

Let's open our Bibles this evening to Acts 22 as we continue our verse-by-verse study through this book. I've been working on 2 Corinthians for Sunday mornings; we're going to start that on the 6th of January. I'm looking forward to seeing how we can put that all in there on Sunday mornings. It's going to be good - lots to learn. And on Wednesday nights, when we finish the book of Acts, we're going to go back to the Old Testament. We stopped, you remember, at the book of Judges. So we're going to pick up at the book of Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles - will be right in a row. And we'll bring you all kinds of layouts and kings and dates and times so you'll be the smartest in the Old Testament than anybody that you've ever met. I'm sure of that.

All right. Acts 22:1. We continue. This book of Acts is a narrative report, which means that it really is just kind of a reporting as it goes, written by Dr. Luke. The coverage is about thirty years of the early-church history, the birth of the church at Pentecost, the spread of the gospel to every corner of the globe in about thirty years, if you can imagine, through people that had come to know the Lord and were filled with God's Spirit. It is a great book if you want to know what the church should be all about. You should be reading it just to say, "Well, this is what the church should be." It's right at the beginning. It's what God intended it to be. It shows us what we can do in the world and what God would like to do through us.

It is mostly chronological. The first fifteen years are the report of the gospel going to the Jews, to the Jews first. But God's desire was always that all men would be saved (1 Timothy 2:4), and that was certainly proven as Peter was led, miraculously, to the house of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, where he encountered a room full of Gentiles; and to his amazement, in a 40-second message, everyone got saved, and it became clear what God intended to do through the gospel. Some believers that were Jewish were upset about the fact that Gentiles could somehow get to the Lord without first becoming Jews. They had a meeting about it (in Acts 15); it's called the Jerusalem Council meeting. Everyone spoke on behalf of God's grace - Peter and Barnabas and Paul. They all agreed that salvation was only by faith in Christ alone, nothing else. And so, though there were Judaizers - and you'll find them in almost all of the books in the New Testament - who opposed Paul and the gospel of grace, they were certainly a thorn in the

church's side early on through evangelism. There are still forms of that floating around to this day, the works-righteousness kind of stuff.

The final fifteen years of the book of Acts, however, focus on the gospel going primarily to the world, to the Gentiles, through the missionary journeys of Paul. He took three of them over about a fifteen-year period. His main method of ministry besides, obviously, preaching was church planting. He did it a lot - a whole lot. Every church that you'll find referenced in the book of Revelation was planted in Galatia. His three journeys were first a two-year trip, mostly to Galatia; the next trip was about six years long, going mostly through Europe, spending a year and a half in Corinth; the third trip, another three years or so, was primarily in Ephesus and then back to Greece before he went home.

The primary learning, and I've mentioned it to you a couple of times, of going through a narrative is that you don't learn from doctrinal statements, which is what we're going to do in the book of 2 Corinthians on Sunday mornings. They are statements of truth and fact that you have to understand in the context, apply them to your life, but they are presented in world-word form, if you want. When you learn from narrative, you learn by example. You watch what goes on in the reports and the illustrations and the real-life experiences of others, and those are the examples God sets before us. So we learn by watching what other people are doing.

After fifteen and a half years or so of traveling and planting churches and suffering, and sometimes very much so, Paul returns from his third missionary journey with a real heart to go to Jerusalem. He had devised an idea. He would go to a lot of Gentile churches. He would ask their elders to send somebody - along with an offering - from these churches to help the poor who were really struggling in the church in Jerusalem. There was a divide between them; grace hadn't really caught hold yet, in many ways, in Jerusalem. They were proud of their religious practices. They didn't let go of them. Paul was able to, Peter was able to; James and some of the folks were not. And so Paul thought this would be a great way to bridge the gap. As he made that last swing before he would go down, back to Jerusalem, though, he lived in Antioch - 300 miles north. He had a whole bunch of guys with him, a lot of offerings that they had with them as well, and they were just excited about what God might want to do with them to bridge that gap between grace and that religious kind of mentality in the religious capital, if you will, of Jerusalem. Paul was warned, as he traveled, by just about everyone he

came in contact with that there was lots of trouble waiting for him, that there was binding and jail and punishment. But Paul didn't care. His heart was, "I want to go minister to my people. I love them. I'm sure that if I have a chance to talk with them that they'll listen."

Last time, if you were with us, Paul arrived in Jerusalem on that last leg of his third missionary journey. He met with James and the elders. The people were glad to see him, in the church. James and the elders listened to Paul's testimony of how God had worked amongst the Gentiles and how the Lord had saved and brought such awesome deliverance. They were quick to praise the Lord with him. In fact, in chapter 21:20, there are two *ands*. The first *and* was, "And they praised the Lord." *And* then they said something else. They said, "Well, we have a lot of zealous people here, too, in our church, Paul. But they're not zealous for Jesus." What they said was, "they're zealous for the law, and they're taught that way." And we learn that the bottom line, at least of the church in Jerusalem, was that they were more interested in their maintenance of an old religious system (though they were saved - understand that they knew the Lord) than they were in the grace of God or the evangelism of the world. They were still legalistically bound in many things, and it's kind of a tragic indictment. Paul knew it was there. He had conflicts with them before. But there was a lot of zeal for tradition. There was a lot of love for custom and legalism and culture and exclusivity and works and all, but there wasn't much excitement for Jesus. So, they said to Paul (last week), "Everyone knows that you're the kind of guy running around the world telling Jews they don't have to follow the law. They can just go to Jesus. There's this grace thing." And I don't think Paul could have denied it. I mean, without apology, he would say, and has said, the customs and the religious practices of Judaism were at best a signpost that pointed to Jesus, who could come; and now that He has come, we have lots of freedom in Christ, by His grace. We looked, last week, a bit at the Roman letter, especially the letter to the Galatians where that's kind of the subject of why he was writing.

They suggested to Paul (the James church) a compromise. Since it was Pentecost, "Here's something you can do to relieve tension between us and what we've heard about you. We'd like you to go to the Temple, and we suggest that you involve yourself in a devotion that four men from our church are making." It was called a Nazirite vow. It could be done both by men and women. It was usually for a short period, but it was a time of just devotion to the Lord. There were things that you couldn't do during that time, things that you could. At the end, you were obligated,

according to the Old Testament, to offer several sacrifices. So it was costly to you. You took time off of work, you spent a lot of time in the Temple worshipping God and praying and all. They said this to Paul, "Why don't you finance these guys? Why don't you pay for all four of them? Why don't you go with them every day for a week to the Temple? Everyone will go away, saying, 'Wow! That's very conciliatory. He isn't at all what we've heard about him.' And then maybe we can bridge the gap." Well that wasn't going to happen. But Paul, we mentioned to you last week, in the spirit of wanting to love his own, compromised. And compromise never accomplishes God's work. Well, it worked all right for the week. But at the end of the week, someone saw Paul near the Temple, in town, with a Gentile. And some of the folks from Ephesus - Jewish men from Ephesus - in town for the holidays, saw Paul and knew him from then (he had been there for three years). They began to accuse him of bringing this Gentile into the Temple, which was religiously illegal. It was a violation. It was blasphemy. Paul hadn't done it; it was a lie. But yet they stirred the people up. It was a religious week. The crowds were already kind of on edge. They mobilized for a riot. Paul was grabbed by the people, and they were beating him and probably would have killed him. That's the kind of religious fervor that Paul found in the city. Fortunately, up on the Temple Mount area, there was a place called the Antonia Fortress built by the Romans to keep an eye on the place that oftentimes exploded. And so they sent the soldiers down. They grabbed Paul, they separated him from the crowds, they saved his life. The captain tried to ascertain what was going on. There were no corroborating statements at all. The crowd was unruly. He put Paul in protective custody. His name was Claudius Lysias; you can read about his name in chapter 23 (next week, verse 26). And Paul said this to the fellow, as they were on the steps going up to the Antonia Fortress, "Could I speak to the people? I'd like to address them." And he gave him an all right to do so, "All right. If you can dispel the crowd, that'd be great." Paul believed (and we talked about it last week) that he could reach them if given half a chance. He loved the Jews, he was a Jew at heart. God sent him to the Gentiles, but even in His sending, when the Lord sent Ananias to pray for him (in chapter 9 of Acts), the Lord said, "I'm going to show him what things he has to suffer. I'm going to send him to the Gentiles, put him before kings." And then He said, "And before the Jews." So it did come in at the last, and Paul's been everywhere else; he thought this was his time. So you can call chapter 22, "Sermon from the Steps of the Antonia Fortress." It was Paul's dream come true, but it would turn out to be a nightmare.

Let's start at verse 40 of chapter 21, the last verse. It says, "So when he had given him permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, saying, 'Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now.' And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent. Then he said: 'I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today.'" Now the word "defense," verse 1, is the word for apologetic, which is where we get our word "apology" from; but the word "apologetics" means to defend your faith with reason or to give an account of what you believe and why, the rationale, to be able to articulate what you believe and why. Now, interesting to me, put yourself in Paul's shoes.....at least in that space that the Scriptures give us. These guys had just been beating on Paul and would have killed him. This was out of control. The soldiers spared his life. Paul's eye was probably swollen shut, bleeding from his head. I mean, these guys were serious, and yet Paul wanted to share with them. And the first thing he calls them, as you begin to read, is, "Brethren and fathers." I might have had a different name for the group that was trying to kill me. But Paul had a heart that he just wanted to minister to the people. So to these would-be murderers, "You are my fathers and you are my brethren, my family."

Paul begins with his Jewish background to share with the people. What would you have shared with them? And he speaks to them in the Hebrew tongue. The common language of Paul's day was Aramaic; Jesus spoke it as well. The ancient Hebrew was dead in Paul's day. It was used by scholars. And no doubt Paul was not speaking the ancient Hebrew there. He's speaking in the Hebrew tongue - he was speaking Aramaic, which everyone understood. So it's kind of like Latin today. If you grew up Catholic like I did, I actually took Latin classes. Well nobody speaks Latin. My dad used to say, "It's Latin to me." I remember Pig Latin, (Laughing) but I don't think that was the same thing. So, I think people had all heard about Paul, and now they were seeing him for the first time, and he began to speak, and he spoke a language that they understood, and they were interested. Notice they were quiet enough to begin with; they were very quiet now.

Paul's defense, his apology, his apologetic is not a sermon on Old Testament prophecy, though I think he probably could have talked about it for hours. He was a scholar, indeed. He did not do a study for these crowds on types, on what the Temple represented, or what the priesthood really meant, and how Jesus fulfilled

all of those things. You might have picked that as a topic because these are religious folks in town for Pentecost. All right, granted, they tried to kill a guy, but still they're religious folks, and they're pretty upset and worked-up. And Paul maybe needs to move quickly. He doesn't do that at all, either. He doesn't talk about types. What he does do is he goes to his personal life and says, "Here's what Jesus has done for me." And I point that out to you because, in a time that we might have picked a lot of different subjects to say, "This might work," Paul reached for personal testimony. And that's important because, at a time when God might like to use you, many of us excuse ourselves by saying, "Well, I don't know a lot. I don't know every verse. I'm afraid to start talking on a subject." Yeah, but you have a testimony as to what God has done for you, and that's exactly where Paul turns to. In front of this large, angry crowd, his one opportunity, he simply turns to personal testimony of what the Lord has done for him. And I think that should inspire us because all of us are capable of telling what the Lord has done in our lives. When that blind man was healed by Jesus (in John 9) - and then he was questioned - first they questioned his parents who said, "Well, you can ask him," and then they asked him, and they said, "This guy, whoever it was, He broke the Sabbath law," and the blind man, able to see, went, "I don't know what He did, but I'll tell you what I know. I was blind, and now I see." His testimony was just, "God did this! He worked this out." And that's where Paul is turning. Don't be ashamed of what God has done in your life. God uses testimony in the Bible more than anything else. He'll stand before King Agrippa and his court, and Paul will tell his testimony. The details are the same, the emphasis is a bit different. He's got a different audience so he emphasizes a bit different things. But it's the same story; it doesn't change from situation to situation. So he refers to God's work in his life, not only in sharing in the book of Acts, but if you get to the epistles, Paul is forever goin', "Oh, you know what happened to me," and he's always interjecting doctrine with personal relationship experiences that he's had with the Lord.

So he starts in verse 3 by saying, "Look, I'm a Jew. Not only am I a Jew, I'm a Hellenist Jew." A Hellenist was a Jew who had a Greek background, lived outside of the religious center of Jerusalem, would oftentimes bring with him - in practice - more liberal thinking than the Jewish practices that you would find in Jerusalem, which was a very strict city. And I should say to you that are going to Israel with us, it is still that way today. Jerusalem is very strict in their religious practice. There're lots of Hasidic Jews and communities and rules and regulations. You won't find them in the Galilee. Galilee is a nice lake to hang out with. You know? The people are kind and easy, and they don't have that kind of driven, religious heart.

So, Paul came from a place called Tarsus. It's a port city in Asia Minor. It was along the caravan route along the Euphrates. Paul would have been a cosmopolitan kind of young man. He'd have met everyone from everywhere, kind of like where you live. But notice he says, "I was also brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel." At 12 years old, his Bar Mitzvah. Paul was sent by his parents to Hebrew school, in town, taught by the finest teacher of his day - Gamaliel - who was a disciple of a fellow named Rabbi Hillel. Everyone admired this man. He was very conservative. He believed in tolerance, not violence. You'll find him in Acts 5 at a meeting talking about how the Jews should handle the early church; gave some pretty sound advice. Nobody listened to it at all. We have some of Gamaliel's writings - not in the Bible - but he wrote that Paul was an outstanding student and that his hardest thing with Paul was to keep him in books. He was a voracious reader, a tremendous scholar. So that's where Paul came at 12 years old. He came to Jerusalem. He came to sit at the feet of a man who had a deep knowledge of the Scriptures, a great love for the Lord. Paul, because of his background, had a good working knowledge of culture and language and custom and history.

But notice that he stresses - to the crowd - his Jewish roots, his Hellenistic exposure, and then he says, at the end of verse 3, "I grew up as zealous for the law as all of you are today." Great zeal. Paul will say to the Romans (in chapter 10:2), "For I bear them witness that they" (the Jews) "have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge." Oh, they want, but they don't follow God's path to find out who He is and to know Him. So it's misdirected zeal. A lot of religious zealots today - programs, habits, customs, culture, symbolic symbolism. People get really crazy about religious things, but that doesn't mean they know the Lord. "I've been where you're at."

In fact he says, in verse 4, ("I was as zealous as you"), " 'I persecuted this Way' " (speaking about the Christians) " 'to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.' " "I was so zealous, I persecuted them, hunted them down, drove them away, made them suffer - those of the Way." Jesus says, "I am the Way." They said, "All right. That's the Way." "I imprisoned men and women. I put them to death. You want to know zeal? I had zeal. You guys were amateurs trying to beat me up compared to what I used to do. I've stood where you've stood. I had extradition papers from the religious leaders in the Sanhedrin, signed by the high

priest. I was the official agent of the Sanhedrin to eliminate them, by their appointment, with their full approval. I was a hitman for the Sanhedrin - to go after Christians." See, if I'm in the crowds, I'm goin', "Man, I don't want to mess with that guy! I was standing too close. He might've hurt me." "Just ask the high priest. Talk to the elders. You'll know about my commitment to the cause of Judaism in my youth and the teachings that I learned. I even traveled 170 miles, all the way to Damascus, to chain up Christians, to bring them back here to stand trial, to punish them for their blasphemous ways." But his point is, "Pretty soon, I was changed. In the most unique way, my eyes were opened. God visited me." And just as a side note - because I said to you one of the best ways that God uses to reach others is to tell your testimony to others - I want you to notice here in Paul's testimony, he's very short on sin and very long on Jesus. Right? He gives us three verses about his old life. I've heard Christians want to just fascinate people with how horrible they were, and then at the end, they go, "Oh, and then I got saved." Wrong emphasis. You were an idiot, then you got Jesus. What has He done in your life? That's the way we want to go. So, Paul does that here, by example. He quickly gets to his new life, what he found and what the Lord found in him.

Verse 6. So, verse 5, he's done. " 'Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" ' " "At high noon, as I neared Damascus for another round of Christian ethnic cleansing, an even greater light than the noonday light invaded my life. God stepped into my life." Paul would know Jesus for the rest of his life the way that he met Him on the road that day. He didn't know Jesus like Peter did or the apostles did. He didn't know Jesus, meek and lowly, Son of Man, tired at night, sleeping on a rocking boat, in the flesh. He didn't know the Lord after the flesh. How he came to know Jesus was he called Him the Lord from heaven. And you will constantly hear Paul, in his writings, say, "And then I met the Lord of heaven" or "the Lord from heaven." His experience with the Lord was pretty moving. He met Jesus the Lord. It moved his life forevermore. His first vision of Jesus was blinding and glorious and powerful. It put him on his wallet, and it changed his life forever. So, in a moment's time - and notice he's getting to his salvation already - this murderer changes allegiance and passion and direction from the zeal that he had for the law to the fire in his heart for this Jesus that he met. Completely changed in a moment.

We read in verse 7, " 'And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" So I answered, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said to me, "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting." And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me. So I said, "What shall I do, Lord?" ' "

Isn't it interesting? In one minute, "Who are You, Lord?" "I'm Jesus." "What do You want me to do?" Imagine having your entire life work with great religious fervor, and you've already got all your stuff with you to drag Christians to their doom, and you now meet the One who you believe was an impostor, the One that these blasphemous Christians were worshipping. And now you find out that you were absolutely wrong, and you find out all at once. "Who are You, Lord?" "I'm Jesus." "What do You want me to do?" Completely hammered his life. Changed him forever. Imagine the guilt and the nightmare of having to sit for the next three days in darkness because you're blinded by this experience and having to consider the households and the children and the parents and the disruption that you felt. If you read Paul's epistles, his old way of life haunted him for the rest of his life. It made him so thankful for God's mercy, but it overwhelmed him that he could be forgiven. He'd been driven by such compassion and zeal, and now he finds this. You always know, I think, right away when someone gets saved when they start to say what Paul said, "What do You want me to do, Lord?"

" 'And the Lord said to me,' " verse 10, " ' "Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do." ' " He got a very clear direction. It wasn't very hard. "Go to Damascus. Wait for further instructions." Which, by the way, is always the way of faith in the Bible. Right? If there's one thing you can learn about walking with God by faith, it is really one step at a time. And very rarely does the Lord give you the year's calendar like, "This'll happen in February, and then in May, we're going to be doing that." He just basically says, "Do it today." Right? And as you're faithful to the Lord today, then you can discover what God has in plans for you on that day. The life of faith is defined as a step of obedience one at a time. You find it constantly. I know we've mentioned to you several times the old Acts 8 - Philip, in the midst of a revival, told by the Spirit of God in his heart to go to the middle of nowhere in the Gaza. And, being led away from a revival in Samaria, he does so without explanation. Doesn't really know what he's doing until he gets to the middle of nowhere, and the Lord says, "Hey, see that chariot kickin' up dirt? Yeah, that guy needs to hear about Me. Why don't you go join into that chariot?" And that was step two. He runs up, he hears the fellow reading Isaiah 53. He asks him if he understands what he's

reading. He says, "I don't.....somebody's gotta help me." And he invited him in. He shared the gospel with him. The man gets saved. He's coming from the Feast Days. He'd traveled for hundreds and hundreds of miles. He'd found no satisfaction in the religion of man, but he met Jesus because one fellow, Philip, was faithful to take one step at a time. If you read the whole account of Peter ending up at Cornelius' house, you'll find that it's just a series of challenges to take one step at a time. Peter would not have gone on day one, he wouldn't have gotten it. But the Lord slowly, just kind of began to work him out. Same thing with Abraham. He was told to leave Ur of the Chaldees, head for Canaan. He made a lot of stops. Should have been going for years earlier. But he waited till his dad died, he kind of lived on a border town, he wouldn't really go. We read about Abraham's faithfulness. Yeah, when he finally got there. But it took him a long time to get there. You'll read in Hebrews 11:8, "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, now knowing where he was going." That's the key. He didn't know where he was going, but when He finally just said, "Go," he relinquished himself and said, "I'll just go wherever God wants me to go." Paul was not given much direction. For as much as he's gone through, it might have been nice to hear, "Paul, we're gonna work this out." But the Lord wanted him to sit and think about his life. And so a walk by faith just implies implicit trust, not always an agenda; we don't know the next ten steps. We do know Paul sat for three days, examining his life, in the dark. How horrible must this have been. Right? Waiting for the next move. Wondering if someone at the door had been sent by the Lord. And Paul would just wait. He would just wait and see what the Lord was going to do for him.

So, there's something about venturing as God directs. I always like the story, in 1 Samuel 14, where Jonathan was looking up at the stars one night, and he thought, "Man, the God I serve is so big! He's so amazing." Moses had said to the people, in sending them into the Promised Land, that if they would walk with the LORD, one could put a thousand to flight and two could put ten thousand to flight (Deuteronomy 32:30). If the LORD is with you. I think it must have gone through his (Jonathan's) head because he said to his armor bearer, as his dad slept under a tree, "Hey, you want to go see what the LORD might want to do with us?" and they went to fight the enemy, and yet the enemy was far bigger than they were. And so they agreed together as they prayed that if they made themselves known to the enemy up on the bluffs, "If they invite us up, then we know that God's with us, and He'll go up with us. But if they say, 'No, just wait right there, we're comin' to see you,' then we get out of here, man, because the LORD's not in it." But it was like

one step at a time. They knew who God was, they didn't know what God might do, but they were willing.

So Paul goes into Damascus as a broken man, led by the hand, but healed in the heart; not seeing with his eyes but for the first time in his life, seeing clearly. Make sense? He was blind but, boy, could he see. He sits for three days by himself in the dark. It reminds me - I always think of Psalm 46:10. It says, "Be still, and know that I am God." I mean, Paul had nothing he could do but sit and think, "Am I dead? Is He going to kill me, hang me up by my thumbs? I've been so wrong. I've caused such hurt." And yet, out of the ashes comes Paul, the apostle - dependent, life of faith, preaching Jesus, standing up for the cross, fighting for grace alone, and suffering like crazy to be His representative. Now, that's all that he has shared. We stopped for a minute, but Paul is just immediately to his salvation. "Here's who I am, here's where I grew up, but here's what happened to me."

He says, in verse 12, " 'Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there, came to me; and he stood and said to me, "Brother Saul, receive your sight." And at that same hour I looked up at him.' " So the last thing Paul had seen was the face of Jesus. The next thing he saw was the face of Ananias. He goes from seeing the Head to seeing the body of Christ, if you will. He tells the crowd the good news and the good report. Notice Ananias had a great reputation among the Jews in Damascus. He was a godly man. He was a Jew.

And so he came, verse 14, " 'Then he said, "The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One," ' " (by the way, an Old Testament demonstrative pronoun for the Messiah, the Jewish title for the coming Messiah) " ' "and hear the voice of His mouth. For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard." ' " Ananias' words to Paul from the Lord - regarding his calling - were that the Lord would use him. The words in chapter 9:15-16 say, "Go, for you are a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show you how many things you must suffer for My name's sake." Paul just kind of puts all those together, and he says, "Yeah, he told me God was going to use me." And so notice what he says, though, in verse 14, "You've been chosen." It's always nice to be chosen, don't you think? I should tell you, by the way, God chooses all. He calls all. He desires all to come. But to know that you're chosen is only a thing in the Scriptures that is told

to Christians, not to the lost. Right? So once you've come to the Lord, He says, "I chose you." It's a comforting truth. On the outside of heaven is a gate. It says, "Whosoever will, let him come" (Revelation 22:17). But the minute you step into Christ, you can look back at the gate, and it says, "Chosen in Him before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4). So that's just for you. You're the chosen. That's a good thing to know. People go, "What if I'm not chosen?" No, no. You're chosen! That's why you're here. God chose you. He picked you. And, "He picked you so that, Paul, you might know His will, see His Son, and hear His voice." Isn't that great? My prayer for you.....every day....for the last thirty years is that you might hear His voice, see His face, and know what He wants for your life. Because that's all that matters. Right? If you can get that part right - I'm right where God wants me to be - we're in good shape. It's exactly what we need to know. Nothing more than that is necessary. So Paul is called, God makes him great promises. Paul had seen Jesus with his own eyes. He shares that now with the Jews. Now he's sneaking up on the obvious. He hopes he's laid enough foundation to be able to invite these folks to come to the Lord like he knows Him and not get caught up in this prejudiced, kind of prideful, group that has tried to kill him. "You will be My witness to all men of what you have seen and what you have heard."

Verse 16, " " "And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord." " " And so Paul was baptized. He outwardly identified with Jesus, who cleansed him from his secret and his sinful ways. " 'Now it happened,' " verse 17, " 'when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance and saw Him saying to me, "Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me." So I said, "Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him." Then He said to me, "Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles." " " Now, verse 17, Paul, from his history, skips over three years. The three years after he came to know the Lord he went (the Bible tells us) to the Arabian Desert, where he learned firsthand from the Lord the things of the Scriptures. He then returned to Damascus, tried to preach in the synagogue; they tried to kill him. He had to be let in a bucket down the wall in escape (Acts 9). He went to Jerusalem. They didn't want to hear from him; lasted fourteen days before they put him on a boat and said, "Get out of here, man. You are trouble!" Paul leaves all of those stories out - just kind of combines them all, if you will, into one. He'd been told to go to the Gentiles, to kings and to Israel.

None of that had worked very well for him. So the Lord says to him, in verse 18 (and, again, we know from the historical portions, he's in Jerusalem after three years, back to Damascus and then on to Jerusalem). So he's in Jerusalem. He's there for two weeks. Maybe two or three disciples meet with him because Barnabas brokers a deal. But basically, "You gotta get out of Dodge. They're not gonna listen to you." And the Lord tells Paul, in a trance, in the Temple, "Then get out of Dodge."

And notice, verse 19, Paul says, "Oh, no. You're wrong, Lord. They know me. They know what I've done, they know where I've been, they know the kind of guy I am, they know how I hated the Christians, how I was there when Stephen was killed. Oh, no, no. They're gonna listen to me, all right." Well, here's the problem. Never argue with the real directions and the clear directions from the Lord. Now, deep down in my heart, I would never say what I read here. But I'd think it. I wouldn't say to the Lord, "You're wrong," but I'd think it. Because it sounds horrible when you verbalize it. Or if you hear someone saying, "Man, the Lord told me that, and I went, 'That's wrong.'" Ahhh! You get goosebumps. Ahhh. You can't say that to God! But you'll think it. And Paul did more than think it. Unless this was in his mind and he was speaking to the Lord back and forth. But however it was, Paul was sure that his resources and determination and his history could reach the Jews. He didn't get a chance; chased out of town, went home for ten years to Tarsus, would finally be brought by Barnabas to Antioch. He would pastor the church there for a year and then would spend the next fifteen years on the road - planting churches; one, two, third journey. But now he's back home, and this whole idea of, "I can reach them," his argument here in verse 18, is now years later, but Paul is picking it up now. "I know that I have street credentials with them. I've got a background." Right? "I'm just sure that they'll listen to me." Paul never lost the idea that he thought he could talk them into it because of who he was. It's amazing, though, how fantasies can fall apart before your very eyes sometimes. Because we think we know better. I think I mentioned to you me arguing with GPS sometimes in my car. "Turn left here," and I'm goin', "What an idiot. No! We go that way." Never have been right. Never have been right. Right?

So Paul goes on. He tells them about the Lord said, "Don't go there." "Lord, they know what I've done" and all. And then he says, in verse 21, "Then the Lord told me I should leave here" (he's talking in the synagogue) "and God was going to send me far from here - God was going to send me to the Gentiles." And here's when everything exploded.

Verse 22 says, "And they listened to him until this word" (Gentiles). Oops. You should know your crowd. The very thought, to them, that the Gentiles could be saved horrified them. "How can they be saved first? This is blasphemy. We're closer to God than they are." And they go berserk. They call for Paul's death, they begin to tear their clothes, they throw dirt into the sky. This hasn't at all been going well for Paul. In fact, verse 22 says, "And they listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, 'Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!' " That's not good. Verse 23, "Then, as they cried out and tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air, the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him." In many ways it's a very sad story, Paul standing with his dream in his hand and seeing the response from the people. God had greatly blessed Paul when he preached to the Gentiles. Yet he longed to reach his own people. The thing is God hadn't called him to that. Heartbroken as he might have been, there was no blessing there for Paul. I'll bet Paul had often asked the Lord in prayer for one opportunity. Well, he got his chance, but he learned something - our best efforts, our specific qualifications, don't matter at all when it comes to spiritual work. I don't want you to forget that either. I know you look at people and go, "He's much more qualified than I am to speak, to share, to go and do that work." That's not so. If God is with you, you're the most qualified. Always so. Spiritually so. It doesn't matter what you think you have in your hand. If God is with you, who can be against you? (Romans 8:31) And never let the situation put you off or steal from you the hope that you have in the Lord. You don't lose by waiting upon God. But Paul needed to learn, and we need to learn that if God is working, qualifications matter little. In fact, if God is working, He'll speak through a donkey if He has to. Just ask Balaam or one of us. The Holy Spirit in you qualifies you for the work. That's the bottom line. Nothing else. God isn't looking for great accomplishments from us; just faithfulness to His calling. And if you'll shine where He's put you, if you'll not have confidence in the flesh, if you rely on the Holy Spirit, if you'll recognize that He doesn't need you but He'll use you, then you won't have to look into your skill set to see if this is a place for you. You can just look up. And God can use you in the most tremendous of places, where you don't belong and there you stand. I love it. It's a great picture.

Well, look at the response to Paul's dream. "This man does not deserve to live!" Well, thank you. I'd hate to hear that after my preaching night. "Yeah, this guy doesn't deserve to live!" (Laughing) It would be my last preaching night. I'd quit. Well, they went down and rescued Paul, dragged him inside, and then the

commander said, "Well, we should just scourge this guy." The exasperated captain had had enough. He wanted to get to the bottom of this. He'd talked to the crowd, got no straight answers. He had Paul talk to the crowd. That hasn't helped either. He would resort, now, to what Romans were good at - scourging: the New Testament version of enhanced interrogation. This nasty Roman practice of leather strips with wooden handles with imbedded bones and metal inside - the big, strong soldier slapping you on the back, tearing huge pieces of flesh out of your back. It doesn't take long for you to come up with a reason they should stop. You would confess to stuff you've never done just to make them stop. So, then, when you read in Isaiah 53:7, where Jesus had nothing to confess, like "a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth," know this - whatever beating they gave Him, it never stopped because He couldn't confess anything. Now there are countries that still flog you. You can get in trouble in Singapore, you'll still get beat. If this beating went on long enough, the Roman kind of beating, you were maimed pretty quickly; you could die fairly quickly as well. Now, it hadn't started. And you remember Paul had been scourged back in Philippi (if you were with us back in those days). He hadn't said anything, but if he had said, "I'm a Roman citizen," the law said you couldn't beat a Roman citizen. But Paul didn't speak up to demand his rights. We don't know why. We trust that the Lord told him not to. Paul went to prison. He was able to lead a jailer and his family to the Lord and then, when they finally found out he was a Roman, he made a deal with the local government to take it easy on the church; he bought them some time. So, it was a good place to not demand his civil rights. People go, "My civil rights!" Well, sometimes you don't need them. You just need to make sure people get saved. On this occasion, however, Paul does speak up to tell them he's a Roman citizen, which saves him a pretty good beating because this guy was not happy, and he wanted some answers.

So we read, in verse 25, "And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, 'Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?' When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, 'Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman.'" So Paul speaks up. They tied him to the post. He thought this was a good time for civil rights. He speaks up, and he is saved. Look, the Lord doesn't always require you to take the martyr's route. Some people go looking for trouble and then they quote, "Well, we're living godly lives in Christ, we're gonna suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12). Well, not if you're a goof. So, Paul claims his citizenship. Now, by Roman law, if you claimed to be a citizen and were not, you got killed. There weren't beatings; you're dead. There was no illegal immigration with the Romans. At all. They were pretty strict.

So, when the centurion heard about it, he ran to the commander who then, "Don't lay your hand on him."

And we read, in verse 27, "Then the commander came and said to him, 'Tell me, are you a Roman?' He said, 'Yes.' The commander answered, 'With a large sum I obtained this citizenship.' And Paul said, 'But I was born a citizen.' Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him;" (nobody wants to lay a hand on this guy) "and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him," which was as illegal as it could be. Roman citizenship could be obtained in Jesus' day in many ways. You could be born in a city that was a free-birth city. Tarsus happened to be one of those. You just got lucky; you were born in the right place. You could receive a citizenship from a king or a high official. Most people bought it at exorbitant prices; it came with lots of benefits. But notice the captain had paid a lot for his. The interrogator was frightened and withdrew himself. The captain wasn't happy. But Paul was safe.

We are told, in verse 30, "The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them," and he wants to work this thing out. So Paul got kept a night in jail. In the morning, the captain felt he'd get to the bottom of this. This was it. He summons the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of the Jews, to show up for testimony. He says to Paul, "I want you to come and stand before them, and we're going to work this out." And so chapter 23 is Paul before his accusers. It's a pretty cool discussion. We don't have time for it tonight, however. So you'll be back, won't you, next Wednesday night? I love cliffhangers.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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