

I WAS NOT DISOBEIENT TO THE VISION FROM HEAVEN

Acts 26:1-32

Key Verse: 26:19

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

In chapter 25 we learned God’s sovereign rule and Paul’s faith. In the time of trial, Paul remembered God’s word of promise and God’s purpose for world mission. Paul looked up at God and found wisdom to appeal to Caesar. In this way, he was spared from the assassination plot of the Jews. Moreover, he began moving toward Rome, according to God’s plan. In trials, we must remember God’s word and look up at God. Then God will give us wisdom to turn the adverse situation into God’s victory and to fulfill God’s will. Very soon we will demolish the old UIC Bible house and construct a new one. UIC ministry will be without a Bible house for a while. Shall we expect one-to-one Bible studies to decrease during this time? No! We must look up at God and find wisdom to increase one-to-one Bible studies, like our coworkers in Moscow. When they had no center, they offered their homes to sheep in the spirit of the house church. Then they increased in number. So should we.

Chapter 26 is Paul’s defense before King Agrippa. Paul was on trial. Yet Paul does not try to save himself. Paul tries to save Agrippa by sharing a testimonial gospel message. It is a one-to-one Bible study between Paul and Agrippa. Today we learn Paul’s gospel faith and shepherd’s heart. We learn how to testify to all kinds of people, including kings. Most of all, we learn that God has given us a great vision and, like Paul, we should not be disobedient to the vision from heaven.

First, Paul’s hope in the resurrection (1-11).

In verses 1-3 Paul begins his defense before King Agrippa. Paul acknowledged that Agrippa knew the Jewish customs and controversies well. So Paul freely explained his conflict with the Jewish leaders. At one time he was one of them, a member of the strictest sect—the Pharisees. Pharisees were known for their extreme self-discipline, devotion to study and loyalty to Judaism. But they did not study the Bible to know Christ and have life (Jn 5:40). Rather, they studied the Bible to acquire knowledge by which they gained a privileged position in the Judaistic system. The desire to hold political power and gain economic benefit made them foolish Bible students.

When Jesus came as the Messiah, the Pharisees’ question was, “How will this affect my socioeconomic situation?” If Jesus were the Messiah he would fulfill the law and the prophets. Then there would be no more need for the temple, the priestly system or sophisticated interpretations of oral laws. In other words, the Pharisees would be out of a job. When they realized this, they rejected Jesus’ claim. Jesus never compromised with them. He taught that they were like old wineskins. Jesus started a new history with twelve disciples. Jesus was sure that his disciples would inherit the blessing of God for world mission. There was a transition in God’s history from Judaism to the Christian church, especially the Gentile church, which Paul had pioneered. So we can understand why the Pharisees felt threatened by his gospel ministry.

Before conversion, Paul, too, thought that he should oppose Jesus. In verses 9-11 he describes his activity. It was just like that of modern criminals, the “deprogrammers,” who kidnapped and tortured sincere Christians. Paul tried to force Christians to blaspheme. It was nothing but the work of the devil. He said, “In my obsession against them....” He could not stop thinking about Christians day and night. His consuming thought was to wipe them off the face of the earth. Now, the Jewish religious leaders

who opposed Paul were doing the same thing. Sometimes we wonder why anti-Christians work so fervently against the gospel instead of freely enjoying their lives in the world. It is because they suffer from the same obsession that Paul had, an obsession that leads to demon possession. When Paul saw the misery of the Jewish leaders, he had compassion on them. It was only by the great mercy of God that he was saved from the same darkness. Paul realized that what they really needed was to change their hope.

When Paul met the Risen Christ, he found the hope of resurrection. He said in 1 Corinthians 15:22, "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." Jesus' resurrection is God's victory over death. Jesus' resurrection opened the way to eternal life in the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is forever. This living hope is what all men really need (1 Pe 1:3,4). In fact, Paul was on trial because he had this hope. The real issue between Paul and the Jewish leaders was about hope. Paul had a living hope in the kingdom of God. They had a dead hope in the system of Judaism. They were like an Indian monkey who sticks his hand into a hole in the ground to grab some nuts. He can not get his hand out without letting go of the nuts. But in his illusion that he can possess the handful of nuts forever, he never lets go. Finally the hunter comes along and grabs him. This happens to all who cling to dead hope in the perishing world. Paul wanted to share living hope with those under the power of death. Look at verse 8. "Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?"

According to one news reporter, 82% of Americans call themselves Christians. A good many of them are "cultural Christians" who believe in Jesus to have a better life in this world. They hope to get a nice wife or a decent husband, a good education, a good job, and so on. However, a genuine Christian is one whose hope is in the kingdom of God through the resurrection of Christ. Christians who have resurrection hope are powerful and free. They can testify to Jesus' name before governors and kings, before presidents and journalists, before friends and classmates, whatever the consequences may be. Now America is in a fierce spiritual battle; it is a battle for the soul of our nation. Just this week the mayor of Chicago spoke in favor of gay marriages. I believe he did so out of compassion for them. It is good to have compassion for them; we are all sinners. But for the church or state to sanction their unnatural relations is a terrible mistake. Remember Sodom and Gomorrah. Remember the Roman Empire. Christians must be the salt of the earth, the light of the world. This will be costly. But with hope in the resurrection we can stand for God's truth as Paul did. Jesus is the only hope in this perverse and sick generation. May God help us teach God's word as it is with resurrection faith. Amen.

Second, the Risen Christ had compassion on Paul (12-15).

In verses 12-15 Paul explained how he met the Risen Christ. When he was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, he saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around him and his companions. This bright light was the presence of the holy God (1Jn 1:5). God is perfect in holiness, truth, righteousness, and justice. When this bright light of the Risen Christ shone on Paul, it illuminated his dark inner person fully. This divine light of the Risen Christ changed Paul into a new creation. After this, Paul could be known as a light to the Gentiles. We see many dark and dirty things in this world. We are burdened with our own sinful natures. But when we look at the light of Christ through sincere Bible study, he renews our souls.

The Risen Christ spoke to Paul. He said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." The Risen Christ knew Paul by name. The Risen Christ helped him realize what he was doing. He was persecuting God Almighty, the glorious Risen Christ. Then the Risen Christ said, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." It was an exact description of Paul's inner life. A goad was a

sharp prod used to drive draft animals forward by pricking their backsides. Most animals go forward when prodded, but some are rebellious; they kick against the goads. They resist to the point of self-destruction. Outwardly, Paul looked like an avenging fury. But inwardly, he was suffering more than those he persecuted. Each time he damaged a Christian, he damaged his own soul more. His life was too hard to endure any longer. The Risen Christ understood his suffering. The Risen Christ visited him to help him surrender to the sovereign call of God. The Risen Christ had great compassion on the most rebellious man. This compassion melted Paul's heart and he recognized Jesus as the Lord. Paul's surrender to the compassion of Christ was a sweet one. It also became the foundation for Paul to be a compassionate shepherd for many rebellious sheep. The Risen Christ is so compassionate toward each one of us. We may not meet him in a blaze of light, like Paul did. But when we simply believe his word of promise, he comes into our hearts, forgives our sins and makes us compassionate shepherds.

Third, the Risen Christ appointed Paul as his servant (16-19).

Meeting the Risen Christ was a dramatic experience for Paul. He might have felt he needed time to digest its meaning. But the Risen Christ said in verse 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 of me and what I will show you." The Risen Christ wanted Paul to stand up before him as a new creation, ready to begin his new life right away. The Risen Christ immediately appointed Paul as a servant of God, as a witness of the Risen Christ. It was the most successful disciple raising example in God's history. In a few minutes, he was changed from God's enemy into the Apostle Paul, God's chosen servant for world salvation. On this basis, Paul identified himself as a servant of Christ Jesus. He lived the rest of his life with this clear identity. He was a servant of Christ Jesus, set apart for the gospel of God.

Paul knew that his drastic transformation would have consequences. The Jews would want to kill him. However, the Risen Christ promised Paul, "I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles" (17a). The Risen Christ would rescue him. No one is wiser than the Risen Christ. No one is stronger than the Risen Christ. When the Risen Christ says he will rescue a person, that person will be rescued. Paul accepted this promise of protection in his heart. Paul entrusted his life to the Risen Christ. From that time on, he boldly went wherever the Risen Christ sent him, with the full assurance of God's protection.

Verses 17b-18 say, "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." The Risen Christ saved Paul to use him as a blessing to the whole world. The world is in the darkness and under the power of Satan. God sent Paul to turn people from darkness to light, from Satan to God. The Risen Christ wanted all people of all nations to hear the gospel and be saved. The Risen Christ wanted God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. This was the vision of the Risen Christ. Paul was chosen to carry out this vision.

Fourth, "I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven" (19-23).

How did Paul respond to God's vision? Look at verse 19. "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven." Paul did not say, "I obeyed the vision from heaven." He said, "I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven." In saying this, he was acknowledging God's sovereignty in world salvation work. He did not choose Jesus. Jesus chose him. Jesus appointed him for the mission when he was living as Jesus' enemy. Paul did nothing but surrender to the grace and calling of Jesus. It was God who was carrying out the work of world salvation. Sometimes Paul could do nothing. Once he said, "We

were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead” (2Cor 1:8b,9). Paul believed that when he was not disobedient, God would intervene. When he depended on God with resurrection hope, God empowered him with God’s strength. So he did not credit himself with a positive obedience, but only as one who totally depended on God.

After his conversion, Paul began to preach the gospel in Damascus, where he had been planning to persecute Christians. He preached so boldly and decisively that the Jewish leaders tried to kill him. So he escaped in a basket. Later, he went to Jerusalem and preached. Again, the unbelieving Jews wanted to kill him. He had to escape. He went to all Judea. Then he went to the Gentiles through three mission journeys. It was God’s power, especially the resurrection power of Christ, that had brought him thus far. Now he was on the way to Rome.

Paul’s gospel ministry was not his own idea. It was God’s work according to the vision from heaven. It was also rooted in God’s promises in Scripture. It was part of what Moses and the Prophets foretold. Look at verses 22-23. “But I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”

God has given us a vision from heaven to pioneer 561 American campuses and 250 Canadian campuses and to establish North America as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God wants to turn the hearts of young people from the darkness of sin and death to the light of Jesus. God is using our one-to-one Bible study to do so. Still, it is a fierce spiritual battle. Sometimes we wonder if it is worth the cost. Sometimes we feel helpless. Sometimes we cannot say, “I was obedient.” But at least we must say, “I was not disobedient.” When we depend totally on God and have resurrection hope we can be used by God, like Paul was.

Fifth, Paul appeals to King Agrippa (24-32).

At this point, Festus interrupted Paul, saying, “You are out of your mind Paul.” To the unspiritual man, resurrection, God’s vision, and eternal life do not make sense. However, Paul used this interruption wisely. Paul said, “What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.” Paul believed Agrippa had a holy desire and boldly appealed to it. Paul wanted Agrippa to make a decision of faith to accept Jesus as his Savior. Agrippa realized this. Surprised, he said, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.” Here we see Paul’s earnest prayer for King Agrippa and all in attendance. Paul had a broken shepherd heart for them. Where did it come from? It was from the Risen Christ, who had compassion on him when he was a miserable wretch.

In this passage we learned the importance of resurrection hope. The things of the world all perish, spoil and fade away. But through the resurrection of Christ, God gives us the kingdom of God which is everlasting. This is our true hope. We also learned that God has given us a vision from heaven. It is to pioneer 561 American campuses and 250 Canadian campuses with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We did not

choose God. God chose us to be his servants. May God help each one of us totally depend on God so we may not be disobedient to his vision.