

"The Gospel Before Kings"
Sermon Series on the Book of Acts – *The Way of the Spirit*
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(Acts 25:13-23; 26:1-3; 26:19-32)

Introduction.

When Billy Graham traveled to London to hold a crusade in May 1954, he had the privilege of being given a private audience with Sir Winston Churchill. On a Monday he was summoned on short notice to 10 Downing Street. Graham had invited the Prime Minister to come to Wembley Stadium for the crusade, but Churchill decided not to attend. As the hour approached, Sir Winston paced back and forth, saying he was quite nervous about the encounter. "What do you talk to an American evangelist about?" he wondered.

At the stroke of noon, Billy was shown into the Cabinet Room, and Sir Winston stood at the center of the long table with an unlit cigar in his hand. He motioned for Billy to be seated and said that he had been reading about Graham's crusade and was most happy to have him come to England because, as he said, "We need this emphasis." Then Churchill asked, "Do you have hope? What hope do you have for the world?"

Billy took out his little New Testament and answered, "Mr. Prime Minister, I am filled with hope." And he went on to walk through various passages of that New Testament and explained the meaning of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and how a person could be born again. The meeting scheduled for 5 minutes lasted 40. And at the end of the time Sir Winston said, "I do not see much hope for the future unless it is the hope you are talking about, young man. We must have a return to God."¹

Our passage this morning tells of another Christian who presented the gospel to a world leader. It was the apostle Paul. But he shared the message of hope not in a private meeting; it was in a public hearing. And it wasn't to a prime minister but to a Roman king, that he shared the good news. Let's take a closer look.

I. The Rulers' Discussion.

In Matthew 10:18 Jesus told His disciples that they would be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them. This prophecy came true in Paul's appearance before Festus and Herod Agrippa. Herod Agrippa II was the son of Herod Agrippa I, who was mentioned in Acts 12, and the great grandson of Herod the Great, who is mentioned in the birth narrative of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. (There are a lot of Herods in the Bible, and it's hard to keep them straight!) Bernice was Agrippa's sister, and there were rumors that their relationship was actually incestuous. He and Bernice had come to Caesarea to pay their respects to the new procurator, Festus, and during their stay the governor raised the matter of Paul's case, which he inherited from the former governor, Felix.

Festus told the king that he had done three things in relation to the prisoner Paul. First, on his visit to Jerusalem, Felix heard the Jewish leaders accuse the apostle and call for his condemnation. But the governor insisted that according to Roman law an individual must be allowed to face his accusers and defend himself against them. So when the Jewish leaders came to Caesarea, Festus immediately convened the court, only to discover that Paul was not being charged with any crimes against the state, but with religious offenses and with the claim that a dead man named Jesus was alive. Finally, because Festus felt that he was out of his depth in religious questions like these, he had asked Paul if he was willing to be tried in Jerusalem. Instead, as a Roman citizen was entitled to do, the apostle appealed to Caesar. And Festus granted his request.

Agrippa was intrigued by Festus' summary of the case, and he said that he would like to hear Paul himself. The apostle aroused the curiosity of the king. So Festus arranged for the king to hear Paul.

II. The Apostle's Defense.

On the following day, Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and ceremony. On such an occasion the king and his sister would have worn their purple robes of royalty and the gold circlet of the crown on their heads. Festus would have worn the scarlet robe which a governor always wore to state functions.² Following them as they entered the audience room would be the high ranking officers, the military tribunes of the governor's staff, and the leading men of the city. When they had taken their seats, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. Tradition tells us that the apostle was a short man and that he was plain in appearance. He was balding, had a broken nose, and tradition also says he had skinny legs.³ Not exactly an imposing figure!

King Agrippa gave permission for Paul to speak for himself. It was a dramatic moment when the apostle stood before this representative of the ambitious and morally corrupt family of the Herods. For generations they had set themselves in opposition to Jesus Christ and the truth of the gospel. New Testament scholar R.B. Rackham writes, "Their founder, Herod the Great had tried to destroy the infant Jesus. His son Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, beheaded John the Baptist, and won from the Lord the title of 'fox.' His grandson Agrippa I [killed] James the son of Zebedee with the sword. Now we see Paul brought before Agrippa's son."⁴ The apostle proceeded to tell his personal story, and he drew attention to its three main phases. He told of his Pharisaic heritage, his persecuting zeal, and his encounter with the risen Christ and subsequent commission by the Lord.

One of the extraordinary features of the leaders of the early church is that they were never afraid to confess what they once had been before. Here in the presence of the king, Paul frankly admitted that there was a day when he had tried to destroy the Christian church and blow it right out of existence. There's no attempt to portray himself in a positive light. He's honest about his shortcomings.

The Bible says that we should always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within us because of Christ. If someone were to ask you, "Why are you a follower of Jesus, and how did you come to know Christ?" would you have something to say? Think about writing out your own story of God's transforming work in your life so you can share it with someone if you are ever asked.

III. The King's Response.

As Luke starts to sum up the proceedings of the trial, he records a rather unorthodox altercation between the bench and the witness stand. Festus interrupted the apostle's defense and accused him of being out of his mind. He suggested that all his study had made Paul crazy. But the apostle responded that what was madness to the governor's way of thinking was simply the truth, and then the apostle appealed to Agrippa. He said that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus were matters of common knowledge, open to verification, not something done in a corner, and anyone who believed in the prophets and compared their predictions with the historical facts concerning Jesus of Nazareth must acknowledge the truth of Christianity.

But Agrippa was embarrassed by Paul's appeal, and he turned aside the apostle's request and said, *"Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"* Paul replied, *"In short time or long, I pray that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."* At that moment, he raised his shackled hands and rattled the chains that bound them.

Paul had the last word, and his light touch at the end of his response evidently broke up the meeting. Agrippa dismissed the proceedings. As he walked out with Festus and Bernice, the king concluded that Paul had done nothing in the eyes of Rome which merited death or imprisonment. And he said, "This man could have gone free, if he had not appealed to Caesar."

IV. Reflections on the Passage.

What can we take home from a sermon like this? There are a few matters by way of application I want you to consider this morning. **First**, notice that God doesn't play favorites, and neither did the apostle Paul. In his appearance before Agrippa, Paul wasn't overawed by the show of pomp and power which marked the occasion, or by the dignitaries present in the court. The apostle made no attempt to ingratiate himself. He was concerned with the king's salvation, not his favor. So he didn't stop with the story of his own conversion. He also hoped for Agrippa's conversion, too.

A person who is secure in Christ isn't swayed by rank or position or power. A person like that sees things from a divine perspective and understands that each person is no better and no worse than anyone else. We're all sinners in need of God's saving grace, and we all stand on equal ground at the foot of the cross. So the Christian is one who is freed from seeking status and position, and the believer is also a person who isn't

intimidated or awed by these things. We should treat the homeless person with the same respect we would a millionaire, and we shouldn't show favoritism to a wealthy person just because of who they are or what they have. We're all equal at the foot of the cross.

Second, notice how Paul was very open about his faith. In verse 26 the apostle said, *"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."*

Christianity isn't some secret religion with mysterious rites of initiation or handshakes. From the beginning Christianity has been out in the open for all to see and inspect.

Our lives as Christians should also be out in the open as well. We shouldn't practice our faith off in some corner while no one is watching. Rather, our commitment to Christ should be open for all the world to see. Not that we flaunt it or seek to draw attention to ourselves, but if anyone should wonder what the driving force of our lives is, it should be evident to everyone what makes us tick.

Several years ago, I spoke in Denver to a gathering of Presbyterian men. The night before another speaker told the true story of a man in his congregation who had been in business with another man for 25 years. Recently the man was talking to his partner about a certain date and reluctantly the man said he couldn't make the engagement because he had a meeting at his church. The business partner said, "I didn't know you went to church." It turns out the partner was a Presbyterian, too! For 25 years they had been in business together, and neither man knew the other was a follower of Jesus.

Finally, notice how the power of the Holy Spirit can transform a person's life. As he shared his testimony with the court, Paul explained how God transformed him and the way in which we went from being an apostle for the Sanhedrin to being an apostle for Jesus Christ. The power of God can transform a person's life and take it in a whole new direction than they ever imagined before.

In the medieval Church, there was a practice that emerged when a monk joined a Benedictine monastery. The person joining would actually go and lie down at the front of the church right where the body would lie at the time of a funeral. They would literally put a funeral pall over the person and ring the bells to signify that a person had died. Then there would be a long period of silence.

That silence would be wonderfully interrupted by a song from the book of Colossians that says, *"...for you have died and your life is hid with Christ and God."* Then there would be more silence, and the monks would begin singing from Psalm 118, *"I shall not die but live and declare the words of the Lord."* Then after one more period of silence, they would break into spontaneous words of triumph from 1 Corinthians, *"Awake, O sleeper and arise from the dead and Christ will shine on you!"* The bells of the Abbey would start to ring, and the new brother would be embraced into the order.⁵

Becoming a follower of Jesus is very much like dying to one way of life and rising to another. That's what the old baptismal liturgy was all about. It meant going under the water to an old way of life and rising again to a new one. The apostle Paul experienced

that kind of transformation in his life. The question I leave with you this morning is, “Have you?”

Conclusion.

A few days ago, former President Jimmy Carter held a news conference to tell the world he has cancer. Doctors discovered melanoma on his liver, and now it has spread to his brain. The former president has begun a cutting-edge innovative regimen to treat the disease which involves chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

When he learned the news of his cancer, Carter said he thought he only had a few weeks left to live, but that he was surprisingly at ease. He said, “I’ve had an exciting, adventurous and gratifying existence. Now I feel it’s in the hands of God whom I worship, and I’ll be prepared for anything that comes. I’m perfectly at ease with whatever happens. I’m ready for anything. And I’m looking forward to a new adventure.”

Perhaps as much as anyone in our lifetime, former President Carter has born witness to his faith in Jesus Christ not only to the news media in press conferences but also to kings and queens and heads of state. When I learned of Carter’s news conference and thought about this passage in the book of Acts, my mind wandered back to another news conference in 1978 when Jimmy Carter announced the Camp David Peace Accord. Back then he was able to bring Anwar Sadat, the President of Egypt, and Menachem Begin, the Prime Minister of Israel, together. It was an unprecedented meeting where a Christian President brought together the Muslim and Jewish leaders of their respective countries to try and find a way to have peace in the Middle East.

During the Camp David peace talks, which were often contentious, Carter openly witnessed to the two world leaders about his faith, and he told them why he believed Jesus was the Son of God. He was bold yet respectful in sharing his religious convictions.

When the peace talks began, a prayer was written which all three prayed together. It said: “After four wars, despite vast human effort, the Holy Land does not yet enjoy the blessings of peace. Conscious of the grave issues which face us, we place our trust in the God of our fathers, from whom we seek wisdom and guidance. As we meet here at Camp David, we ask people of all faiths to pray with us that peace and justice may result from these deliberations.”

On September 17, 1978, Jimmy Carter held that other press conference I mentioned, and there he told the world that their prayers had been answered. It was a remarkable expression of how one person followed the example of the apostle Paul and bore witness to his faith in Jesus Christ before kings and queens and heads of state. May we be so bold in our witness for Christ to the average people we meet in the coming week. Amen.

¹Adapted from John Pollock, *Billy Graham*, (1966), pp. 131,132.

²William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 191,192.

³F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, p. 484.

⁴R. B. Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Exposition*, p. 457.

⁵Cited in a sermon by Jim Singleton, Dec. 4, 1995.