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18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
Sunday, June 9, 2019

Acts 26:13-20 “The Message of Salvation”

Intro. One time a wealthy young man came up to Jesus and asked Him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The Philippian jailor asked Paul and Silas, “What must I do to be saved?” Many religions attempt to answer those questions. And when we realize how short and uncertain life is, we should all seek to know for sure the answer to those questions. Well this morning, I am going to answer those questions from the Word of God.

The apostle Paul claimed that he had received the answer to those questions directly from God. He did not invent a plan of salvation. In fact, he wrote in Gal. 1:11-12 that “the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Here in Acts 26 we have the account of how Jesus Christ called Paul to bear witness of the gospel message, and how He first revealed the gospel of salvation to Paul (vv.16-18). In this text Paul explains how a person can be forgiven of all their sins, and how they can have eternal life. The focus of today’s message will not be about what Christ has done to make salvation from sin possible by dying on the cross. Rather, this is a message of what *we* must do to receive this marvelous salvation.

I, too, have been called to proclaim the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ and I will do so today. If you are not yet a Christian, you need to listen so you can be saved. If you are already a Christian, I hope you will listen so you can share with others what they must do to be saved.

So first of all, notice with me the fact that:

I. YOU MUST BE CONVICTED OF YOUR SINS

That means, you must become keenly aware that you have sinned, and God will hold you accountable unless you are forgiven. Paul no doubt had experienced conviction of sin himself. This is in many ways the first step to salvation. You will not seek salvation in Jesus Christ unless you first sense a *need* for a Savior.

A. How Paul Was Convicted of His Sin - Paul was a self-righteous Pharisee who had considered himself to be very righteous. He did not sense a need for a Savior, for he was trusting in his own righteousness. So notice what God used to convict him that he was indeed a sinner in need of a Savior:

1. By the Bright Light – Paul said in v.13, “at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me.” That light not only manifested the glory of Jesus, but was also intended to manifest the fact the Paul had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). In the brightness of this heavenly light, Paul could see himself as he really was, a sinner. His sins that had remained hidden in the cover of darkness were suddenly revealed by the bright, holy light of Jesus Christ!

How does that apply to us today? It is highly unlikely that Christ will appear to you as He did with Paul. But there is another way God’s light can shine into your soul and reveal your sin. It is by the light of God’s Word. Read it. Hear it with attentive ears, and you will be convicted of

your sin. The Word of God is also like a mirror (Jas. 1:23). Hold up your lives in this holy Light of God, and I shall be surprised if you do not find enough sin to make you ashamed.

Have you seen one of those lighted, magnifying makeup mirrors? With that you can really see all the flaws in your face and cover them up with makeup! At least, that's what women do!

2. By Calling Out His Name – In v.14 Paul said, “And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul...’” I’m sure Paul was also convicted by Jesus calling him by name. Paul was traveling with others, and he might have imagined that Jesus was speaking to someone else. But no! Jesus was confronting Paul, and He called him by name. Jesus knew him personally.

When I had done wrong as a child and my mother was ready to confront me, she would call me by name, and not just by my first name, but my *whole* name: Stephen Frederick Felker. I can still hear the inflection of her voice!

In the crowd of a church service, it is easy to imagine that the preacher is preaching to someone else. Yet the Spirit of God has a way to applying God’s Word to *your* heart. So you need to think of yourself like Paul was, all alone before Jesus Christ. He is the living, reigning Lord of the universe, who has perfect knowledge of each of us. We each stand isolated before Him. He knows you by name. He directly addresses Himself to each man and woman among us. What would He say *to you*? [Be careful to give good eye contact].

In the book of Revelation Jesus wrote to 7 churches and addressed them by name. He had some words of rebuke to 5 of those churches, and they could not excuse themselves by supposing that Jesus was writing to some other church. If Jesus wrote a letter to you, with your name on it, what would He write? I’m sure you know of some sins that He could write you about. Real conviction comes when you feel like God has singled you out and is speaking directly to *you*. Perhaps every Christian has had the experience of sitting in a church service, and it would seem that the preacher was preaching directly to you! You would wonder how the preacher knew what you had been doing!

3. By a Penetrating Question - Paul was convicted furthermore when Christ asked him in v.14, “Why are you persecuting me?” This was the first sin that Jesus confronted Paul with. Paul was persecuting Christians. Acts 9:1 says he was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord...” And why did Christ say that he was persecuting *Him*? Well David understood that sin is not just against our fellow man, but also against God. He wrote in Psa. 51:4, “Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight...” Have you ever asked why you sin against Christ? An unbeliever may say, “Well, I don’t have anything against Jesus, but I just like the pleasure of sin, and I don’t want to accept the responsibilities of being a Christian.” So you are building your life upon yourself, and whether you want to or not, you are adding grief to the heart of Christ!

B. How We Should Respond to this Conviction - You certainly should not do what Paul did. For some time he had been witnessed to by Christians and prayed for. Seeing the way Stephen died must have made an impression upon him. The Holy Spirit kept pricking his conscience like an ox goad. I say that because the word “kick” is a present, continuous tense. So notice what Christ says to him here in v.14, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” With Paul, it was as if he were kicking against the goads. The ox goad was like a long spear which the ploughman used to prod the ox along. A gentle prick should be enough to keep the ox working. But a stubborn ox might kick against the goad, and only hurt himself, not the ploughman. Then it

would receive a more painful prick. It was as if Jesus were saying, “Saul, give up; you can’t win.” Paul was unsuccessful in trying to get Christians to blaspheme Jesus. He had to have been impressed by their zeal for Christ. So he was fighting something he was supposed to be submitting to. He was fighting a losing battle. In fact, that phrase was used as a proverb in ancient Greek literature to express the futility of striving against fate or against the gods.¹ Felix and Agrippa would have been familiar with the proverb. Thus, Christ was saying to Paul that it was futile to resist Him any longer. You can imagine there wasn’t a person on earth more miserable than Paul.

Even so, when the Spirit of God convicts you of your sin, how foolish it is to resist that conviction. How much more blessed it is to confess your sins and yield to the Lordship of Christ. Indeed, you should recognize the utter futility of opposing God’s will. You only bring harm to yourself, for you cannot avoid the divine law that you reap what you sow.

Aaron Burr was a Revolutionary War hero and almost became our third President. Years later, his granddaughter gave her heart to Christ in an evangelistic meeting. That evening she said to her grandfather, “I wish you were a Christian, too.” He replied, “When I was a young man, I went to an evangelistic meeting. I felt my need of God’s mercy and forgiveness and knew that I should give my heart to Christ, but I walked out without doing it. I stood under the stars and looked up toward heaven and said, ‘God, if You don’t bother me anymore, I’ll never bother You.’ Honey, God has kept His part of that bargain. He has never bothered me. Now it is too late for me to bother Him.” Though his adult life started out well, it did not end well. He mortally wounded Alexander Hamilton, a political rival, in a duel, and was charged with murder. Later he was charged with treason against the United States. He was acquitted of both charges but spent several years in self-imposed exile in Europe. Then he returned to practicing law in New York City and lived a largely reclusive existence until his death.² I wonder how different things would have been if he had given his heart to Christ?

C. The Problem to Overcome - When Paul was converted he learned more about this conviction. In v.18 we read that the eyes and understanding of the unsaved are closed and blinded. 2 Cor. 4:4 says, “The god of this age hath blinded the minds of them who believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ... should shine unto them.” So the first thing you have to do with unsaved people is pray that their eyes will be opened, because their eyes are blind according to Jesus Christ. But when the Spirit of God takes the Word of God and opens the eyes of unbelievers, they suddenly see what they never saw before. And one of the first things that they realize like never before is the depth and seriousness of their sin. That is this conviction of sin that we have been talking about. And then, and only then, they will believe.

Unsaved people are blind and slaves of Satan (v.18); we must rescue them, for they will be saved no other way. As Pastor James Merritt told a group of pastors recently, we need to pray v.18 over unbelievers. Ask God “to open their eyes, and ...turn them from darkness to light....”

Now once you come under conviction of sin, you need to take the next step toward salvation:

II. YOU MUST BE CONVERTED FROM YOUR SINS

¹ Daniel P. Fuller, *Hermeneutics* (Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974), VIII.9, quoted by Fernando.

² Gospel Herald in *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations* by Paul Lee Tan, #4981 on page 1133. Added details from Wikipedia Encyclopedia.

In v.18 Christ says, "...in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God..." Notice the word "turn" (*epistrepho*). That is the literal meaning of conversion. In high school I played in the marching band. In fact, in my senior year, I rose to the rank of Master Sergeant, and I used to give orders during marching drills. One of the commands I had to give was, "About Face." [Demonstrate]. So when you come to Christ, you need to know that it involves a change of direction [Illus.#C-1722]. Now I want you to notice with me what all is involved in a conversion to Christ:

A. By Repenting of Your Sins – In v.20 Paul was told that he was to preach to people "that they should repent." That literally means to change your mind. We all need to reach a point in our lives where we experience a change of mind regarding sin. And Jesus warns in Luke 13 that if you don't repent of your sins, you will perish in your sins. You can't receive Jesus as your Savior and hold on to your sins at the same time.

C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Great Divorce*. It describes a place in which people go to make final decisions about their eternal destiny. There is a mountain which represents the kingdom of God and most people are approaching that mountain to make their decision. One man approaches with a lizard-like creature on his shoulder, representing the sin of lust, and is immediately confronted by a huge angel who says, "You can't come to the mountain with that." The man turns to go and the angel says "Why are you leaving? Let me kill it for you." The man says, "If you did that I would die as well." The angel said, "You won't die, may I kill it?" The man said "The decision is so hard. Why didn't you just kill it without asking me?" "Because I need your permission. May I kill it?"

While they are talking a strange phenomenon is occurring. The man is shrinking and the lizard-creature is growing larger. The angel said, "Quickly, before it is too late, let me kill it." Finally, the man gives his permission and the angel closes his fiery hands upon the creature, twists it, and flings its broken body to the ground. The man screams in pain and falls backward crying, "You said it wouldn't hurt me!" The angel responds "No, I didn't. I said it wouldn't *kill* you." Then a transformation takes place. The lizard-creature was transformed into a great white stallion. And the man grew in size and stature. His clothes became a brilliant white. Then he mounted the stallion and rode him up the mountain of God. [Illus.#C-419].

Even so, to enter the kingdom of heaven, you must repent of your sin. It's *impossible* to do on your own, and it will probably be painfully difficult, but God will help you if you are just willing. Then, you can enter into eternal life. Have you repented of your sin? Like the man in the story, some need to repent of the lust they enjoy contemplating and fulfilling. Some need to repent of sins such as unbelief, pride, lying, drunkenness, profanity, or a host of other sins I could name.

Now repentance is the place where you *decide* to turn from sin. Then, you must go from decision to action. What must you do? You are converted:

B. By Turning from the Life of Sin – The old sinful life is described in two ways in v.18. First, it is described as:

1. A Life of Darkness - There are two types of darkness that we are to turn from. First is the darkness of sin. John 3:19 says "men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." Do you still need to turn from sin? Then, we must turn from the darkness of spiritual ignorance. Eph. 4:18 says, "Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them...." After you have turned from spiritual

darkness, you can see the truth of God, and your path becomes clear. You can understand what God is doing and saying.

You also need to break free from:

2. Living Under the Authority of Satan – In v.18 Jesus commanded Paul to “turn them ... from the power of Satan to God....” In Colossians 1:13 Paul thanked God that He had “rescued us out of the authority of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.” The Bible teaches that Satan has great authority and power over the lives of unbelievers. In Eph. 2:2 Paul wrote, “in which you once walked ... according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience.” In 2 Cor. 4:4 he is called the “god of this age.” He has tremendous influence over the trends of the world. He influences the beliefs and actions of the peer group that surrounds you in secular society. Every man in the world is either under the power of Satan or the power of God. There is no such thing as a completely free, independent man. You have to choose who your master will be: either Satan or God. Salvation means that you transfer from Satan’s kingdom to God’s kingdom. I want to tell you that God’s kingdom is far better. Amen?

Not only must you turn *from* sin but you also must turn *to* God, as we see in vv.18 & 20. You can’t just turn from sin. It is not enough for you just to try to reform your life. You must also turn to God. Sin must be replaced with godliness and devotion to Christ. So this leads to my last point:

III. YOU MUST COMMIT TO CHRIST BY FAITH

How do we turn to God and receive salvation? We must turn to God in faith. This is mentioned in the last of v.18, where Christ talks about being “sanctified by faith that is in me.” Also, Eph. 2:8-9 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” Now notice:

A. Faith Must Be Directed to Jesus – Faith is only as good as the object of our faith. In the last of v.18 Jesus speaks of “faith in me.” Jesus, and no one else, must be the object of our faith. Acts 4:12 says, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (KJV). You are not saved by trusting in your own righteousness, or by trusting in your baptism and church membership. Nor are you saved by mental assent to a set of doctrine. It is faith in a person, who is God’s Son, who is to become our Savior and Lord.

Have you placed your faith in Jesus? Are you trusting in Him for forgiveness of sin and eternal life?

B. True Faith Will Change Your Life - James wrote, “Faith without works is dead.” That fits in well with the last of v.20, where Jesus said, “and do works befitting repentance.” This is what John the Baptist (Mt. 3:2, 8) and Jesus had already taught (Mt. 4:17). If you have truly repented; if you have truly believed, then you will show your faith by your works. Your life will change. If your life hasn’t changed, then how can you say that you have believed in Christ?

There was a young convert in Haiti whose family believed in voodoo. They urged him not to forsake the family faith for this new Christian religion. But he ignored the family pressures and came for baptism. He walked into the water, stopped, and turned back! The missionaries were sure he had changed his mind. They were certain that the family pressures had prevailed.

But he went back to shore to empty his pockets of all his voodoo charms. Then he reentered the stream and was baptized. Real repentance shows itself in action. [Illus.#C-1047].

C. Faith in Jesus Will Bestow Blessings - Two blessings are promised in v.18:

1. Forgiveness of Sins – Remember who Paul was speaking to: King Agrippa and Bernice. Paul knew some of the well-known sins that Agrippa and Bernice had committed. She was actually his sister. But he was living with her as if she was his wife. It was an incestuous relationship. Yet, by God’s Word, he offers them forgiveness. Oh, what a blessing it is to know that your sins are forgiven, no matter how great or how many! Romans 4:8 says, “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.” Don’t you want to be forgiven of all your sins?

2. An Inheritance with God’s People - In 1 Peter 1:4 we are promised an inheritance undefiled and reserved in heaven for us. Paul said in Romans 8:17 that we are “joint heirs with Christ.” That means that you will share all that Christ has. What an easy choice. You can either have hell, where you have nothing that you want, or you can have heaven, where you have everything you need, and everything you could possible want!

Conclusion: So have your eyes been opened? Have you been convicted of your sins? Have you turned from your sins? Have you turned to Christ by faith? Have you received His offer of forgiveness and eternal life? If not, why not this very day? Don’t let love of sin keep you out of heaven. Christ died to save you. Trust in Him today.

Most of us are already saved. But sometimes we fall back into sin and darkness. If that has happened to you, I encourage you to turn back to the Lord, and claim the promise of forgiveness as you confess your sins to the Lord.

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hgts, VA: Published by Author), 2019; Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); John MacArthur, Jr., *Paul on Trial: Study Notes on Acts 24-26* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1986); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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