

A Call to Consciousness

Acts 26:2-32

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As we go before the Lord now, as we look together at the Book of Acts chapter twenty-six -- what could it be like to be so certain that you are right, only to find out that you were totally wrong? And to be awakened to that consciously, and have your whole life completely changed, turned around, heading in the opposite direction? To go from being the leading persecutor of the early Christian church to being one of its most outspoken spokespeople? That's the life of Paul. This is about Paul's call to consciousness, his conversion.

Now, if you're paying attention, if you've been here at all, you will have noted, this is Paul's conversion the rerun. This is the third time in the Book of Acts that we hear of Paul's conversion. Were you to take the amount of Scripture given to Paul's conversion, more would be written about his conversion than Jesus' resurrection. This is how important it is to the early life of the church and to the church today, the testimony of Paul's conversion. Because Paul is a human like us, and his life was radically changed.

Hear now the life of Paul and his conversion, again, now before Agrippa. This is the fifth trial he's been in since chapter twenty-two of Acts, over the same issue. He keeps appealing to the higher level. He's going to reach Caesar. But Agrippa is nobody's friend. He is a difficult character. He comes from a long line of difficult characters, of those who would persecute Jesus, Stephen, James, and now he stands before him as Paul. Hear now, God's Word, Acts chapter twenty-six.

"King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.

"The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee. And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?

"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

"On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

"Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?'

" 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. 'Now get up and stand on your feet. 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. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. 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.'

"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."

At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane."

"I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do."

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"

Paul replied, "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."

The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. They left the room, and while talking with one another, they said, "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment." Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Heavenly Father, I ask that you would instruct us from your Word, to call us by your light to consciousness, to life with Christ, and to then know life, and to know it fully in the light of your truth. Help the teacher. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

My list of Southern authors that I've enjoyed over the years is somewhat long, but top among them is Walker Percy, who wrote a book in the early '80s called *The Second Coming*. This is a brief summary. It is the story of Will Barrett, who had lived the American dream, a successful Wall Street legal career, early retirement on a beautiful, Southern mountainside, a six handicap golf game, more money than he'll ever spend. As far as anyone can see, things can't be better. But Will Barrett realizes one day in the middle of all his achievement, luxury, pleasure, and time, that his life has not been such a success. For the first time, believes Will Barrett, he can see everything clearly. He says:

Not once in his entire life had he, Will Barrett, allowed himself to come to rest in the quiet center of himself, but had forever cast himself from some dark past he could not remember to a future which did not exist. Not once had he been present for his life, so his life had passed like a dream. He was ever reaching to go ahead, to move on, until there was no place left to go.

And so now Will Barrett, in the middle of this reality, in the middle of looking at his life, comes to a devastating question, and that question I pose to you this morning, and it is this: is it possible for people to miss their lives in the same way one misses an aeroplane? Is it possible to miss your life in the same way you would miss a plane? That's an important question. Let's look at the conversion of Paul to discern what the answer and what the antidote is.

We see in this passage very clearly two themes – or let me say, I see it clearly. I hope you do too. So let me say that. One of the things that I see is, something has to happen from the outside in. And then something has to happen from the inside out. This call to consciousness, whether it be Will Barrett in the novel, *The Second Coming*, or the life of Paul, or us – something has to come from the outside in, to call us, to awaken us. What happens to Paul?

These first verses, the first ten or so verses leading up to the specific conversion story of what happened on the Damascus road, is that Paul goes through first what he was certain about, what he had a great degree of certainty about, and it was this: Paul woke up every day believing that his life was well-ordered according to the religious beliefs that he had, the religious truths that had governed his life as a faithful Jew and leading Pharisee who had learned at the feet of Gamaliel, one of the leading Pharisee teachers. Paul had awakened every morning, got his cup of coffee, as it were, and lived his life with full purpose and a great degree of certainty.

He was, as I've referred to before and I will use it again, because it is still very relevant, and that is, Paul was like ISIS. He sought Christians out from city to city, wanting them to blaspheme the name of Christ, force them into conversion, and if not, to the point of trial and death. This is precisely what Paul's life was about, and he believed it was absolutely right, and he believed that God was his shield. He did it in God's name, every day, and he taught others to do the same.

So were we to ask Paul, is it possible to be absolutely certain about something and also be completely wrong, the story of his conversion is, absolutely yes. Paul was missing his life as one can miss a plane.

So what happens that this certainty was shaken to its core? Because his centeredness, the second C, the centeredness of his life, took a radical change, and that was because the Lord confronted him. And when he confronts him on the Damascus road, he calls Paul into this question: why, Saul, are you persecuting me? What he's telling us, what Jesus is saying to Paul, is when you persecute someone who belongs to me, you are persecuting me. And so in that one question, that one call to consciousness, he's asking Paul to look back at the entirety of his life, and he's saying, all those Christians you sought out? All those you tried to force to blaspheme? All those you voted for their death and wanted them to be convicted of heresy? All of those people, and everything you said, and everything you did, every vote you made, was a vote and a word against me.

Jesus so aligns himself and unites himself to his church that when the church is persecuted, Christ is persecuted. The Lord suffers with his church, even though the Lord is seated at the right hand of God the Father. His name is injured. His character is hurt. He hurts for his people. And so he comes to Paul, and he says, what are you doing? You thought I was at the center of your motives. The truth is, you were, and not me. And so he calls Paul to question what really is at the center of your life? Could you be so certain of what is so core about you and yet be completely and utterly wrong? This is a question that, during commencement speech season, was offered by one commencement speaker in 2005. I've quoted from him before. His name is David Foster Wallace. And in his speech, speaking to young soon-to-be-graduates within a few moments, he says to them, talking to them about the point of their liberal arts education, and he calls them to this reality – he says:

I want you to be just a little bit more critical of yourself. Be a little more aware and critical of your certainties, because a huge percentage of the stuff I tend to be automatically certain of is, as it turns out, totally wrong and deluded. Here is just one example of one thing I was

absolutely certain of, but I'm completely diluted of, and I now realize I'm wrong. I tend to be automatically sure that everything in my own, immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of my universe. The realest, most vivid, and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness because it's so socially repulsive, but it's pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hardwired into our boards at birth.

Think about it. There is no experience you have had that you were not the absolute center of. The world you experience? It is there in front of you, or behind you, or to the left, or the right of you, on your TV, or your monitor, and so on. Other peoples' thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, and real. I once believed that I was the absolute center of my universe. I now realize that I was completely deluded.

And he says the real value of a liberal arts education is to learn how to think, not just what to think, and to be able to be self-critical. Now, David Foster Wallace was not a professing Christian. I don't know where he ended up before his death. But he is precisely correct. It is possible to be so certain, yet to be so wrong.

How did Paul, then, go from being so certain, believing he was not the center but now realizing by Jesus's question that God was not at the center, he was – how did he come to that reality? And it's the third C, God's compassion. Paul says this when he says, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. Now get up, stand on your feet. 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." And what does the Lord show him? What the Lord shows him is the compassion of his salvation, that God would condescend to him to reveal himself in his grace and in his mercy to one whose life was so bent on persecuting Christ – would now call him into forgiveness and into the joy of knowing the risen Christ. And that in so showing him that everything you thought you were completely right about, you were completely wrong about it. And he does it by doing something that is so ironic.

Paul thought he could see so clearly, but he never saw so clearly until he was blinded. That Christ's presence, so full of light, would take from Paul his visual eyesight and yet, with that being taken, it was in that physical blindness that he was finally able to truly see just how compassionate, just who the person is of the Lord Jesus Christ and what he came to do and who he was. It was the Lord's compassion. It was the Lord's compassion that came from the outside of Paul's life into Paul's life and questioning his certainties, removing the centeredness from himself onto Christ. And now, everything that Paul's life was built on is now being replaced by something else, and that is the salvation of the Lord Jesus Christ and of his life, of his death, and of his resurrection. And the Lord would now make him the writer of more books and letters of the New Testament than any other writer. That can only happen when something comes from the outside in, that disrupts.

But Paul's conversion isn't just the story of something that is Christ coming from the outside in. It's also what it did for him from the inside out. The text tells us, when we learn for the first time this statement from Jesus, as he confronts Paul on the Damascus road. He says to him, it is fruitless – if you will – to kick against the goads. Why are you doing this? Why? It is so hard for you to do this. And so they use this word "goad." What does that mean?

Now, if you've spent any time around farms, perhaps you know. But in the event that you didn't grow up in an agrarian culture, this is what a goad is. A goad brings things into alignment, specifically your ox. They used oxen to cultivate fields, and so they had to use an instrument called a goad that had a sharp end and a flat end. The sharp end kept the oxen driving the apparatus to cultivate the ground. It had a flat end to clean off the bottom of the hooves, to keep them going. But the goad is what keeps the oxen aligned with the purposes of the one driving it.

Humanly speaking, in the contemporary world, a goad is much like a check-engine light is in our car. It comes on. It has for you, it has for me. What is the check-engine light telling us? The check-engine light is saying, there's something wrong with your engine. You need to have it serviced. And so initially we begin to think, is it because it comes on automatically, because it's trying to convince me to go into the service department? Did our manufacturer just set it there to force me? Because the truth is, they make more money from their service department than they make money off the sale of their cars. So I get what this is about. So we think about it, perhaps, cynically or jadedly. But the other thing is, perhaps you know there's something wrong with your engine, but it's still running. It's still going to get you from point A to point B. And if it's running, and it's getting you where you want it to go – I'll get to that later.

If you're like me, somewhere perhaps in your life, you either will be or you have been tempted to ignore that check-engine light, and have driven, oh, say, ten thousand miles more. Why do we keep driving when the check-engine light has been on for, oh, I don't know, back when I had my Nissan Sentra, for a few months maybe? Why do we do that? It's because going into the service center brings up a number of issues. One, it's really inconvenient. Number two, I'm afraid of what I don't know. I'm concerned about the loss of my money that it's going to take to put this engine back in working order. We know intrinsically that when that check-engine light comes on, something is getting ready to be inconvenient. Something is getting ready to be, perhaps, expensive. And something I'm going to have to do that I really don't want to do – I'm going to have to face the truth that I'm not in control.

The goad that Paul was kicking against was the goad of the Lord's truth poking at him like a check-engine light. Paul, Paul, why do you persecute me so? It is God's truth revealed through the work and person of Jesus Christ and all that he has commanded, all that he had taught, and Paul knew it. But like us and our car with the check-engine light, Paul ignored what he knew. The Lord tells us. He says, it is hard to kick against the goads. He's telling us something – that the Lord had already tried to wake him up. The light was going on. Every time he turned on his engine, every time he went after a Christian, perhaps – just perhaps – somewhere in the back of his mind, could the question not have been placed there? Saul, Saul, I am the one who came to redeem Israel. And yet, in his willful ignorance and his desire not to be inconvenienced, the costliness of having all these things disrupted, his life invaded, he ignored it until this point. And so the Lord says, I am the one who has come to bring your life in alignment with my lordship, and now I'm going to make you a witness to all that you have seen.

I want to ask you the question: what is the Lord asking you this morning to consider? What check-engine light is blinking in your life? If you are a Christian, I am certain that the Lord's desire of his truth of the risen Christ and all that he taught us is that, one way or another, blinking, bringing your attention, perhaps, to something that needs to be brought in alignment with his lordship. But you know what is so beautiful? It is because first his compassion came in. And because the Lord is so compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love, that makes that check-engine light something not to be feared, but something that can be trusted, like taking your loved one to a doctor who can bring healing.

My father, a year go, after having a new pacemaker, after having heart bypass surgery, came down with an absolutely horrible case of bronchitis. The check-engine light of his body was going off, but he resisted medication. Five days later, he almost had to go back into the hospital, and it could have cost him his life. Almost a year later, my father came down with bronchitis again. My mother was in the bedroom, and my father was in the living room, and he coughed. My mother heard that cough, and she knew immediately. She walked in there, she grabbed him by the hand, and he did not resist. Why? Because he had been there before, and he knew that his wife of sixty years loved him, was full of compassion, and the most loving Nurse Chickenhawk, as we would call her, that he could ever and could not avoid. It is hard to kick against the goads. And she took him to the doctor, and three days later, he's doing great.

Why can we trust the truth and the person of Jesus Christ to bring our lives into alignment with his lordship? It is because he is full of compassion, and that's what works on the inside – the light of his Word by the Holy Spirit bringing alignment.

The last is this. Paul says something over and over again in this passage, that once his life had been invaded, brought into alignment with the Lord from the inside, now he is a witness to others. And what does he say? He says, my life is now bent on one thing – preaching Christ, preaching repentance. And he says to preach that Christ would suffer as the first to rise from the dead and would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles. He now, whose life has been brought into alignment with the Lord by his compassion working from the outside in, is now going to be a witness to the Lord to be light, to illumine the glory of Christ by bringing the light of his truth and of his person and of his salvation to the Jews and to the Gentiles.

Light continues to be a theme in this passage. The light of God's presence blinded Paul. The light of God's truth illuminated what was going on in his life and brought alignment to it. And now he is going to be a witness to the light. This is a continual theme throughout all of Scripture, from the first, that the Lord said let their be light, to the point of the coming of Christ, who would be the light of the world, who came into the darkness to illuminate the darkness.

One of my hobbies that I've recovered in my life is photography. The word "photography" literally means "light drawing." For years, and when I first started photography, I believed that photography was about capturing images, things, people, places, objects. But as I've grown and I've studied it more, I've realized it's actually not about just capturing an object, but rather, it's about capturing the light as it illuminates objects. Paul says here that he is called to be a witness to the light. When he uses the word "light" and in the synoptic gospels when it uses light, and John when he uses the word "light" – it's synonymous with salvation. Paul is going as a witness to salvation, the light of the Lord, that the gospel of grace will come in and draw that light out in your entire life, and it will illuminate hard truths, costly things. But it will be so that Christ in all of his glory would be captured by our hearts, and we would be captivated in our minds.

C.S. Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen – not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." Paul's life was brought about through the light of Christ from the outside in, working its way from the inside out, bringing alignment and illuminating so that we, so that he, can see by the light of Christ life and everything as it ought to be. This is what Christ came to do in the life of Paul. This is what he has come by his light to do in us. And I, as a witness to that light, have been given the calling to tell you of everything that the Lord has commanded, and ask you to walk in it, because by his compassion he has made himself known.

And so I say to you, first, if you are not a believer – is it possible to miss your life as one misses a plane? From a human perspective, yes. But it doesn't have to be that way. Jesus Christ, by the light of his Word, is calling you to the light of his compassion and of his love.

If you are a Christian – is it possible to have fallen asleep or to have ignored the check-engine light of the Lord's truth in your life? Yes, it is. But his compassion and his mercy are made new every morning. And he comes to you, and he invites you into the light, that by it you may see him and his work for you. Let's pray.

Now, Lord, work in us your will for your glory. Illuminate our hearts by the light of your truth, for your glory, forever and ever. In Jesus' name. Amen.