**The Career of an Apostle**

(Acts 26:19-32)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

 One day a man asked his teenaged son what he wanted to be when he grew up, and he replied that he was looking into a career as a scarecrow. His father told him that he could never make a living as a scarecrow, but his son stubbornly became one anyway, and now he’s outstanding in his field.

 Then there’s the man who had a career as a professional rock-wall climber. It was going pretty well, but he started a side business in mattress-making, just to have something to fall back on.

 Speaking of careers choices, here in Acts 26, the Apostle Paul is telling a Roman king named Agrippa how the Lord Jesus Christ had made *his* career choice *for him* when He appeared to him in a vision on the road to Damascus, made him an apostle, and sent him to the Gentiles. And now, after describingthat vision to the king, Paul told him,

 **“Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision” (Acts 26:19).**

Once Paul learned that the Jesus he’d been persecuting was God, he knew he couldn’t disobey him. He knew he had to go to the Gentiles like the Lord told him.

 But I’m sure he was *tempted* to disobey Him, because Jews didn’t *like* Gentiles. So I’m sure Paul was tempted to do what the Jewish prophet Jonah did when God sent *him* to some Gentiles in Syria. He said, as it were, “I’m not going to go give the gospel to those Syrian Gentiles! The Syrians are *butchers* who make towers out of the skulls of their enemies after they conquer them. They deserve to burn in hell, not hear the gospel and get saved.”

 And Paul could have said the same thing! He could have said, “I’m not going to give the gospel to the *Roman* Gentiles who conquered my people in Israel, because they deserve to burn in hell too!” But in the end, Paul figured that being an apostle was a better career choice than getting a job feeding whales like Jonah did. So he was obedient to the heavenly vision, and became “the apostle of the Gentiles” (Rom.11:13).

 But before he *went* to the Gentiles, he did something else first, something he talked about in verse 20 of our text, where we read,

 **“But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance” (Acts 26:20).**

After Paul got saved on the road to Damascus, he continued down the road to Damascus, and when he got there, he preached to *Jews,* not Gentiles, as we saw back in Acts 9, where it says,

 **“Then...Saul...at Damascus...preached Christ *in the synagogues...”* (Acts 9:19,20).**

After that, verse 20 of our text says Paul went to Jerusalem, and Judaea, where he preached to even *more* Jews. And only *then* did he go to the Gentiles. So he sure took his sweet time being obedient to the heavenly vision—and he paid the price for it, for

 **“...at Damascus...the Jews took counsel *to kill him”* (Acts 9:22,23),**

 because they didn’t want to believe that the humble carpenter from the despised city of Nazareth was their Messiah. And everywhere Paul went in Jerusalem and Judaea, the Jews tried to kill him in those areas as well, until finally the Lord had to repeat Himself and tell Paul,

 **“Make haste, and get thee quickly *out* of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning Me....Depart...*unto the Gentiles”* (Acts 22:18,21).**

As usual, the Lord knew best, and knew that the Jews wouldn’t listen to the gospel. And if Paul had just listened to the Lord in the first place, he could have saved himself a whole lot of trouble and misery.

 And so will you, if you’ll just obey the Lord the first time He tells you to do something *in His Word.* He still knows best, and you can save yourself a whole lot of trouble if you’ll just begin to obey Him the first time He tells you to do something.

 Now if those words have you feeling bad about all the times you took *your* sweet time obeying the Lord, I can assure you that the Lord was able to *use* Paul’s slow obedience to do what he said in Romans 10:21, where

 **“...to Israel He saith, All day long I have stretched forth My hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people.”**

When Paul went to Jews instead of Gentiles, God was able to use Paul’s slow obedience to continue to reach out to the people of Israel through his ministry, after they rejected the ministry of the twelve apostles. So even if you’ve spent most of your life *not* obeying the Lord, I think you’ll find at the Judgment Seat of Christ that God was able to use you in those years more than you thought He did. But in the meantime, you’ll be a whole lot happier in life if you obey God right away. The choice is yours.

 But here we have to stop and ask why Paul is telling *Agrippa* all this. I mean, why would a Roman king care if Paul preached to Jews before going to Gentiles?

 Well, what Paul was doing was defending himself against something that the Jews charged him with back in Acts 21:28, where they said of him,

 **“This is the man, that teacheth all men...*against the people.*”**

The Jews charged him with being *against* the people of Israel. So to prove that wasn’t true, Paul told the king how he *ignored the instructions he received from his God* to go to the Gentiles, and went to the Jews first, because of his great *love* for the Jews. He wasn’t against the people of Israel! He was on record as saying,

 **“...my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is, *that they might be saved”* (Romans 10:1).**

But verse 20 of our text says that it didn’t matter *who* Paul was preaching to, his message for Jews and Gentiles was the same. He told them both that they should repent and turn to God. That’s actually just two different ways of saying the same thing, because the word “repent” *means* to turn, as we see when the prophet Ezekiel said,

 ***“Repent,* and *turn* *yourselves...”* (Ezekiel 14:6 cf. 18:30; Hosea 11:8)**

*Gentiles* in Paul’s day needed to repent by making the kind of turn the Thessalonians did. Paul reminded them how

 **“...ye *turned* to God *from idols* to serve the living...God” (I Thessalonians 1:9).**

Gentiles needed to turn from *idols* to be saved in those days, and Jews needed to turn from their rejection of Christ to be saved. Today, most of us had to turn from believing we could be saved by doing good works to be saved, because that’s what most people think.

 But verse 20 *also* says that once we’ve repented and turned to God, we should do works that are “meet” for repentance. And the word meet means *fitting.* If you’ve repented by turning to God, and God has saved your soul, it’s only fitting that you do works that are *meet* for repentance to thank Him for saving you, as Paul said in Ephesians 2:8-10, where he wrote that

 **“...by *grace* are ye saved *through faith*...it is the *gift* of God: *Not of works...*we are *His* workmanship, *created* in Christ...*unto good works.”***

When we turn away from thinking we can be saved by good works, we are “created in Christ.” God makes us “a new creature” (IICor.5:17), a new creature that’s the product of *God’s* workmanship, and not of our *own* good works; a new creature that’s created *unto* good works. Most people think you have to do good works to be saved, but that’s getting the cart before the horse, and you can’t get to heaven in a cart that’s drawn by good works.

 Now you don’t *have* to do good works for God. You can live selfishly for yourself if you want to. But Paul told Titus,

 **“...these things...affirm...that they which have believed...*might be care-ful to maintain good works*. These things are *good and profitable unto men”* (Titus 3:8).**

If you spend your life doing good works for God, you’ll find life is a whole lot more profitable than if you live selfishly for yourself. You’ve got God’s Word on it.

 Well, once Paul proved to Agrippa that the Jews didn’t want him dead because he hated Jews, he went on to tell the king the *real* reason they wanted him dead in verse 21, where he said,

 **“For these causes the Jews caught me in the temple, and went about to kill me” (Acts 26:21).**

Now in our studies of Acts, we’ve seen that there were *two* causes why the Jews wanted Paul dead. First, it was because he preached that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead. That was a cause that Governor Festus had already explained to King Agrippa back in Acts 25, where it says,

 **“Festus declared Paul's cause unto the king, saying...the Jews...brought...accusation... of one Jesus, which was dead, *whom Paul affirmed to be alive”* (Acts 25:14,15,18,19).**

The Jews knew that the resurrection of Christ proved He was God in the flesh (Rom.1:4), so if He really *did* rise from the dead, that meant they’d *crucified* the man who was God in the flesh, their long-awaited Messiah. So naturally they wanted to *kill* Paul for preaching Christ’s resurrection.

 But Jews *also* wanted Paul dead for the cause of saying that the Lord had sent him to the Gentiles. Do you remember what happened when he *told* the Jews the Lord sent him to the Gentiles? Acts 22:21,22 says,

**“...He said...Depart: for I will send thee far hence unto the Gen-tiles. And they gave him audience *unto this word,* and then...said, Away with such a fellow...*for it is not fit that he should live.”***

The Jews wanted to kill Paul for bringing God’s salvation to the Gentiles because they’d been kicked around by Gentiles throughout most of their history, and they didn’t *want* them to hear the gospel and be saved.

 So for those two causes the Jews were trying to kill Paul—and *had been* trying to kill him for years! The only reason he was still alive is because of what he says in the next verse of our text, where he explains:

 **“Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come” (Acts 26:22).**

The only way Paul was able to “continue” to preach the resurrection of Christ to the Gentiles was that he had obtained help from God time after time. When he got stoned to death in Acts 14, God raised him from the dead. I’d find that *very* helpful, wouldn’t you? Then in Acts 21, God helped Paul by using *the Roman army* to save him from the Jews. Later in Acts 23, God used Paul’s young *nephew* to save him from the Jews.

 And with help like that, Paul was able to continue to witness to “small” people, like a young boy named Timothy in Acts 14, and a young demon-possessed girl in Acts 16, and “great”men like Governor Felix and Governor Festus, and King Agrippa himself.

 But how could Paul say that he went around saying none other things than what Moses and the prophets said should come? I mean, by this time in the Book of Acts, he’d already written the Book of Romans, and in Romans 16:25, he described his preaching as

 **“...the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of *the mystery,* which was *kept secret* *since the world began.”***

If Paul’s message was a mystery to the Old Testament prophets, how could Paul say he preached none other thing than what prophets like Moses said would come? Well, the things that Moses and the prophets said would come were the things Paul delineates in verse 23 of our text, where he explains how they said

 **“That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:23).**

The prophets preached all of that—*and so did Paul.* The prophet Isaiah predicted that Christ would die in Isaiah 53, and Psalm 22 predicted that Christ would die *and rise again,* and Psalm 16 did as well. And those things were part of Paul’s message too.

 But don’t get confused when verse 23 says that Christ was the first to rise from the dead. The prophets Elijah and Elisha raised people from the dead in the Old Testament, and the Lord raised *three* people from the dead in the New Testament. But those dear folk just got their old lives back, *and died again.* The Lord Jesus Christ was the first to rise from the dead with *resurrection* life, *never to die again.* And that’s the kind of life I want after I die, how about you?

 But verse 23 says the prophets *also* predicted that Christ would show spiritual light to the people of Israel, and to the Gentiles. Isaiah predicted He’d show light to Israel when he wrote,

 **“in Galilee...people that walked in darkness *have seen a great light ...*.For unto us a child is born...a son is given...His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:1,2,6).**

But Isaiah *also* overheard something God said to Christ in Isaiah 42, where he quotes the Father as saying,

 **“I the LORD...will...give Thee...for a light *of the Gentiles;* To open the blind eyes...” (Isaiah 42:6,7).**

 But the prophets weren’t the only ones to preach that Christ would show light to Jews and Gentiles. Paul preached that too! But he also preached *more* than just those things.

 We know he preached more than Christ’s death and resurrection, because Acts 17 says he *started* his messages by saying that. Luke tells us,

 **“Paul, as his manner was...reasoned with them out of the scriptures, *opening* and alleging, *that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again...”* (Acts 17:2,3).**

Paul *opened* with the message of Christ’s death and resurrection. If men received that message, he would go on to preach the mystery that Moses and the prophets knew nothing about by shining the light of *grace* to Jews and Gentiles, and not just the light of the New Testament, as we discussed in our last lesson.

 So when Paul says he preached none other things than what Moses and the prophets said, he meant he didn’t preach anything that was *contrary* to what they said. He’s using that word “other” in the same way he used it when he told Timothy to

 **“...teach no *other* doctrine...” (I Timothy 1:3).**

And he meant the doctrine found in his epistles, of course, the doctrine of grace. But we know that didn’t mean that that’s *all* he wanted Timothy to teach, for he went on to tell Timothy that

 ***“All* scripture...is profitable *for doctrine...*Preach the word” (II Timothy 3:16; 4:2).**

 There are *other* doctrines in other parts of God’s Word that Paul wanted Timothy to teach. So “teach no *other* doctrine” meant: don’t teach anything *contrary* to Paul’s doctrine. And here in our text, teaching “none other things than what Moses and the prophets did say should come” meant teaching nothing *contrary* to what they said would come.

 And Paul didn’t! His message *agreed* with what they said would come. We know that because after James heard what Paul preached, he said,

 **“...to this *agree* the words of the prophets...” (Acts 15:15).**

So Paul wasn’t lying when he said he preached what the prophets preached. He just preached some new things that they *didn’t* preach, things God kept *secret* from the prophets.

 But as soon as Paul said that Christ would rise from the dead, the Roman governor Festus, who was with King Agrippa here, interrupted Paul in verse 24:

 **“And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad” (Acts 26:24).**

Pagans like Festus didn’t believe in resurrection, as we saw back in Acts 17:32 when Luke wrote of the Athenians:

 **“...when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, *some mocked...”***

When pagans heard anyone suggest that dead men could rise up out of their graves, they figured they were mad as a hatter, and kookoo for Cocoa Puffs.

 The funny thing is, Festus didn’t interrupt Paul earlier in the chapter when he was telling Agrippa how he used to *execute Christians.* Festus didn’t think there was anything mad about that! He thought, “Yeah, I can see why you’d want to *slaughter* people who didn’t believe what you believed!” But he thought it *madness* to believe that the dead could rise.

 But after he blurted out that Paul was mad, he remembered that *King Agrippa* was a Jew who believed the prophets, and he’d just called it *madness* to believe what the prophets said about resurrection! So he added, as it were, *“Much learning* has made you mad, Paul. Only learned men believe the Jewish prophets!”

 By the way, isn’t it interesting that Festus accused Paul of having *too much* learning, but the twelve apostles had been accused of not having *enough.* Back in Acts 4,

 **“...they saw...Peter and John, and perceived *that* *they were unlearned”* (Acts 4:13).**

You see, men like Festus, who don’t *want* to believe the gospel, are always going to find fault with the people who preach it. Aren’t you glad God can use *all* kinds of preachers, learned ones like Paul, and unlearned ones like most of the rest of us. God can use *even you,* just as long as you’re *beside yourself for the Lord.* In other words, *crazy about Him!*

 When *Paul* was accused of being crazy, he replied,

 **“...whether we be beside ourselves, *it is to God...”* (II Corinthians 5:13).**

You’ve heard of being crazy like a fox? We need to be crazy like an apostle, the Apostle Paul!

 Back when Senator Barry Goldwater was running for president in 1968, he got accused of being an extremist. And he said something that went on to become a famous saying. He said, “Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice.” And it’s no vice to be extremely *excited* about the things of God!

 Do you remember what happened when Elisha the prophet told a man to go anoint a man named Jehu the king of Israel by pouring oil on his head? Shortly after, we read that

 **“Jehu came forth to the servants of his lord: and one said unto him, Is all well? *wherefore came this mad fellow to thee?”* (II Kings 9:11).**

Jehu’s servants thought you’d have to be *stark raving mad* to walk up to a man and pour oil on his head, when all he was doing was making him Israel’s king. And when you make the Lord Jesus Christ *your* king by obeying Him in life, people are going to say *you’re* mad, because obeying the Lord often involves doing things the world doesn’t understand, just like the guy who poured the oil on Jehu’s head.

 Do you know what you should do when that happens? Say what David said when he got accused of getting a little crazy in expressing his joy to the Lord. He said,

 **“It was before the LORD...*and I will...be more vile than thus”* (II Samuel 6:21,22).**

In other words, he said, “If you think I got a little crazy for the Lord, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet!” And when men say *you’re* crazy for the Lord, you tell them, “You ain’t *seen* crazy yet—but it’s comin’!” Then go out and live a mad life of obedience to the Lord filled with good works.

 But after Festus called Paul “mad,” look what Paul called him in the next verse of Acts 26:

 **“But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness” (Acts 26:25).**

Paul had such respect for rulers in government—even when they didn’t *deserve* respect, like Festus here—that when Festus called him *mad,* he called Festus “noble.” That’s grace in action! Do you give nice names to people who give you insulting names? It’s hard to do, but it’s the only to be Pauline in practice as well as in doctrine.

 Now I should add that while Paul was respectful, he also respectfully told the governor that he *wasn’t* mad, that he spoke words of truth and soberness. The words he spoke about Christ’s resurrection were *true* words, and the words he spoke about how the Lord made him the apostle of the Gentiles were “sober” words. He’s using the word sober the way he used it when he told the Romans,

 **“I say...to every man...*not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think;* but to think *soberly...”* (Romans 12:3).**

 If you think more highly of yourself than you should, you’re probably high on something. I’m told that getting drunk can make a man pick a fight with a man twice his size, and make him think he can do other things he can’t as well. But *Paul* wasn’t thinking too highly of himself in saying that the Lord had picked him and him *alone* to be the apostle of the Gentiles, because those were words of truth as well.

 And we know this wasn’t the first time that Agrippa had heard those words, because it says in the next two verses of our text,

 **“For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner.**

 **“King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest” (Acts 26:26,27).**

It was evidently common knowledge that Agrippa believed the Jewish prophets. But it was *also* common knowledge that the Lord Jesus Christ had risen from the dead, because He hadn’t risen in some out of the way corner of the world like Monkey’s Eyebrow, Kentucky. And yes, Virginia, there is a town called Monkey’s Eyebrow. If you’re trying to find the bigger town of Paducah, Kentucky, they tell me it’s halfway between Monkey’s Eyebrow and Possom Trot, Kentucky!

 But the Lord hadn’t risen from the dead in Possom Trot either. He rose from the dead *in Jerusalem,* the capital city of the region that Agrippa was king of! Hey, if a man rose from the dead in Washington, do you think maybe the president would have heard about it sometime down the road?

 So Agrippa had heard about Christ’s resurrection, and we know that he almost believed it, because in verse 28 we read,

 **“Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” (Acts 26:28).**

Those are some of the saddest words in the Bible, because being *almost* a Christian just isn’t good enough.

 Many years ago, Hall of Fame slugger Frank Robinson’s team was way behind in a game, and they made an amazing comeback, but still lost the game 12-11. After the game, a man said to Frank, “Well, you *almost* won the game,” and he replied, “Almost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.” And it’s said that he was the first to say what has now become a well-known saying.

 Almost getting a ringer in horseshoes will get you one point. But almost being a Christian gets you nothing but an eternity in the flames of hell and the lake of fire. And Paul wasn’t about to let Agrippa get away with *almost* getting saved. Verse 29 says,

 **“And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds” (Acts 26:29).**

*Paul* had been *fully* persuaded to be a Christian on Damascus Road, and he told the king, “I wish you were too, and all the rest of you people as well.” All except the chains that he wore, of course. He wouldn’t wish those on anyone.

 Paul’s words there were so moving, and so touching, that Agrippa had to cut him off before he said something that *did* persuade him to be a Christian, as we see in the last three verses of our text:

 **“And when he had thus spoken, the king rose up, and the governor, and Bernice, and they that sat with them:**

 **“And when they were gone aside, they talked between themselves, saying, This man doeth nothing worthy of death or of bonds.**

 **“Then said Agrippa unto Festus, This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar” (Acts 26:30-32).**

The king found Paul innocent of all charges. But he couldn’t *dismiss* the charges, because earlier Paul had appealed to Caesar, so now only the emperor could dismiss the charges. So it looks like Paul goofed in appealing to Caesar. But we saw in our earlier studies that he made the best choice he could at the time.

 And you know what? There’s going to be times when you make the best decision *you* can make about something, and it won’t work out good for you either. But what’s Paul say about that in Romans 8:28,29?

 **“...we know that all things work together *for* good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose. *For* whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate *to be conformed to the image of His Son.”***

Now don’t read those verses the wrong way. It doesn’t say that all the things that happen to you are good. You know they’re not. It says all things work together *for* good, because God can take the *bad* things that happen to you and work good in you with the—*spiritual* good. Things like Paul talked about when he told the Romans that

 **“tribulation worketh *patience;* and...*experience;* and...*hope”* (Romans 5:3,4).**

 I’d call those things spiritually good things, wouldn’t you? And God uses *tribulation* to work them in you.

 Let me ask you: if God reached down and miraculously, supernaturally made you *patient—*would that be a good thing? Of course! Well, that’s what God did at Pentecost, when He filled those Jews with His Spirit.

 But that’s not how God makes us patient today! Today, in the dispensation of grace, He uses tribulation to make us patient. He takes all your troubles and works them together for your spiritual good—*if* you keep in mind that you’re called according to His purpose. Because God’s purpose for your life isn’t to keep bad things from happening to you. It’s to conform you to the image of His Son. Was His Son a patient man? Of course! Well, tribulation can conform you to be like Him.

 Now at the Rapture, God is going to conform you to be like Christ *miraculously,* all at once. But in the meantime, He takes the bad things that happen to you and uses them to conform you to His Son’s image—unless you kick against the process by *griping* and *complaining* about your troubles. Then you’re just going to be miserable all the time, and remain conformed to the image of *Adam,* the image you inherited when you were born. You know. The one that likes to gripe and complain.

 But if you love God *so* much that all you care about is His purpose for your life, God can make you a patient, hopeful Christian. And isn’t that what you want in life?

 Do you know how to carve an elephant? You start with a ten-ton block of stone, and chip away everything that doesn’t look like an elephant. And that’s what God wants to do with your troubles in life—use them to chip away everything that doesn’t look like His Son, and conform you to His image. Why not let Him, by always keeping in mind the invaluable things God is doing with tribulation in your life.

 You’ll be eternally glad you did.