

THE PRESCRIPTION FOR A HEAVY HEART

Acts 26:1-11

Bob Bonner

October 11, 2015

It is good to be back. I want to thank the elders for the extra time given me to be with family after Dad's passing. Victor has been gracious enough to tell me I can have a couple weeks in January for these I have taken. As I have been putting this message together with Dad's passing heavy on my heart, I have been amazed to realize that we have come to a portion of scripture this morning that gives us a prescription for a heavy heart.

When I came back and was getting together and praying with our group of pastor buddies, one of them shared that one of his spiritual disciplines had faded and he needed to renew it. He said that there are two fifteen-minute segments in every day that are the most important of our twenty-four hours. That is the fifteen minutes before bed and the fifteen minutes right after waking. During those times we can have devotional intimacy with our Lord, not have the latest TV show on our minds, but be engaged in prayer, even while lying in bed.

As I thought about that, I remembered that years ago I heard a pastor question in the middle of his message, "When you first get up, do you look at the bad news first or the good news?"

I was then personally convicted, and for a long time have had to guard my heart against reading the news first. Often, the more you look and see the news, the more you wish you could just change something. You wish you could put an end to ceaseless and senseless murder, terrorism, and school bombings. You don't want to see another person die of cancer, but wish all would pass like Dad did in his sleep. You wish you didn't have to watch dear friends and relatives struggle with the disease of Alzheimer's. You wish you could just stop sex trafficking. You wish you could see individuals addicted to performance and other people's approval find freedom from that.

Some days, I can't handle listening to the news or reading the paper or logging on to the internet news. It's just so bleak. It makes your heart sick. It's just what **Proverbs 13:12** declares, "**Hope deferred makes the heart**

sick.” Deep inside, the cry of every heart is, “I just wish things were different, better.” But taking that proverb from the other direction, we can realize that if your heart is sick, it is probably because your hope is distracted and you have lost sight of the broad perspective—the promises of God.

We are not the only generation who has lived with the hope that one day we would be totally free of all of ills and major traumas. This morning, we will see that there is a prescription for that which breaks our hearts and causes us to feel weighed down, despairing, and heavyhearted. We will see what it is that our hearts yearn for more than anything else. It’s basic, but so few discover the prescription for a heavy heart. So few know the way out of the forest of discouragement, let alone the Shepherd who promises to lead us down paths, even dark paths temporarily, which eventually lead back out into the light and into righteousness and life.

If you have your Bibles with you, turn with me to **Acts 26**. At the conclusion of the previous chapter, the Apostle Paul had just been brought in to the celebration being held at the governor’s palace by the sea in Caesarea. The event was the welcoming party in honor of King Agrippa who had come to pay his respects to the newly appointed governor, Festus. When we finished our study last time, Paul had been left standing in the center of this august group in a very large palatial hall where a white tie formal affair was taking place.

In **Acts 25:23**, Luke, the author of **Acts**, called the event a “**great pomp.**” In Greek, that expression referred to a short lived, fleeting, and showy pageant. In short, Paul was at an event where he was surrounded by people of wealth, stature, power, and influence. There was the Roman governor of the southernmost part of Israel known as Judah. His name was Festus. Then, there was King Agrippa II, who was of Jewish descent, but appointed by Rome as the king over the northern majority portion of Israel. At his side was his sister, Bernice.

I haven’t told you much about Bernice, but from what we can gather from the historians of her day, she was a real piece of work. She was mostly known for her tumultuous love life. She had multiple marriages between the years of AD 40-50. She spent much of the remainder of her life in the court of her brother, amidst rumors that they were carrying on an incestuous relationship. She later

had a love affair with the to-be emperor of Rome, Titus Flavius Vespasianus, but due to her unpopularity with the Romans, he was forced to drop her in AD 79 with his accession as emperor. She then disappeared from the pages of history. But nonetheless, at this point in her career, she was the informal queen to her brother.

Along with these three, there were five Roman commanders and other prominent wealthy business leaders of Caesarea. All of these individuals were educated and fashionably dressed for such an occasion and matched by their wives or significant others who had joined them. Then in stark contrast stood Paul in the center of them all, dressed in a toga and sandals. He was short and somewhat plump in stature, balding, and basically, physically unimposing.

Most of the guests at this event had heard of this newsworthy religious freak named Paul, but few had ever seen him. Festus, while pointing at Paul in the center of the room, addressed his most honored guest, King Agrippa II, introducing him to Paul, his prisoner. Paul was at this affair at the request of King Agrippa. King Agrippa had for years heard of the Apostle Paul but had never met him nor heard Paul's complete story. So in our passage, Agrippa invited Paul to speak and to explain himself. "How did you find yourself in this pickle?"

As you read through the book of **Acts**, you find that this is the third account of Paul's conversion. **Acts 9** is the first historical account, written by Luke. The second occurs in **chapter 22** where Paul personally gives his testimony to his Jewish opponents in Jerusalem on the Temple Mount, just having been almost beaten to death. Upon being rescued by the Roman commander, Lysias, Paul was given permission to speak, and speak Paul did. At that time, he explained for the first time to his fellow Jewish leaders how it was that he came to believe that Jesus was, indeed, their prophesied Messiah.

The third account of Paul's conversion occurs here in **chapter 26**. Like the previous account in **Acts 22**, here also is Paul's personal testimony. This time it is given primarily to non-Jewish rulers and people of power and influence.

There are both similarities and differences in all of the narrations. These differences help us identify the unique emphasis of this account in **chapter 26**.

- 1.) This is the longest of five of Paul's defenses that Luke records.
- 2.) The specific details cited in this account lead one to believe that Luke, who had been with Paul in Caesarea, may have been a firsthand observer, and thus was able to record these details. Otherwise, how else could Luke write, **"Then Paul stretched out his hand and proceeded,"** in **Acts 26:1**?
- 3.) As we will see, this is Paul's explanation of the gospel and of his ministry, more than a personal defense of such that he gave before his Jewish brethren on the Temple Mount.
- 4.) This was not a trial, but an unofficial hearing. In this setting, Paul was not trying to prove his innocence so much as he was trying to explain to King Agrippa the reasons for the Jewish opposition to Paul and his ministry.

Throughout Paul's testimony, it is obvious that the target of his remarks was King Agrippa. From beginning to end, it is particularly evident that Paul was addressing Agrippa. As you read through the entirety of the address, you see that it was Agrippa who was named in Paul's introduction and conclusion, as well as being personally addressed in the middle by the words **"O King"** in **verses 7 and 13**.

With that brief setup to our passage for this morning, let's begin reading at **Acts 26:1**.

¹**Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself."**

Then Paul stretched out his hand and proceeded to make his defense: ²"In regard to all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, I consider myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I am about to make my defense before you today; ³especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.

⁴ So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem; ⁵since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion.

⁶And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; ⁷the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day. And for this hope, O King, I am being accused by Jews.

⁸Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead?”

Agrippa took charge of the proceedings, and informed Paul in a relaxed statement that he was free to explain his situation.

With all the possible confidence he could possess, knowing that he was doing God’s bidding and that his destiny was secure, Paul raised his hand to the crowd, signaling that he has been given the floor to speak and that they were to be silent, by order of King Agrippa. When it was silent, he then began to speak.

From the get go of his speech, we learn a lesson of what it means to stand tall amidst adversity. When God grants us the rare opportunity to stand before prestigious people and high-ranking government officials, it is best to demonstrate courtesy and grace. Unfortunately, this lesson would do well for many who attend City Council meetings and County Commissioner meetings. Regardless of their lifestyle or political leanings, one ought to speak respectfully. Don’t exaggerate or overstate the point. Model grace. Show

some class. Avoid being confrontational if at all possible. Paul was the picture of graciousness as he addressed these people, considering all that he had been through for the previous more than two years. As a result of Paul's approach in speaking to these authorities, it is not surprising that his audience homed in on his every word.

Paul's manner of addressing King Agrippa in **verse 2** was not false flattery. Paul meant every word he said. Because of King Agrippa's Roman orientation, he was not likely to be sympathetic to the Jewish Sanhedrin or to want to show them certain favors so as to win the Jews' approval. As a ruler, Agrippa had already earned their respect, in comparison to other Roman rulers. Being of Jewish descent, Agrippa was more easily accepted, for he fully understood the Jewish Law, the culture, and the customs. Although King Agrippa did not rule Judea, he had been granted control of the Temple treasury and the right to appoint the high priest. The reason for this was that the Romans considered him an expert on Jewish affairs. Festus knew this, and that was the reason for his eagerness for the king to hear Paul and give his opinion on the case, so as to help Festus stay out of trouble with Caesar for Festus' inability to resolve this problem with Paul.

Up until King Agrippa arrived, all the Roman governors, such as Pontus Pilate, Felix, and Festus never really stood a chance to tame the Jews, because these Roman rulers were ignorant of all manner of Jewish life. In addition, because of the heightened anti-gentile, pro-Israeli sentiment at the time, all the Jews resented Rome's presence in their land. They put up with the Romans only because they had to, because the Romans had the military might to force their will upon the Jews. The Romans were considered occupiers of the Jewish homeland. This is why Paul's statement of considering himself fortunate was not flattery, but heart felt. He had the ear of Agrippa, who could best understand Paul's story of how it came to be that Paul found himself in the position that he was in.

By the way, just so there is no misunderstanding, the Jews would more easily accept King Agrippa's authority over them than they would other Roman rulers, but don't mistake that to mean that the Jews whole-heartedly embraced King Agrippa. They would later rebel against him and view him as a traitor when the Jews revolted against the Romans just five years after Paul's

meeting with Agrippa. In AD 66, at the beginning of the revolt, Agrippa sided with the Romans.

Nonetheless, Paul's primary goal in speaking to Agrippa was not to exonerate himself. He didn't need to. The decision had already been made: Paul was headed to Rome to face Caesar. Paul's goal in what he was about to say was to encourage King Agrippa to entrust his life to Jesus Christ as his personal Savior. He wanted the king to be reconciled to Yahweh, the Living, One and only true God.

Now, just in case that word "reconciled" may be new to you, as it concerns its Biblical meaning, allow me to define this very important term. To reconcile means, "To bring back together that which was once together, but presently is apart." In its Biblical usage, it means to bring back together into a permanent and eternal living relationship or fellowship with God, persons who were separated from God due to personal sin, rebellion towards God or plain ol' simple ignoring of God.

You see, before the Fall, there was no death, disease, taxes, divorce, murder, despair, depression, or wishing that things could be better. There was no sense of being alone or that something was missing in life. Instead, there was satisfaction, a peaceful union with the living God, ongoing verbal personal communication with and intimate knowledge of the creator. There was purposeful and meaningful activity. Work was fully satisfying, and it was not by the sweat of the brow. There was no guilt or shame or fear before God. There was complete acceptance and harmony between the Creator and His creation.

But Adam and Eve chose to rebel, breaking their intimate fellowship with God. This led to spiritual death or separation from God, which soon thereafter led to death, disease, friction and tension between husbands and wives, divorce, murder of brothers, which expanded to wars among nations, oppression of peoples, burdensome taxes, and ultimately the total breakdown of human relationships. Along with this broken relationship between God and people came confusion as to what is truth.

The only hope to regain life as God created it to be was to regain that intimacy with the Creator; to be rightly reconciled with God. The only way people can

be reconciled to a holy God is for sin to be totally forgiven and God's wrath against sinners satisfied so that it will never be felt again by God toward humans. The only way that can happen is if someone put his/her complete trust in the finished work of Jesus on the cross, who died for their sin, so as to forgive and forever placate God's anger against them. There is nothing one can do to add to the finished work of Christ. Salvation and reconciliation takes place only by putting confidence in what Jesus has done on our behalf.

Knowing this message of reconciliation and caring for all people, including King Agrippa, Paul wanted the king and everyone else in the room at that time, including the Roman governor and soldiers, to know Jesus.

Hence, reconciliation had always been the goal of Paul's ministry, as he had clearly written about two years before this encounter with King Agrippa. In his third letter to the Corinthian church, Paul wrote these words in **2 Corinthians 5:17-20**:

¹⁷Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. ¹⁸Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, ¹⁹namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word [information and delivery of that information] of reconciliation. ²⁰Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

What is the job of an ambassador? An ambassador is the spokesperson for a president or foreign ruler. He is to speak on behalf of, to carry and to keep before all foreign citizens the message and purpose of the one he serves. This is what all Christians are. This is just what the Apostle Paul did. Although he was a Roman citizen and a Jew, he was a citizen of heaven, a follower of Jesus Christ His Messiah first. Likewise, I may be an American and preaching in a Baptist church, but I am a citizen of heaven and follower of Christ first and foremost.

In **verses 4-5**, Paul reminded Agrippa what all the Jews, including Agrippa, knew about Paul's resume as a Jew. Although he was not born in Israel, at a very young age Paul was sent to Israel, grew up in Israel, was schooled in Israel, became a rising star among the Pharisees, and eventually took a key role among the Sanhedrin. His reminder to Agrippa of his resume was to make the point that no one better understood the theology and customs of the Jews than Paul.

Having established that, Paul moved in **verses 6-7** to the key issue, the most important issue for which he had been rejected by the Jews and was on trial for his life. Three times Paul points to the **"hope of the promise"** to which all true Jews believed and looked forward to. What was this **"hope of the promise?"** It was salvation through a Messiah. This promise included personal as well as national deliverance and blessing. As the Messiah, Jesus was prophesied to be a resurrected savior. And hence, all Jews who had been faithful to the teachings of the Old Testament believed not only in the resurrection of the dead, but also the resurrection of the Messiah. This is the **"hope of the promise"** to which Paul referred. What Paul would soon be arguing is that he had been consistent in his loyalty to the Jewish hope, whereas his opponents, the other Jewish leaders who wanted him dead, were strangely inconsistent.

Then, Paul poses a question in **verse 8**, **"Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead?"** To whom is Paul referring when he says, **"you people?"** In Greek, the **"you"** here is not the singular, as to mean Paul was speaking to Agrippa alone, but plural, meaning a group of people. Obviously, Paul is still speaking to Agrippa, but now he widened the point of his message from just Agrippa to the others in the chamber, the

Romans, and any other Jews, Pharisees, or Sadducees who may have been there among the prominent people.

Clearly, the “**raising of the dead**” in connection with the “**hope of the promise**” had Christ’s resurrection in mind--the act that proved that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, Son of God, God’s son, God and son of man! Paul’s point is the question: If belief in the resurrection of the dead is a fundamental premise of Judaism, how is it that the Jews condemn Paul for believing in the resurrection of Jesus? Why do they find believing in an actual instance of resurrection (namely, Jesus) so incredibly difficult? Judaism was not consistent with itself in its response to Paul’s proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is the reason for the uprisings over Paul which the Roman rulers were trying to discover. Paul let Agrippa know, at the outset, what the issue was.

Having paused at the end of **verse 8** to give time for his audience to answer his question, and having received no response from Agrippa or the other skeptics in his audience, Paul continued speaking. In his next words, he courageously and with great vulnerable authenticity testifies to his own failure to be consistent with the Old Testament teachings about the resurrection and the Messiah. And, in turn, he takes responsibility for his role in the deaths of many innocent Jews who had chosen to follow their authentic Messiah. In other words, in these verses, Paul reminds his audience that he once was the chief unbelieving persecutor of Jews.

No doubt, Paul’s tone changes slightly as he testifies to his own fears that had blinded him to the truth. At this point, Paul’s audience was so silent you could have heard a mouse sneeze. Paul continues in **verse 9**, “**So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.**” At first glance, it might be hard to pick up what Paul is saying here, as well as what was going through his mind. So allow me some room to give an extended paraphrase of Paul’s words, “**So then, I thought to myself,**” which will be verified with the rest of his message.

What Paul is trying to explain here were his feelings and motivations for what he is about to list. He is communicating this: “Likewise, I thought to myself the same things the rest of you must have thought about the possible resurrection of Jesus Christ--that this resurrection thing just can’t be true.

And if I had allowed other Jews to continue to spread these lies about Christ's resurrection, it would have caused Judaism to become unraveled. At the time, I thought it pure heresy. I had to stop it at all costs, including being a party to murder, if necessary." That's what is wrapped up in Paul's, **"So then, I thought to myself."**

Let's continue with verse 10.

And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.

Keep in mind that all of what Paul said took place in Jerusalem, less than twenty-five years previous to this. Hence, there must have been Jews still living who remembered, and they may have been in the room with Paul at that moment. There were certainly Jewish family members who lost loved ones because of Paul's religious vigilantism.

One might ask, "Why did Paul make so much of his days as a persecutor of the church?" The answer is to establish his credibility with Agrippa, who came from a long family line of Christian haters and murderers.

- Agrippa's great-grandfather, Herod the Great conducted the search and destroy mission against the infant Jesus.
- Agrippa's great uncle Herod Antipas murdered John the Baptist.
- Agrippa's own father, Herod Agrippa I, executed James and imprisoned Peter.

Agrippa knew how committed Jews were to treat threatening Christians. Paul said to him, "I used to be just like them." His point was that there had to be

something drastically true, which touched Paul to the core of his being, for Paul to totally change and become a chief ambassador for Jesus Christ.

Like many of our generation, Paul was a man who suffered with the shame and guilt of his past. He may even for a moment have thought that he had committed an unpardonable sin, only to find the forgiveness of the Savior. He also found a new purpose for living, fortified by the hope and the assurance that there is a new Kingdom coming of which Jesus had made him a citizen. Paul discovered that Jesus was his ultimate solution for all that ailed him.

Today, this same resurrected Jesus Christ is the solution and healing for broken hearts. He is the lifter of our heads when the cares and chaos of this world leave us feeling weighed down, despairing and heavyhearted.

Have you ever felt that you committed an unpardonable sin? Because Paul was forgiven for the murders of Jewish Christians and for playing a role in the execution of the savior, Paul's personal testimony seriously questions the possibility of your having committed an unpardonable sin.

Years ago, I remember hearing a testimony about a woman who struggled with trusting Christ because she had had an abortion and didn't believe she could be forgiven for having killed her unborn baby. She asked, "How could Jesus forgive me, a mother who murdered her child?" Another woman counselor responded, "Sister, your problem is far greater than you think. You didn't just murder your baby, but because of your sin, you brought about the murder of Jesus Christ, which he willingly accepted because He loves you. If God can forgive murderers of the Savior, I'm sure he can forgive you for the murder of your unborn child. Jesus' death on the cross paid for all sins."

With that harsh understanding of reality and the saving work of Christ, this heavyhearted woman finally was able to get free of her sin. She understood that if Jesus could forgive Paul and her for the part they played in the Savior's death, then Jesus could indeed forgive all sin, even her sin of an abortion.

That woman went on to experience the loving embrace of the living God. She had hope about her future--that one day she would be with Jesus and her baby. She had hope for the rest of her life, that Jesus would indeed make her

remaining years a trophy of His grace as she lived for the One who rescued her life from the pit. Jesus is indeed the prescription for a heavy heart.

Many of us today are dealing with bad news from this world such as personal failure, the loss of a loved one, the loss of possessions, or the loss of a dream. But it is not the news of this world that we should focus our hearts on but the good news of the Gospel. Jesus Christ is aware of our future and holds it in His hands.