

**OPEN THEIR EYES,
TURN THEM FROM DARKNESS**

Acts 26:1-32

Key Verse: 26:17b-18

'I am sending you to them 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.'

In today's passage Paul appeared before King Agrippa. This turned out to be Paul's last public appearance in Israel before he was shipped off to Rome. What follows in chapter 26 is arguably one of the most vivid and heart moving conversion testimonies recorded in the bible. May the Lord fill your heart with hope and one word of direction for 2023 as you listen to Paul's graceful testimony today! Amen

In verses 1-3, the passage begins with Paul already standing before King Agrippa. After the king permitted Paul to speak, Paul motioned with his hand and began his testimony. In verses 4-5 Paul shared with the king that from a young age he was a respected member of the Jewish community. They all knew how he had lived ever since he was a child..... from the beginning of his life in his own country and Jerusalem. They had seen Paul grow up; they had known him for a long time and could testify that Paul conformed to the strictest sect of the Jewish religion, living as a Pharisee. Nevertheless, some Jews and religious leaders turned on Paul when he claimed that God raised Jesus from the dead. (6-7). They considered it incredible (or absurd) (8). So they vehemently opposed the name of Jesus. They also persecuted Paul for teaching in His name, resulting in Paul being on trial for the last two years he spent in Israel.

Look at verses 9-11. (Read) When we listen to these verses, we can hardly believe our ears. Is this the same Paul we came to know last year in the book of Acts?! It is truly remarkable to hear that Paul was once convinced that he ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, he behaved in the same manner as the Jewish people who now persecuted him. In fact, Paul was once worse than them..... for on the authority of the chief priests Paul actively searched for believers and put many of the Lord's people in prison! And when they were put to death, he eagerly casted his vote against them. Again, are we sure this is really the same Apostle Paul from the bible? If this was not bad enough, many a time Paul went from one synagogue to another to have believers publicly punished for believing in Jesus. He even tried to force them to

blaspheme so he could put them to death. Can you imagine?! Paul became so obsessed with persecuting believers that he even hunted them down in foreign cities beyond Israel's borders. This surely cannot be the same Paul who wrote to the elders in Ephesus: be shepherds of the church of God, which He bought with his own blood?! (Acts 20:28) For he was actively destroying the church. Amazingly, this was the same Paul!

But how could he have behaved in such a wicked and violent manner? In context of our key verse, it was because..... Paul's spiritual eyes were still closed.....his heart turned from light to darkness...and controlled by the power of Satan. Sound shocking, right! The truth is, Paul's spiritual condition is a representation of every single person that is born into this world; including you and me. By nature our spiritual eyes are shut by sin so that we do not and cannot know God. By nature sin cuts us off from God and therefore the darkness of sin totally fills our hearts. By nature, we are controlled by the power of Satan who blinds our spiritual eyes so we cannot see the light of the gospel. (2 Cor 4:4) And at the same time he stirs up our sin, puts ill things in our minds, prompt us to resist true spiritual teachings from the bible and persecute those who bring it to us. Just like Satan did with Paul. What a miserable life we are all born into! I will say it again, what a miserable life!! But there is hope for change!!

Follow with me as I go through verses 12-15. One day, on one of these persecuting journeys, Paul was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, as Paul was on the road, he saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around him and his companions. They all fell to the ground. Then Paul heard a voice saying to him in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, (for that was Paul's name at the time, before he met Jesus) why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' "Then Paul asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied.

Jesus is man's only hope for change! Though Paul did not know Jesus, Jesus knew Paul perfectly. He knew his name. He also knew how terribly Paul persecuted the church. Moreover, he knew the utterly deprived condition of Paul's dark and sinful heart. Still, Jesus visited Paul.....not to condemn him..... but to open Paul's spiritual eyes.....to turn his heart from darkness to light and forgive his sin!

Look again at verse 14b. Jesus said: "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." A goad was a sharp prod (a needle) used to drive animals trained to pull heavy loads. Animals like horses, donkeys and oxen. After the load was attached to animal, the rider would drive the animal forward by pricking its backside. Most animals go forward when prodded, but some were

rebellious; and kick against the goads. In other words, they resist the rider and refused to move forward. However, it is never the animals place to resist the rider. So the rider would prick their backsides again.....and again....until the animal moved forward. Yet sometimes an animal was so stubborn that it refused to move forward despite the great pain caused by the goad. This was an exact description of Paul's inner life. Outwardly, Paul looked healthy and strong. He even looked religious. But he was as rebellious as a stubborn animal kicking against goad. Despite witnessing the power of Jesus spreading in the land, Paul resisted Jesus with all his might.....until his heart was bleeding with terrible pains.

Jesus understood Paul's suffering.....and had great compassion on the most rebellious man, Paul. With His warm love Jesus finally opened Paul's spiritual eyes! And with this, God made His light shine in Paul's heart to finally recognize Jesus as the Lord and Christ. It was at this moment that Jesus turned Paul's heart *from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that Paul might receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Jesus.*' Put simply, it was then that Paul was born again.

Look at verse (16. Read) I think we would all agree that meeting Jesus for the first time is a dramatic experience, right?! It was no different for Paul, especially because of the manner the Lord appeared to him. One might have expected Jesus to end the encounter after Paul's conversion. To give Paul some time and space to process what just happened to him. But that was not what Jesus did. Instead, Jesus told Paul to get up and stand on his feet as a new creation and be ready to immediately begin his new life as a servant of Jesus. This is remarkable, right!? One moment Paul was on his way to persecute believers. The very next moment, Jesus appoints him to go and immediately witness to the very same believers. As we can see, the change in Paul's heart.....in his life.....was instantly!

Look at today's key verses, verses 17b-18. Can we please all read it together? (From I am sending you) I am sending you to them 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. It is astonishing that Jesus was sending Paul to do for others what Jesus had done for him, which was to open their eyes and turn their hearts from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God. The question is, is that even possible?! How can a mere man open the spiritual eyes of another man, let alone turn his sinful heart to God? Look again at verse 18b. The purpose of doing so was that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Jesus. This can only be done when someone hears and personally accept the gospel

message. Therefore, when Jesus sent Paul to open their eyes and turn their hearts, He did not mean that Paul should do this on His own. But instead, Paul had to simply preach that they had to repent and turn to God (20) by looking at Jesus as the promised Messiah. Then Jesus, by His Spirit, would open their spiritual eyes.....He would turn their hearts back to God.....He would give them faith.....He would forgive their sins.....and give them eternal life. Jesus would do all this in a man.....when Paul do only one thing.....share the gospel message of repentance with people. One commentator wrote: '*This is one of the best summary statements of not only Paul's mission but also the mission of every believer; and may I add.....of you and me.*

Once, I was a rebellious sinner kicking against the goad, just like Paul. Like him, I grew up in the church and listened to the word of God on Sundays. I also attended Sunday school and occasionally studied the bible at home with my family. Yet, just like Paul, my eyes were closed to God and my sinful heart turned from light to darkness and from God to the power of Satan. In ignorance, I sinned terribly against God by watching pornography from a young age, masturbating, getting drunk, using filthy language and partying the nights away in dark and loud night clubs. Though outwardly I looked like a good guy, happy and confident, I remember how I was wasting away inwardly with a deep sense of fear and despair because I had no direction in my life. Jesus saw my tears of suffering. And despite the total depravity of my heart, Jesus visited me when my shepherd share the gospel message with me. Through His word Jesus opened my eyes to see Him as the Christ of God.....Jesus then turned my heart from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God.....Jesus helped me to repent of my sin and gave me faith to believe in him to receive from Him forgiveness of my sin. About six months later, Jesus appointed me as a campus shepherd in Pretoria UBF. This was 15 years ago.

Yet for the first time I clearly understand through this passage exactly what Jesus sent me out to do. He has sent me out to open the eyes of unbelievers and turn their hearts from darkness by sharing the gospel message with them. Honestly speaking, I have not gone out to share the gospel of Jesus with unbelievers. Yes, I took care of his sheep in the church, but rarely if at all did I share the gospel with an unbeliever. But through preparing this message I realised that Jesus is eager to open the eyes of unbelievers and turn them from darkness, just as the Lord did for me.

Then how did Paul respond to the Lord's commission? Look at verses 19-20. Paul was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem

and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. May God strengthen our hearts to do the same in 2023.

In conclusion. We are standing on the verge of a new academic year. At the moment, I cannot think of a better passage to give us one clear word of direction for 2023. That Jesus has sent us to unbelievers to open their eyes and turn them from darkness by sharing the gospel message of Jesus with them. At first, this sounds like a daunting task for there are so many hostile people who would not only reject us for our faith but even persecute us. However, when Jesus sent Paul out, He promised to rescue Paul from both Jews and Gentiles. As our minds think back at what we have learned in the book of Acts we can quickly realise that Jesus faithfully kept His promise. He will do the same for us.

As encouraging as this might sound, I am certain many of you also think you do not know enough to share the gospel with unbelievers. However, Jesus appointed Paul as a witness of only what he had seen of Jesus and what Jesus would show him. In other words, Paul simply had to share what Jesus revealed of himself to Paul. And so should we!

May the Lord have mercy on you and me in 2023! May he help us remember how he opened our eyes with His warm love, how he turned our hearts to God and fill us with His light! So that we can accept and obey His word for us 2023: which is to open the eyes of unbelievers and turn them from darkness! Amen.