

Just Like Me

Acts 26:19-32

Main Idea: Paul lovingly and obediently leverages every opportunity for sharing the gospel in spite of opposition and ridicule.

INTRODUCTION

This morning, we are going to continue our study of Acts, we will be in Acts 26:19-32. If you are using one of the pew Bibles, you will find it on page 880.

Speaking of pew Bibles, if you don't already own a Bible, we would invite you to take a pew Bible with you. Or talk to me (or another leader) and we will happily assist you in getting a Bible that is set up well for you (the right font size, notes, etc.).

Context

We begin in verse 19 with, "Therefore...", immediately calling us to consider the previous context. So, let's take a couple minutes to review, first looking at the broader context and then zooming in to the specific scene we are looking at today... Going back to Acts 21, Paul finishes his third missionary journey and arrives in Jerusalem. He wasn't there long when an angry mob is stirred up by Jews from Asia Minor, who are vehemently opposed to his ministry. The uproar ends up leading to Paul's arrest. He is then brought before the Sanhedrin, where (as you may remember) he directs the conversation to the resurrection, which divides the assembly.

You also may remember the attempt made to ambush and kill Paul (a group even vowing not to eat or drink until it was accomplished). Due to this threat, Paul is assigned a large military escort that safely transfers him from Jerusalem to Caesarea, where he is tried by Felix, the governor of Judea. Felix keeps Paul in prison, sending for him often, simply hoping to get a bribe out of him. Two years pass (Paul in prison this whole time) and eventually Felix is replaced by Festus. The High Priest and Jewish leaders see this as an opportunity and ask the new governor, Festus, to have Paul transferred back to Jerusalem. Their hope is for another opportunity to ambush and kill him.

Newly appointed to this role of governor, Festus would love to give a favor to the Jewish leaders but is also restrained by the desire to portray some semblance of following Roman law. So, he asks Paul if he would like to go to Jerusalem to be tried, hoping he will say yes. Instead of agreeing to this arrangement (which would have given Festus legal grounds to grant this favor to the Jewish leaders) Paul appeals to Caesar. Which was a wise decision, considering the threat to Paul's life in Jerusalem. It also helps him get to Rome, where Paul has resolved (in the Spirit) to go and preach the gospel.

Let's pause for just a minute to consider Paul's situation. He has been imprisoned for 2+ years, without any legitimate charges against him! He is the subject of incredible anger and hatred with multiple attempts being made against his life. And he is being used as a political pawn by corrupt politicians. His response? He lovingly and obediently leverages every opportunity for sharing the gospel with as many as possible!

As we move into the specific event we are looking at today, let's quickly review what has already happened... If you have been here for the last couple of weeks, you will remember that Festus is in a bit of a predicament. Though he knows Paul is innocent, he didn't actually declare that innocence and release him, as it would not have been beneficial (likely problematic) for his relationship with the Jewish authorities. Now Paul has appealed to Caesar and Festus doesn't know what to write regarding the charges against him. There aren't any real, legitimate charges against him. Felix and then Festus have simply been hoping to use him for financial and political gain. Now that Paul has appealed to Caesar, Festus fears the consequences he could face from sending a Roman citizen to Caesar without any legitimate charges.

It's at this time that King Agrippa and his sister, Bernice, arrived in town. Festus shares the situation with Agrippa, who has experience and connections both with the Jewish leaders as well as the emperor. Agrippa is intrigued and wants to hear what Paul has to say. The next day Agrippa and Bernice arrive at the trial venue with much pomp, along with Festus and many other official and prominent people of the city. Agrippa invites Paul to share his defense, and so Paul... recounts his upbringing and life of conformity to the strictest sect of Judaism. He talks about originally being convinced that he should do everything he could to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth – which led to him persecuting believers in Jerusalem, and even pursuing and persecuting them in other cities.

And then he tells of the incredible story of what happened to Him as he was traveling to Damascus to oppose the name of Jesus and persecute his followers! Jesus Himself shows up in a blazing light that causes Paul (and those traveling with him) to fall to the ground. Paul's life is immediately changed as he recognizes Jesus as the Messiah that the prophets were pointing to and that he and his fellow Jews were looking forward to, who would bring life and restoration! Not only is Paul immediately transformed by the gospel, but he is assigned by Jesus to go and share this good news with both Jews and Gentiles (with everyone!). That is the context, and now as we pick up the story in verse 19, we continue with Paul's defense...

Paul's Defense

He says, ¹⁹“Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. ²¹ For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.”

At this point in his defense, Paul doesn't just claim innocence, he claims obedience to God. In other words, if he had not done what caused the Jews to seize him and try to kill him, he would have been being disobedient to the heavenly vision and the assignment given to him by the risen Christ. As we continue into the next section, Paul moves into a clear presentation of The Gospel, doing exactly what Jesus had assigned him to do...

Paul's Witness

Verses 22 and 23, ²²“To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: ²³ that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.” Paul again points to the divine origins of his ministry. In the previous verses he spoke of his divine assignment. Now he points to divine enablement.

This is consistent with what Jesus told His disciples would happen in Luke 21:12-15...

¹² But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. ¹³ This will be your opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴ Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, ¹⁵ for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.

This is exactly what Paul is experiencing - persecution, trials, prison, being brought before kings and governors for Jesus' name's sake - and Paul is recognizing it as the opportunity it is to bear witness, enabled by the Holy Spirit! Paul could have been discouraged, depressed, and despondent. He could have been angry, accusatory, and condemning. He could have been self-focused and fearful. But instead, he sees the opportunity to bear witness and is available and cooperative with the Holy Spirit's work through him! As Paul steps through this door of opportunity, in dependence on the Spirit, he comes back to an argument he began earlier saying “I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but

what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass:” Paul says that his message is consistent with what the prophets and Moses predicted. His message isn’t something new; it isn’t something he, or a radical group made up; it is consistent with (and the fulfillment of) Old Testament prophecy.

In verse 23 we see the precise nature of Paul’s message...²³ that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.” Jesus is what has been predicted! He is the suffering servant spoken of by Isaiah, who would be despised and rejected, who would bear our grief and our sorrow, who would be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities, who would bear our punishment, and through whose wounds we could be healed (Isaiah 53:3-5)! And Paul is sure to include the essential fact that Jesus didn’t just die, He didn’t just take the punishment of sin, He rose from the grave making the resurrection life and restoration (that His people were looking forward to and longing for) available to ALL! Upon Paul making this clear connection between Old Testament prophecy and Jesus as the fulfillment, there is an immediate reaction...

Reaction

Verses 24 and 25, ²⁴ And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.” ²⁵ But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words.

Some have suggested that Festus is complimenting Paul. Something like, “Oh Paul, you are so smart; so well-read; such a good student, that you’re seeming getting just a little bit crazy”. However, I am doubtful there is any compliment here. The text says that Festus said this with a “loud voice”. And, Paul’s response seems to indicate that Paul understood the accusation quite literally – Festus was actually accusing him of being out of his mind and irrational. This was a strong, sudden outburst and reaction from Festus. ~~But~~ look at Paul’s clear, calm, courteous response... “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. After being opposed and insulted loudly by Festus, Paul responds with a respectful address, “most excellent Festus”, calmly disagreeing with the accusation of insanity. These seemingly “crazy” ideas Paul is sharing are actually sober, factual, and clearly articulated realities.

And then, Paul wisely directs the conversation back toward King Agrippa, who has Jewish heritage, knows what the prophets have predicted and what the Jews are looking for in the awaited Messiah, and knows some of the things that have occurred with Jesus and his followers...

Paul’s Persuasive Plea

Verses 26-29, ²⁶ For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” ²⁸ And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” ²⁹ And Paul said, “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.”

Besides what I have already mentioned regarding Agrippa’s Jewish heritage and thus familiarity with Old Testament Prophecy, why does Paul claim that King Agrippa, “knows about these things”?

First, I would suggest this may have been due to his connections to the religious and political happenings surrounding Jesus and His followers. As Pastor Grant has previously shared, King Agrippa’s great grandfather, Harod the Great, was the one who was troubled when the wise men arrived in Jerusalem and asked, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” (Matthew 2:2). In consultation with the chief priests and scribes he found out that it was prophesied that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem. So, he sent the wise men to Bethlehem, asking them to return and tell him where

they find the child, so that he too could go and “worship” him. After being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the wise men return a different way. Herod is furious and sends to Bethlehem to have all the male children killed.

And the family connections continue... King Agrippa’s Great Uncle, Herod Antipas, was the one to whom Pilate sent Jesus, shortly before His crucifixion. Luke tells us that Herod **had long desired to see Jesus, because he had heard of him, and was hoping to see him perform a sign or miracle**. When that didn’t happen, Herod and his soldiers proceeded to treat Jesus with contempt and mocked Him. Pilate and Herod (who had previously been at odds with one another) became friends that day. And then there is Agrippa’s Father. While serving as King of Judea, He participated in persecuting the church and is the one who had James (the brother of John) killed. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he arrested Peter. The night before Peter was to be brought from prison (likely to also be killed) an angel shows up and Peter was miraculously rescued. Besides family being heavily involved in these events, King Agrippa himself had been given responsibility for the Temple in Jerusalem, including the job of appointing the High Priest. (So, Agrippa and his family are heavily involved in the religious and political happenings in Jerusalem.)

Second, Paul makes the case for Agrippa’s familiarity with these things by saying, “this has not been done in a corner”. Jesus’ suffering, his death, and resurrection, was not hidden. It was a public spectacle, surrounded by some astonishing events. Remember, as Jesus hung on the cross, it became dark for three hours in the middle of the day. Upon his death the curtain in the temple was torn in two, there was an earthquake, tombs were opened and saints who had died were raised and appeared to many in Jerusalem.

The events surrounding Jesus’ death were so remarkable, that the centurion (and those who were guarding Jesus with him) couldn’t help but respond by saying, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:54)

After His burial, the chief priests and Pharisees remembered what Jesus had said about rising after three days. And so, they went to Pilate and received permission to seal Jesus’ tomb and place guards, ensuring no stunts could be pulled, making sure the disciples couldn’t steal His body and claim He had risen.

However, on the first day of the week, as Mary Magdalene and the other Mary approached the tomb, there was a great earthquake, as an angel descended, rolled back the massive stone sealing the tomb, sat on it, and said, “*Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, as He said...*” The guards trembled, became like dead men, and later went to the chief priests telling them all that had happened. (Matthew 28:1-4, 11). Between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, He appeared to more than 500 people (1 Cor 15:6).

These things were not done in a corner,

And, King Agrippa likely had a particularly good vantage point, due to his many familial and political connections. Thus, Paul directs an invitation directly to Agrippa by saying...²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” This is a beautiful, loving plea from Paul (and the Holy Spirit through Paul), to a morally confused and politically corrupt leader. It is a plea to choose life by turning to Jesus - the one the entire Old Testament is pointing to, the long-awaited Messiah, the one who rose from the dead, and the one who alone can save. Paul could have been furious that he was unjustly standing there in chains. He had been imprisoned for TWO YEARS, though innocent! He could have angrily hurled accurate accusations of sin and corruption. But instead, he leveraged the situation, saw the opportunity to bear witness, and extended the same gracious, loving, and sacrificial invitation he had received years earlier from Jesus Himself on the road to Damascus.

We see that Agrippa’s response to this invitation is non-committal. He says, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” He doesn’t deny Paul’s testimony, he doesn’t react like Festus and accuse Paul of being out of his mind

(he likely knows enough that he can't brush it off as insanity). At the same time, he doesn't receive or embrace (at least publicly) Paul's gospel presentation and invitation. To do so, likely would have been incredibly costly politically and socially.

Paul (and the Holy Spirit in Paul) continue the loving and patient call to life to Agrippa, and now also extended to everyone within earshot. And Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains. Paul is in an unfriendly courtroom, full of enemies, corruption, and sin. Though he isn't worried about the timing, his desire is that everyone would become like him. That they would encounter Jesus, be transformed, and enjoy the resurrection life in Christ for all eternity!

And just for the sake of clarity, and maybe a bit of humor, Paul throws in a clarification. He would like everyone to become like him - except for these chains. How many of us, when being unjustly treated, desire that the injustice being directed toward us would be turned on those who are inflicting it? Paul doesn't wish for these corrupt leaders to get a taste of their own medicine; he isn't hoping that his enemies would become the recipients of what they are dishing out. Paul has been transformed by the One who gave His life for His enemies. Paul has received this merciful and gracious gift, and (as he has been called to do) is extending it to those who are persecuting him! In the last two verses we see the conclusion of this gathering...

Response

Verses 30-32, ³⁰ Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. ³¹ And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment." ³² And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

In private, King Agrippa, Festus, Bernice were willing to admit Paul's innocence, when it doesn't have any negative political ramifications. But publicly, no effort is made to clear his name, to secure his release, or to make any movement toward justice. This just amplifies what Paul has done...

Main Idea: Paul (He) lovingly and obediently leverages(d) every (this) opportunity for sharing the gospel in spite of opposition and ridicule.

APPLICATION

As we move to application, I would like to ask us to consider a couple of questions...

1. First, have you responded to the radically loving call to life in Christ? Our Heavenly Father, the Creator of all things (including each of us), made us for relationship with Him. But, through Adam and Eve, we rejected His authority; rebelled against Him, and walked away from our good, life-giving King. Instead choosing the selfish, self-destructing path to death.

His response (though it would have been perfectly just to abandon or obliterate us) was to launch His plan of redemption. Jesus would come to the earth that He created, but that was now groaning under the curse of our sin, and saturated with the horror of everything opposite his goodness. He would be rejected, beaten, and crucified. Dying the horrific death we deserved. And then He rose from the grave, proving that He was who He said He was (God incarnate) and making a way for all who would believe on Him to be saved and receive eternal life. Our Heavenly Father is extending a radically loving call to life in Christ to you today! I plead with you to choose Life! Look to Jesus; put your trust in Jesus, and you (like Paul) will be transformed. Your destination will

be changed from death to life! From enmity with God to fellowship and friendship with Him. As the Holy Spirit extended the invitation to Agrippa through Paul, He extends the same invitation to you today!

2. The second application question I would like to ask is... What can we learn from Paul's example of lovingly and obediently leveraging every opportunity for sharing the gospel in spite of opposition and ridicule? I think there is much to learn here, and I am only going to point to three things this morning. (I would encourage you to further consider this on your own or in a small group.)

Here are three things I suggest we can learn from Paul this morning...

- a. The importance of love and perfect courtesy.

Though Paul had not been treated fairly (but instead had been used as a political pawn) he refers respectfully to both Festus and Agrippa, frequently calling them by name. He acknowledges their value as fellow image bearers who God SO loved, that He sent His son to die for them! Even when Festus interrupts, loudly reacts, and accuses Paul of being out of his mind, Paul responds in love and perfect courtesy, addressing him as, "Most excellent Festus"! There were plenty of sins Paul could have called out and angry accusations he could have leveled against these two men, but instead he follows in Christ's footsteps, lovingly extending the gospel to his enemies!

Paul responds to opposition and ridicule with love and perfect curtesy. I want to briefly emphasize perfect curtesy, because I think it is increasingly rare and is less and less valued even within the Church. But this was important to Paul. Not only do we see it in his example in this story today, it is something he taught...

In Titus 3, Paul says this to his young protégé in regard to his pastoral assignment... Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work,² to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people. Could that be said of us? Do we show perfect courtesy toward all people? What if we did? How might the Spirit be calling us to lovingly communicate and display the gospel through perfect courtesy?

- b. I think we can also learn from how we see Paul Leveraging unexpected opportunities.

As Jesus had predicted, being on trial (though a significant hardship) was actually an incredible opportunity to bear witness (Luke 21:12-13)

Not only did the unjust trial give Paul an opportunity to share the gospel publicly and with some powerful and influential people... It gave opportunity for the gospel to be authenticated and practically demonstrated as Paul extended the same, sacrificial, radical love to his enemies that he had received from Jesus while on his way to persecute the followers of Christ in Damascus.

I can't speak for you, but I know for myself that the first thing I think of when I am opposed or ridiculed isn't, "ah, a gospel opportunity!" And yet, if we step back and think about it for a minute, it is in these moments that there is unique opportunity for the gospel; for the love of Jesus to be displayed. I believe this is true not just in the extreme moments of opposition, ridicule, and persecutions, for the name of Christ, but also in everyday challenges. Difficulty is always an opportunity for Jesus to be expressed; an opportunity for the gospel!

c. We are absolutely dependent.

Paul recognized his dependence on God, as he gives testimony in verse 22 of the help that God consistently provided. This is a fulfillment of Jesus' promise to His disciples that the Spirit would provide and speak through them when they were on trial before governors and kings for His sake (Mark 13:9-11). Paul beautifully articulates this dependence at the end of Ephesians 6, where he says... To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints,¹⁹ and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel,²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

Paul recognizes his dependence, it is expressed in his request for prayer, and we see an answer to this prayer, as he boldly declares the gospel to Agrippa while standing there in chains! Like Paul, we are absolutely dependent on the Spirit. So let's keep looking to him and relying on him as we seek to follow Paul's example of...

Main Idea: Lovingly and obediently leveraging every opportunity for sharing the gospel, in spite of opposition and ridicule.

Just Like Me

Acts 26:19-32

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Context (19a)

Paul's Defense (19-21)

Paul's Witness (22-23)

Reaction (24-25)

Paul's Persuasive Plea (26-29)

Response (30-32)

Application

Application Questions

1. What stands out to you in Paul's example of lovingly and obediently leveraging every opportunity for sharing the gospel in spite of opposition and ridicule?
2. What are some examples you have seen of love and perfect courtesy in our cultural context? What might be some opportunities for us to grow in this?
3. Are there any situations in your life that may be unexpected opportunities for the gospel?
4. What might it look like for you this week to follow Paul's example of lovingly and obediently leveraging every opportunity for sharing the gospel?