

Good morning, Moon Valley!

Today we resume a sermon series titled, □ “The Church that Changed the World.” It is a study through the New Testament book of Acts.

Our text for today is □ Acts 21:37-22:21. From this text, we are going to learn one important way that we can bring life to our divided and contentious culture—one way that we can change the world—one way to love people and to fulfill God’s purpose for our lives as believers.

It is something that anyone can do. It involves no special training or knowledge. It requires no extraordinary talent. You already have what it takes. And it is modeled for us by the apostle Paul in our text.

You may recall that Paul is in Jerusalem, which is the final destination on his third missionary journey. He has brought with him a few ministry partners, some of whom are from churches that, at Paul’s urging, are providing financial support to the church in Jerusalem. To this point in history, the church in Jerusalem has been the mother church—the hub of Christianity. It has been the church home of the twelve apostles, including Peter, John, and James, the half-brother of Jesus. Its members are predominately Jewish.

In the culture at large, tensions between Jews and Gentiles in Israel have intensified, and Jewish nationalism has been on the rise. The people and leaders of Jerusalem have shifted further to the right in response to their culture war with Roman Gentiles. And observance of the Jewish Mosaic law was viewed as an expression of fidelity to Israel. Jews who believed in Jesus and those who did not had a common enemy: the evil Roman Gentiles. Observance of the Mosaic law both in

and outside the church was viewed as a patriotic act of solidarity in the political culture war.<sup>1</sup> And this culture war bled into the church.

Some of the Jewish believers in the church at Jerusalem are hearing gossip that Paul, himself a Jew, has become anti-Jewish. Rumor has it that Paul has been teaching Jews to forsake the law of Moses, commanding them not to be circumcised, and telling them to forsake their Jewish customs. The suspicion is that Paul has gone liberal, that he has forsaken religious traditions deemed sacred, that he has betrayed his country, that he is a traitorous JINO—you know, a Jew in name only.

The rumor is patently false. The truth is, Paul has not discouraged any Jews from being Jewish. He has not told any Jews that they should not be circumcised. Jewish Christians are free to be as Jewish as they want as long as their traditions do not become a kind of legalism that replaces faith in Christ with works as the means by which we are saved.

At this point, you may be wondering, “Well, then how in the world did such false accusations about Paul start circulating in the church?”

I believe the church in Jerusalem got caught up in the culture war between Jews and Gentiles. And they put on culture-war goggles. Those donning culture-war goggles abandon critical thinking, rationality, and nuance in favor of partisanship, polarization, and oversimplification.

And Paul is a casualty of culture war.

Paul is distinguished as an apostle to the Gentiles. But through the lens of culture-war goggles, this makes him a Gentile sympathizer. As a Gentile sympathizer, Paul is no longer in the Jewish “in group,” which means he no longer gets the benefit of any doubts. Anything he has

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<sup>1</sup> Keener, vol. 3, pp. 3115-3116.

ever said that could be remotely construed as negative toward the Jewish law or circumcision is assumed to be bad and anti-Jewish.

Some unbelieving Jews from Ephesus—perhaps some who had traveled to Jerusalem in observance of the day of Pentecost—they see Paul in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. And they attack, vilifying Paul as an anti-Jewish, Gentile-sympathizing enemy. They accuse Paul of unlawfully bringing Gentiles into the temple.

Once again, the allegations are untrue. While Trophimus, a Gentile believer from Ephesus had indeed accompanied Paul to Jerusalem, Paul had not taken him into the temple.

But when one wears culture-war goggles, one can bend the truth to suit one's partisan purposes. Bringing Trophimus to Jerusalem might as well be bringing him to the temple. It is a small-but-expedient stretch that allows them to cancel their enemy. Because to bring a Gentile into the temple was to defile the temple. It was an offense punishable by death.

A mob mobilizes to apprehend and kill Paul.

But the Roman tribune intervenes. The tribune is a Roman military commander stationed in a garrison directly adjacent to the temple. His priority is to maintain order. So, he immediately takes Roman troops with him to arrest Paul and bring him to the barracks to calm things down and sort things out.

This is where our text begins in □ Acts 21:37. And this is where Paul models for us the one thing he does to bring life. It says,

ESV Acts 21:37 As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek?"

The tribune is surprised that Paul speaks to him in Greek, probably because he mistakes him for someone else. The tribune's confusion is reflected in □ verse 38, where he says,

ESV Acts 21:38 “Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?”

History tells us that an Egyptian false prophet had mobilized a small army on the Mount of Olives to attack Jerusalem. The Romans had put down the revolt, but the Egyptian leader ran away.<sup>2</sup>

Apparently, the tribune in our text has mistakenly assumed Paul to be the runaway Egyptian leader. Paul corrects him in □ verse 39.

ESV Acts 21:39 Paul replied, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.”

Paul asks and is granted permission to speak.

At this point, put yourself in Paul's sandals. You have been wrongly accused by partisan Jews who have their angry culture-war goggles on so tight they have completely misunderstood and misjudged you. Their accusations are patently false. And they are now seeking to kill you for no good reason.

What do you say in the face of such partisan acrimony? Do you try to explain how wrong these people are? Do you decry the injustice of it

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<sup>2</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, Acts, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2016), 428.

all? Do you try to take their side in an effort to save yourself? Do you turn to the tribune to seek his favor?

Paul doesn't do any of these things. Instead, he seizes the opportunity to do something no one expects him to do.

He shares his testimony of how Jesus changed him.

Paul simply tells the story of the new life he has found in Christ. And he does so in such a disarming, unanswerable way, because he completely sidesteps the partisan acrimony to give a factual account of what he himself has experienced and what it means to him. Paul rises above petty culture wars.

The big idea Paul models for us is this: □ Personal testimony transcends partisan acrimony. That is to say, just telling your story rises above culture wars.

There is nothing quite like a first-person account of personal transformation. Nothing compares to simply, humbly telling your own story.

No one has legitimate grounds to say, "I disagree" because a personal story is not an opinion or a selling point; it's just your story. No one has a bona fide basis for saying, "you're wrong" because you're not contending for what is right; you're simply explaining what happened to you. You're not throwing down the gauntlet; you're just laying out the facts.

Perhaps the simplest testimony is given by a man born blind in John, chapter 9. There was a culture war then, too. It was Jesus versus the Jewish religious establishment.

In the middle of that culture war, Jesus heals the blind man. And some members of the religious establishment known as Pharisees are incensed because the healing took place on the Sabbath in violation of their rules. The Pharisees interrogated the healed man, trying to draw him into the culture war by getting him to corroborate that Jesus is a sinner for doing work on the Sabbath. But the man rises above the partisan acrimony to give his simple, humble testimony. In □ John 9:25:

ESV John 9:25 . . . “Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

That is as simple as it gets. “I don’t know about your beef with Jesus. But here’s what I do know. Before, I was blind. Then, I encountered Jesus. Now, I see. That’s my story.”

Personal testimony transcends partisan acrimony.

Back in the story of our text, the tribune grants permission, and Paul begins to address the angry mob in □ verse 40 of chapter 21 and the first two verses of chapter 22.

ESV Acts 21:40 And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:

□ ESV Acts 22:1 “Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.” 2 And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. . . .

Paul addresses the Jewish audience in their own language, not in Greek. Greek was likely Paul’s native language. Greek would have been understood by most Jews in the audience. And Greek was the primary

language of the Gentiles. Nevertheless, Paul shows respect for his audience by speaking their language, either formal Hebrew or the more commonly used Hebrew dialect known as Aramaic.

That a perceived Gentile sympathizer like Paul would address his Jewish audience in their own language quiets the crowd.

Paul's personal testimony comes in □ three simple parts:

1. Before Christ
2. Encountering Christ
3. And, After Christ

The "Before Christ" part begins in □ verse 3.

ESV Acts 22:2 . . . And he said: 3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day."

Here Paul establishes common ground with his Jewish audience, saying "I am a Jew."

He was born in Tarsus, well outside of Israel, the land God promised to his people. In the eyes of some, this may have made Paul a second-class Jew. But Paul counters this notion by explaining that he was raised in Jerusalem under the tutelage of Gamaliel, one of the one of the most respected leaders of Judaism.

Paul explains that he was and is just as zealous for God as his audience. This is Paul's way of saying that he gets why the people might be angry at the prospect of a fellow Jew disrespectfully violating Jewish religious laws. In □ verses 4 and 5, he provides evidence of his own zeal for God, saying,

ESV Acts 22:4 “I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, 5 as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. . . .”

The □ “Way” is the way of Christ, or more specifically those who follow Christ. Paul had considered followers of Christ to be blasphemers. Paul persecuted such Christian blasphemers by imprisoning some and killing others, a fact to which the Jewish high priest and whole council of Jewish elders could testify.

In fact, these Jewish leaders had commissioned Paul to go to Damascus to round up Christians and bring them to justice. Paul explains this in the rest of □ verse 5.

ESV Acts 22:5 “. . . From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.”

That brings us to the second part of Paul’s story: his encounter with Christ, which is presented in □ verses 6 through 16. It is so simple, I am just going to read it through.

ESV Acts 22:6 “As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me.”

□ ESV Acts 22:7 “And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’”

□ ESV Acts 22:8 “And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’”



- ESV Acts 22:9 “Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me.”
- ESV Acts 22:10 “And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.’”
- ESV Acts 22:11 “And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.”
- ESV Acts 22:12 “And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, 13 came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him.”
- ESV Acts 22:14 “And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; 15 for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.’”
- ESV Acts 22:16 “‘And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’”

The call of Ananias for Paul to be baptized does not imply that the physical act of baptism cleanses from sin. We are eternally saved and our sins are forgiven the moment we believe in Jesus as our Savior. We are saved through faith alone in Christ alone. Water baptism is merely an outward symbol of the inward transformation that has already occurred.

The New Testament pattern is for converts to be baptized after believing in Jesus.

This confirms that, through his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul has come to saving faith in Jesus. And it is no wonder. An appearance of the risen Lord who strikes Paul blind and questions his persecution would have been pretty convincing.

Ananias now bids Paul to be baptized to publicly picture the cleansing that has already taken place.

As an aside, if you are interested in being baptized or just want to find out more about baptism, I will be leading a baptism orientation next Sunday, October 15, in Room 303, right after the church service. The orientation will help you determine whether baptism is a step you want to take right now.

Having described his encounter with Christ, Paul now gives the part of his story that summarizes his life after his encounter with Jesus, beginning in □ verse 17. He says,

ESV Acts 22:17 “When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance 18 and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’”

This suggests that, after Paul’s conversion, he began to share his testimony concerning Jesus in Jerusalem. But the Lord directed Paul to leave Jerusalem right away because the residents would not accept his testimony. While personal stories can be disarming, it doesn’t mean everybody is going to accept them.

Upon receiving the directive from the Lord to leave Jerusalem, Paul argued against it, probably because he cared so much for his fellow

Jews that he wanted to bring the life of Jesus to them. In □ verses 19 and 20, Paul explains,

ESV Acts 22:19 “And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you.’”

□ ESV Acts 22:20 ““And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.””

Paul’s argument with the Lord seems to be that, surely, the Jews in Jerusalem who knew him as a zealous persecutor of Christians would be persuaded to believe in Jesus, because nothing short of God’s transforming power could account for such a radical change in Paul.

Perhaps Paul also reasoned that, surely, they would be in awe of the grace of God in forgiving Paul and using him in spite of all the horrible things he had done to oppose Jesus and his followers.

But, as Paul explains in □ verse 21, the Lord was unrelenting.

ESV Acts 22:21 “And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

Paul explains to his Jewish audience that the Lord himself commissioned him to bring the life of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. Paul does not shy away from his association with the Gentiles his audience abhors; he explains it as a mandate from God.

That’s his story.

In our text, Paul models for us the big idea: □ Personal testimony transcends partisan acrimony. We are now left to consider what this means for us.

What is your personal testimony?

I encourage you to think through what it would be, perhaps using the simple three-part outline: before Jesus, encountering Jesus, and after Jesus. You might even want to write it out. Not necessarily that you would read it to anyone. But sometimes writing it out helps you think through some things you may be taking for granted. Writing out your testimony can be an act of worship.

It doesn't have to be a literary masterpiece. Just your story in your own words.

You may be thinking that your testimony is boring. There were probably no blinding lights. No voice of Jesus on the road to Tucson. No miraculous restoration of sight.

And for those who came to faith as a child, like my own children, it's hard to say that Jesus saved you from a life of debauchery at the age of five.

But the power of a personal testimony lies not in how sensational it is, but in how authentic it is.

If God can use a small stone from the sling of David to slay Goliath, he can also take a small story from your mouth to bring life to others.

Here's my story.

I was born and raised in Tucson, the youngest of a family of four.

We were a tight-knit family—still are—but not really a religious family. At least not back then. On Sundays we went to Dairy Queen. Or maybe to Benson and St. David to visit the grandparents. But not to church.

When I was eight, Mom had me baptized in the Mormon church because she had some Mormon relatives who had been really good to her and it seemed like the right thing to do, but it didn't seem to take. By the time I hit puberty, I was a full-on blasphemer.

Upon graduation from Rincon High School in Tucson, I started dating this pretty girl named Cathy. Striking blue eyes. Dimpled smile. Fair cheeks dappled with freckles. As far as I could tell there was only one thing wrong with her.

She was a Christian.

And not just in name only, she was a full-on follower of Jesus. So, there we were in the summer of 1975, the date-and-debate couple: Bob the Blasphemer versus Cathy the Christian. Despite our theological differences, we were crazy about each other. Partly because I was irresistible.

Summer turned to fall, and Cathy went to Biola College (a do-gooder Christian college in California) while I stayed in Tucson to attend Arizona's first and finest university. We continued to date long distance and she gave me a Bible, which I began to read for the first time, mostly to try to discredit it because I wanted to convert her to my way of thinking.

But God has a sense of humor.

As I began to read the Bible for myself, particularly the gospel accounts of the life and claims of Jesus—his love, his invitations to believe, his crucifixion, his resurrection, his promise of eternal life to those who have faith in him—I was strangely drawn to him in a way that I had never experienced before.

In the summer of 1976, I found myself believing in Jesus as my Savior. I didn't tell anybody at first because I didn't want to be associated with the creepy, charlatan preachers on TV. I still don't. And I didn't want Cathy to think that I had become a Christian just because she wanted me to. Being a Christian was certainly not what I had envisioned for myself, so I didn't quite know what to do at first.

But the more I read and the more I got involved in the little church Cathy attended, the more comfortable I felt in my new skin.

I was the first in my family to believe in Jesus for eternal life. I am delighted that every other member of my immediate family has since believed. God's grace is amazing.

Cathy and I were married in 1978, in the middle of my junior year of college. She put me through school, we had two kids, Candace and Chase, and I worked in the field of marketing research for about fifteen years. We were doing great. Nice house, two cars, a motorhome, a boat, and I just got a promotion to the number-two position in my company.

So, I quit.

We sold all our stuff, and I went to seminary to become a pastor. We burned through all our savings. I graduated magna cum laude and bank account nada. And after a three-year stint as an associate pastor, we started a new church in the cafeteria of a junior-high school with

nothing but a small group of wonderfully committed people and the faint smell of school lunch. Moon Valley began.

And I love it. Jesus is the most important thing in my life. He gives me hope and meaning and joy, even in the darkest, most painful seasons. And the word of God is so helpful and timeless and enriching to my life that it's hard to imagine my life without it.

Cathy and I resonate with the words of the apostle John who says, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 John 1:4).

Now, I want to bring the life of Jesus to my world in various ways because I have no greater life to live, and I can think of no greater gift to give.

That's my story.

Today we have an opportunity to celebrate and remember our own Jesus stories through communion.

When we eat the bread, we are reminded of his body sacrificed on the cross in payment for our sins.

When we drink the cup, we are reminded of his blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

When we partake of these elements, we are proclaiming our faith in Jesus as our Savior, the maker of our story.

In a moment, I am going to pray. After that, some music will be played. During the music, whenever you are ready, you may come forward to either one of the tables in front to receive the elements.

You may partake of the elements immediately at the table. Or you may take the elements back to your seat.

If, for any reason, you would prefer me to serve you the elements where you are seated, that would be my privilege. Whenever you are ready, just raise your hand, and I will come to serve you.

Let's pray. Lord, we are so grateful for your sacrifice on the cross in our place and on our behalf. You are the maker of our story. A story of redemption. A story of forgiveness. A story of new life. Please use our story to bring the life of Jesus to others. Amen.