

## ***Jesus Testifies Before the Kings of this World***

Acts 25:23-26:32

Acts of the Exalted Jesus Sermon Series

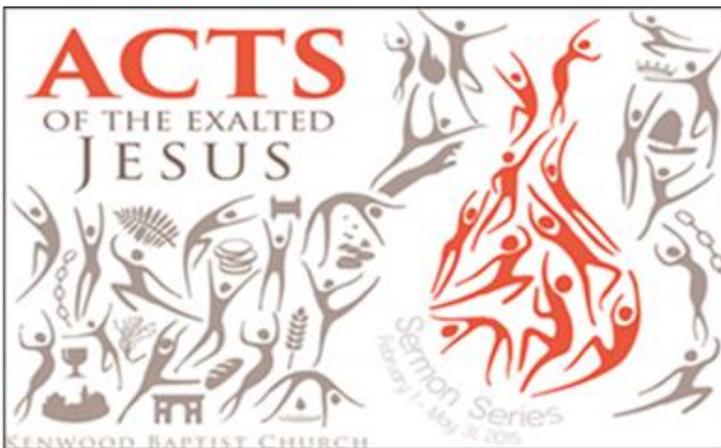
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

May 31, 2015

**TEXT:** Acts 25:23-26:32

I am excited about this passage and what we have to talk about from God's Word this morning.



We finish a large arc that we've been on as a church family looking at the Acts of the Exalted Jesus and seeing what Jesus does in Scripture and how He continues to do that in the world today. It is so fitting that the end of the service this morning is the commissioning of a mission team. That will be the perfect ending to a series on the Book of Acts. This morning we look at the fulfillment of

what Jesus promised in Matthew 10:18-20 when Jesus said:

*“On My account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”*

We look at the conclusion of Acts, which is Paul's great journey in obedience to Christ. From Ephesus last week, he ends up as a prisoner in Caesarea. He appeals to Caesar, and he will end up in the great city of Rome.

We pause now with one of the speeches or defenses that he makes before the kings of the earth, and we will follow what is embedded in Paul's testimony as an example of the truth of what we believe as Christians. It is really a statement of the mission of the church and the vision that should drive us, not only as a local community, but as Christ's vision for the church as a whole. I want to point to one small thing before we look at the text closely, it is this book called *In the Steps of St. Paul* by Peter Walker. This is the best guidebook I know to make the Paul's journeys and the testimonies we read about come to light. Keep your Bible open to Acts as we look at this defense speech. It is a testimony that the apostle Paul makes before King Agrippa and his sister Bernice, and before the Roman governor, Porcius Festus. This happens on the accusation of his own kinsmen, and yet we see that it is Jesus Christ who speaks through him

and speaks directly to us. We set the scene at the end of Acts 23. We read that on this appointed day, Agrippa II, the last of the Herodian kings, along with his sister Bernice, come to Caesarea, the promontory palace for this audience, to hear Paul's defense. Luke tells us that they came in in style. Have you ever known someone whose clothes bespeak their sense of style and taste? They have flowing robes, ornate dress, and they are people of means. They enter in, together with high-ranking officials, prominent people of the city, and Festus, the Roman governor himself, calls Paul in. So you have kings, upper-class people, soldiers, prominent people in the city, and then in comes this man bound in a chain. He is invited to speak for himself. The Roman governor invites Paul to speak to this illustrious gathering. At the beginning of Acts 26, we have the apostle Paul's defense speech. In the Greek text, the word used for defense is *apology*, where we get the study of apologetics, the defense of Christian faith. Paul begins his speech in Acts 26:2 by saying:

*"King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense."*

Paul tells his hearers first of his way of life before being met by Christ, and he reminds his hearers that he is was a zealous man, a man seeking God. He says in Acts 26:4-5:

*"The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee."*

He is setting his religious credentials before his audience and saying: "I sought God; I trusted God; believed in His promises." Then he says in Acts 26:6:

*"And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today."*

Can you imagine saying that in a courtroom setting? "What are you on trial for?" "I am on trial for the truth of what God promised us in Scripture." That is what this trial is about. That is a high-stakes claim: "I am on trial for whether or not God has fulfilled His promises among us or not." As the speech unfolds, the fulfillment of that promise will have universal implications. If God has fulfilled His promise, kept His word, then that has implications for every one of us in this room, not only for all those who heard Paul in the promontory palace of Caesarea. He is very clear about what this promise is. He says in Acts 26:7:

*"This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me."*

What is this hope? He tells us in Acts 26:8:

*"Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?"*

The promise of God is that at the turning of the ages, He would send the Redeemer and raise

Him from the dead, providing forgiveness for sins. If that is true for Paul's hearers, it has implications. If it is true this morning that God has kept His promise, made provision for our sins which produce death, and has brought resurrection from the dead, that eternal life begins now, if that is true, it has implications for all of us. Do you believe that? Do you believe that eternal life has begun and we are in it? We are called, then, to herald it and announce it. We have something to share with the rest of the world.

Paul says as he continues his own testimony in Acts 26:9, that before seeing Christ:

*"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth."*

Many in the world today are convinced that Christ should be opposed. The manifestation of Paul's opposition to Jesus was overt persecution. Many alive today are convinced that Jesus and His followers should be opposed. Some in our country imagine that the followers of Jesus will somehow restrict human freedom, which is the highest virtue in this society. It is true, actually, that if Jesus is exalted and raised from the dead, that does put limits on my freedom, and yet it is also the gateway to Jesus who said: *"If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."* Real freedom comes from knowing Christ. Others in the world are convinced that Jesus should be opposed because the doctrine of Christ seems blasphemous to certain religious groups alive now.

Paul manifested his opposition to Jesus through persecution of the followers of Christ. In his zeal to oppose Christ, he says, he went beyond the borders of the land to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests to arrest the followers of Jesus. He was in active opposition to Him, and he is clear about it. Then, one thing changes everything, and it is the same thing that changes everything for you and for me. In Acts 26:13, Paul says:

*"About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions."*

I remember being a third-grade student at Greenwood Elementary School in Michigan, and my teacher explained to me that an eclipse was going to be happening. I was so excited, even though I didn't even know what an eclipse was. She said we would be building these things out of cardboard boxes and were going to put aluminum foil on the back to get to see the eclipse. I was even more excited about it. She said we would all position ourselves behind the swing, set up our boxes, and were going to look at the eclipse. I thought, "This is awesome!" Then she said, "Don't turn around when the eclipse is happening and look at the sun, because you'll be blinded." My enthusiasm just plummeted. I thought, "This is not a recess for the ages; this is the most dangerous recess we have ever had at Greenwood Elementary School! What kind of teacher is this sending out her students to lose their sight on the playground?" Yet, underneath my fear, my sense of awe for the sun grew immensely. You could be blinded by looking at the

sun. How great is the sun! I couldn't fathom that it was 93,000,000 miles away; I couldn't fathom the size and power of the sun as a third-grader. But, I want to tell you today that Paul says: "When I saw the radiance of Jesus Christ, it was greater than the sun." Do you believe that the radiance of Christ, which is greater and more powerful than the sun, has implications for us? I do. Not only was it a brilliant light, not only was it the luminosity of the risen exalted Jesus Christ, but it was also a voice speaking. It was not just an apparition, but a person speaking from the middle of that light. Paul said in Acts 16:14a:

*"We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Hebrew, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?'"*

This light is the radiance of a Person who is alive, exalted, and stops this hater of Christians on the road and addresses him by name. Who is that? That has implications, doesn't it? "Why are you persecuting Me?" We discover at the very least that Jesus is alive, glorious, radiant, intervening this persecutor on the way, addressing him by name, and revealing that the way you treat Christians in the world is the way you treat Jesus Christ. "Why are you persecuting Me?" Then he adds this line that we have only in this portion. The story is told three times in Acts, and this one account includes this extra line that Jesus says to Paul in Acts 26:14b:

*"It is hard for you to kick against the goads."*

The image here is wonderful. Paul, the learned Pharisee, is likened to an ox plowing fields. It is a fitting image because in Judaism the imagery is of taking on the yoke of the commandments, and Jesus says to him: "*It is difficult for you to kick against the goads.*" The goads are pointed sticks behind the ox that keep the ox going. Oxen are dangerous. Try to control a creature that weighs several thousand pounds. Jesus says: "You cannot resist; it's impossible and futile."

John Stott wrote a short book *Why I am a Christian*, and the first chapter of that short, wonderful book says: "I am a Christian because of the Hound of Heaven chasing after me." This is what David says in Psalm 23:6:

*"Surely Your goodness and mercy will chase after me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of God forever."*

Do you believe that Jesus Christ chases down sinners? I do. I praise God that He chased me down, and that He has chased you down. It is really futile to resist the prompting of His goad and to refuse joining Him in His service. Paul looks up at heaven in Acts 26:15a and says:

*"Who are You, Lord?"*

Jesus replies in Acts 26:15b:

*"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."*

"I AM," the name of the living God. "I AM," Jesus says, and Jesus is saying that He is alive. Then He says in Acts 26:16:"

*“Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of Me.”*

Jesus has appointed Paul for a specific reason. This is critical for us to be gripped by afresh at Kenwood Baptist Church. Jesus does not appear and take hold of our lives just to give us the benefits of eternal life. He appears, takes hold of our lives, to draw us into His mission in the world. Notice what He says. I imagine Paul face down, and Jesus says: “Get up, man, stand on your feet. For this reason I have appeared to you. Take hold of this. I've appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and a witness of what you have seen.” The first thing Jesus says is: “You have seen Me so that you can serve this Gospel. Paul never forgets delighting to call himself *Paul a servant of Jesus Christ*. He never forgets this language, and he is a witness of what he has seen. Then he receives his commissioning in Acts 26:17-18. Jesus says:

*“I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.”*

That means that the people around us can't see, and that should fill your heart with compassion. When you see someone in the grocery store with a seeing-eye dog, when you see someone walking through a crowded street and the effort they make to cross that street, to see someone straining, laboring to work in this world with the condition of blindness, it usually fills our hearts with compassion. It is an automatic response, and Christ says to Paul that the people around him can't see. That compassion should rise up within us, and Jesus says: “I am sending you to open their eyes, and when their eyes are open,” Jesus says, “they will turn from darkness to light.” Jesus interprets this radical turn as saying: “It is a turning from the power of Satan to God.”

What joy to be entrusted with the Gospel of Christ that can open blind eyes and turn people from the power of darkness to light. There is no power like Christ's, and as a result, in this heralding of Christ, they would receive forgiveness of sins and a place. I love that! It is only in Jesus Christ that we find forgiveness, and it is only in Jesus Christ that there is a place, an inheritance, in which we are given a portion. Jesus appears to Paul for the purpose of calling and commissioning him, and this all is true because Jesus is alive. Jesus is not an idea; He is not a philosophy; He is more radiant than the sun and speaks with power and authority and calls all nations to Himself, and He gives you and gives me the greatest privilege in this life of being involved with His mission. Really the Book of Acts has been all about this trajectory.

When Paul then finishes his defense, he says to the king in Acts 26:19:

*“So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven.”*

What is our vision as Christians? It is Jesus Christ. The mission of the church is to make Christ known. Paul says to the king: “I was not disobedient to what I saw from heaven.” What have we

seen from heaven? We see that Jesus Christ is alive, that He has conquered sin, death, and hell on our behalf, that He lives and reigns forever, and that He calls all people to Himself. That is the vision that Paul has from heaven, and that means that everything that we do as a church should be Gospel driven, should be formed to extending and sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The ending of the speech produces a mixed reaction. The Roman governor, like many today, concludes that Paul is insane. Have you ever tried to share your testimony with someone and have them cut you off right after you give the punchline and say, "You know, I have come to the conclusion that you are insane"? He says in Acts 26:24:

*"You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane."*

Yet, Paul says in Acts 26:25:

*"I am not insane, most excellent Festus. What I am saying is true and reasonable."*

If Christ is exalted, if He is raised from the dead, then what Paul says here is true and reasonable, and there is none like Him. The Roman governor thinks Paul is insane. King Agrippa, however, hangs in the balance. King Agrippa says in Acts 26:28:

*"Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"*

King Agrippa is shaken. Festus protects himself by doing an ad hominem: "You're insane. I don't have to listen to you." Agrippa is shaken. Paul says in Acts 26:29:

*"Short time or long--I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."*

If Jesus is raised from the dead; if He is exalted; if this whole spring series has had anything true in it, it is this: that the Acts of the Exalted Jesus Christ continue in the world today, and you and I find our purpose and meaning in serving Him, and we find the mission and vision of a local church in extending the knowledge of Christ and calling people to Him.

I want to conclude with two different stories. I love to read testimonies because testimonies confirm that what we read of Christ in Scripture is the same action that He is doing today. Do you believe that? I really do believe that. If you remember just one thing from these many weeks we have been in Acts, just remember that what Jesus does in Scripture, He is doing today. If you could see a tenth, a hundredth, of what He is doing today, your heart would burn with zeal and love. One place I like to go to for testimonies is a book by Kelly Monroe called *Finding God at Harvard*. She shares the story of a Hindu student at Harvard named Krister Sairsingh. Krister Sairsingh writes that he was raised as a devout Hindu. He says:

*"I took it for granted that only Hinduism through the disciplines of yoga offered a path to spiritual perfection and divine realization. I respected other religions as fragmentary*

manifestations of the divine reality, but believed that only our great gurus and swamis attained God-consciousness. As a young man, an important event for our family took place with the visit of a swami to our home, and he gave me a short Sanskrit prayer that I recited many times throughout my childhood.”

He said throughout his high school years he studied Hindu poetry and the teaching of his guru. He says:

“Towards the end of high school, I had a bizarre experience which caused me to question the efficacy of my faith. I was sitting on my bed studying chemistry late at night in preparation for final examinations. I felt a slap on my face and I was thrown to my bed. I felt as if something was physically strangling me. I was unable to speak. I repeated the prayers I had been taught, but to no avail. I danced before the idols of Shiva in my room to no avail. I began to wonder if there was a power in the universe greater than these. The next morning I related my experience to a classmate who had become a Christian. I wondered whether he could explain what had happened to me. He struck me as someone who might be connected with the spiritual world. He told me that the worship of idols made me vulnerable to demonic attack, and I was deeply offended. He told me that I should begin to read the Gospels, and so I did. At the urging of my classmate, I began to read the Gospel accounts of Jesus to learn more about Him, and He struck me as utterly unique, different from anyone I had ever known or read about. There was a curious mixture of attraction and ambivalence to Him. What astounded me the most about Jesus was His claim to be able to forgive sins.

“I understood the fundamental principle of my religion well enough to know that within Hinduism there is no such thing as forgiveness. The law of karma is that whatever we do wrong we will have to pay for in some other life. This rules out the idea forgiveness. According to karma, reincarnation is necessary to pay for the sins of a previous life. One’s present life is determined by one’s previous existence, and each soul is held responsible. There is no way out of the endless cycle of birth, suffering, death. Who was this Jesus who could break the bonds of karma? He said He had power to forgive my sins. Over the next six weeks, I went daily to the sugarcane fields to pray hoping to find God’s truth. I wanted the truth, and as the weeks went by, the Person of Jesus began to exercise a powerful hold on my imagination. I could not evade His call to follow Him. In Him, the truth of God’s reality could not be denied. It was as if He were telling me that He could actually come and forgive my sins, and finally one night, after meditating on the account of His death and resurrection, I asked Jesus to forgive my sins and set me free. I confessed my sins, surrendered my life to Him and worshiped Him as Savior and Lord.

“Just at the time of my conversion, my mother was offered a privileged position of leadership at a Hindu temple. My family was in charge of this temple. It created an awkward situation and hostility from our extended family. My mother admitted that she was baffled by the transformation in my life. She noticed I no longer was fearful. She told me she could

not understand how such joy could have filled my life; she could not understand how so suddenly she, who had spent her whole life in meditation and yoga, still felt oppressed by the burden of karma. The whole situation was scandalous to the Hindu community. Friends and relatives were shocked and outraged. But then, within six weeks of my conversion, my mother, my grandmother, my brothers, my sisters, my cousin, and an aspiring guru all openly professed their faith in Jesus Christ.”

Jesus does this every day, and if we want our life together to matter, we’ve got to get involved in what He is doing. Krister Sairsingh ends this chapter addressed to the unbelieving community of Harvard University today. He says:

“The divine love is expressed not only internally within the Trinity, there is an outward expression of the divine love. In this outward expression of love God creates, preserves, and redeems. The God of Christian faith is not trapped in heaven. The God of Christian faith is free, and He has come down and shown us His face and saved fallen human beings from sin and death and brings lost humanity into glorious communion with God.”

The love of God means that God, in Christ, has offered Himself for us, and in so doing has reconciled to Himself those who in faith repent and turn to Him. This is the Good News of the Gospel which changed my life and offers the only hope for the world. This is the One we get to serve. This is the One in whose service we are all called to join. Tim Dearborn, one of the authors for *The Perspectives* course, said:

“Mission must never have first place in the church's life. The church is to have but one Lord, one passion, one in whom all the fullness of God dwells. If the church is in need of a conversion today, it is always and only to Jesus Christ. We must say an emphatic **no** to lesser gods, and **yes** to the One in whom all creation is summed up. It is insufficient to proclaim that the church of God has a mission for the world. It is insufficient. Rather, the God of mission has a church in the world. It is insufficient for us to say that we have a mission and let's go do it. The subject and the object are the wrong way. It is so much more profound and meaningful and significant and energizing and motivating to say: ‘The God of mission has a church in the world, and I’m a part of it.’”

I want to end our series just asking you to renew your own resolve to join Him on that mission. That is really all I want today. I am going to pray, and as I pray, I don't know what the specifics are for you, but I want you to look in your heart, and with fear and trembling, just say to Jesus: “Christ, I will go with You where You take me.” If the Lord looks down and sees a community that says, “We will go where You send us,” I believe He will continue to speak and show us the doors of His opening all around us. Amen.