

Become What I Am

He was a former high-powered lawyer and political leader with an extremely bright future, who now is a vagabond living a hand-to-mouth existence sewing tents to make a living. He stands in a courtroom where he could have been the well-dressed prosecuting attorney, who after the trial would have lunch with the governor. Instead, he is in chains, the one accused of federal crimes, defending himself because he can't afford an attorney. If you were an uninformed stranger sitting in the public gallery of the courtroom, you would probably have great pity for this man and ask someone, "Where did this guy's life go so terribly wrong?" And as this "loser" concludes his defense, he says to the judge:

...I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am... (Acts 26:29)

You would undoubtedly be thinking, "Become what YOU are? Are you kidding?? I feel so sorry for that poor, demented soul!"

So, let me ask you, under what circumstances would you say to someone, "I pray that you might become what I am"? Isn't that rather arrogant?

This morning we come to the surprising conclusion of our study of Paul, the ultimate border crosser. And we have the rare privilege of sitting in the courtroom as he gives his final defense. First, please notice, he takes the opportunity to speak...

I. A Message to His Opponents.

His opponents are the Jewish religious leaders from Jerusalem. Now, let's remember, first of all, that the charges brought against Paul are false and without any credible proof. The lawyer for the High Priest Ananias, the same high priest who condemned Jesus, charges Paul with disturbing the peace and desecrating the temple by bringing a non-Jew into the restricted area. These charges are false.

Paul has now been in custody for over two years because Felix, who was then the governor, was hoping to get a bribe from him. Finally, Festus succeeded Felix as governor and a trial was begun, but since the Jews wanted Paul to be tried in Jerusalem so they could ambush his transfer there and kill him, Paul trumped their change of venue with a change of venue of his own. He appealed to Caesar which was the ultimate legal right of every Roman citizen, which Paul was by his birth in the Roman city of Tarsus. Besides, Paul had always wanted to preach in Rome!

So, Festus is forced by law to send Paul to Rome but he has nothing to charge him with. He wants to do the Jews a favor by not releasing him, but what's he going to tell Caesar? So, he asks the political leader to the north, King Agrippa, to help him "invent" a charge against Paul. Political corruption is a very old game.

So now, Paul appears before Festus and Agrippa. You'd expect him to attack his opponents with a withering argument about their lies, false witnesses or even the proof he had that they wanted to kill him by ambush. But Paul doesn't do that. Instead, Paul gives his opponents one final chance to be forgiven of their evil deeds, including their sin of murdering the Son of God. Listen: (Acts 26:19-23)

So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. But I have had God's help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen – that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.

Persecution for being a Christian is not limited to Paul's day. Our speaker last week, Brother Afeef, made us aware in conversation this past week of multiple pastors and Christian workers in Arab countries who are right now being tortured and one has even died, simply because of his faith in Jesus Christ.

So, how should we respond? Is it wrong to take legal action? No, Paul used the legal system of his day to block the evil intent of the Jewish hierarchy. But he did NOT use the legal system to retaliate. No, he used the legal system to defend himself AND to preach the good news to his enemies, so that even they might repent and be forgiven by God. Where did Paul get this crazy method? He got it from Christ who was the fulfillment of the predictions of the Prophets, whom his enemies claimed to follow. Christ did not come to OVERPOWER His enemies. Not the first time. The next time He comes He will destroy His enemies. But the first time He came, He came to suffer, to die and be resurrected so that ALL enemies of God could be forgiven. Paul didn't attack his enemies. He identified with them, praying that some might repent and be saved. What's your intention toward YOUR enemies? Secondly, Paul also had...

II. A Message for the Ruling Authorities.

If you've ever stood trial for any reason, you know, almost by instinct, that the one thing you don't want to do is anger the judge. Right? Everybody understands that – DON'T GET THE JUDGE MAD AT YOU!!! This is just common sense.

So then, why, why, why does Paul do what he does next? Festus interrupts Paul and shouts at him:

You are out of your mind, Paul... Your great learning is driving you insane. (Acts 26:24) Paul responds:

I am not insane, most excellent Festus. (Okay, that's good Paul. Don't get in a shouting match with Festus! That's good, that's good.)

But then, Paul turns to King Agrippa (who, by the way, has a long history of insanity in his family) and he says:

King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do. (v. 27)

If Paul had had a lawyer, at this point that lawyer would have been on his feet asking for a recess. John Stott gives this commentary:

The court gasps. Has any prisoner ever before presumed to address His Royal Highness with such impertinence? Agrippa is unhorsed. Too embarrassed to give Paul a direct answer to a direct question, and too proud to allow him to dictate the topic of their dialogue, he takes evasive action with an ambiguous counter-question.

“Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” (v. 28)ⁱ

If Paul had wanted to improve his chances of a “good report” to Caesar from Agrippa, he should have just shrugged his shoulders and smiled at this point. But Paul could care less about what Caesar thinks of him. He has a singular goal – saving another lost soul. He replies: (v. 29)

Short time or long – I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.

Now we see the context of Paul’s words that I’ve taken as the title for this sermon. It’s not an arrogant boast at all by Paul. What does he mean by, “become what I am”? Well, in a letter Paul told his protégé, Timothy, what he was:

...Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. (I Tim. 1:15b)

What do you tell people you are? What do you THINK you are? Do you think that you USED to be a sinner but now you’re a Christian? That’s not how it works. The opposite of a sinner isn’t a Christians but Christ. Only Christ is sinless. As long as you are capable of sin, which we all are, we are still sinners. But that’s not ALL we are. Paul finishes his definition of what he is with these words to Timothy:

But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. (I Tim. 1:16)

An example of what? An example of what the grace of God can do! The apostle Paul is not boasting about himself before King Agrippa. No, he’s boasting about Jesus Christ. Rather than trying to influence an authority over him for his OWN benefit, Paul is trying to influence the King for the KING’S benefit, that he might believe and receive that same grace. If you had two minutes to speak with our governor, whose benefit would you pursue – yours or his?

Finally, we need to see that in this courtroom appeal, Paul also has...

III. A Message for Us.

For the third and final time, Paul tells how he became a Christian and what it was that he was assigned to do by Jesus. Some of you may know that numbers often symbolize a particular truth beyond the words of Scripture. For example, the number three or finding things in groups of three in Scripture often points to completeness. For example, God is complete in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Time is described completely by past, present and future. The angels practice complete worship as they sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy.” I think you get the idea.

Now, it has also been noticed that Jesus’ life often demonstrated this same pattern. Jesus’ complete ministry lasted three years. He raised three people from the dead. God the Father announced His pleasure from heaven, three times during his ministry. It was the third hour He was crucified, the third day He was resurrected and three times the resurrected Christ asked Peter, “Do you love me?”

And here, in the book of Acts, Paul tells the story of how he met Jesus three times. And in this last telling, Paul is not so much describing his conversion as his commissioning. Jesus commissions Paul with a three-part mission. These are revealed in three verb forms - one past tense, one future tense and one in the

present tense: *I have appeared to you, I will rescue you, I am sending you.* First, in the past tense, Jesus says to Paul:

I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. (Acts 26:16)

The importance of this is that it states by what authority Paul was sent. How important is authority? If you received a text message on your phone, does the authority of the sender matter? If your neighbor sends you a text that says, "I need you to come to my house tomorrow at 6 am to run an errand for me," will you go? How about if your boss sends you the same message? The authority behind a message matters a lot.

Was this message just for Paul or also for us? Doesn't this message to Paul echo the message Jesus gave to all of us? Jesus said, "When the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be my witnesses." So, Jesus' message to Paul is Jesus' message to us.

Secondly, Jesus says to Paul regarding the future: (Acts 26:17a)

I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles.

Did this mean that Paul would never suffer? No, this wasn't a promise of a suffering-free ministry but of a successful ministry in spite of suffering. Jesus is telling Paul, "No one will be able to stop you or silence you until your task is complete." Is this important? Is this motivational? It is for me!! Jesus is telling us that if we are doing ministry in the center of His will, nothing will be able to keep us from completing the purpose of that task from the viewpoint of heaven. Heaven's definition of success may be different from my definition, but heaven's definition is the one that matters and it can't be stopped. That's what Jesus is guaranteeing Paul.

But what is the present tense of God's plan for us? What am I specifically supposed to do? Jesus says to Paul and through Paul to us: (Acts 26:17b-18)

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

Is this commissioning only for Paul? No, Jesus has commissioned all of us as His followers with the same message. He *appeared to us* in His Word which carries full authority. He promised through His Word to *rescue us*, to guarantee our success. And Jesus says to us, "Today, present tense, *I am sending you to them.*" We are to go to those who are suffering under the power of Satan's authority to open their eyes to the good news so that they can repent, be forgiven and be set free.

So, how could everyone here obey this clear command from Jesus? Jesus meant for every one of us to obey this or He wouldn't have given us this command to go. So, are we all supposed to go? When Paul "crossed the border" on his three trips, the whole church at Antioch didn't go with him. Not physically. But they did "GO" with him through prayer and through generous giving. This past week in our morning-prayer times, we've heard from some of our World Outreach Team members. It was there that we heard and saw real people who are suffering under the power of Satan. Brother Afeef spoke of 350 million Arabs who are waiting for someone to tell them how they can be released from the bondage of Islam. His organization is seeing great success, planting 80 churches in 11 countries. But there

are 11 more countries he wants to plant churches in. He's got the trained pastors, he just needs prayer support and the finances to send them.

Kami West de Ciprian of *Kids Alive*, told us about the children of Santo Domingo. Children like Mimia. [Show photo #1] At four years old, she was wandering the streets which are filled with drug dealers and pimps. No one was at home to supervise her because her mother is a drug addict. Or this boy Ocuar. [Show photo #2] Ocuar showed up at their *Kids Alive* children's home in his underwear. When Kami tried to bring him back home, his grandmother screamed, "Get out of here! I told you never to come back here!" Kami says there are hundreds of kids in Santo Domingo in this very same situation. They want to come and live at a *Kids Alive* Center because they know they will be cared for there. The only thing stopping them is space and adult staff.

So, why does our World Outreach budget go up so much every year? This is not about dollars!! It's about real people in need! Jesus' message to us is:

I appeared to you - "Make no mistake!" Jesus says, "I want you to do this!"

I will rescue you - "If you will just say 'yes!', I will see that you are successful."

I am sending you to them - "Rescue them, rescue those kids in Santo Domingo and Hartford, rescue those Arabs from the power of Satan."

You might say, "Look, I want to help but really, I don't have any money." Let me say two things. First, if you are not contributing 10% of your income to God's work, then you are stealing money from God. You say, "Wait! Where do you get that from?" I get it from God's Word. Listen to what God says:

But you ask, 'How do we rob you?'

"In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse - the whole nation of you - because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." (Mal. 3:8b-10)

Do you ever wonder why you're always short of money at the end of the month? Well, if you're robbing God, you're under a curse! That's not the best place to be. But if you will tithe your income, God promises to pour out a blessing on you.

That's the first thing. Here's the second thing: our World Outreach budget is a Faith Promise budget. It's not about cutting back so that you can give more, it's about stepping forward by faith. Here's an example. David and Karen Abrahamsen took a huge step of faith last year and wrote down a very big number on their Faith Promise card. They had no idea how they would pay it but they promised the Lord that, if He provided it, they would give it. Two months later, through a completely unexpected inheritance, they got a check in the mail. It was, to the penny, the exact amount they had written down on their Faith Promise card.

Do you hear what God is saying to you today? He's shouting, "Look, I don't want your money! I don't need your money. I want your heart. If you will trust Me, I will open the floodgates of heaven and I will save those kids in Santo Domingo and I'll let you come along just for the pure joy of it!" Why would you NOT want to go on this joy ride? When Paul says, "Become what I am," he means, "become the most blessed man on earth - one who knows the joy of being used by God!!" Let's pray...

¹ John Stott, *The Spirit, The Church and the World* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), p. 376