



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts 26: 12-29

"Paul's Madness"

Resurrection Sunday 2023

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Seth,

Christ is risen.

[Congregation] He is risen indeed!

Well, it's very good to be back with you all, and I want to thank Alan for preaching for me a couple of weeks ago. He and Mike (*Black*), were both watched from Jerusalem, where the church began almost 2000 years ago. So it was a nice experience for us, Alan; we enjoyed the lessons.

We had a good trip. We saw a lot; and one of the things that we saw were tombs. There are a lot of tombs there in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. But actually, there are a lot of tombs everywhere, aren't there, here as well as anywhere—because, "...it is appointed unto man once to die..." (Heb 9:27). And so, this world is full graves.

But there are historical tombs there and we visited some of them. We went to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the traditional site of the tomb of Jesus and the site of Calvary. It's not a very pleasant place to visit, I have to tell you. But we went to another place, the Garden Tomb, which is very pleasant. It's near Gordon's Calvary, and it's what many Protestants believe is the real location of those sites.

Except for the tourists popping in and out of them, both tombs are empty. No body there; no corpse. We might think that that is proof that Christ is risen indeed—

but I also looked into David's tomb. —It's empty. In the Israel Museum there is the ossuary of the high priest, Caiaphas, the box that contained his bones. —It's empty too. So does that mean they were resurrected?

No. The Lord's tomb was empty on the first Easter morning because He did arise, and He appeared to Mary Magdalene—and then He appeared to the apostles. That was clear evidence, indisputable evidence that He was raised from the dead. But how do we know that that's true?

We know it from the Bible. This is really kind of the burden that I have before we go into our sermon, and it's what I want to emphasize. The basis for all that we know and believe as God's people is God's Word. The Bible defines itself as God's Word. It is inerrant revelation; God breathed, breathed out and through the apostles and the writers of Scripture by Him. And we know that by faith, which is God's gift to us.

It is reasonable, it is rational. The Word of God is alive and powerful, self-authenticating with evidence. But we know this by faith. That's the teaching of the Word of God. Hebrews 11, verse 3, "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen is not made out of the things which are visible." By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the Word of God.

God's revelation is our starting point; it's where we begin. It is our *first principle*, the only basis for our understanding of God, of man, of salvation—our only basis for understanding reality. It's our authority. It is self-authenticating, and indisputable. Therefore, here, we preach it every week, in season and out of season.

So let's hear now the Word of God for this Sunday morning, this Easter morning. It's Acts 26, verses 12 through 29. We're coming into the middle of Paul's defense of his faith. He's giving an account of his conversion to an august crowd in Caesarea by the sea. He's explaining that he had persecuted the church. Verse 12,

¹² "While so engaged as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, ¹³ at midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me. ¹⁴ And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' ¹⁵ And I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶ But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; ¹⁷ rescuing you from the *Jewish* people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, ¹⁸ to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.'

¹⁹ "So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but *kept* declaring both to those of Damascus first, and *also* at Jerusalem and *then* throughout all the region of Judea, and *even* to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance. ²¹ For this reason *some* Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death. ²² So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; ²³ that the Christ was to suffer, *and* that by reason of *His* resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles."

²⁴ While *Paul* was saying this in his defense, Festus said in a loud voice, "Paul, you are out of your mind! *Your* great learning is driving you mad." ²⁵ But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth. ²⁶ For the king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner. ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do." ²⁸ Agrippa *replied* to Paul, "In a short time you will persuade me to become

a Christian." ²⁹ And Paul *said*, "I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains."

Acts 26: 12-29

May the LORD bless this reading of His Word and our time of study in it together.
Let's pray.

Father, it's a great privilege to be here on this Sunday morning, this Resurrection Day which the church has celebrated for centuries. But the reality is, LORD, every day for the believer in Jesus Christ is Resurrection Sunday. We live in the hope of the resurrection to come, based on the resurrection of Your Son, and we live in that resurrection life. We give You praise and thanks for that, Father.

It is a great and glorious thing, to be able to say with the apostle Paul, that You, the Lord God, raised Your Son from the dead. You sent Him into this world to die for sinners, to bear our sins and remove our guilt. It was a sacrifice that He made. You sent Him to make that sacrifice. He offered it to You, and You accepted it so that He could say, "It's finished."

And the proof of that is, You raised Him from the dead. And that's our hope. And so we give You praise and thanks for that, and pray that our time together this morning would be a great blessing to all who are here, and that we would reflect deeply on this great blessing and this great historical event, when You raised Your Son from the dead.

So bless us spiritually, LORD, but we pray for those that are in material need. We pray that You would bless them, give healing, give encouragement, give encouragement to so many of us, LORD, who are in difficulty. You know our needs, and we pray that You bless and encourage.

And so bless us now, LORD, as we continue; bless us as we sing our next hymn, bless the special music we'll enjoy, and bless the entire service this morning. —May it be to Your glory. And we pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

(Message) History has some rare moments of individual courage that are so impressive they could easily be the stuff of a good novel. I was reading about the King of Constantinople when the city fell to the Turks in the year 1453, and how, when the Ottomans breached the walls and poured into city, he tried to rally his army.—But it was no use; everyone fled. Constantine, the last emperor of Byzantium, flung off his imperial insignia, and the author wrote, "plunged into the fray, sword in hand, never to be seen again."

Well that's like something out of Hollywood. The history of the church has moments like that. Luther defending the Gospel at the Diet of Worms was such a moment. He stood before the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire with his books stacked before him. His life was on the line when he declared, "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." It was a moment of courage.

But no greater than the one that Luke records in Acts 26 when Paul stood alone before the last Jewish king in a court at Caesarea. His freedom was at stake; his life was on the line; but he didn't become timid. He plunged into the fray, sword in hand, and he gave the Gospel boldly and unapologetically.

Now I don't know what gives men the courage to rush headlong into an attacking army, but I know the source of Luther's courage, and Paul's courage—it is the living Christ; it is the resurrection. And that is the very thing that Paul preached that day before the king and the governor and all the distinguished men and women who were present at court.

It was a very impressive and intimidating occasion. Luke describes it in chapter 25 of the Book of Acts. King Agrippa wanted to hear Paul the prisoner; so the Roman governor, Festus, arranged it. It began with great pageantry. King Agrippa and his queen, Bernice, entered wearing their purple robes and gold crowns, accompanied, I'm sure, by sounds of trumpets. Festus came dressed in the scarlet robe that Roman

governors wore on occasions of state. The Roman tribunes attended in their military uniforms, escorted by guards with their armor and swords. The rich and influential were dressed in fine clothes.

Then into the midst of this pomp, Paul entered. He didn't have a gold crown or a gorgeous robe. No trumpets announced his arrival, just the rattle of his chains. He was not impressive in appearance. According to an old tradition, Paul was 'a small man with bowed legs and a hook nose'. But when King Agrippa told him he was permitted to speak, Paul, this little Jewish man surrounded by this proud and powerful audience, gave a calm and compelling defense of the faith.

He was courteous. He began by expressing his gratitude for the opportunity to make his defense before the king. He then gave a review of his life in Judaism, explaining that he had been a faithful Jew; that he'd been raised in Jerusalem and trained as a Pharisee, which was the strictest sect of his day. So how was it that Paul, a devout Jew, came to be on trial? He explains that it was because of, "...the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers..." (Acts 26:6).

That "hope" is the hope of the resurrection from the dead. The irony is, the charges brought against Paul were brought by the Jews themselves who were given the hope of the resurrection. So Paul asks, in verse 8, "Why is it considered incredible among you *people* if God does raise the dead?" 'Why is that so hard to believe?'

It's really the same question that the LORD asked Abraham in Genesis 18, verse 14, "Is anything too difficult for the LORD?" In Genesis that question had to do with Sarah conceiving and giving birth to Isaac, the son of promise, when she was barren. It was humanly impossible, but God can and did do it. And God can raise the dead. Why is that so hard to believe?

So Paul's question was directed to Agrippa, the Jewish king—but it must have resonated with this Roman audience also. It is a question for all men: 'Why do you limit the unlimited God?' The question is, 'How big is your God', or, 'How small is your idea of God?'

The God of the Bible is limitless; He's all powerful, all knowing. There's nothing that He cannot do. He can raise the dead. He gave life to Sarah's dead womb to give her and Abraham their promised son, Isaac. He keeps all of His promises. And He raised His Son from the dead. Why is that so hard to believe?

That's what Paul preached, the resurrection of Christ which proved that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and Savior of the world. It proves that when He offered up His life on the cross, He was offering up a sacrifice to His Father, bearing our sins, removing our guilt, by paying for all of them. —And God demonstrated that He accepted that sacrifice by raising Christ from the dead. It is the demonstration, the proof, that Jesus Christ is God's Son, and our Savior. And that is really what Paul's accusers objected to.

Paul understood that. He understood it well because he too, had opposed it. He persecuted Christians and told Agrippa about it, not only because it was part of his story, but because it was evidence of his message. The change in his life from a rabbi to an apostle, from a persecutor of the faith to a preacher and defender of the faith, is evidence that something significant happened. And what happened was divine intervention: The resurrected Christ appeared to him.

He was on his way to Damascus on a mission to arrest Christians, on a mission to destroy the church. And he said in verse 13, "At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' "

That wasn't a hallucination; the light and sound was heard and seen by those with Paul. They all fell to the ground, but Paul realized it was the voice of God and said, "Who are You, Lord?" And when the Lord answered, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting", (vs15), Paul knew that Jesus was indeed alive from the dead—resurrected and vindicated as God's Son...and he believed.

Then he told Agrippa that he was made “a minister” and “a witness”, and sent to the Gentiles. He says in verse 18, "...to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God." He was to, ‘Go tell the world about Christ and the hope that we have in Christ.’

But the way his mission was stated indicates both the greatness of man's need, and the greatness of God's salvation. Mankind is in darkness, spiritual darkness, under the power and influence of Satan—he is ‘the spirit of this age’ that energizes the world in its rebellion against God and keeps people in unbelief. He blinds their eyes: The whole world is under a strong delusion, and doesn't know it. Of course that's the nature of a delusion; you think you're right when you're absolutely wrong.

The Gospel is the light that dispels the darkness. It's God's power that liberates the mind to give life to the lost—eternal life. And so Paul's mission was to go to the blind and give them sight—to tell them the Good News so that, by God's help, by God's grace, they would turn from error to truth, from Satan to God, through Christ.

Paul did that; speaking in the synagogues of the Jews and the marketplaces of the Gentiles, giving well-reasoned explanations of biblical truth. In verse 20 he tells Agrippa the wide scope of his ministry, from Damascus to Jerusalem and through all the region of Judea. And then into Gentile lands, preaching that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.

That's the Gospel. It is not only to rescue from judgment. It is that. That's the glorious news; Christ has born our judgment in our place. And all who have placed their faith in Him escape that for all eternity. We have eternal life, so it is certainly ‘Rescue from judgment.’

But it is more than that; it is also rescue from ourselves, because we become new creatures in Christ, and we're delivered from sin, and we're delivered from rebellion. It is life that is given to us, eternal life. It is the new power to live obediently, to live moral lives; it is transforming power.

And that was the message that Paul preached from the beginning to the end; from the first day that Christ gave him that message in Damascus to his last day in Rome. He never changed his message. He didn't alter it in any way. It was the message given to him; it was the message given to the Prophets and to Moses. It is the Gospel that has always been. As he said in verse 22 and verse 23, he was, 'stating to them only what the Prophets and Moses said would occur, that the Messiah, the Christ, would suffer, die, and be raised from the dead.'

Now you may wonder, where is all of that taught in the Old Testament? Where did the Prophets teach the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ? Well, Psalm 22 for one; it is a prophesy of the Lord's crucifixion. "They pierced my hands and my feet." (vs16b). Now David wrote that Psalm, but his hands and feet were never pierced. Jesus identified with that Psalm on the cross by quoting it, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" (vs1a).

Psalm 16, verse 10 is one place where the resurrection was prophesied; that God would not allow His "Holy One to undergo decay." David again wrote that Psalm but he wasn't writing about himself. He died and turned to dust—but Christ did not. 1000 years before the Lord was crucified and buried, the prophecy of His resurrection was given.

All of Isaiah 53 proclaimed it.: "The LORD was pleased to crush Him", (crush Him on the cross), but 'He will see His offspring.' (vs10). He will live, He will see.

In Isaiah 52, verse 13, it is prophesied that He would be "lifted up and greatly exalted", lifted up on the cross, and greatly exalted through the resurrection and ascension. And Daniel as well prophesied of resurrection in Daniel chapter 12 verse 2.

Paul was not an innovator. He taught what the Prophets taught and that is the point he made here in his defense. He had been seized in the temple and put on trial for teaching what Israel's ancient faith had always proclaimed. He was consistent with God's revelation. He taught that Christ suffered and died, and was resurrected because it was true. The Prophets said it would occur and he had witnessed it on the Damascus road—Jesus Christ is alive.

That's when Festus, the governor, had heard enough. All this talk about Jewish Prophets and the resurrection of a dead man was too much for this Roman, this materialist to take. He understood tangible things. He understood conquest, and building, and ruling—worldly power. To talk of resurrection and life to come was preposterous to him. So, unable to endure it any longer, he interrupted Paul and said, "Paul, you are out of your mind! *Your* great learning is driving you mad." (vs24).

Now words like that can defeat a person, can anger a person; but Paul was unruffled. He calmly rejected the insult and said that his words were true and reasonable; sound words. Nothing he spoke about, he said, 'was done in a corner.' (vs26c). In other words, the cross and the empty tomb were not secrets. They were public events. They were all well attested to. There were many witnesses to them all. Paul talks about that in 1 Corinthians 15; How the resurrected Jesus appeared to Peter, and then to the 12, and then to more than 500 witnesses; to James, and to others—and finally to him.

These things weren't 'done in a corner.' These events were all done out in the open. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was a public event. He talked and He ate with people for nearly 50 days. So it may not fit the philosophy of a Roman but it was not the fantasy of a madman. It had solid, tangible, legal proof. The evidence for the resurrection is historically documented. "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth.", (and the king knew that), "For the king knows about these matters..." he said. (vs25&26). The whole region did.

So Paul turned to Agrippa, the last Jewish king of history, and got very personal, because the Gospel is very personal. He said, "King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do." (v27). Suddenly the tables are turned, and Agrippa was now on the spot and made the focus of the court. "Do you believe the Prophets?" Yes, he did: He believed the Old Testament was sacred; he believed it was true. But the question meant more than that. If he believed the Prophets, would he believe in the One of whom they prophesied? Would he believe Jesus is the Christ, crucified and resurrected?

Agrippa wasn't ready to do that and answered Paul, "In a short time, you will persuade me to become a Christian." (vs28). The King James Version gives the poignant translation, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian", which suggests that Agrippa had really been stirred by Paul's words—and was under conviction; 'Paul, I must confess, I'm being drawn. I'm almost persuaded.'

I'd like to believe that, but I don't think that was the case. I think more likely, while he was under conviction, deep conviction, his statement was made in jest. It was an attempt to put off Paul and avoid the question. He was uncomfortable, and he refused to believe...Now let me say this: It is a very dangerous thing, a very dangerous thing to come very close to the Gospel, to come face to face with the Gospel, the Good News of salvation, and turn away. It never becomes easier to believe. That was Agrippa.

Why? Paul gave a reasonable, biblical defense to a man who believed the Bible. His statements were supported with evidence. But still, Agrippa did not believe in the hope of Israel, 'Paul, I can't go that far. I'm done.' Why?

I suppose there are a lot of reasons. Agrippa was afraid of being called a madman by Festus. He was afraid of losing his power as king. He was afraid of losing his queen, who was also his sister, Bernice.

But ultimately, the 'Why' of unbelief is answered by Jesus in verse 18: Spiritual darkness. Men are blind and must be given spiritual sight by the sovereign grace of God. He gives it. He gave it to Saul of Tarsus, just as He gave great power and presence of mind to Paul to stand before this daunting company and preach the truth without fear for his life and liberty. He was every bit as valiant as that emperor plunging into the fray, sword in hand.

Earlier I said that the courage of Luther and Paul and others comes from Christ and the resurrection. Paul knew that the God who raised Christ from the dead guided and guarded him. This is real. This is the Christian life. I often say, it's a supernatural life—it is, this is real. And Christ, who is alive, lived in Paul through the Holy Spirit. He

empowered Paul. Jesus stood trial before hostile accusers Himself and He gave Paul His courage and presence of mind in the same kind of situation.

And then, the very fact of the resurrection and the hope of the resurrection that we have, gives great courage to the believer, as we reflect upon it and we understand that this life is not all there is. This life is fleeting. It is short—and we have eternal life before us. We have heaven before us, and we have the resurrection of the body to come. We have the kingdom to come, and the eternal state—"world without end." (Eph 3:21). That gives courage.

That is the life that every believer in Jesus Christ has: The hope of the resurrection to come, but also resurrection life now, the life of Christ now, that empowers us to live well, to do righteousness, and to think righteously. And because of that, Paul not only had the Lord's power, but the Lord's compassion. He loves sinners and wants their salvation. He secured their salvation.

Paul very much wanted salvation for those before him. And while Agrippa deflected an embarrassing question with a clever response, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian," Paul would not be put off. And in one last attempt to appeal to the king, he said, "I would wish to God, that whether in a short time or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains." (And you can just hear the chains rattling as he held them up to the king.)

What Paul was saying was, 'Agrippa, I only want your welfare. I want you to have what I have. Not these chains, but the freedom that I have within these chains, and the hope that I have forever.' He wanted that for everyone in the audience: To know Christ, to have the forgiveness of sins, and life everlasting. That's hope. That is the only hope.

And so do we. That's what we want. So if you're here this morning without Christ, that's what we want for you. You must choose: To come to Christ the light, or stay in the darkness—to embrace the apostle's '*madness*' or follow the folly of the world.

Paul's *madness* is actually sanity and life. So look to Christ. Believe in Him.
Receive the forgiveness of sins and an eternal inheritance. May God help you to do that.

One of the most interesting things I saw in Israel is in the Israel Museum: Two tiny scrolls that were rolled up in what they described as an *amulet*, (probably a kind of good luck charm). They are the oldest biblical text known today and probably precede the Dead Sea Scrolls by 400 years. I will conclude our meeting with that prayer. Let's pray.

The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance on you and give you peace.

And I add, in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

(End of Audio)