

# Hope For the Hardest Hearts

## Acts 26:1-32

### Sermon Handout

“And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, ‘Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind!’” Acts 26:24

**When the gospel sounds like complete madness, we need to remember that the only thing that convinces people of the truth of the gospel is the resurrection power of Christ.**

“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.” 1 Corinthians 1:17-18

### **1. The Reasonableness of Paul's Theological Conviction. Acts 26:1-8**

Paul’s belief is consistent with historical Jewish teaching and practice. Resurrection hope is at the core of the Jewish Scriptures.

"And now I stand on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?" Acts 26:6-8

- As a Jew, Paul is as devout as they come:

“If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” Philippians 3:4-6

- As a Jew, Paul is as consistent as they come:

“And now I stand on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” Acts 26:6-8

“But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” Matthew 22:29-32

“When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” 2 Samuel 7:12-13

“...when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days.” Isaiah 53:10

"Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?" 26:8

For Paul, what is shocking is that the Jews can't see the resurrection as a clear and faithful doctrine/teaching.

## **II. The Radicalness of Paul's Conversion. Acts 26:9-15**

How Could Paul Go From The Church's Chief Enemy to Christ's Greatest Advocate?

Paul's Opposition: "I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities." Acts 26:9-11

Paul's Conversion: "In this connection, I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. At midday, o king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'" Acts 26:12-15

It is clear that Paul was converted by a direct intervention of the risen Christ.

**When the gospel comes with saving power to a person, it isn't just the message of the crucified and risen Christ that saves people but it is the presence and power of Christ that saves people through that message.**

“God glorifies himself towards the creatures also two ways: (1) by appearing to them, being manifested to their understandings; (2) in communicating himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in, and enjoying the manifestations which he makes of himself.”  
Jonathan Edwards, A Dissertation on the End for Which God Created the World

### **III. The Repetitiveness of Paul's Resurrection-Displaying Mission. Acts 26:16-19**

Paul would be called to proclaim the power of the resurrection while depending on the resurrected Christ to rescue him from death over and over again.

“And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand on your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sin and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” Acts 26:15-18

- Paul’s Conversion is a Resurrection: “But rise and stand on your feet...” (vs. 16)
- Paul’s Sufferings are Continual Personal Resurrections:

“for I have appeared for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant to the things in which you have seen me and to those which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles.” (vss 16-18)

“But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.” Acts 14:19-20

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’” Romans 8:35-36

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.” 2 Corinthians 4:7-11

- Paul's ministry is a ministry of resurrection:

"to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

#### **IV. The Resoluteness of Paul's Evangelism. Acts 26:22-32**

Paul is called to stand before great and small proclaiming Christ in the hope that they might be raised from spiritual death to spiritual life.

"So I stand here testify both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles." Acts 26:22b-23

Only God can raise the dead. Festus and Agrippa resist Paul's witness but see Paul's innocence. God may raise a person in an instant or patiently and progressively open their eyes and change their hearts.

"At age seventeen, Lewis wrote to longtime friend Arthur Greeves, 'I believe in no religion. There is absolutely no proof for any of them, and from a philosophical standpoint Christianity is not even the best.' Fifteen years later, Lewis wrote to Arthur, 'Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call 'real things'. . . namely, the actual incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection.'" David Downing, C.S. Lewis: The Most Reluctant Convert

Group Study Questions:

1. In Acts 26:1–8, Paul argues that his belief in the resurrection is consistent with Jewish Scripture. **Why do you think the resurrection seemed “incredible” to his audience, and does it still seem that way to people today?**

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2. Paul emphasizes his strong religious background (Philippians 3:4–6). **How can deep religious knowledge or tradition sometimes help—or hinder—someone from recognizing the truth about Jesus?**

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3. Acts 26:8 asks, *“Why is it thought incredible that God raises the dead?”* **What perspectives might make the resurrection easier—or harder—for someone to believe?**

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4. Reflecting on Acts 26:9–11, Paul was once a fierce persecutor of Christianity. **What does Paul’s past teach us about how we should view people who strongly oppose the gospel today?**

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5. Paul’s conversion (Acts 26:12–15) involved a direct encounter with the risen Christ. **In what ways do people today experience the “power and presence” of Christ, even if not as dramatically as Paul did? What is your story?**

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6. The lesson says that conversion is not just about hearing a message but experiencing Christ’s power. **How have you seen God work beyond words to change someone’s heart—or your own?**

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7. In Acts 26:16–18, Paul is called to open eyes and turn people from darkness to light. **What does that transformation look like practically in someone’s life today?**

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8. Paul’s life involved repeated suffering and deliverance (Acts 14:19–20; 2 Corinthians 4:7–11). **How can hardship in a believer’s life actually display the “resurrection power” of Jesus? Where have you seen this?**

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**9.** Paul remains resolute in sharing the gospel with both “small and great” (Acts 26:22–23).  
**What helps—or hinders—you from being consistent in sharing your faith with different kinds of people?**

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**10.** The lesson notes that God may change hearts instantly or gradually (example: C.S. Lewis).  
**How does understanding different conversion timelines shape your patience and expectations when praying for others?**