

God's word for our consideration today is taken from Acts 26. But being that it is such a small snippet of a much larger drama, allow me a few minutes to provide some much-needed explanation and context. You see, the apostle Paul had been making regular missionary journeys through what we call Asia Minor. These journeys often lasted many years as he went through various cities and founded Christian churches in them. Once he was satisfied the groundwork was laid, he would move on. But every so often he would loop back around and return to Jerusalem, his home.

Now, along all these journeys he made frequent enemies among the Jews who would not accept his message of Christ Jesus crucified and resurrected. In fact, such was their anger at him that they would even follow him from city to city in order to continue persecuting him. It was on one of his visits to Jerusalem that a large group of these Jewish enemies caught up with him in the Temple courts and causes such a scene, that the Roman overseer had Paul arrested. Naturally, the Jews couldn't prove any specific charge against Paul, but such was the ferocity of the accusations, that the case had to be heard.

The Roman authorities had to treat the matter carefully, as Paul was a Roman citizen, which was a status you didn't come by easily in those days. And so when a plot to kill Paul arose from the Jews, the Roman centurion had Paul transferred to the city of Caesarea, where the local Roman governor, Felix was. Felix heard Paul's case and could find nothing to charge him with and yet wanted to appease the Jews and so in essence he did nothing. He let the case sit until he retired as governor and the next man, Festus, came in to replace him. Paul sat there in prison for two years. When the new governor came, he heard the case again from the start. He also then called in the Jewish puppet King Agrippa to help him understand all this Jewish religious babble. And that is where we find Paul in our reading.

He makes his defense to King Agrippa, beginning with the account of his own miraculous conversion on the road to Damascus and how Jesus himself charged him with the mission to spread the gospel message far and wide to all nations. After finishing that story, Paul continues in our reading: <read text: Acts 26.19-29>.

The most telling moment of this interplay is the exchange right at the end. King Agrippa, defenses up, scoffs at what he considers Paul's heavy-handed attempt to change his mind. Really, Paul? You think that in just a few minutes you can talk me into giving up what I've known from childhood and joining your little party of deviants? But to Paul the time is immaterial, it could happen in a short time, as he just described with his own conversion. Or it could take a long time of the gospel hammering on a hardened heart. But to him it didn't matter how fast it happened or when it finally took place or whether it benefitted Paul personally to have a friend in a high place. His only prayer was that everyone who heard the gospel might become a believer like him.

For King Agrippa, the things that were getting in the way were the things he valued most and held onto tightest. First and foremost, his own intelligence. He thought he knew how the world worked and what truth was. No one could deceive him and his smarts. This story of Paul's was nonsense because everyone knew the Messiah was going to show up in force and power and restore Jerusalem and Judah to glory like the days of King David and Solomon. A guy who wandered homeless for a few years and died could not possibly have been it. This, too, was Festus' problem. He thought Paul was mad, not rational.

Of course, another thing that got in Agrippa's way was his title and authority. He expected that Paul wasn't really interested in whether or not he agreed with Paul, but more whether Paul could have a friend in a high place. Which, sure, that wasn't necessarily unfair of Agrippa to expect, people with power are always surrounded by other people who want to use that power to their own means. But Paul didn't care whether Agrippa helped him out here or not. In fact he knew that one way or another this case would be heard in Rome before it was over, the Lord had promised him this. But Agrippa thought Paul only wanted to convert him for Paul's own gain. It never really occurred to him that Paul was genuinely concerned about him as a precious soul.

It is a shame that Agrippa had these hang-ups of course, a shame that he put so much stock in these earthly treasures. They became obstacles to his coming to faith, and as a result he was denied the peace and joy he could have had from knowing the Lord Jesus and the truth of his sins forgiven. Paul personally knew exactly how conversion truly worked. Coming to faith was not an act of human will, but rather the power of the Spirit of God working through the means of his Holy Word. And that power can work in an instant as it worked on him during his trip to Damascus. Only God can cause anyone to believe in him. But that doesn't mean we are powerless when the Spirit comes. We, sadly, can resist. We can defy. We can block the Spirit's effort with a hardened heart, by refusing to let go of our own pride and self-importance. And in doing so, by holding on to the things we think are so valuable, we deny ourselves the joy that God has in store for us.

Of course, you may be now thinking, "Thank goodness that is not me!" And to an extent, rightly so. We should rejoice that the power of the Holy Spirit has worked on each of us. We should rejoice that the stubborn obstacles of our hearts were overcome by the love God has for us. That the law of God showed us our faults in earnest and knocked down any pride and any thought that we could somehow save ourselves. And we rest comfortably and confidently in the peace of knowing that God took it upon himself to die for those crimes we committed. We find daily peace in knowing that come what may in the rest of this earthly voyage, our eternity is assured. That the end does not depend on our performance but rather on the promises of God who does not fail and does not make mistakes. For all this and more we should daily thank and praise our God.

But before we get too congratulatory, let's watch that this, "Thank goodness that is not me!" doesn't turn into, "I thank you, God that I am not like other men." Let's remember a few things before we get too far down a road of self-congratulation. To start, you do not enjoy this special position as a follower of God because there is something special about you. You are not more clever than the rest. You did not recognize God as the wiser choice. The gifts that you have in God did not come to you and work on you because you were better equipped to receive and understand them. They worked on you in spite of who you are. They managed to overcome your natural hatred of God. God has done all the work and made you into something you were not. We rejoice in what we have, but we do not rejoice in ourselves because all we ever did was hinder God's work.

And even in God, let's not fall into the trap of thinking that we are somehow "done" or "entirely complete" now that we know our Savior and have been gifted with faith. Our lives of living for God are never as good as they could be. Our faith is never as strong as it could be. Our process of sanctification, as we call it, is not done. Just because we are in the faith doesn't mean we are done throwing our own obstacles in the way of that faith and in the way of God's work in us.

Consider Paul in our account. Consider his circumstances. Attacked by his own people. Forced into years of imprisonment while callous governors simply made him wait. Brought before those so full of their own self-importance while he was in chains, while he had a message of utmost importance to share with the world so that they could be rescued from their own stupidity. Now consider how you would react to those circumstances. We, who boil over at just one day of inconvenience. We, whose days are ruined by a singular annoyance we cannot change. Does Paul attack the authorities for the unfair treatment he received? Does he build up a sob-story about what he's been through to get here? Does he remain silent about Christ because these people don't even deserve his help? No, of course not.

His concern, his singular driving purpose was his Lord Christ. And in this case it was the will of his Lord that his message be shared with everyone. That was Paul's mission given to him by Jesus himself. And so that is what Paul uses this situation for. He doesn't care if the end result changes his legal situation, he cares whether the Holy Spirit has a chance through the word of God to change a heart so that it can be saved. In his single-minded purpose of living for his Lord, Paul knew peace and joy and contentment in all circumstances.

I feel safe in suggesting that is not how we live our lives. Anger, frustration, misery, depression. Take your pick. They come and they go and they rob us of the joy that God promises us in our lives for him. But do you see where these villains of peace come from? They all stem from us holding on to something that is getting in the way of our faith. Look again at Paul. All the things that could have caused him frustration or anger in his situation were ego-centric. They would all have been about how he was treated. How he had to live. What his plans were. But in letting go of those things, in placing his trust securely in the Lord, he was able to put aside those obstacles to his faith and live in the peace and joy of God.

What is in that gets in your way? What are the obstacles of faith in your life? I can't tell you what they are for you. I could make some suggestions, but I could be way off base. The bumps and detours in my life are different than yours. So ask yourself, "What is it that steals my focus away from my God? What is it that makes me care more about it than about my Lord? Is it my own pride? My own self? Is it a hobby? A job? A person?" Whatever takes your eyes off God, whatever is distracting you from your life of faith is robbing you of the joy you ought to have. So often these things promise happiness, but all they do is steal true happiness from us. We get attached to what we think we ought to deserve and then when it is taken from us we lament and moan as though God himself were dead.

But even if we manage to identify the obstacles, that does not mean we have the strength to overcome them ourselves. Just like we needed help having a hole drilled to our heart and our souls resuscitated from within, we need help to pulverize these obstacles to faith that stand in the way of our peace and joy. We need God to regularly remind us that we are sinners, to cut us down in ourselves and bash away our pride so that he can lift us up in true strength, in his arms of what he has done for us. It is there, holding on to him alone for hope and joy with the obstacles removed that we really will know peace.

Find the obstacles of your faith in your life. Use the power of the Holy Spirit in God's word to tear them up and throw them away. With the obstacles removed, let the joy and peace of God fill your every day in him until eternal life. Amen.