is trying desperately to quiet her son. He listens to her for a moment, and when she doesn't change her mind and grant his request, he breaks out in a new round of screaming, even louder than before. In her desperation and embarrassment, you see her bend down and whisper something to her four-year old that silences him immediately. What could her secret be? Then you see her take him by the hand and lead him over to the counter and buy him what he wants. Now you want to scream, because you see what she is doing. She is actually training her son to scream in order to get his way. She is rewarding him for bad behavior, which will only encourage him to do it again. The problem is that she doesn't see what she is doing, the harm that she is bringing to the one she loves so much. She is blind on this matter.

Or consider another example, described so poignantly in the book of Proverbs.

For at the window of my house I have looked out through my lattice, and I have seen among the simple, I have perceived among the youths, a young man lacking sense, passing along the street near her corner, taking the road to her house in the twilight, in the evening, at the time of night and darkness. And behold, the woman meets him, dressed as a prostitute, wily of heart... She seizes him and kisses him, and with bold face she says to him,... "Come, let us take our fill of love till morning; let us delight ourselves with love. For my husband is not at home." ... All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter... He does not know that it will cost him his life. (Proverbs 7:6-10, 13, 18-19, 22-23).

He is blind to the true nature of things, with catastrophic results. There is an even more tragic blindness than these two examples. There is a blindness about the nature of God that not only ruins this life, but can ruin one for eternity. So God is viewed as a harsh taskmaster by some, but one who can be bought off and placated by some religious deeds. Still others, and this is more common in America, view him as a genie in a bottle. We summon him when we want him to grant us a wish, and leave him safely tucked away in his bottle all the rest of the time. Still others see him as the author of all their problems, and they are filled with anger toward him.

Blindness is widespread and destructive, and God calls us, just as he did Paul, to open blind eyes. How do we do so? The answer brings us to our next point.

II. The Solution to the Problem – Witnesses

How can we possibly open blind eyes? The answer is that we can't, but God can. In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul writes, **"the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers"** (v. 4). He then goes on to say, **"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"** (v. 6). God will use us to open blind eyes as we do two things: move out into the world as his sent ones, and witness to him.

First, we are to be the sent ones. Jesus told Paul on the Damascus Road that he was sending him as a missionary. The entire church is also sent out by Jesus. We are at our heart to be missional. One of our church missionaries, Dan Herron, says that Christians are like manure. If we gather in a big pile, we stink. But if we are spread out, we do a great deal of good. Suppose that four hundred Christians feel a sense of call from Jesus to move to Birmingham in order to open the eyes of the blind in this place. They realize that most of them will have to get jobs throughout the city, and they begin the process of securing jobs in all the areas where they have training and experience. And then they decide that they aren't all going to live together, but that their mission would be much better served if they

spread out and lived in a variety of different communities. And then they reach into their communities, both at work and in their neighborhoods, to form relationships with people, some of which will lead to opportunities to speak of Jesus. Of course, that is our exact situation right now. We are sent out into our world in a variety of ways.

One of the striking things about this passage is to see the way God is continuing to send out Paul even in circumstances that are less than ideal. Paul is imprisoned. A great deal of his witness occurs in circumstances he did not plan. But God planned it all along, and now Paul has an audience with the king of Israel and the Roman governor of Israel. The lesson is that you don't have to wait for better circumstances to be a witness for Jesus. Right where you are now, even if it feels like a detour to you, God has sent you and you can be his witness.

So God uses us to open blind eyes as we are sent out by him. And then the second way he uses to open blind eyes is as we become his servant witnesses. Jesus says to Paul, **“I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me”** (v. 16). It is impressive to see the way Paul fulfills that calling in his appearance before Agrippa. He is both a servant and a witness, speaking of Jesus' resurrection before this court (v. 23). That led Festus to proclaim that Paul was out of his mind. But then notice the dialogue that ensues between Paul and Agrippa, one that must have shocked those who listened. Paul boldly asked Agrippa if he believed the prophets. Agrippa, probably taken aback, evades the question. **“In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian”** (v. 28)? And then Paul replies with sincerity, **“Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am** (and then probably lifting his shackled hands)—**except for these chains”** (v. 29). He spoke boldly to the king, not in an attempt to secure his own release, but in an attempt to secure the king's release from his own spiritual blindness. He was a servant-witness, being more concerned for the king's salvation than for the king's favor toward himself.

III. The Outcome of this Solution – Forgiveness and a Place

Though King Agrippa didn't come to faith in Jesus through Paul's witness, Jesus told Paul that as he witnessed to those in darkness, they would **“receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith”** (v. 18). These two outcomes, for those who have had their eyes opened, are among the best gifts in the universe. First, there is forgiveness of sins, the cleansing of one's guilty conscience through the blood of Jesus. This forgiveness should never cease to be the source of great joy in our hearts. We thrill with the hymnwriter, who said, “My sin—oh the bliss of this glorious thought—my sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more. Praise the Lord, Praise the Lord, Oh my soul.”

The second outcome is a place. This speaks of belonging to the most important group in the history of the world—those who are sanctified by faith in Jesus. In other words, this is speaking of heaven. Have you ever felt out of place among a group of people, like you just don't belong there? Perhaps you have very little in common with that group, and your differences with them are before you very clearly. I imagine Paul felt a little that way before this court with all the important people there. But I don't think it bothered him, because he knew he had a place in the courts of heaven, where a King far more significant than Agrippa awaited him. He was actually on that King's business that very moment, sent to be his witness.

How do you know that these outcomes are true of your life, that your sins are forgiven and you have a place in heaven? For many in the Bible belt of the south, their blindness is evidenced by the fact that they think they are saved when they really aren't. How can you know? I came across a verse this week in my Bible reading that answers this question. Psalm 2:11 says, **“Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling.”** Those last two qualities seem incompatible, don't they? How can we rejoice with trembling, being filled with joy and fear at the same time? It is the presence of these two qualities at the same time that marks a genuine faith. Let me offer an illustration that will help us see how both these qualities can be present at the same time. Suppose you are on a hiking outing with your family and you get lost deep in the woods. Everyone is getting very tired as you have been walking for hours trying to find your way out. Then it gets dark, and a storm blows in. Though you can't see a thing in the complete darkness, you keep walking for a while trying to find your way out. Finally, you realize that you can't go any further, and everyone huddles together against a rock that you've found to wait for daybreak the next morning. When the day finally dawns, what you see and hear causes you to rejoice with trembling. You see that you have spent the night only a few feet from the edge of a cliff. Had you kept walking even a few steps more in the direction you were heading, your family would have fallen over the edge of the cliff. You tremble at the thought. But then you hear the sound of the rescue team calling out your names, and you know that you are safe. So you rejoice at your rescue, while trembling at your near tragedy. That is exactly our condition once our eyes have been opened to spiritual things, trembling at the judgment deserved by our sins and rejoicing at the mercy shown us through Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

As we close in prayer, let's thank God for opening our blind eyes, that we might rejoice with trembling. And let's ask him to use us as his witnesses in seeing more blind eyes opened.