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“The Acts of Bethany: Obeying the Vision”
Acts 26:19-29

Attention: Tom Friends of The New York Times asked coach Jimmy Johnson what he told his players before leading the Dallas Cowboys onto the field for the 1993 Super Bowl.

"I told them that if I laid a two-by-four across the floor, everybody there would walk across it and not fall, because our focus would be on walking the length of that board. But if I put that same board 10 stories high between two buildings, only a few would make it, because the focus would be on falling."

Johnson told his players not to focus on the crowd, the media, or the possibility of falling, but to focus on each play of the game as if it were a good practice session. The Cowboys won the game 52-7.

Phil Grant wrote that “A vision is the dominant factor that governs your life. It determines all the choices you are making. It's what's left after all the layers are peeled away like an onion. Clinging like glue to the inside of your rib cage. ... It's what your mind naturally gravitates toward when it is not legitimately concentrating on something else. It's ... what determines your friendships and your relationships that you are cultivating. ... It's what your prayers are about--what you dream about and are giving money toward. [Topic: Vision, Subtopic: Dominates Life, Index: 506]

In the past few weeks we have been looking at how the early church carried out Jesus' command in Acts 1:8 (NKJV) But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.", and how it applies to us right here at Bethany.

We began with their witness to their near neighbors, and how it extended out from Jerusalem, and God's call to us to be God's witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Much of the book of Acts is filled with the amazing stories of three Missionary Journeys of Paul, whose Jewish name is Saul, but when it became evident that he was going to mainly be a missionary to the gentiles, began to use his Latin name, Paul (Paulus).

His life is a powerful testimony to the power of the gospel and a vision from God to transform a life.

Our text this morning comes from the events leading to his trip to Rome, which was the result of his appeal as a Roman citizen to have his case heard by Caesar.

In the course of his legal process, he appeared before high political figures, and in Acts 26, he appears before Pontius Festus, the Roman Governor,

King Herod Agrippa II and his sister and consort, Bernice.

In this passage Paul gives his testimony of his call to follow Christ and sums up his mission in life: God says, "I am sending you to 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.'

The next thing he says is, Acts 26:19 (ESV) "Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision".

This morning: "Obeying the Vision"

1. God has a vision for each person who will follow Him that, if acted upon, will transform their life.

A. Paul's vision turned his life upside down. V. 12-23

His conversion story begins in v. 12 [read v. 12-18]

- The next verses tell how this vision transformed Paul's life: Acts 26:19-20 (NKJV) "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.

It was a bold, courageous testimony!

Having a vision of what God wants you to do for his glory is a rewarding experience, but a vision from God demands a commitment to put your life and your lifestyle on the line to see that it is accomplished.

Look at the kind of cost it had for Paul!

- But Paul was not disobedient.

How can you be disobedient to your Vision?

1. By rejecting the Vision.

2. By Revising the Vision.

Make it "realistic"

Make it comfortable.

Make it inoffensive.

3. By Receiving the Vision in theory but not in practice

In *Christianity Today* a while back Billy Graham spoke of the future of the evangelical church. He says it will be determined by six things, and the first is, "It will depend on our Vision"

Dr. Graham said the two enemies of Vision are complacency and discouragement.

Complacency makes us lazy. Discouragement paralyzes us.

Complacency is pride or self-sufficiency in the face of success.

Discouragement is despair in the face of evil.

trans: A Vision is something to be obeyed.

B. I have a vision for my life and for this church: to turn passive Christians into full-time ministers, and Lost people into people with a mission.

Paul “declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles”.

1. “Damascus” was not Paul's home, but where he was when he got the vision.

- His response was urgent and immediate.

- Paul did this kind of thing throughout his whole life. He did not wait for a place of comfort, but ministered in prison, in synagogues, in homes, along the road, in a storm at sea, etc.

2. "Jerusalem and Judea" was Paul's "home turf"

A witness by Paul throughout all the region of Judea is not recorded elsewhere in Acts but must have occurred during the time right after his conversion when he was in Jerusalem

It's one thing to minister in foreign places and situations, but are you willing to be a witness at home, where you are well known?

3. "Then to the Gentiles" is the equivalent of sharing the good news across a cultural barrier.

C. What is God's vision for you?

Obedience to a Vision produces noticeable change

v. 20b [I preached] “that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.”

1. Step one is Repentance and Faith.

a. Turning away from the world's values.

b. Turning in Faith and trust is to begin to live by Christ's principles, priorities and powers.

There is a price to pay for this: v 21 “For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.”

Paul goes on to explain why the Jews wanted to kill him, and then boldly cites passage after passage of the Old Testament scrip-

tures which have found their fulfillment in the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus.

2. The confirmation that repentance has taken place is Action.

Paul confirmed his testimony by being a witness to all who would listen: v. 22 Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come-- 23 that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."

The inclusiveness of Paul's witness was both social (small and great) and racial (the Jewish people and ... the Gentiles).

His message was always grounded in the scriptures: "saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass".

It can begin with small steps.

Some of these steps might be: [examples]

- Making time to spend with an unbelieving neighbor.

- Breaking a bad habit [substance abuse, etc.]

- Discipline of TV, substituting meditation.

- Breaking a relationship that demands compromise, and making a commitment to a small group, or to a ministry.

- Making a promise to always speak well of others, instead of speaking evil.

Trans: God has a vision for each person who will follow Him that, if acted upon, will transform their life.

2. If you take your vision seriously, some people will think you are a fanatic, but some will believe.

v. 24-27 "Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!"

But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe."

Festus, the Roman Governor, had no point of reference in understanding Paul, so he concluded Paul had "gone round the bend".

Paul's reply is that his is a message of "truth and reason". Christians need never apologize for the gospel as if it was based on myths. The truth of the resurrection did not "happen in a corner", and does in no way defy reason.

King Herod Agrippa grew up hearing the Old Testament scriptures, and Paul's appeal to them would have struck a chord in him.

Paul says to him, "I know you believe". Agrippa had a reputation as a pious Jew, which is why Paul could make this appeal.

What boldness! What courage! What insight!

This is something you and I can say to people as well, for in their heart of hearts, they know God!

What an impression this made! "And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?"

Agrippa put him off, quipping that it was too "short" a time for making such a decision. Paul picked up on Agrippa's remark: short or long, he wanted everyone to trust Christ.

Trans: If you take your vision seriously, some people will think you are a fanatic, but some will believe.

3. If you live according to your vision, you will find it a treasure you would not give up for the world.

V. 28-29 (ESV) And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?"

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."

Can there be any doubt that Paul shared Christ's love for lost people?

The NKJV translates as the KJV, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian."

Are you an "almost Christian"? You say, "Pastor, I'm almost there". Spurgeon said, "Almost persuaded to be a Christian is like the man who was almost pardoned, but he was hanged, like the man who was almost rescued, but he was burned in the house. A man that is almost saved is condemned."

How many "almost Christians" are there in your circle of people?

Action: What Vision is God giving you?

Are you obeying it? Are you praying for people around you for a chance to rescue them for Jesus Christ?