



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

UNSTOPPABLE: God's Work in the World

Guess Who? — Acts 26
Tim Badal | March 17, 2019



We're finishing up a long series on the book of Acts, but I hope and pray it has been a profitable time for you, whether through the pulpit ministry on Sundays or through your small groups. We've studied this incredible "Second Gospel of Luke," if you will, where he tells the story of the New Testament church—how it was birthed, how it grew and how it made life-changing impacts on people. And because its testimony has continued now for 2,000 years across the globe, we find ourselves as a 21st-century church being mesmerized and changed by what they did back then. We also realize that we, too, are called to proclaim the unstoppable gospel of Jesus Christ.

Over these weeks we have walked in the footsteps of the apostle Paul, who himself was changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ in Acts 9 through a dramatic conversion experience. There he met Jesus face to face as he was in the process of persecuting the church and seeking to destroy the movement of Christ. We've followed Paul as he's taken the gospel message throughout the Roman Empire, preaching to Jews and Gentiles alike.

Paul has preached to people who were far from God and to those who seemed to be close to God. He's preached to the rich and the poor. He's preached to men and women. He's preached to people in high authority—kings, governors, rulers—and he's preached to slaves and servants. We are reminded through his ministry that the gospel is for all.

Whoever you come into contact with this week, however you might define their identity, Paul reminds us that they too are in need of the gospel. Just as Paul went without prejudice, without hypocrisy, without pre-judging individuals, so we should be ready to proclaim the gospel to everyone. That's the great theme of the book of Acts. The world is lost, and Jesus came into the world to save sinners from their sins. He uses you and me—broken, flawed, finite individuals—to make life changes in those around us, if we will be obedient to follow in the footsteps of these believers in Acts and be obedient to the call God has for us.

This morning we'll be in Acts 26, where we'll go through Paul's courtroom experience. For the last three chapters, he had been in front of one judge or magistrate after another. He started in a religious court, then moved to different levels of the Roman appellate court system. He finally arrived at the final place to defend himself against the accusation of starting a mob riot in Jerusalem. The religious leaders hated him and wanted him dead.

He then stood before Governor Felix, who was the provincial governor of the land. Felix didn't know what to do with him, so he left Paul in prison for two years. After that, Festus came in as the successor to Felix, but he also didn't know what to do with Paul. He listened to Paul's arguments, then decided to bring in Herod Agrippa, the Jewish leader of Judea, to hear Paul's defense.

As we'll see today, because Paul was a Roman citizen, he asked for an audience with Caesar, which was his right of appeal. From a human standpoint, that appeal may have come back to haunt Paul, because the Caesar he appealed to was a man named Nero. At the time Paul made his appeal, Nero hadn't yet gone off the deep end, but by the time Paul actually arrived in Rome, as we'll

read about in the next two chapters, Nero had changed. His hatred for the gospel of Jesus Christ and for Christians brought Paul face to face with the very man who would execute him for the sake of the gospel.

Yet from a spiritual standpoint, we also see that God always had been—and we know always is—in complete control and was moving Paul exactly where He wanted him to be, putting him in front of exactly the people He wanted him to speak to. We need to remember there are no chance events in our lives, no random opportunities, but that God Himself has already gone before us.

I'm going to read our text in Acts 26 and much of what I'll read will feel like we've "been there, done that." We've already heard this testimony. But as I'll remind you, all of Scripture is God-breathed and is useful to teaching, rebuking, correcting and training us, the people of God, in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). As you listen, ask God, "Why is this passage here? Why are You repeating these same things over and over again?" Hopefully I'll be able to show you why I believe Luke wrote these things down through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is a lengthy passage, so follow along with me as I read Acts 26, then I want to make two points this morning.

So Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense:

²"I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, ³especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.

⁴"My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. ⁵They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. ⁶And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, ⁷to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! ⁸Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

⁹"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

¹²"In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. ¹⁴And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' ¹⁵And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, ¹⁷delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you ¹⁸to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

¹⁹"Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰but 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. ²¹For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. ²²To 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: ²³that 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."

²⁴And 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." ²⁵But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. ²⁶For 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. ²⁷King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe." ²⁸And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" ²⁹And 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."

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."

As we look at this text, I have a bit of a confession to make. It's been really hard for our preaching team to teach these texts over and over and over again. Three times in the last three chapters we have seen Paul share the same story in a very similar situation to a similar group of people. We might be tempted to say, "And Paul said, 'Yada yada yada.' And the people responded with, 'This, that, and the other thing.'" But that would be glossing over what God wants us to see.

As a preaching team, we thought, "Maybe we should take all of these defenses and cover all three chapters in one sermon; just knock it out of the ballpark while everything feels fresh." But then we were reminded of an important truth: all Scripture is God-breathed. All Scripture is inspired by God.

So let's ask Luke, "Why would you spend three chapters covering in essence the same testimony, unless there's something in this you want us to know? Is there something in your choice to repeat what Paul was like before he came to Christ, how he was changed by Jesus, and what he became after that? Is it important to think about all the people he's preached to over the years? Is there something for us to glean from this?" I believe his answer would be yes.

Before we look at Acts 26, I want to go back to something I think is very significant. Every time Paul had an opportunity to give his defense in a courtroom context, he shared the same story. "I have been changed by Christ. I am no longer the one who lives, but it is Christ Who lives in me." Do you have that story this morning? Whatever circumstances you find yourself in, is that the story? There's a hymn that says, "I love to tell the story." Do you love to share that story?

Paul's time in court shows us different responses to the gospel.

I want you to notice that in the three times Paul told his story, there was very little difference between the three accounts. His story was consistent. That reminds us that our story of the gospel also needs to be consistent. The reason I think we have three accounts of the same thing isn't that Luke thinks we're not getting it. Rather, he wants us to see that as Paul shared the same gospel, there were different responses to it; I believe this is significant.

Any time in a passage of Scripture something is repeated, we need to ask if there's a reason for that. Three times in Acts 25, Luke tells us that the events in that chapter took place in the city of Caesarea. But Caesarea wasn't an especially important city from the world's point of view. It was located on a piece of land that jutted out into the Mediterranean Sea, 70 miles northwest of Jerusalem. In a car today, it would take about an hour and a half to drive from Jerusalem to Caesarea. We know Paul had first gone to Jerusalem to take a large sum of money for the relief of the Jewish Christians there who were experiencing a famine. Yet he was met with great hostility on the part of the Jewish leaders. Because of that, a riot broke out and he was accused of inciting a mob against Caesar and against the peace that Rome had established.

He was then taken from Jerusalem to Caesarea, a city known for two things. The city had originally been called Philippi, but when the Romans came in, they renamed it Caesarea Philippi after the emperor Caesar, the "omnipotent" ruler in Rome. There were actually a lot of cities named Caesarea across the empire which were set up as the governing capitals of the various provinces. The name was intended to remind everyone of who was in charge.

The other thing Caesarea was significant for can be found in Matthew 16:13. Years before Paul was on trial there, a special event took place. Matthew wrote, "*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'*" He wanted to know what the disciples had heard about Him around town. Notice in verse 14 some of the answers they gave Him: "*Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.*" But then Jesus turned His question to them: "*But who do you say that I am?'*" Peter replied, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" It's significant that this conversation took place in Caesarea, a city dedicated to a man who was believed to be god. It was here that Jesus wanted to know who people thought He was. Peter declared that He was the Son of God—God in human flesh. His disciples understood that He was not one of the prophets or John the Baptist reborn, but rather the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

The question Jesus asked His disciples is the same question He asks each person in the world today. The most important question you will answer is not where you'll live, not whom you'll marry, not who your friends will be or what house you will buy. The most important question you'll ever have to answer is, "Who do you say Jesus is?" Is He some nice guy, some good teacher, or some foolish lunatic? Or is He Lord?

Paul was on trial because, in the same city that Jesus asked the question, he was claiming emphatically and without apology that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. As he made this claim, there were varied responses to it in his day—and that is true of us today as well. Over the last three chapters we've read in Acts, we can see five different responses to the proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah. As we go through these, I want to provide us with an evaluative tool. Many of us will say we're followers of Christ, but are we really?

One of my youngest son Luke's favorite games is the game, "Guess Who?" Maybe you know this game. You choose a character and the other person has to figure out who it is based on asking questions. Recently he asked me to play it with him and he quickly beat me three times. So I told him to go play it with his mother. Even when you get beat, it's a fun game. So, I chose Daniel and it was Luke's job to figure out through a series of deductive questions who my character was. Then when he can get to the place where he asks, "Are you Daniel?" he wins the game. So he might say, "Does your guy wear glasses?" No. "Does your guy have blond hair?" No. He'll ask all kinds of questions and I will respond—no, no, no—and as I do, he knocks down the different tiles that do not apply to my character. Eventually he will be able to conclude that Daniel is in fact the guy I've chosen.

I want you to play a game of "Guess Who?" this morning. I'm going to describe some things and I want you to apply these descriptions to yourself. "Is that me? Is that what I think?" It's not to find out who you want to be or who you're pretending to be, but who you really are. If you don't get this answer right, you will stand before God, and as Jesus said, "Many on that day will say, 'Lord, Lord, did I not do this? Did I not do that?'" And Jesus will say, "Depart from Me. I never knew you" (Matthew 7:21–23). You might say, "But I went through all this religious fanfare. Surely that will get me into Your heaven." God will say, "Depart from Me."

Let's look at some varied responses from our text.

Some will oppose it.

One response to the gospel in which Paul declared that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God, was to oppose it. In his first courtroom appearance in Acts 23, Paul stood before a group of Pharisees and Sadducees—Jewish leaders in what was known as the Sanhedrin. Paul declared Jesus to be the Messiah Whom the prophets had foretold and spoke of how he had been changed by Jesus and how He had come to change the world. His audience, the religious leaders of that day, knew the Word of God better than anyone. What then would cause them not to believe Who Jesus was when He was in their midst? Jesus was open about His relationship with the Father and demonstrated His power through signs and wonders. Even when He was hung on a cross, He defeated death and rose again. So why were men who were waiting for the Messiah opposed to Him?

Not only did they oppose Jesus, they also wanted to kill Paul who was proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah. They wanted to shut him up once and for all. Why would religious people do that? I'm of the belief that the Pharisees wanted a Messiah, but not the Messiah of God. They had another Messiah in mind. They wanted a Messiah who would live according to their rules and regulations, fitting their mold. He would like the people they liked and dislike the people they disliked. In essence, they wanted a Messiah of their own making.

Instead, Jesus lived according to His Father's will, not human will. Jesus preached His Father's words, not those of the Pharisees. Jesus was a Friend of sinners, not a friend to the Pharisees. Because of this, they eliminated Him as being a Messiah they could accept. He wasn't what they were looking for; He didn't agree with them.

Can I tell you that the spirit of the Pharisees and the Sadducees—who talked a good game of waiting for the Messiah but were opposing Him when He actually arrived—is alive and well today. We might not have the harshness of their ways, but instead we have subtleties. In our culture we have people who say, "I love Jesus" and they will claim to love His teachings, but they have what I call "Dalmatian theology." They pick spots in the Bible they like and leave the other spots out. They'll choose words or phrases of Jesus, like "Love one another," and "Love your neighbor as yourself, and "Don't judge," as though they're in a cafeteria line. "I'll take a little of this Jesus and a little of that Jesus." But all the while, they're leaving parts of Jesus on the table. Inevitably, they'll construct a Jesus of their own making. This is "media Jesus." People might say they love Jesus and they love His teachings, but they really only love certain teachings of His.

They'll read the Sermon on the Mount, or at least the first part in the first 20 verses of Matthew 5. But after they get out of chapter five, Jesus gets really serious—even what they would call bigoted. He becomes harsh and even intolerant. But that's not the Jesus they want and if someone points out that Jesus said other things than what they want to hear, they don't like it.

Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me*" (John 14:6). The same people who say they love a Kumbaya Jesus and group hugs don't want anything to do with that Jesus. There may even be some here this morning

who have constructed a Jesus in the same way the Pharisees did. "I'll take Jesus, as long as He fits into my paradigm. I'll follow Jesus as long as He does what I want Him to do. I will love Jesus as long as He allows me to do the things I want to do. I'll make my own Jesus; Jesus will not make me." When you fall into that, Paul made it clear that we are standing in opposition to the one true God, the one true Savior.

Are you in opposition to the gospel by sugar-coating it or changing it to make Jesus something He is not?

Some will see it as an opportunity.

In Acts 24 Paul moved on to a Roman appellate court and stood before Governor Felix. Felix had married a Jewish woman, so he had some knowledge of what was going on. He was brought in to bring order out of the chaos in the Jewish controversy. As he listened to what Paul said, he did not oppose what he was hearing. Rather, Luke records that Felix engaged Paul in conversation. We read in Acts 24:24-25, *"After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, 'Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity, I will summon you.'"*

Notice that word "opportunity." Essentially, he was saying, "When it is convenient, I will bring you back to me." He still sounds incredibly open, but there's an opportunity. What is the opportunity? Luke tells us in verse 26: *"At the same time [Felix] hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him."*

The second response we get to the gospel is that there might be an opportunity to gain something. Felix saw conversing about the gospel as a monetary opportunity. Why in the world would Governor Felix, who apparently had all the wealth and prestige he needed, seek money from a prisoner? Well, let's think back because context is king. Remember that Paul came into Jerusalem with a large offering for the Christians that he had collected from the Gentile churches. Scholars believe this offering would have serviced hundreds if not thousands of people for a significant season of time. Felix probably knew Paul came to the city with bags of money, so maybe he had more where that came from. Or maybe all Paul's followers would hear he was in prison and would bring Felix a bribe so he could be released. So Felix kept talking to Paul, hoping that his attention would entice Paul to offer him money. But at the end of the day, Felix was not being changed by the gospel. He was using it only as a means to another end: he wanted to be richer.

Here's another question for you this morning: are you pursuing the gospel, not so you can be saved, but so you can get something else? Some of you may be here, not because you've been changed or want to be changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, but because it will benefit you in some way that has nothing to do with Jesus. Maybe you're here this morning, young person, and the only reason is that you want Mom and Dad to think you're okay with God. But you know that as soon as you're out of their house, going to church will be the first thing you cross off your list. Maybe you're a spouse this morning and you know you won't get what you want from your spouse if they know you're not committed to Christ. So you play along. You play the part of liking their religion and their God because it benefits you.

Before I dated Amanda, I did what was anathema for many young Christians. I was dating a girl who was very religious but who did not have a real relationship with Jesus Christ. She was a non-believer when we started dating. Judge that as you will. I was told by my mentors, including my dad and my youth pastor, that this was dangerous ground. It wasn't a good idea to be too deeply connected with someone who didn't accept Christ. Very quickly I began to present the gospel to her. We had discussions and debates. Many of our first interactions were more about Jesus and why she needed to be saved than they were about our likes or dislikes. I knew if this thing was going to work, she had to come to know Christ.

About a month into our dating, a situation came up that provided me with a perfect opportunity to share the gospel without apology. I didn't do it with an ultimatum like, "If you don't accept Him, then I'm not going to be with you anymore." But unbeknownst to me, she decided she wanted to be saved. She wanted to live for Christ. I remember how excited I was. This was before cell phones, so I went home and woke up my mom and dad. I said, "She's bowed the knee to Jesus! She's in a relationship with Jesus." I was expecting them to be excited. My dad just looked at me and said, "We'll see." I said, "What are you talking about? Why would you not be excited that the love of my life has come to know Christ." Dad replied, "Because people will do anything to stay in a relationship. I don't know why she would want to do that with you, but..."

How true is that? How many young people have bought into the belief that their future spouse is a follower of Jesus Christ, when really it's all about wanting to be with you? There may be a lot of us who don't realize that the gospel for us really isn't about Jesus, but about an opportunity for us. The American gospel that's being promoted in our country is a gospel that says, "What can Jesus

do for me?" rather than being about receiving what He offers us. He's not a means to an end—He is the end. He Himself is what we're all actually striving after.

Are you opposing the gospel? Are you seeing it as an opportunity to gain something else?

Some will make it the object of ridicule.

There's a third response, which is making the gospel an object of ridicule. In the third installment of Paul's trials, in Acts 25 and 26, Paul next testified in front of Festus, who succeeded Felix. Festus listened to Paul's testimony, then he brought in Herod Agrippa. As Paul was preaching, notice what it says in Acts 26:24: *"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.'" To which Paul responded, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words."*

How many of you have shared how Jesus has changed your life with your family, neighbors, coworkers or fellow students only to be ridiculed or mocked? How many of you have been called crazy for what you believe? If you haven't, then you're not around family like I am or around friends like I have. When I start talking about my walk with God and what I believe about Jesus at my other job—as a boss in a catering company—some of my employees will say, "That's craziness. Do you really believe that?" Not too long ago I was asked if I believed Adam and Eve were real people. "Do you really believe Adam and Eve were walking around naked in a garden and that a serpent tempted them with a piece of fruit from a tree? And because of that, we all got plunged into sin? Do you really believe that?" I said, "Absolutely." They said, "That's crazy." Yet this was what Paul was called. "You've lost your mind." One of the ways people will respond when you are open and honest about the gospel is with ridicule.

Richard Dawkins, a very famous atheist, says, "The only response to people who follow the Bible is to rightly ridicule them to no end, because what they believe is absolute absurdity." That's what the world thinks of what we believe, whether they are honest or not to our faces—and some will be, as Festus was with Paul. "Paul, you've lost your mind."

Imagine for a moment what your neighbor is thinking. Every Sunday when you leave for church, they're cleaning their yard or washing their car or having family time, maybe going to travel sports. Or maybe it's just a day to watch more TV. But every Sunday they see you load up the family and head to church. Or they see you heading out for your small group or youth group—and they think, "You're at church all the time. What are you doing there?" "Well, we sing to an invisible God. We talk about how great He is. Then we listen to a man rant and rave about how awesome this Jesus is—a Man Who lived 2,000 years ago, Who died on a cross and we believe He rose from the dead. We give our lives to Him and we give our money to Him. We believe when we die, we don't just close our eyes. We're going to stand before this God and He's going to let us into a place called heaven. We've never been there. We've never seen it. We've never even talked with anybody in real life who's been there. But it's the great hope we live for."

If your neighbor is really honest with you, he might say, "It's time to move. Are you kidding me? How do you talk to this God?" "I pray to Him." "Pray to who?" "God." "Well, do you see Him?" "No." "Does He talk back to you vocally?" "No. But He leads me and guides me." "Listen, in our world we call those types of people crazy."

Here's the thing. If you're not being called crazy for believing some of this stuff, then the world doesn't know what you really believe. If you're sitting there thinking, "I've never been called crazy," well, have you ever told people what you actually believe? You'll be called crazy. Listen, that doesn't mean every time a Christian is called crazy it is Jesus' fault. But I will tell you the gospel will cause people to think we're crazy and they'll make us objects of ridicule.

Some will be open to it.

Finally, after all the responses that don't accomplish anything good, some people will be open to the gospel. Enter Herod Agrippa. He was a Jewish man who had been around Christianity and the teachings of Christ. He was the last of the Herods, who were kind of like the Caesars in Rome. They were the ones who ruled over Judea and the land of Israel and they were not a good lot. In fact, Herod Agrippa was probably as good as they got.

Herod Agrippa's family had been ruling since before the birth of Christ. One of his relatives was the one who sought to kill Christ as a baby, what is called the "killing of the innocents" in Bethlehem, when all the boys two years old and younger were slaughtered. Another Herod in Agrippa's family had beheaded John the Baptist and put his head on a platter. Another Herod was in power during the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. These were not nice people.

That may have been why Paul considered himself fortunate to be presenting his testimony before Herod Agrippa. We read in Acts 26:2, *"I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews."*

Agrippa knew what was going on. Paul was essentially saying, "Your family has tried to destroy us, but we've only gotten stronger. You know it is because we believe with all our hearts that Jesus Christ has been raised from the grave." Agrippa knew the impact Jesus had on thousands of people in his region. Agrippa realized there was enough veracity to the claims of Christ that he was willing to keep an open mind. Paul said in Acts 26:26–28:

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."

Right now, you're among people at work, school, and in your neighborhood who are open to the claims of Christ. We should be thankful for that and take every opportunity to speak of Christ.

Some will obey it.

Salvation is not a game of horseshoes or bocce ball. Close isn't good enough. Just being open to the gospel doesn't mean you're obedient to it. Is that true of people you know—that they're open, but they're not there? None of these responses—ridicule, opposition, openness—will work. The only way we can respond properly to the gospel is to obey it. Paul is the character in this story we need to follow. Everyone else responded wrongly; only Paul received and believed the truth of the gospel.

We hear Paul's story for the third time in Acts 26 and I want to comment briefly on it. Paul described how he came into contact with Jesus. These other people had heard the gospel from Paul, but Paul had heard it from Jesus Himself. At the time, he too was far from God.

In the vernacular we use in churches today, we speak of how people should "accept Jesus as their Savior." That's theologically wrong. You might disagree, but here's how I see it. We go into the pet store of worldviews and beliefs, then we find that little cylinder where they have all the puppies. We're open to bringing home a puppy. We're open to buying what someone else is selling. The puppies are cute, with all their different quirks, and we pick out—we "accept"—a certain puppy to bring into our lives. We take that puppy out and tell him we love him because he was the cutest or the friendliest in the bunch. That's in a sense what we do with Jesus. We look at all the gods and say, "Well, this god has this feature that I like, but I really prefer Jesus. I want this Jesus to come home with me. I accept this Jesus, so I'll pull Him out of many and take Him home."

That's not how the New Testament speaks about the gospel. Rather, the gospel is a command given by a Superior Officer to you and me, people who are far less than that Superior Officer. God says, "I am offering you something and the way you receive it is by obeying My command to do something."

Notice the words that are given about becoming a follower of Christ: "Repent. Turn. Believe. Follow." All of these words, every time they are used in the New Testament, are commands, not suggestions. They're not offers—they're commands. "Do this. Believe this. Repent of this. Trust this. Follow this." They're commands that are to be obeyed. When you came to know Christ, you did not accept Him as if He was there "on sale" for you to take. You heard the gospel call and you made a decision. "Will I reject it or will I obey it?" For those who are truly saved, you have obeyed the command of God and because of it, you've been saved.

What keeps people from this salvation proves to us that this is a command and not a suggestion. Paul said in Acts 26:14, *"And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to fight against the goads.'"*

What in the world is he talking about? What are goads? In his day, a goad was a long stick that had a sharp object tied to the end of it to poke a sheep or other animal. It's the way a shepherd or horseman would get the animals to go in the direction he wanted them to. Paul was being told he was kicking at the goads of God in his rebellion. When an animal was goaded, it would instinctively kick back against the person if he didn't want to go the way he was being directed. In a similar sense, God had been goading Paul to turn around all the while Paul had been persecuting the church. He wanted Paul to turn, believe and follow Him. Then finally, Paul yielded to God and obeyed Him.

If you are one who is far from God, what goads is God using in your life? It might be a life that lacks fulfillment. You've filled your life with sensuality and other worldly things, but none of them have been satisfying. That is God goading you to turn to Him. Jesus said, *"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"* (Matthew 11:28).

Even as we're pursuing these things, we're kicking against God. Paul finally realized it wasn't worth it and decided to believe. What goads are you kicking at today?

Which role fits best?

My second point will be really short. Going back to the game of "Guess Who?", which one are you? Because you're in church on Sunday, you might say, "I'm Paul. I obeyed the gospel." Let me ask you three more questions. If you say you are obedient to the gospel, let me ask you this.

Have you been transformed?

In Acts 26, we're told for the third time in three chapters that Paul went from being a man who hated Christ and hated Christians to a man who loved Christ and wanted to bring people into the Kingdom of God. What changed? It was an experience in which, once and for all, he obeyed Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

Let me ask you this. You say you're obedient to the gospel, so what areas of transformation have taken place in your life? Are you speaking in a way you didn't speak prior to meeting Christ? Are you living in a way different from the way you used to live? Are your desires and pursuits the same as they were when you were in death and darkness? Or are they different now because you've met Christ? What aspects of transformation have taken place in your life?

Don't just say with your mouth that you're obedient if you're not living up to these things. Paul says there are acts of repentance that will show whether we're truly believers or not. Are you transformed?

What do you treasure?

At the end of chapter 26, Agrippa said to Paul, *"In a short time, would you persuade me to be a Christian?"* Paul responded, *"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."* In other words, *"Whatever it takes, I wish everyone would find Christ. I'll do whatever I have to do, however long it takes, to proclaim Christ to you, so that you can become His follower as I am. The only part of my life I don't want you to have is the chains and my suffering. I want you to have the blessings."*

Let me ask you: what are the things you treasure? Is it your finances, your family, your comforts, your pursuits? Paul said as an obedient follower of Jesus Christ, *"The one thing I treasure is to find others who will be obedient with me. I will strive toward that end until God calls me home."*

Are you testifying?

Are you telling others about Jesus? Three times Paul had the opportunity to say anything he wanted in these court appearances, but always he chose to share his testimony and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Are you doing that? Are you showing the world and showing the God Who saved you that you're obedient to His gospel by being transformed by it, by treasuring it above all other things and by testifying to it?