

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH
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SCRIPTURE: Acts 26:8-29

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SERMON: “Persuasion”

(Acknowledgement to The Bible Project for their series on Luke/Acts, and to Pastor Tim Keller for his sermon “Persuading the King”)

For those of you who are participating in the **BibleProject 2022** discipleship program, you know that in early May we spent a couple of weeks looking at the apostle called **Paul** (graphic) and the role he played in the growth of the early church.

During the final Wednesday night of that series a group of us met as usual down in the café where we watched the video and then discussed it. Near the end of the evening Pastor Ray made reference to this passage found in **Acts 26**, and so I turned there, and while the rest of the room moved on with the discussion, I found myself engrossed by what I was reading there. It was a passage I’d read on numerous occasions...but something about it just struck me this time, and so this morning I’d like for us to look at it together.

Here’s the setting...Paul finds himself accused of numerous things, for one, he’s insisting that Jesus rose from the dead and is very much alive. And so he’s been in prison for over 2 years now in **Caesarea**, a city about 50 miles north of Jerusalem. Paul is eventually going to be sent to **Rome** to appear before one of the highest courts in the Roman Empire. Before being taken there, Paul is brought into what the Bible describes as an “audience room” where many prominent people are gathered, and he finds himself with this unique opportunity.

We're going to pick up in verse 8, where we find Paul asking those in the room this question:

Acts 26:8-29 Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?

“I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

¹² “On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³ About noon, O King, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. ¹⁴ We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’

¹⁵ “Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’

“ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. 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. ¹⁷ I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them ¹⁸ 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.’

¹⁹ “So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. ²⁰ First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. ²¹ That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. ²² 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—²³ 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.”

²⁴ At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.”

²⁵ “I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. ²⁶ The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”

²⁸ Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

²⁹ 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.”

It’s interesting, when Paul was led into this room, he didn’t see this as an opportunity to defend himself against the allegations brought against him, but an opportunity to persuade those in the room to become followers of Jesus.

And King Agrippa is quick to pick up on this isn’t he? He basically says to Paul, “*Are you actually trying to persuade me to become a Christian?*” And what’s Paul’s response?

“Not just you, but all who are listening to me today”...in this room...and in this room. And in whatever room you find yourself in at this moment.

This morning’s message is titled **PERSUASION...*Paul looking to persuade anyone listening to become a Christian...which means leaving behind our way of doing life and embracing Jesus’ way of doing life.***

Now this word persuasion can be a pretty complicated word. If I asked you how someone would go about persuading you to believe something or act on something,

you might say, “*Well, make your case. If it’s reasonable, better yet if it’s prove-able, then, sure, you can persuade me.*”

But persuasion isn’t as simple as that. Studies show that we are more likely to be persuaded by people who we like...people who tend to think like we think and believe what we believe. On the flip-side, it’s difficult for us to be persuaded by those who we don’t like, no matter how reasonable or fact-based their argument.

And so Paul persuading Agrippa to become a Christian, you and I persuading our friends and family to leave behind their way of doing life and embracing Jesus’ way of doing life can be challenging, and so let’s get into it.

There’s a lot going on in this passage...this is quite a scene as Paul appears before this elite crowd. As we look at what unfolds in this audience room, I’d like for us to begin by taking a look at **Paul’s Backstory**...then I’d like for us to take a close look at **Paul’s Approach**...and we’ll see that he comes from a number of different angles. And then we’ll close as we usually do, with me asking you to consider **Your Next Step** in light of whatever God teaches you this morning.

So first,...

1. PAUL’S BACKSTORY

Back in the first century, there was this group of men and women who began sharing with anyone who would listen about this incredible event that had just taken place: The resurrection of Jesus. And it started a movement, which began in Jerusalem, and then spread throughout neighboring regions.

And Paul, whose Jewish name was Saul, was one who was very much opposed to this fast growing movement. In fact, he was *one of the leaders* of this opposition movement, working tirelessly to find, arrest and in some cases put to death those who were insistent that Jesus was very much alive.

Then one day Paul was on the road to a foreign city, looking to hunt down “the Lord’s people”...when he had a personal encounter with Jesus. Blinding light, and then, “*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me...it is hard for you to kick against the goads*”...whatever that means. This encounter changed his life forever.

Paul traveled throughout the Roman Empire telling others about Jesus, and the church continued to grow. Back in Jerusalem however, there were many Jewish leaders who wanted Paul dead because he had changed sides.

In spite of the risk, and the pleading of his friends not to go, Paul returns to Jerusalem, taking some funds that he had collected in order to help the poor in that city. And he’s in Jerusalem for close to a week, when he is spotted at the temple. And it says that...

Acts 21:30 The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions.

They seize him and begin beating him, when news about this uproar reaches the ears of the commander of the Roman troops in that area. And so he runs to the scene and when he arrives the Jews stop beating Paul, and the commander gives Paul permission to address the crowd that was just beating on him.

It didn’t go well, and so the commander orders that Paul be taken to the barracks where he’ll be beaten *by them*, these local Roman authorities. Paul can’t win, can he? And just as he’s about to be beaten, Paul reveals to the commander that not only is he a Jew, but also a Roman citizen, which alarms the commander, because Roman citizens cannot be punished without being proven guilty of a crime. And so Paul is able to avoid another beating.

Eventually Paul is taken to Caesarea, the location of the Roman headquarters in that region. And there Paul stayed for the next two years, and brings us to this morning’s Bible passage.

Here are the people whose names you will want to know. **Festus**, is the **newly appointed Roman Governor** there in Caesarea. He meets with Paul, who indicates that as a Roman citizen, he wants his case to be heard in Rome by a Roman court.

But now Festus is going to have to write something up, a case, a statement of the issues that will be sent on to Rome to give them some idea of the charges...but he's in over his head. He's new, he's a novice, as a Roman he doesn't understand much about Jewish theology and Jewish politics, all he knows is that these religious leaders from Jerusalem want Paul dead because he's claiming that Jesus is alive.

Fortunately for Festus, **King Herod Agrippa** and his wife **Bernice** are in town, traveling from Jerusalem to Caesarea in order to pay their respects to the newly appointed Governor.

So Festus takes advantage of this opportunity, because Agrippa's family has lived for generations in and around Jerusalem. And so Festus fills Agrippa in with what he knows and Agrippa is fascinated, telling Festus *"I would like to hear this man myself."*

Acts 25:23 The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high ranking officers and leading men of the city.

And Paul is led into the room, and given permission to speak. And what we see here in...

2. PAUL'S APPROACH

...are three different ways that Paul goes about persuading Agrippa – and everyone in the room and in this room - to become followers of Jesus.

First,

A. Paul's Challenge to Use Our Heads

As Paul addresses the room, he talks about how Jesus has risen from the dead and spoken to him about what he was to do...

And Festus, the Roman Governor, and after listening for a while, he can't take it anymore. He cuts Paul off and says,

Acts 26:24b “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.”

In the original language what Festus is saying to Paul is that “*You’re raving mad.*”

But notice how Paul responds.

Acts 26:25-26 “I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. ²⁶ The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, *because it was not done in a corner.*”

Paul realizes that Festus would have little to no knowledge of what had transpired in and around Jerusalem during that incredible 3-year period of Jesus’ ministry. And so he turns his attention to King Agrippa, because Paul is convinced that he would have been *very* familiar with Jesus and all that was being said about Him.

Because it was not done in a corner. What a great phrase. What a confident phrase. You don’t play that card, you don’t use those words unless you are confident in what you are talking about. “*Festus may not know what I’m talking about, but you do, don’t you, Agrippa?*”

They say that Herod Agrippa would have been about 8 years old when Jesus was crucified and resurrected. And Paul knew that it would have been impossible for Herod to grow up and be unaware of what had transpired *after* that weekend.

And so rather than buckling under the accusation of being “stark raving mad”Paul says, “*No...this is reasonable...and the King knows it.*”

The king probably knew that in the village of Nain, there was a funeral procession for a widow's son. Everybody in the village knew the son had died. They were part of the funeral procession that was taking place when Jesus came along, and raised the son from the dead...and everybody in the village knew that the son was now alive.

The king probably knew that in the town of Capernaum, a man was paralyzed, Jesus came along, and then he could walk. In Bethsaida there was a man born blind, Jesus came along, and then he could see. In Bethany Lazarus was dead, Jesus came along, and then he was alive.

And the King surely would have heard that Jesus was nailed to a cross and died there...was laid in a tomb, and rose on the third day. He would have heard how Jesus appeared to hundreds of people over the course of the next 40 days.

And these things would just be the tip of the iceberg, because in town after town, village after village...hundreds, perhaps thousands of people would have stories to share of what they had witnessed. Because none of it was done in a corner.

Paul is essentially saying to Agrippa, *"There is a lot of evidence out there, and you don't have to believe it, because people are free to believe anything they want...but you can't argue with the fact that what I'm saying is reasonable."*

Paul is challenging Agrippa – and us – to use our heads. In addition to that, there is a second challenge that I think we see here, it's found in...

B. Paul's Challenge to Search Our Hearts

So, there's another great phrase here in the midst of today's passage, it's found in verse 14 where Paul hears the voice of Jesus saying....

Acts 26:14b 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

Another fascinating phrase. *“It is hard for you to kick against the goads.”* So what’s a “goad”?

Well, a goad is a sharp stick that shepherds would be used to prod cattle or sheep and get them going in the right direction. But what’s this have to do with Paul?

Well, back at the beginning of this chapter, when Paul first begins to speak, he talked about how he belonged to a strict, conservative religious group known as the Pharisees.

For the Pharisees, and none more so than Paul, obedience to God’s commandments – to His laws – was everything. For Paul, obedience to God’s laws would mean that he was doing life right. And in many respects, he was.

But from another passage in the Bible we know there was this time that something was working inside of Paul’s heart. He talked about how he knew that this was wrong and that was wrong, and he did it anyway. He talked about how he knew the right thing to do, but couldn’t bring himself to do it.

And he realizes that that his way of doing life – when it came to pleasing God - wasn’t working out after all. Outwardly maybe, but in his heart he knows something is wrong.

And so Jesus meets Paul on this road and essentially says, *“Paul, you are killing yourself. You’ve been persecuting me, fighting me, but you feel that sharp stick don’t you? I’ve been prodding you to stop persecuting me...goading you into following me. It is hard for you, isn’t it Paul, to kick against the goads....to fight against me.”*

And Paul came to realize that he was fighting against the very One who was the answer to what was churning inside.

Paul had been relentless in trying to stick it to Jesus, and he eventually came to see that he was only just sticking it to himself. And so in this audience room, Paul shares his personal experience of what Jesus said to Him in getting him to search his heart.

And one more challenge that I think we can see in this passage, it's...

C. Paul's Challenge to Search The Bible

It's found in verse 27 where Paul says...

Acts 26:27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do."

See, Paul is saying that following Jesus make rationale sense, it makes emotional sense...and it also makes Biblical sense. Paul thought that he knew the Scriptures, and I'm sure that he did. But once his mind and his heart came together, the Scriptures came alive for him.

The things that Isaiah and Daniel and Ezekiel and others foretold...Paul had to have seen and understood what had been written about the coming Messiah in a way that he never had before. And he's trying to persuade Agrippa to search the Scriptures: *"Read what the prophets wrote, and see if it doesn't come together for you."*

And while at this point the New Testament has yet to come together, the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection would have been repeated and recorded and was out there for anyone who wanted to know more.

Paul is looking to persuade all who are listening, Agrippa, Bernice, Festus, the dignitaries, you and me...to follow Jesus. Embrace His way of doing life. In light of all of this, what do you see as...

3. YOUR NEXT STEP

If you're one that has yet to be persuaded to leave behind your way of doing life and embrace Jesus' way of doing life, then the next step that Jesus would have you take would be to ***"Use your head, search your heart, search the Bible."***

And can I just share with you my experience as one who had no interest in being persuaded to embrace Jesus' way of doing life?

As a late teen and then young adult, my exposure to “the evidence” – that which was not done in a corner - came from observing those who I saw as Christians. My exposure to Christians didn’t come so much from personal encounters...I didn’t run in that world as a teenage or young adult....but as best as I can remember, my exposure to Christians came from – to be honest - what I saw on TV. There are today and there were then religious shows on TV.

And let me acknowledge that sometimes we only see what we want to see, but to me it seemed like every Christian on TV looked the same...perfect hair, perfect make-up, everybody singing in perfect harmony. I was trying to figure out to describe this, and the best word I could come up with was “slick.” I remember everything that I saw looking so slick, and I wasn’t looking for slick, I was looking for “real.”

And it wasn’t until I started attending church here at Five Forks that I saw Christians that looked real. I saw men and women who followed Jesus with an attitude of humility, admitting areas of brokenness (we’re not perfect)...following Jesus and not always getting it right, but genuine about wanting to get it right.

It opened up a whole new world, and as I looked around and began considering the evidence, I found that this isn’t a mindless religion, but there are a lot of smart, thoughtful people in this church and around the world who have asked the hard questions and done an honest search, and have become committed followers of Jesus.

I would just like to encourage you, more than that, to challenge you to use your head...look around and see the evidence supporting Jesus’ way of doing life. Look at lives that have been changed...because people’s lives are not lived in a corner...we see who people were...we see people change – sometimes dramatically, sometimes subtly – but lives do change for those who have been persuaded to follow Jesus.

But don’t just look around you, look inside of you. Your way of doing life...how’s that working out for you? And don’t think that as long as your life isn’t a train wreck, then you must be doing okay. I came across this interview that *Rolling Stone* magazine did

with actor Brad Pitt years ago. Some of you are aware that Brad Pitt has found incredible success *and wealth* as an actor.

In the midst of the interview, Pitt was lamenting the numbing of our souls, and interestingly, the decay of spirituality. And when asked what should be done about it, here was Pitt's response:

“Hey man, I don’t have those answers yet. The emphasis is on success and personal gain. (Smiles). I’m sitting in it, and I’m telling you that’s not it. I’m the guy who’s got everything. I know. But I’m telling you, once you get everything, then you’re just left with yourself. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: It doesn’t help you sleep any better, and you don’t wake up any better because of it. Now, no one’s going to want to hear that. I understand it. I’m sorry I’m the guy who’s got to say it. But I’m telling you.”

Those could be the words of Paul. He was sitting in it...a Pharisee of Pharisees...but he knew something wasn't right. And that goad that was sticking Paul sounds like it was sticking Brad Pitt as well. And maybe it's been sticking you.

Maybe you've been kicking and resisting Jesus...and in doing so, only sticking it to yourself. Jesus is challenging you to search your heart, and recognize that success and personal gain is not "it."

Finally, let me encourage you to search the Bible. There was an Anglican preacher named Dick Lucas, and someone once came to him and said, *“Dick, I’m a skeptic, but if you can give me an airtight argument for the truth of Christianity, then I can believe.”* And Lucas said, *“Well, what if God didn’t send an airtight argument, but instead sent an airtight person?”* And the guy said, *“What do mean?”* And Lucas said, *“I challenge you to read the gospels and get to see what Jesus did and what Jesus said, and it’s possible you’ll come to believe that He is who He says He is.”*

You see, when you thoughtfully consider how Jesus lived, His character, and the brilliance of what He taught, the mind and the heart come together and the Bible comes alive and helps make sense of everything.

As always, I would welcome the opportunity to follow up on any of this or all of this if you'd like. I'm easy to reach, just call the church office or shoot me an email and we can set up a time to meet, and you can tell me your story and where you're at...and we'll go from there.

Now, some of you have already taken this first step, and you're not looking to be persuaded, you're looking to do the persuading. And so that's the next step for some of you: **Consider how to be persuasive.**

It's been said that to the degree you've been persuaded, to that degree you will be willing to persuade others. Are you confident that Jesus' way of doing life is the only way of doing life? If so, share with others what evidence has been meaningful to you. What change can you point to in your life...change not done in a corner but evident to yourself and to those around you?

What can you share about your inner struggle? Did you kick against the goads, do you remember resisting Jesus and if so, how did you come to recognize this in your heart? And how did Jesus walk you through it?

What are your "go-to" Bible passages that you are ready to share with anyone you might be looking to persuade? I have about 3 or 4 that I have ready depending upon the circumstances. I know them, I can explain them, and Jesus can use them to help persuade someone to follow Him by embracing His way of doing life. If you're interested, I've asked Julie to list them in the bulletin, and again, feel free to contact me if you'd like to talk about these passages or share with me your "go-to" passages, I've love to hear them and maybe learn from you.

This passage that we've looked at is fascinating I believe, as I said, there's a lot going on here, but Paul sees an opportunity and takes advantage of it. My prayer for myself

and for all of you is that we will recognize any opportunities that come before us, any opportunities to persuade someone to find life by following Jesus.

PRAYER