

Waking the Sleeping Giant - 24

Becoming who you are!

Insecurity is a crippling condition. Yet, it is a plague which has spread throughout all sectors of our society. But this plague is not limited to non-Christians. It affects Christians as well. Our own insecurity as believers keeps us from living a full and free Christian life. As believers, we can be severely retarded in our development because of our own insecurity. Because we doubt our own worth before God, we are all too willing to be content to live a passive Christian life. Because we lack confidence, we also lack the aggressive boldness which we need in order to have a real impact on the world for Christ.

Waking the Sleeping Giant is as very appropriate title for this series in the book of Acts. If the Church of Jesus Christ were to become in practice what we know it is in theory – it would make Godzilla look like child's toy! The church would tower over all of man's wisdom and intelligence and be the central, driving force of society. The challenge to you and to me is to wake up to who we are in Christ. It is a challenge which every Christian faces on a daily basis as he or she endeavours to be the kind of man or woman God intends for them to be.

Those of us who struggle seriously with the claims of Christ for our lives are constantly challenged with our own need to be more effective in our Christian walk and witness. But sometimes our own fears, doubts and insecurities get in the way of what we desperately desire to do for Christ and who we desire to be in Christ. How can you be all that you desire to be for Christ when you see so many areas of lack in your own life? Is it possible to be the kind of Christian witness you need to be when you are still struggling with so many shortcomings in your own life? It is true that you can't give what you don't have. But it is also true that our perception of ourselves is not always accurate. Our insecurities arise, in large part, because we haven't seen by faith and accepted by faith God's own word concerning us. There is a desperate need in the body of Christ for believers to come to know who they really are in Christ. We need to understand God's opinion of us. We need, by faith, to come to know what we have received in Christ. And we need to accept the extent of His forgiveness and acceptance of us.

Our text speaks to this theme by directing us to one who was far from perfect, but who lived in the confidence of his position in Christ. Perhaps as we look at Paul's appearance before King Agrippa, we will not only come to understand his motivation to see people come to Christ, but we will also catch a vision of who we are in Christ which will give us the same confident assurance which Paul had.

Acts 26:24-29 *"At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defence. 'You are out of your mind, Paul!' he shouted. 'Your great learning is driving you insane.'*

'I am not insane, most excellent Festus,' Paul replied. 'What I am saying is true and reasonable. 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. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.'

Then Agrippa said to Paul, '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 to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.'"

As this episode in the life of Paul unfolds, we find him imprisoned in Caesarea. Because of a near riot in Jerusalem and a plot by the Jews to kill him, Roman officers had brought him to Felix, the governor, so that his guilt or innocence could be ascertained. Paul remained in prison under Felix for two years, at which time Festus succeeded Felix as governor. During this time, Paul preached the gospel to both Felix and Festus. But neither one of them could decide what to do with Paul. They both knew that he was innocent, yet they wanted to please the Jews, who wanted Paul in jail. They were in a political dilemma. Should truth prevail over political expediency? It should, but very often it does not.

King Agrippa arrived to pay a visit to Festus. King Herod Agrippa II was the great-grandson of Herod the Great, who had murdered all the male children in the vicinity of Bethlehem because he feared the birth of Jesus. He came to visit Festus with Bernice, who was sister to Drusilla, Felix's wife. This made her a sister to Agrippa II. We have here a sordid affair indeed. Paul was brought before Agrippa to present his defence.

One characteristic which is unmistakable about the apostle Paul is that he was an aggressive, confident soul-winner. Everywhere he went, and to everyone he met, he gave a witness of the grace of God and of their need to come to Christ for salvation. This meeting with Agrippa certainly was no exception. Picture what must have happened.

“The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high ranking officers and the leading men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. (Acts 25:23)

Great ceremony and pomp surrounded this official occasion. No doubt, Festus had donned his scarlet governor's robe for the special event. King Agrippa and Bernice were also arrayed in the splendour of their royal robes. I'm sure the court was majestically decorated also. The captains, centurions, and legionnaires stood in stately splendour as they lined the great Hall of Audience to remind everyone of the military might of Rome.

The honoured guests and dignitaries looked also witnessed the questioning by Agrippa. Paul is then brought into this magnificent hall, before these imposing earthly powers. He is a man small in stature and physically unimposing. The chains of his imprisonment dangle from his wrists. He wore no royal robe, but rather the robes of a prisoner. Yet, within this little Jewish man is a power unmatched by all the regalia which now surrounds him.

As you look into his eyes, you see a certain majestic confidence and a depth of understanding which was unsurpassed. When Paul speaks, his voice cuts through the pretentious elegance of this glorious display of pomp. What he says rings with truth and is clothed in power.

So, Paul begins to make his defence before Agrippa. But as you read his defence, you find that it is as much a testimony to the gospel of the grace of God as it is a defence of his innocence. Paul was neither impressed by Agrippa nor afraid of Roman power. Paul was a soul-winner at heart. His motivating desire was to see people come to know Christ, and so he was determined to use every opportunity to see that happen.

There is a message here for us. We see that Paul seized the opportunity to share Christ with Agrippa. The example of Paul should be an encouragement to us to do the same thing. Do we see, as he did, that whatever the circumstance of our encounters with other people, they are opportunities to share the good news of God's amazing grace? When people encountered Paul, they encountered Christ's ambassador, and when they encounter us, they also encounter Christ's ambassadors.

2 Corinthians 5:20 *"Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."*

As ambassadors for Christ, we all stand before this watching world, in the place of Christ, entreating all those who do not know Christ to be reconciled to God. We must use every opportunity to get that message across. We also see an unmistakable message here. It is the message that we must share with every person, regardless of their place in society. Paul preached to the poor, Gentile, and Jew alike. But he also preached to the affluent and socially important as well. Paul could stand before paupers and kings. It didn't matter to him, and it shouldn't matter to us. A man is a man regardless of his title, and without Christ he is lost. Sometimes the temptation is to draw back from sharing with so-called VIP's. And, in our insecurity, sometimes we do draw back and miss the opportunities God provides.

What we need to do is to catch the confidence which Paul manifested here. We need to see ourselves as ambassadors for Christ. We are set forth in His authority and by His command. Furthermore, we possess His power to get the job done. He has ordained us to be His representatives in that confidence. We need not fear any human. We see in Paul an aggressive soul-winner and that is precisely what we can be and should be every day.

What was the effect of Paul's witness to Agrippa? We see that this passionate soul-winner produced a rather anxious King. As Paul preached about the truth of salvation by faith in the risen Christ, King Agrippa was getting more nervous. Agrippa knew of these things, and Paul's testimony had a ring of truth about it. You see, truth produces conviction. And Agrippa was feeling that conviction. Truth will also produce confrontation – every time - and so this was a very tense moment.

Perhaps Festus noticed Agrippa's uneasiness. Because when Paul's message was being driven home, Festus intervened. At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defence. *"You are out of your mind, Paul!"* he shouted. *"Your great learning is driving you insane."* (Acts 26:24)

But Paul would not be turned aside from his goal. Still standing before King Agrippa, he replied to Festus, *"I am not insane, most excellent Festus,"* Paul replied. *"What I am saying is true and reasonable. 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."* (Acts 26:25-26)

Then Paul delivers a call for decision. He says to the king in verse 27, *"King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do."* Paul was calling for Agrippa to make a decision. You see, truth demands a response. Agrippa had already experienced the conviction of truth. And now, he must decide what he will do. He must respond. Agrippa decides to take the course of evasion. He says, in verse 28, *"Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"* The thrust of Agrippa's statement was that Paul shouldn't expect Agrippa to make such a decision on the spur of the moment.

The fact is that Agrippa was very uncomfortable. He had heard the truth, and somehow, he knew it to be true. He was feeling the pressure. Perhaps deep down within him, faith was attempting to be born. But he quickly aborted that attempt.

In our witnessing encounters we are certain to run into our own Agrippas. Not everyone is willing to hear the truth. You will witness to people who profess themselves to be open-minded, thoughtful intellectuals, but who are opposed to the truth. They will not admit it. Many times, they will seek to evade the truth by refusing to admit it is the truth. They do not want to admit that they are rejecting truth. That would portray them as being not so smart after all. The real reason they reject the truth is not for intellectual reasons, however - it is for moral reasons. There is no other explanation for why intelligent people would reject truth.

The Bible calls this original sin. It is the utter moral depravity of humankind. We are addicted to selfish sinful pleasures and we do not desire to change. This was the situation with King Agrippa. What Paul says next is simply amazing. This nervous King was about to hear a most audacious statement from the lips of the apostle Paul. In response to Agrippa's bold statement, Paul makes a statement of his own.

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." (Acts 26:29)

On the surface, I find this statement utterly amazing. What I find incredible is not Paul's desire to see the king saved, but the way Paul expressed that desire. He said that he desired that the king and everyone else "*may become what I am.*" On the surface, this seems like reckless arrogance on the part of Paul. Did Paul think he was such a great person that they should desire to be like him? Why didn't he say that they should become like Christ? After all, isn't Christ supposed to be our example? Isn't His life the life we are to emulate? What does Paul's statement say about his own self-worth? What does it say about his view of himself as a sinner who has been forgiven? What does it tell us about Paul's view of the grace of God working in his life?

Paul certainly knew all his shortcomings. He knew his faults. He was aware of his sins. On several occasions in the New Testament, he reminds us of just how great a sinner he was before his conversion to Christ. Paul had persecuted the church. Because of his activity, many in the early church suffered and even died. I'm sure the apostle spent many hours after his conversion in utter remorse over the pain and suffering he had caused so many innocent saints of God. I'm sure he repented in dust and ashes over his behaviour which had been motivated by a false zeal for his religion. Paul called himself on one occasion, "*the chief of sinners.*" He was fully aware of his own sinful past. But he was aware of something else as well.

At just the right time in Paul's life, Jesus Christ had come to him. He had encountered the grace of God. With his face to the ground, he had received Christ as his Saviour and Lord. All of those horrible sins he had committed were forgiven. His heart was cleansed and he was set free. Paul had come to understand the complete forgiveness of Jesus Christ. He Himself wrote about us and said that we are "*accepted in the beloved.*" This sinful man had come to understand that when Christ receives you, "*old things are passed away; behold, all things become new.*"

This is perhaps one of the hardest lessons to learn in the Christian life. I know intellectually about the forgiveness of Christ. And I know what the Scripture says about my forgiven state. But while I know that Christ has forgiven my sins, sometimes I find it extremely hard to accept the fact that I am forgiven. I suppose we all find it hard to forgive ourselves, to really believe that we are accepted by Christ. Therein lies our insecurity and our lack of confidence.

So let's get back to this interesting statement which we hear the apostle making in verse 29. He said that he wished that all those who heard him that day, "*may become what I am, except for these chains.*" Paul was saying, "*This is my only exception...I would like for you to be just like I am, except for these chains.*" We, like Paul, must also make some exceptions. What would your exceptions be? If you had to tell someone you'd like for them to be just like you are, what would you have to except? Would you have to say, "*except for this sin in my life*" or, "*except for this lack of obedience to Christ?*" What would we have to except? All of us have those exceptions - the things which we carry like heavy baggage through a busy airport. By the time we get to where we're going, we're exhausted. The exceptions are burdens too heavy to bear. But in Christ, the exceptions can disappear. In Christ, we can be made whole. In Christ, we can find a confidence for daily living. For we can find acceptance as His children.

Our insecurity flows from the fact that we live in the exceptions rather than the acceptance of Christ. It is hard to forgive yourself, but you must. For Christ has already forgiven you, and you are now a new person in Christ. You can begin again. This is what the grace of God is all about. God knew what He was doing when He chose you. He knows all about your sins and your weaknesses. He called you while you were still up to your eye-balls in sin. The Bible teaches that *"while we were yet sinners Christ died for us."* The Word God begins, God finishes. Remember that *"you are His workmanship."* He will see you through by His grace.

If we would ever meet the challenge of living biblical Christianity in a secular world, if we are to ever see the Sleeping Giant wake up, if we are to ever see the Church of Jesus Christ take her rightful place in the world then it must begin here, in our individual hearts. We must begin to see ourselves from Christ's perspective. That is why Paul could be so bold and confident – because he knew who he had become in Christ. So too should we.

We are forgiven, cleansed and redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. God sees us through the finished work of Christ. We are priests in the kingdom of God. No matter what our outward circumstances, we can hold our heads high. We never have to be ashamed of the gospel. We can proclaim it boldly, seizing every opportunity to share it with every person, everywhere.

The same confidence which we see in Paul here, can be our confidence, because we are indwelt by the same Spirit and we worship the same God!