

## “Decisions, decisions!” (42)

In our study of the **Book of Acts** we have been on an incredible journey, especially in these last few chapters following the apostle Paul in his trials and tribulations. He has been passed from pillar to post but he never lost sight of the fact that God was in control of life as long as he remained faithful to the task of witnessing for Christ. And we saw the last time we were together how if any man ever had an excuse to give up on God, Paul would be that man. But he decided not to give up, even when he was being passed around from one legal courtroom to another.

Let me share with you a story about a small boy, with his father, who were in an elevator going up in the **Empire State Building in New York**. As they flashed by the 66<sup>th</sup> floor, the lad, in considerable anxiety, seized his father's hand, and in an awestruck whisper, said, "Does God know we are coming?"

You see God really does know who's going where and even though Caesar didn't know the apostle Paul was coming to Rome, God certainly did. But before God gets Paul to Rome he has some unfinished business in yet another courtroom. We pick up Paul's story again here in **Acts 26** and it's here that we find Paul making his defence before King Agrippa.

**Acts 26:1-5** “Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defence: "King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defence against all the accusations of the Jews, and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently. "The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee.”

Now remember that Festus had the full authority of Rome behind him, but here Luke tells us that it was Agrippa who told Paul he was permitted to speak. And so with an outstretched hand Paul began by saying he was happy to make his defence before the king, especially because King Agrippa would have been familiar with Jewish teachings and customs. Now Paul must have had a long talk in mind which is the reason he begged the king to be patient.

And so Paul goes on and talks about his citizenship. He reminds the king that though he was born in the city of Tarsus, he was brought up in Jerusalem and was well known among the Jews. In fact he was so well known amongst the Jews, Paul says; **why not ask those who are accusing me today?** Because the truth of the matter is loved ones, some of his accusers may well have remembered the zealous young Pharisee from his school days.

They would have remembered Saul as he was known back then during his time as a persecutor. But again **isn't it amazing what people choose to remember?** Decisions, decisions, **what are we choosing to remember?** I know all of us at some point in our lives have had bad experiences whether they are church related or not. And I've said this before and I will say it again, your memory is your choice.

Yes we may have had a bad experience in the past with some people but don't tell me they were all bad. I'm sure there would have been some great times of friendship and love with these same people. And so what I'm saying is chose wisely, focus and remember those good times. Because let me tell you loved ones speaking from experience, if you dwell on all the bad things, it will eat away at you and stop you from moving on.

**Philippians 3:13+14** “Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” Paul says forget what's happened in the past and move forward.

Now remember in **Acts 24:21** we saw that Paul said he was being judged for his hope in the resurrection. But here look at what Paul tells Agrippa he was being judged for. **Acts 26:5-8** “And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?”

**Has the charges been changed without anyone knowing about it? Is Paul changing his argument?** Well I don't believe he is, I believe that when Paul says, he was now being judged "for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers."

I believe he is referring to the promised Messiah. **And what was the hope that the Messiah would bring with Him?** The hope the Messiah brought with Him was the hope of the resurrection of the dead.

Can you imagine waiting on the **number 33 bus** to come to the **Collingwood Centre** for worship, and you ask the elderly gentleman next to you **'when does the number 33 arrive?'** and he says **'in about five minutes.'** So you have a few of minutes to spare so you focus your attention on how you look, making sure your hair is nice, your trousers haven't got any creases in them and your shoes are nice and clean. And when you have checked yourself over and over again you ask the kind gentlemen next to you, **'how long now before the number 33 bus arrives?'** and he says, **'oh you just missed it.'** And the reason you missed the bus was because you were so focused on yourself, you forgot to look up for the bus.

Now as silly as that illustration sounds that's exactly what the Jews did, they didn't have a few minutes, they had over **400 years** to wait on the very Messiah they were promised. And they missed Him because they were so focussed on all the technicalities in looking good and they forgot to look up. That's why Paul argued that this very hope was sought by all the tribes of Israel.

In fact, he said their daily earnest service to God was based upon that very hope. And Paul couldn't understand this charge because he said it is was the very essence of that hope which was the basis of the Jews' accusations against him. They missed the Messiah and they didn't even understand their own argument.

Loved ones let me give you a piece of advice this morning when it comes to defending your actions or beliefs. It's a little piece of advice I was given two years ago from our old friend, **Nthembako**. If you ever get into a debate with anyone about any issue, always argue with scripture. Because it never ceases to amaze me the amount of people, even Christians who try and make a point about something and they throw Scripture at you but that same Scripture never seems to apply to themselves. It never ceases to amaze me when people quote Scripture at you, how it seems to have a different meaning when it is applied to them.

The Jews knew about the Messiah, they knew about the hope they had in the resurrection of dead but they forgot the Scriptures applied to them too. But not only did the Jews know about God's abilities, so did King Agrippa. That's why Paul asked him, **"Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?"** Now again because Paul asked this specific question, this shows us that his accusers were primarily of the Sadducees, who if you remember didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead which is sad you see.

And so Paul from looking at his upbringing as a Jew moves on to his time as a persecutor of the Lord's church. **Acts 26:9-11 "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them."**

Paul says he took actions to stop the teachings about Jesus and His followers, because he was convinced that is what the Lord wanted him to do. And so just as Agrippa's family had pursued an end to the life of Jesus, Paul had pursued an end to the teachings of Jesus. He says that many of those saints were shut up in prison in Jerusalem because of his actions.

And when Paul says, **"When they were put to death, I cast my vote against them."** What he is saying here is that as a member of the Sanhedrin he voted to condemn them. But as we know he didn't stop there, he punished them in every synagogue, he even went to cities outside of Jerusalem in an effort to get them to speak against the name of Jesus.

What Paul is basically saying here is, don't tell me what the Jewish beliefs are, I know them, don't tell me how zealous you have to be against anyone who teaches anything against our forefather's teachings, I was. **Philippians 3:5+6 "Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless."** Paul says when it came to being a Jew he was right at the top with the best of them.

And so Agrippa must be a patient man as Paul continues with his defence in **Acts 26:12-18 "On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, O king, as**

I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. ' Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them 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.'"

Now I'm not going to dwell too much on this because we have studied Paul's road to Damascus experience a few times already in this study. But here Paul shares the account of his conversion and his purpose for that conversion. And to further make his point to **Agrippa**, he tells him that on his way to Damascus in pursuit of even more Christians, he saw a great light, which was brighter than the sun, coming out of heaven at midday and surrounding him and his companions.

And after the group fell to the ground, a voice spoke to him in **Hebrew**, saying, "**Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.**" Naturally, Paul asked the Voice to identify Himself and the Voice identified Himself as Jesus of Nazareth. This Jesus of Nazareth told him to stand up because He intended for him to minister and witness for Him both as to the things he had seen and would see.

The Lord went on and promised to protect Paul from harm coming either from the Jews or the Gentiles, to whom he was being sent, which we saw very powerfully last time. And just in case Agrippa wondered what Paul's purpose was, Paul tells him his purpose was to open their eyes to their own sinfulness. To show them the way of receiving forgiveness of sins and the great inheritance available to those set apart by their faith in Jesus.

Paul as you can imagine is now in full flow sermon mode and like all good preachers, he knows when it's time to get to the point. **Acts 26:19-21 "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me."**

Paul could not disobey a voice from heaven, so he preached the gospel in Damascus and Jerusalem, both to the Jews and Gentiles. And I want to raise an important point here again loved ones, but it's not my point it's Paul's point. Notice, Paul's preaching included the necessity of repentance, a turning toward God and living a life showing the works of repentance.

Now loved ones we all know the importance of repentance before a person becomes a Christian. But please don't ever think that, that is the one and only time you ever need to repent. Christians are a repentant people and when they sin and confess those sins to God, they need to repent. Now we can tell each other that we have repented of a sin but we're not fooling anyone except ourselves if our actions aren't backing up we're confession.

Now forgive me if I get a little passionate about this, but I get a little frustrated when I get emails asking me to **'say a little prayer and invite Jesus into my heart and I will be a Christian'**. No mention of believing, confession, or baptism, never mind the word repent. I get a little frustrated when people call me or email me and say they are sorry about this or that but their actions clearly tell me a different story. Listen loved ones Paul says in **2 Corinthians 7:10, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death."**

In other words repentance produces fruit; repentance is proven by the actions which follow. It's more than feeling sorry for ourselves, it's a clear demonstration to God and your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ that you are sorry for your sin. In fact when Paul was in Athens he said in **Acts 17:30 "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent."**

Now if that offends you, I'm not sorry about that because Jesus Himself said in **Luke 13:3 "Unless you repent, you too will all perish."** If repentance is a part of the gospel message, if repentance is a command which we are commanded to do every time we sin against God or our brothers and sisters in Christ. Then we need to keep it in the gospel message, we need show our repentance in our actions.

In an area of Scotland, there was once a tower called the "Tower of Repentance." What gave the tower its name we are not told, but it is said that an English baronet, walking near the castle, saw a shepherd boy lying upon the ground, reading attentively. "What are you reading, lad?" "The Bible, sir." "The Bible, indeed!" laughed the gentleman; "then you must be wiser than the parson. Can you tell me the way to heaven?" "Yes, sir, I can," replied the boy, in no way embarrassed by the mocking tone of the other; "you must go by way of yonder tower." The gentleman saw that the boy had learned right well the lesson of his book, and, being rebuked, he walked away in silence.

Non-Christians and Christians have a decision to make, repent and live or don't repent and die. That's John's point in 1 John when he talks about the sin that leads to death. Any sin which isn't confessed and repented of will lead to death.

Now I know that the word **repent** not only silences some people but it also upsets some people but there is nothing new there **is there?** Paul said to Agrippa the minute that he mentioned the word **repentance** the Jews got really mad, even to the point of trying to seize him in the temple to kill him. But Paul being the devote Christian that he was gave credit where credit was due.

**Acts 26:22+23** "But I have had God's help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen- that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles."

Paul said, it was only by God's help that he was still alive to tell Agrippa that Moses and the prophets had said the Christ would suffer, rise from the dead, and spread the good news among Jews and Gentiles. He wasn't alive speaking to Agrippa because he was an eloquent speaker; he was still alive because God had a purpose for him. He gave credit where credit is due and that's why it's important to thank God today for the life He has given us today.

And so after a long time speaking with the king, Festus has heard enough. **Acts 26:24-27** "At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defence. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane." "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do."

Luke tells us that Festus interrupted with a loud declaration that Paul had gone crazy from too much learning. But Paul answered that question by simply saying he was not crazy but spoke the truth. And from our text it seems that Paul's failure to defend himself, led him to focus more on trying to convert his judges. And so the apostle went on to note that the events surrounding and following Jesus' life were done in the open for all to see and had been well known to King Agrippa.

He then asked Agrippa if he believed the prophets. Paul answered for him, perhaps sensing, or through the Spirit knowing, what the King was thinking, of course he believed the prophets. And Agrippa recognized that Paul was using a concise argument intended to persuade him to follow Jesus as the Christ, that's why he asked following on in **Acts 26:28-29** "Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" Paul replied, "Short time or long-I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."

Luke tells us that Paul expressed his true desire that Agrippa, along with everyone else who heard his voice, would be converted to the point of zealously following the Lord just as he did. And loved ones that should be the goal of every single Christian right there. Yes we have friendships, yes we have people we just say **hi** to, but underneath all of that there should be a desire within every one of us for them to become what we are, Christians.

Now every now and then people will realise this and do one of two things. They will either want to know more, or they will walk away. That was the choice which Agrippa, Festus, and Bernice had to make. **Acts 26:30-32** "The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. They left the room, and while talking with one another, they said, "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment." Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

Agrippa, Festus, and Bernice left the room coming to the conclusion that Paul had done nothing worthy of death or chains. In fact King Agrippa stated that Paul could have been released had it not have been for his appeal for the case to be heard by Caesar. They left the room but Paul seized the moment and the seed was sown. These people knew where Paul was brought up, they knew what he was like as a child, they knew what he was like as a Jew, and they knew what he was like before becoming a Christian.

And just like the many people in our lives, they too need to know certain things about our past because just like Paul they also need to see the transformation power of the gospel in our lives as Christians now. Because let me tell you loved ones, we're not born Christians, we are born again Christians.

And it should be the prayer of every single Christian that all of our friends, family, neighbours and enemies that short time or long that they too will be become what we have become. And remember we have already made our decision to follow Jesus, it's our friends, family, neighbours, and enemies who need to decide for themselves who they want to follow.