

From Darkness to Light

Acts 26:1-32 on January 16, 2022
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Please read Acts 26:1-32 before going further in this transcript.

Where is one of the darkest places you've ever been? Like maybe a cave, or a camping trip out in the middle of a deep, dark forest on a moonless night, or something like that? For me, the darkest place I've ever been, is probably a cave in Texas. It was on a family vacation quite a few years ago. Initially the cave was well light. But, at one point in the tour, our tour guide invited anyone who wanted to, to walk down the long stairway, all the way down to the very lowest point of the cave. Our family decided to go for it. Once we got to the bottom, our tour guide then warned us before shutting off all the lights. We then just stood there, in absolute, pitch black, darkness. Now normally, after a little while, your eyes will adjust enough so that you can at least make out the rough shapes of the objects right in front of you. But not this time; this was literally "I can't see the hand in front of my face darkness." The obvious contrast to absolute darkness, is brilliant, bright light. So, what is one of the brightest lights you've ever seen? For me I might have to say it's the light I looked at about three weeks ago. My new son-in-law bought me a mega-bright flashlight. Great gift! However, at first, I couldn't figure out how to turn the stupid thing on! So, I'm twisting the bottom and feeling around the sides for the power switch. Of course, not being all that bright myself, I was looking directly into the lens of the flashlight, you know, to see if it had turned on yet, uffdah! My eye was about an inch away when I found the power button. And then... I experienced the brightness of about 20,000 candlepower directly in my eye! Well, today's message is titled, "From Darkness to Light." That cave I talked about illustrates that human beings are not designed to live in perpetual darkness. That's just as true for SPIRITUAL darkness, as it is for PHYSICAL darkness. We need the light of the gospel to illuminate the darkness in this world, so that we can find our way to God.

In last week's text Governor Festus and King Agrippa decided to call a special meeting, for the express purpose of finding out what crime to charge Paul with. Clearly his Jewish opponents were upset with him, but why? Paul now gives them a thorough and convincing gospel defense. It's not exactly the CRIMINAL defense that they were expecting, but it is the GOSPEL defense that God intended all along. Paul's gospel defense sheds light on what's really going on here; the LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL. In today's text, the light of the gospel illuminates at least 4 things:

First of all, **the light of the gospel illuminates...**

1. God's promised hope. In Acts 26:6-7 Paul explains why he's on trial, "And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors 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. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me.” In other words, there is no criminal charge.^{1 2} This is about God’s master plan of salvation for all of humankind. This is about the hope of the Messiah, promised and prophesied long ago in the Jewish Old Testament Scriptures. In other words, Paul is saying that the Christian gospel, that he’s been proclaiming all around the world, actually represents true Judaism.³ Paul doesn’t follow Christ in *addition* to being a God-honoring Jew, He follows Christ *because* he’s a God-honoring Jew!⁴ So Paul declares, “Here’s why I’m on trial”: “it is because of my hope in what God has promised our Jewish ancestors. Jesus is very hope that we Jews have been waiting for, been watching for, for centuries!” By rejecting Jesus, Paul’s Jewish opponents have rejected God’s promised hope!⁵

Later on, in Acts 26:22-23 Paul explains, “...I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”⁶ When verse 22 refers to, “the prophets and Moses,” this is Paul’s way of referring to the OT Scriptures. This is the *Jewish* Old Testament, the very Scriptures with which all of the Jews were exceedingly well-versed. In other words, even though Paul’s preaching about Jesus seems like something new, “it is in fact very old, rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures;” so Paul is not aspiring to be a religious innovator or an inventor of some new heresy; he’s preaching a message that’s right in line with what God promised all along.^{7 8 9} Verse 23 says that the Old Testament predicted two things about Messiah: Messiah would suffer, and he would bring the message of light. Isaiah 53:4-5 foretells that

¹ “Agrippa II “who is Jewish but also part of the ruling Roman elite, understands both the theological (Jewish) and legal (Roman” aspects of Paul’s case.” *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2274 footnote on Acts 26:3.

² Now, those of us who’ve been tracking this trial since Paul’s initial arrest back in Acts 21, really wish someone would finally just tell us what they actually ended up charging Paul with! But, Luke never actually records the charge that Governor Festus came up with, assuming he did come up with one. So, we never do find out what Festus writes to Caesar, but we do know he sends Paul to Rome. In fact, his long voyage of sailing across the Mediterranean begins in Acts 27. Pastor Eric will preach on “Sailing on the Promises of God” next Sunday.

³ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 720.

⁴ “The true Jew must become a Christian in order to remain a Jew.” Citing Conzelmann, Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 714.

⁵ In fact, in Acts 25:19 reminds us that these particular Jews think Jesus is still dead!

⁶ This is the same message Peter preached back in Acts 3:18, “But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer.”

⁷ See Jesus’ words in Luke 24:44-47. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 721.

⁸ In other words, Paul’s Christianity was a natural progression for his Jewish faith. In fact, it was an obedience to the same God in heaven that all the Jews claimed to serve. Paul’s Christian faith was not a violation of his Jewish heritage. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 714.

⁹ If we were to ask Paul, “why did you have to go and travel all over the world and take the light of the gospel to those nasty Gentiles!?” He might reply, “Well, Jesus...made me do it!” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 720.

Messiah would suffer, “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Isaiah 42:6-7, predicts Messiah “would bring the message of light.” “...I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”¹⁰ Light is “a messianic image in the Old Testament;” it describes how the Messiah leads the way to God.¹¹ This is why the message of the gospel, is a message of light.

In Acts 26:8 Paul then asks a fair question, “Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?” Back in Acts 23, we saw that the Jews were adamantly divided over the resurrection issue. The Pharisees insist that God raises the dead, but the Sadducees reject this idea outright.¹² However, there shouldn’t really have been much debate, since their own Jewish Scriptures predicted a future resurrection: Daniel 12:1-2 prophecies a resurrection of the dead, “...There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.” Isaiah 26:19 agrees, “But your dead will live, LORD; their bodies will rise—let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy—your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead.” Therefore, most of the Jews believed in the doctrine of the resurrection, especially in how it would come into play during the End Times.¹³ Unfortunately, many of them would not embrace the resurrection hope displayed before their very eyes through Jesus. They were still in spiritual darkness and resisted the invitation of the light of the gospel.¹⁴ Later on, in Acts 26:23, Paul explains that Jesus was the “1st to rise from the dead,” but He will not be the last. Jesus’ resurrection was only the beginning; His resurrection “guarantees that all believers will rise as he did.”¹⁵ ¹⁶ In other words, “Jesus’s suffering and resurrection...[were right] in line with Jewish

¹⁰ Isaiah 49:6 says, “...I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

¹¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 718.

¹² See Acts 23:6-10.

¹³ See discussion by Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, top of p. 715.

¹⁴ Paul’s testimony in Acts 26:15 makes it clear that “The Lord who appeared to Saul is the RISEN Jesus who is being persecuted when his people are persecuted....The LIVING Lord was defending his followers.” (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, top of p. 717.) In other words, Jesus is very much alive and well, and having a conversation with Paul.

¹⁵ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2275 footnote on Acts 26:23.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:22-23, says, “...in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.”

messianic hope.”¹⁷ “Israel’s hope was that God would save his people and raise the dead.”¹⁸ And that’s exactly what God did through Jesus.

The light of the gospel (also) illuminates...

2. The need for radical change in people’s lives. It took a bright light from heaven to help Paul see his own spiritual blindness.¹⁹ This is now the third time that Luke records Paul’s personal testimony in the book of Acts. As Paul shares his personal story before Festus and Agrippa, he’s hoping that the light of the gospel will open up the spiritually blind eyes of his listeners. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” When we proclaim the gospel, we shine the light of the gospel into the lives of unbelievers. And because Satan uses his power to blind their minds to God’s truth, we are then sent out, just like Paul was in Acts 26:18, “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 (*Jesus*).” The day of our salvation is a radical change for each of us! Brother or Sister in Christ, our gospel witness is a supernatural battle of trying to lead people “From Darkness to Light.” This is why, since the very beginning of the book of Acts, the power of the Holy Spirit is essential to the light of the gospel going forth. This is spiritual warfare; unfortunately though, we tend to think of spiritual warfare as mostly having to do with casting out demons, or with pentagrams and seances and the like. (And sometimes that is how the devil works in this world.) However, Satan is often content with far less, than these more sensational and fantastical things.

1 John 3:8 says, “The one who does what is sinful is OF the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.” You see, the devil’s work is to cause humans to sin. His first success was way back in the Garden of Eden, when he deceived Eve into eating the forbidden fruit, and then Adam joined her. Satan’s goal hasn’t changed over all these thousands of years. So let’s not be confused into thinking that Satan’s primary interest lies in various mystical devices. His primary interest, his “bread and butter” if you will, is to keep us trapped in regular old sin. The devil’s primary goal is to

¹⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 714.

¹⁸ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2274 footnote on Acts 26:6-7.

¹⁹ We may think to ourselves, “Well yeah, if I saw a miraculous vision from heaven, I’d believe in Jesus too!” That’s not necessarily true though. Read Luke 16:19-31, especially verses 29-31. This is the classic story of “The Rich Man and Lazarus.” Lazarus tells the Rich Man that if his brothers will not believe Moses and the Old Testament, then they’re not going to believe even if somebody rises from the dead. The Jews in Acts 26 prove the truth illustrated in this story. If we keep asking God for more evidence, than the evidence we already have in front of us, there will never be enough evidence to convince us. So what are we really waiting for?

distract us from God, to make sure that we love and enjoy sinning, more than we love and enjoy God. This is why Paul makes sure to articulate what his gospel message meant by repentance. In Acts 26:20 Paul clarifies, "...I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds." True repentance means that we've truly turned to God. True repentance indicates a change in direction, away from sin and darkness, which should immediately reveal a change in behavior.²⁰ If our behavior hasn't changed, then we know that our repentance hasn't been sincere. Now, sincere repentance doesn't mean that we'll never stumble into sin ever again, but it does mean that we're at least stumbling in the right direction, and consistently bringing our sin into the light. So when we talk about "The need for radical change in people's lives," what we're talking about is an extreme paradigm shift in how we behave. What we're saying is that when the light of the gospel shines on the darkness of our personal sin, and when we then choose to respond in surrender, like Paul did, the change in our lives will be radical.²¹

Acts 26:18 explains the light of the gospel clearly: "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 (*Jesus*)."²² The gospel OPENS our spiritually blind eyes, it TURNS us from darkness to light, and then we can RECEIVE forgiveness of sins and a place among God's people. So our faith in Jesus not only provides us with forgiveness of sins, but it also provides us a place among His family, among those who are sanctified by faith in Jesus. Therefore, not only does our BEHAVIOR change, but our IDENTITY changes as well. We are now people of the light, who belong, to the God of Light.²³

A third thing, the light of the gospel illuminates is that it's...

3. A message intended for all peoples. A primary impetus for Paul's trial before Festus and Agrippa was the Jewish intolerance of the Gentiles. Paul was commissioned by Jesus Himself to preach to the Gentiles. In Acts 26:23 Paul says, "...Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people AND to the Gentiles." If it feels like we keep repeating this theme over and over again, that's because the Bible keeps repeating this theme, over and over again. God is concerned for all peoples; to put it more directly, the gospel does NOT tolerate racial intolerance. So as we listen to this sermon on the eve

²⁰ Any repentance from sin, that's not accompanied by a genuine change in behavior, is not biblical repentance. We might say that it's a form of godliness, but it's not genuine godliness. Consider 2 Timothy 3:1-5.

²¹ See Matthew 7:17-18; Romans 13:12-14; Galatians 5:19-25; and Ephesians 5:8-14.

²² The original Greek grammar is helpful here: "Paul's task is described in three infinitives: to open...to turn...and to receive." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 718.

²³ See Luke 16:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:5; and 1 John 1:5-7.

of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, it's worth considering this message from God's Word again: the gospel is "A message intended for all peoples."^{24 25} The light of the gospel demands that we shine a light on the value of every human life, regardless of their ethnicity. Whether that person is Jewish or Gentile, black or white, Anglo or Native, Uyghur or Han Chinese, Tutsi or Hutu, and so on. In Acts 26:22 Paul clarifies, "...so I stand here and testify to small and great alike...." Let's remember that Paul is speaking before a prestigious group of people, including King Agrippa, who "came with great pomp."^{26 27} Paul reminds us that the gospel message is for all peoples, regardless of how small or great their social status may be.²⁸ Regardless of whether some people may deem them as insignificant or even as a burden on society.^{29 30 31} The gospel calls us to value every human life, regardless of status or age. Whether that person is healthy or debilitated, young or old, born or unborn.

The final verses of Acts 26 bring us to the final crescendo! The light of the gospel illuminates...

4. A true and reasonable invitation. Pastor Kevin DeYoung points out that Acts 26 contrasts three very different *responses* to the light of the gospel: Surrender, scoff, or sidestep. The Apostle Paul *surrendered* to the light of the gospel. Governor Festus *scoffs* at the light of the gospel. King Agrippa *sidesteps* it entirely.³² Acts 26:24-25 says, "At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "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." Festus scoffs at this gospel invitation! In fact, he shouts right in Paul's face: "you're

²⁴ The light of the gospel is for BOTH Jews AND Gentiles alike. In Acts 26:23, "The two groups are tightly linked by the conjunction *te*, meaning "both" Jews and Gentiles. (See *ESV* translation of Acts 26:23.) Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, pp. 721-722.

²⁵ God told Abraham way back in Genesis 12:3, "...all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

²⁶ See Acts 25:23

²⁷ Acts 9:15 calls Paul a "...chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel."

²⁸ *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2275 footnote on Acts 26:22-23.

²⁹ In Luke's Gospel, chapter 2, he records the angels bringing "good news that will cause great joy for ALL the people." There was certainly intentionality behind this being announced to the lowly shepherds who were working out in their fields that night. They were the ones to whom the angels proclaimed that a Savior had been born; he is the Messiah!

³⁰ The "high-ranking military officers" from Acts 25:23 likely still remembered that Paul had arrived in Caesarea two years earlier under armed military escort, on horseback with cavalry surrounding him! The "prominent men of the city" refers to "wealthy citizens and civic leaders. Paul gains the opportunity to preach the gospel before a prestigious audience." *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2274 footnote on Acts 25:23.

³¹ It helps to envision the setting in which Paul was sharing his gospel defense. Since this was only an informal gathering designed to help Festus decide what charge to bring against Paul, they met in the "audience room," not the judgment hall. This was "an auditorium appropriate for the pomp of the occasion" with a king, a governor, and many other high-ranking and prominent leaders. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1876 footnote on Acts 25:23.

³² Kevin DeYoung and Chris Ranson, *Acts: A Visual Guide*, Christian Focus Publications, Scotland, 2018, Acts 26:12-32, "Sanity and Salvation." <https://www.avisualguide.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/57.-Sanity-and-Salvation.mp3>

insane!”³³ ³⁴ Paul replies that what he’s saying is both true and reasonable.³⁵ It’s not so crazy to believe in Jesus! Paul hasn’t lost control of his mind, he had just finished laying out a clear and articulate gospel defense.³⁶ The Christian belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus is rooted in real historical events. In Acts 26, Paul explains the gospel clearly to his listeners: Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promised hope, the hope predicted in the well-attested Old Testament Scriptures. There’s nothing insane about what he believed or the invitation he was giving them that day.

Paul goes on in Acts 26:26-27, “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.” In verse 26, when Paul says that these things were “not done in a corner,” he’s declaring that his gospel defense is based on verifiable events, “lived out in [real] historical times and places.”³⁷ The fact is, many of the other world religions today, rely on “PRIVATE messages from God, [but] Christianity relies on PUBLIC [verifiable] events.”³⁸ In verse 27, Paul then asks the king a question: “do you believe the prophets?” Because “I know you do!” And so, you must also know, that the prophets predicted the very things I’m talking about, and that they’re actually a part of God’s deliberate plan.³⁹ In other words, Paul makes the argument, “I know you believe the OT prophets, and because you do, I’m sure you can see how the facts that I’m presenting to you about Jesus, reveal that HE, is indeed, the promised Jewish Messiah.”

But Agrippa sidesteps Paul’s penetrating question about the prophets, and then anticipates Paul’s next question.⁴⁰ Acts 26:28-29 says, “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 to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.” Now, was Paul really trying to persuade his listeners to be Christians? You bet he was! Absolutely he’s trying to

³³ Consider 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 and Acts 17:32.

³⁴ It’s also possible that Festus thought it ridiculous to suggest that Jesus, a JEWISH Messiah, would ever treat Gentiles with equal favor. “Reconciliation of the races before God, is a struggle for some people to accept.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 722.

³⁵ The *ESV* translates this “true and rational words.”

³⁶ See Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, bottom of p. 722.

³⁷ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1878 footnote on Acts 26:26.

³⁸ Kevin DeYoung and Chris Ranson, *Acts: A Visual Guide*, Christian Focus Publications, Scotland, 2018, Acts 26:1-11, “Why is it Thought Incredible that God Raises the Dead?” <https://www.avisualguide.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/56.-Why-is-it-Thought-Incredible-That-God-Raises-the-Dead.mp3>

³⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, top of p. 723.

⁴⁰ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1878 footnote on Acts 26:28.

persuade them! (*Just as I'm trying to persuade anyone reading this sermon right now.*) Let's be clear though, Paul presents his gospel defense "with persuasion and invitation but NOT coercion."⁴¹ Paul is not trying to bully anyone into the Kingdom of God. Paul never tried to hide his agenda or pull a bait and switch. He's not manipulating anyone through intimidation. He simply makes a compelling case for Christ, and demonstrates that his evidence is sound. And that's what I've tried to do as well.

⁴¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 725.