

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 54, Chapter 26

We'll begin at verse 9 of Acts chapter 26 today. So open your Bibles there.

At the picturesque seaside port city of Caesarea Maritima, the provincial capital for the local region including Judea, **Sha'ul** is standing before Governor Festus, King Agrippa and Queen Bernice and an assortment of other unnamed dignitaries. The purpose of this gathering is not as Paul's judicial trial since that has already occurred; and the results of the trial were ambiguous to say the least. In fact it is precisely the vagueness of the testimony that was given by Paul's accusers and then Paul's rebuttal to it that has put Festus in a similar befuddled position as it did for Festus's predecessor, Felix. Both Felix and Festus could make little sense of the accusations against Paul, concluding that essentially none of it had anything to do with Roman law but rather the dispute had to do with some arcane nuances of Jewish religious laws. For reasons that aren't given, the former governor, Felix, apparently didn't want to rile the High Priest and the Jewish leadership by the outright acquittal of Paul, so Felix's solution was simply to do nothing and let the un-convicted Paul languish in prison until the situation somehow worked itself out.

The new governor, Festus, was caught in a similar set of Chinese fingers as Felix; he needed to have good relations with the Jewish leadership (since it was Felix's inability to maintain peace and quiet in Jerusalem that got him fired from his job), yet as an able administrator and judge Festus was not disposed to convict an obviously innocent man purely for the sake of local politics (especially when that man was a Roman citizen). However Festus had a peculiar problem that Felix didn't; as Paul was explaining himself to Festus he declared his rights as a Roman citizen to appeal his case directly to the Emperor (who at this time was the notoriously fickle Nero). Festus had little choice but to grant Paul his wish, but at the same time the Emperor would expect to have a well articulated issue of Roman law presented to him in order to make the judgment. In this case Festus had already determined that Paul broke no Roman laws, and so he had no idea what he should write and send to Nero as the issues of this case that Nero was being asked to settle. However by good fortune the Jewish King Agrippa and his sister Bernice had arrived in Caesarea for a visit, so Festus thought that perhaps they could better understand the accusations against Paul and help Festus formulate a proper letter of charges to be sent along with Paul to Rome.

Let's re-read part of Acts 26 to begin.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 26:9 – end

Some Bible commentators aren't satisfied with Paul's approach in his speech because they aren't sure that what **Sha'ul** is saying is logical. So for them there is doubt as to whether this account is entirely accurate. While acknowledging their concerns, it seems to me that Paul is evidently saying that he completely understands his adversaries' mindset as regards their

distrust, even hatred, of Yeshua and of the Jewish sect he spawned, The Way, because Paul himself had once harbored these same views. When witnessing to un-Believers about the Lord, or even when explaining to long-time Believers about why they should take the entire Bible seriously (including the Torah) and that manmade Church doctrines need to be re-examined and some taken with a healthy dose of salt, it is usual for me to explain that not that long ago I was in their shoes, with the same worldview that the Christian majority holds. What we read here in Acts 26 is Paul's way of saying that he doesn't condemn his opponents for their current way of thinking because he understands that they are as ignorant of the truth as he used to be. Yet at the same time Paul communicates that (excuses aside) a new age has dawned, the Kingdom of Heaven has broken through, and it is time to set aside old prejudices and thought patterns and be willing to accept God's sovereign will; and that begins with accepting His Son, Yeshua, as Lord and Savior.

He goes on to say that he was not only in agreement in principle with the High Priest and the Sanhedrin concerning Yeshua and The Way, but that he was an active part of the group who sought to arrest and persecute Christ's followers. He confesses that he voted with the majority to put Stephen to death for no other reason than he was a Believer. Further, on behalf of the Sanhedrin Paul traveled from synagogue to synagogue ferreting out any possible Jesus sympathizers and then trying to get them to blaspheme. In our previous lesson we discussed the notion that is nearly universal among New Testament commentators that the blasphemy that Paul had in mind was to get these Messianic Jews to renounce Yeshua. But that is illogical because from the viewpoint that Paul held at the time, it was **believing** in Yeshua that was heretical; not the act of renouncing Him. If Paul could get a Jewish Believer to renounce Christ and return to mainstream Judaism, it was seen as a happy ending for everyone and was certainly not blasphemy. So it is clear to me that Paul was trying to get the Believers to say things against Jewish Law, **halakhah**, which would then constitute a case of blasphemy and thus could be taken before the Sanhedrin; a charge, which proved, exacted the death penalty from the blasphemer.

Now that Paul has established his life history including where he was born, his religious and political affiliations, and that he was against the very sect of Judaism that he is now part of, he explains what brought on his radical change of heart. Beginning in verse 12 he tells his story of meeting the risen Yeshua, who speaks to Paul from Heaven, as Paul is traveling towards Damascus, Syria to arrest some Believers who have been reported to have fled to a synagogue there.

As all who have taught for any length of time will tell you, it is sometimes necessary to repeat some of the more important information so that students have a better chance to digest it. So I want to say again something that I have said to you in previous lessons: even though most Bible commentators and Pastors will refer to Paul's meeting with Christ on the Road to Damascus as his "conversion experience", it was anything but that. Paul did not "convert"; Paul merely learned in rather dramatic fashion that the Messiah that he (and all other Jews) were waiting for had come, and His name was Yeshua of Nazareth. For a Jew to convert means that he or she becomes a gentile (or in the religious sense of the New Testament, a gentile Christian). And in fact it is clearly the aim of many Christian denominations to establish Paul as leaving his Jewish heritage and religion behind and adopting a gentile one. This

doctrine of conversion is widespread in spite of Paul's claims to the contrary in the Bible because as the early Church Father Chrysostom and others before and after him claimed, Paul maintained his outward Jewish appearance and customs as an elaborate, but well meaning, deception so that he might have a better chance of gaining an audience with Jews for the purpose of telling them the Gospel.

This is the third time we've encountered the same story of Paul's experience with Yeshua (first in chapter 9 and then again in chapter 22) so we won't go over every detail as Paul recounts that experience for his distinguished audience. I will mention however that there are minor differences in small details among these 3 tellings, mainly involving how the bright light shown, who fell down and who got back up, and who saw or heard what, among those travelling with **Sha'ul**. What is key is that the event actually happened, and that it was inherently supernatural; this is the point that Paul wants to come across to the dignitaries sitting in front of him and to all who might ever hear this story.

Since the era of the Enlightenment that began in Europe in the early 1700's A.D. the trend of Christianity has been to search for a rational explanation for what the ancient Bible clearly wants us to see as irrational to the human mind. And especially in the later 20th and now the 21st centuries among many Christians and Jews, an acceptable explanation of events such as the plagues that bedeviled Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea waters, and Paul's experience on the road to Damascus must be presented as something that can happen in the natural realm since the supernatural is deemed but primitive and unintelligent myth. To that end I found some words from a one-man play written by Phillip Goble, called **The Rabbi from Tarsus**, in which Paul is depicted as being interviewed by his friend and sometimes travelling companion Luke, giving him information for the gospel Luke wishes to write.

I want to quote this to you because not only is it delightful to hear but because it truly exposes the folly of any Christian wanting to have their cake and to eat it, too, so to speak. That is, for anyone to profess faith as a Believer in Jesus, but then to demand that when reading the Bible we run across things that can only be described as "miracles" we cannot accept them as real unless a basis in science can be found to explain them, is itself an irrational if not downright silly stance. And I truly believe that anyone who takes this approach may attach a Christian label to themselves, but it is in fact a dangerous self-deception that they think allows a person to have one foot in the Kingdom of Heaven and the other comfortably in the world. Listen to this because I chuckled over it long after I first read it, and yet it is profound enough that it added one more solid brick to my personal foundation of faith. Perhaps it will to yours as well.

This is Paul speaking to Luke about his experience on the road to Damascus: ***"Now let me pause to clear up one thing, Luke....for the benefit of the scoffers you MUST refute. What exactly made me switch....NOT religions but vocations, from that of a persecutor to that of an advocate and an apostle? What was the problem, Doctor? Are the scoffers right? Was it really just a case of sunstroke? Nervous collapse? Hallucination? Guilt catharsis? 'What is truth for you, Paul, is not truth for me', they say. 'There are natural explanations for everything'."***

"Yes, yes, Doctor, here is the natural explanation. One day, on the road to Damascus,

while I tried to enforce the Law of Moses, piously serving my God with all my heart, I...the arrestor....was arrested by a naive superstition. Quite naturally, a meteor just happened to blaze across the sky. At the very same time, it just happened to thunder, so that the other rabbis quite naturally did see and hear something. At the very same time...clumsy me....I just happened to fall off my horse. And at the very same time, I just happened to hallucinate with a nightmare vision, complete with face, fire and voice, that just happened to be my ENEMY, who just happened to want me to go to work for HIM!! And this (work was to be) among people who just happened to be my enemies, the Gentiles. And at the very same time I just happened to have tissues form over both my eyes with a purely accidental case of coincidental cataracts.”

“Yes, Doctor, there are natural explanations for everything, if one has enough bad blind faith to go his own way. Many like Nero are lords of their own lives who want to go their own way, even if it may lead to Hell. But, Luke, I had to trust God, and like any other disciple take a step of faith into the mikveh waters and then into the Damascus synagogue.”

Back in Acts 26; Paul continues in his story of his experience with Christ with the words of verse 14 when he says that the voice from Heaven not only identified himself as Yeshua, but also spoke to Paul in Hebrew! I find it most fortunate that Luke would include this seemingly minor bit of information, because Yeshua could have spoken to Paul in his native Greek tongue, or even in Aramaic in which Paul was conversant. But since Luke says that Messiah spoke to Paul **in Hebrew**, would he have said: “Hey Paul, it’s me Jesus?” Or would he have said “Hey **Sha’ul** it’s me **Yeshua**?” I say that tongue in cheek because whether you realize it or not, the names Paul and Jesus are strictly English-language words (a language that didn’t come about until 13 centuries after the New Testament was created). So for those who still have trouble with using the Hebrew names of Jewish Bible characters, and especially for Our Savior, please note that Christ clearly would have spoken of himself as **Yeshua** and called Paul **Sha’ul** since Luke specifically says that the conversation between Paul and Christ was in Hebrew.

Then in verse 18, in a sentence that was sure to raise the eyebrows of his aristocratic audience, Paul says that Yeshua was sending him to open peoples’ eyes in order that they might turn from darkness to light. And that the people he was being sent to were both Jews and Gentiles. And that those people, Jews and Gentiles, who put their trust in the very same person who had interrupted Paul’s journey of persecution would receive forgiveness of sins and become a member in the community of those whom God set apart for holiness. So now Paul has crossed a line; it is one thing to more or less instruct Agrippa and Bernice who, because of their Jewishness, understood that Paul was speaking as a Rabbi from a Jewish cultural and religious standpoint. But when Paul said that this trust in Yeshua was also necessary for Gentiles to have their sins forgiven, this was a direct assault on Festus and his gods.

But understanding that essentially Agrippa was in attendance because of his Jewishness, Paul addresses him by name and says that he did not disobey this vision from Heaven. So he went on to Damascus, then back to Jerusalem, and then journeyed throughout the province of

Judea proclaiming the Good News about forgiveness of sins wherever he went. But even more that people's lives need to reflect that they had turned from their sins and repented. Repentance is always presented, Old and New Testaments, as the prerequisite to forgiveness of sins whether that sin was atoned for by the blood of animals on the Temple Altar, or by faith in the blood that Yeshua spilled at Calvary. Let me repeat that: the writers of the Holy Scriptures know nothing of a kind of forgiveness that occurs without first sincerely repenting and turning. I think this is perhaps the single reality that worries me the most for all who profess Christ. I worry that the weak doctrines taught today (and for a long time, really) incorrectly tell seekers of God that one can achieve forgiveness of sins by merely professing Christ, and maybe by attending Church or synagogue from time to time, but they can also go right on living as before with only lip service paid to actual repentance.

Confessing that one has sinned or is sinning or is contemplating committing a sin, is not repentance (although confession is a good and needed first step). Notice how John the Baptist preached one thing only, and baptized for one thing only: repentance. The Baptist did NOT baptize for forgiveness of sins; but only for repentance to PREPARE for forgiveness of sins. This naturally followed the Law of Moses in its principles. Before presenting one's sacrifice of atonement at the Temple Altar, FIRST that person had to have repented and gained a contrite heart. If they didn't, their sacrifice had no effect. It is the same for Believers today. Too often I meet people who truly believe that praying the sinner's prayer is the beginning and end of their obligation to God. How they live their lives, what they fill their minds with, and their personal behavior aren't seen as a reflection of their faith (or perhaps lack thereof), but rather as entirely separate issues.

James (actually Jacob), Yeshua's brother and the supreme leader of The Way until his murder by the High Priest in 62 A.D., had strong words for those in his time who thought faith and behavior were not connected. And these strong words are there as a warning for us as well.

James 1:22-25 CJB

²² Don't deceive yourselves by only hearing what the Word says, but do it!

²³ For whoever hears the Word but doesn't do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror, ²⁴ who looks at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

²⁵ But if a person looks closely into the perfect Torah, which gives freedom, and continues, becoming not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work it requires, then he will be blessed in what he does.

And lest anyone think that Paul has a different viewpoint on this subject, listen to this:

Ephesians 2:8-10 CJB

⁸ For you have been delivered by grace through trusting, and even this is not your accomplishment but God's gift.

⁹ ***You were not delivered by your own actions; therefore no one should boast.***

¹⁰ ***For we are of God's making, created in union with the Messiah Yeshua for a life of good actions already prepared by God for us to do.***

It has always been a struggle in the Christian faith to balance trusting (faith) with works. And it seems that we always get either too faith-heavy (meaning we see works as perhaps counter-productive or as even offensive to our faith) or too works-heavy (meaning that we focus so much on good works that we either get very proud or we lose sight of our first love, Yeshua). So while Paul is always consistent in insisting that salvation is an act of grace that is not achieved by our good works, at the same time he counters that if we have truly received the divine grace brought about by our trust in Yeshua, then it ought to manifest itself as good fruit in our lives. If the good fruit (synonymous with good works) is not there, this can be an indication of a serious problem. And this is because we weren't given salvation simply for its own sake; but rather salvation is the necessary spiritual condition to ready us for doing the ***“good actions already prepared by God for us to do”***.

Finally in verse 20, Paul states the reasons as he sees it for his being harassed and arrested: 1) he took this message of Good News to Gentiles, and 2) he went to Jewish synagogues and proclaimed the same. So the issue is that the Jewish religious leadership were livid that Paul took a message of salvation (that they didn't believe in), which was manifest in Yeshua of Nazareth (who they also didn't believe in), to **gentiles** who they saw as occupiers. Once again: we find that the issue is actually political and cultural, not religious. I also want to alert you to something we discussed last week: it is that in verse 21 where the CJB says “It was because of those things that Jews seized me.....”, almost all English translation will say that it was “the Jews” (adding the article “the” before the word Jews). The article is simply not there in the Greek. And by adding “the” to make it “the Jews seized me” it becomes an indictment of Jews in general. By leaving out the article “the” (as in the oldest Greek documents we have), then it means that only certain Jews seized Paul. These seemingly minor nuances (or perhaps better, discrepancies) that appear all throughout most standard English Bible translations are additive in their effect. Suddenly instead of Paul or Yeshua being accused or persecuted by a certain group of Jews, we find the entire Jewish race being implicated, which was never the intent of the Scripture passage.

Paul says he has been able to withstand the plots and attacks against him because he had God's help. So in the conclusion of his speech he says that he has said nothing except what the prophets and Moses said would happen. In other words, he is claiming that he has not created some new doctrine nor has he said anything against normative Judaism. So is he talking about Jewish Law, here? No. Just as we discussed in earlier lessons about how to know when Paul uses the term “law” whether he means Jewish Law (***Halakhah***) or the Law of Moses (the Torah), here we see that when he says “the prophets and Moses” it is exactly synonymous with the term “the prophets and the Law”. Saying someone follows Moses is just shorthand for saying they follow the Law of Moses. So by using the terms Moses and Prophets together, we can know for certain that Paul is speaking of Holy Scripture and not traditions and customs. ***Sha'ul*** is saying that he is being persecuted for simply believing and quoting the Holy Scriptures. And we find that Paul said nothing about Yeshua that Yeshua didn't also say

about Himself. In the Gospel of Luke we find this:

Luke 24:25-27 CJB

²⁵ He said to them, "Foolish people! So unwilling to put your trust in everything the prophets spoke!

²⁶ Didn't the Messiah have to die like this before entering his glory?"

²⁷ Then, starting with Moshe and all the prophets, he explained to them the things that can be found throughout the Tanakh concerning himself.

Paul also says that the Scriptures explain that Messiah would die, and rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to Jews and gentiles. This first of all put him at odds with the High Priest and the Sadducees because they didn't believe in resurrection even though the Scriptures clearly speak of it. But that doesn't matter; in most of Judaism and Christianity traditions and customs often trump the Bible. If the religious leadership in Paul's day actually believed God's Word, they would see that Paul exactly fit the profile of the prophesied servant of Isaiah 49 who would announce light to both Jews and Gentiles. Paul is being persecuted for doing the very thing God says must happen.

Isaiah 49:5-6 CJB

⁵ So now ADONAI says- he formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Ya'akov back to him, to have Isra'el gathered to him, so that I will be honored in the sight of ADONAI, my God having become my strength-

⁶ he has said, "It is not enough that you are merely my servant to raise up the tribes of Ya'akov and restore the offspring of Isra'el. I will also make you a light to the nations, so my salvation can spread to the ends of the earth."

So here the venerated Isaiah says that the day will come when light will come to the nations (gentiles). What does that mean, to be a "light" to the nations? The word for light in Isaiah is the same as we find it early in Genesis regarding creation: **owr**. **Owr** is better translated as enlightenment than light. **Owr** is a spiritual term that speaks of God's enlightenment; it speaks of good and of truth. It does not mean light that comes from light emitting objects such as the sun or from stars or from a light bulb. So clearly the meaning here in Isaiah is that God's enlightenment, God's truth, will be taken by this honored servant to the gentiles. Paul is doing exactly that.

But now in verse 24 Festus simply loses it; he can't fathom what Paul has been saying (interestingly Paul wasn't even addressing Festus). To Festus (a man who doesn't know God) the divine truth that Paul has been speaking sounds like foolish nonsense; the ramblings of a madman. Of course! One must be "of God" to understand the things of God. Festus was anything but.

1Corinthians 2:14 CJB ¹⁴ Now the natural man does not receive the things from the Spirit of God- to him they are nonsense! Moreover, he is unable to grasp them, because they are evaluated through the Spirit.

Many years ago my wife and I were visiting her elderly father. A college educated man who was a retired school teacher, he found the Bible impossible to comprehend. One day we were sitting together in his living room talking about something in the Bible when he just burst out in frustration that he has tried and tried to read the Bible but it was just words that formed no meaning for him. He said he saw that there were sentences and paragraphs and that the words were actual words; but they made no sense to his mind. He was not a Believer.

A few years later, and only months before he passed away, he made his peace with God. He entered a local church that had been very kind to him, walked forward and went to his knees and sincerely prayed for forgiveness. He received Christ. We saw him a few weeks later reading his Bible and he said all of a sudden the words have meaning and bring him great comfort; and he couldn't understand why until then those Bible passages were just a jumble of nouns, adjectives and verbs.

Festus was an educated and intelligent man who worshipped the pagan Roman gods. He had no relationship with the true God and (he admittedly) knew little about Jews or the Jewish religion. So Paul's words were just so much noise and clatter to him. Essentially, Paul's speech and the beautiful life-giving truths that were embedded within it were far beyond Festus's spiritual capacity to grasp. And this is something we must understand when we speak to non-Believers about the Lord. Unless the Lord has already done a work in them, everything we might say seems like foolishness because non-Believers have no spiritual capacity to understand them.

Paul responds with great courage to Festus that what he is saying is not crazy-talk, but rather is truth and sanity. And that King Agrippa surely understands these matters (being Jewish), so that's why Paul was addressing himself to Agrippa and not to Festus. So then Paul confronts Agrippa and asks him the \$64,000 question: "So king, do you believe the prophets?" Agrippa is incredulous! He's also no doubt somewhat embarrassed so he fires back that he now realizes that all along Paul has been trying to persuade him to become a Believer! Paul minces no words and acknowledges that indeed he'd like for Agrippa to become a Believer and in fact he wants everyone to become a Believer.

That last thought was a real conversation stopper. Agrippa and Bernice had heard enough and quickly made their exit. But even though in Festus's opinion Paul was perhaps not in his right mind, and despite Paul's aggressive evangelism, he had certainly not done anything that deserved death or prison. So essentially Agrippa and Bernice proved to be of no help to poor Festus; he still had no idea what to tell Nero about Paul's case.

The chapter closes with Agrippa dumbfounded that Paul had appealed to the Emperor because since he has essentially been found not guilty he could have walked away a free man right then. But because Paul appealed he would have to remain in custody many more months, maybe even a year or more, until he could be transported to Rome and until Nero could hear

his case. What Agrippa doesn't know is that God had planned it this way, and Paul was aware of it and happy as could be that he was about to get a free ticket to Rome so that he could share the Good News with the Romans and hopefully even with Nero himself (all as God told him would happen, several years earlier).

What to the average person might seem like a terrible outcome for Paul (STILL remaining incarcerated for now well over 2 years), was for Paul a victory. What a lesson for us; even the unpleasant things that happen in life that seem to be anywhere from inconvenient to painful or even catastrophic as perceived by our fleshly eyes may well be God's plan and purpose for us if we're willing to take it up. Paul wasn't being punished or ignored by God; he was being used in one of the mightiest ways we'll find in all of Holy Scripture. But it wasn't glamorous, comfortable or convenient.

Luke 9:23 CJB ²³ *Then to everyone he (Christ) said, "If anyone wants to come after me, let him say 'No' to himself, take up his execution-stake daily and keep following me.*

Paul exemplified Yeshua's statement. So the question we each face (if we have the courage to be honest with ourselves) is how far away from our comfort zones are we willing to go should the Lord call us? What is the limit to our self-sacrifice and personal discomfort that we are willing to experience to do the Lord's will? Paul had no limit.

Next time we'll take up Paul's perilous voyage to Rome, and hear one of the most amazing and dramatic sea stories ever recorded in ancient history.