

Text: Ac 22.17-22

When I got out of seminary and moved up to Victoria, I was still quite young and naïve.

- I had hours of theological training.
- I had answers to most Bible questions.
- I understood the fact of widespread unbelief.
- I also had wit and charm (maybe)!

I had a sense that, while many didn't believe, all those answers and all those convincing proofs would bring many into the kingdom.

Many apologetics ministries seem to have something of this sense as well. If only men and women just understood...

- The folly of evolution
- The grand simplicity of creation
- The deep and universal problems caused by the fall
- The hope of the gospel

... then we could easily persuade them to become Christians.

Have you had this experience?

On the contrary, no doubt if you have made attempts to give the gospel at all, you find that people just don't respond.

- They are indifferent to your warnings.
- They refuse to consider your reasoning or your science.
- They mock your message.
- They get downright antagonistic if you point out they are sinners.

Why is unbelief so strong? Our passage today illustrates this pervasive problem.

Read Acts 22.17-22

Proposition: Unbelief in the heart of man persists despite convincing proofs: only God's grace through the Word can overcome it.

I. The optimism of the faithful (19-20)

A. Recall that sprinkled throughout this speech are statements identifying Paul as a faithful Jew

1. “Brethren and fathers” (1) – a Jewish expression
2. Biography of upbringing and training: testimony of zeal (3)
3. Record of persecution (4-5)
4. Even the description “Jesus the Nazarene” (8)
5. Ananias described as devout acc. to the Law, well-known by other Jews (12)
6. “God of our fathers” (14)
7. “The Righteous One” (14)
8. Personal devotion in temple (17) [beginning of today’s text]

“A person who goes to the temple for prayer is not likely to desecrate it.”¹

All of this reflects an *attitude* of Jewish identity: his self-image is Jewish, he wants to get across his message to Jews.

B. The assumptions in Paul’s astonished rejoinder to the Lord

1. He assumes Jewish familiarity with his testimony — pre- and post-conversion — should count for something (19)
2. Especially his participation in Stephen’s should gain him credibility (20)

Note use of the word “approving” — a “word for being pleased at the same time with”²

Paul testifies in Romans his great desire to see Jews come to Christ:

Rm 10.1 ¶ Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for *their* salvation.

¹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 462.

² A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ac 22.20.

- C. The use of this testimony in this speech reflect his desire to reach even these mad Jews who lately were trying to kill him

“He likely objects [to God] because he considered himself the very man to win his people ... Rhetorically, [in this speech], it is included to appeal to his present hearers”³

In other words, surely, if they would hear anyone, it would be someone with a testimony like his.

II. The realism of the Saviour (17-18, 21)

- A. This is on the occasion of Paul’s return to Jerusalem after (apparently) three years in Damascus post-conversion (see 9.22ff.)

1. We will look at this passage in some detail this afternoon
2. Here, note 9.28-29

Ac 9.28-29 And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic *Jews*; but they were attempting to put him to death.

3. The movement about Jerusalem included, for a faithful Jew, regular attendance at the temple for prayers

- B. In one of these prayers, Paul received a vision from the Lord, warning of danger

1. The Lord urges immediate departure, for “they will not accept your testimony about Me” (18)
2. After Paul’s objection, a peremptory command: “Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles” (21)

³ L. Scott Kellum, *Acts*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2020), 256.

C. The reality that unbelievers will not believe

1. Jesus found that many who saw his works yet did not believe

a. He challenged them to believe the works (Jn 10.37-38)

Jn 10.37-38 “If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; ³⁸ but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father.”

b. In Jn 11.43-44, Jesus raised Lazarus, and many believed (Jn 11.45)

Jn 11.45 ¶ Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him.

c. Yet the chief priests only thought to counter him, not believe him

Jn 11.47-48 Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, “What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. ⁴⁸ “If we let Him *go on* like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

d. Not even his brothers were believing (at that time) Jn 7.5

Jn 7.5 For not even His brothers were believing in Him.

2. After the healing of the lame man at the temple, the leaders of the Jews (and most of the people) still didn't believe

Ac 4.15-17 But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, they *began* to confer with one another, ¹⁶ saying, “What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷ “But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name.”

“Unbelievers gonna unbelieve.”

III. The radicalism of unbelief (22)

A. The crowd turned on a word: “Gentiles”

1. Earlier in the speech, Paul said it this way

Ac 22.15 ‘For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard.’

2. Here, he says, “I will send you far away to the Gentiles”

a. This word brings all their fury to the fore

“But ‘this word’ was like a spark in a powder magazine or a torch to an oil tank. The explosion of pent-up indignation broke out instantly worse than at first (21:30).”⁴

b. For them, it must seem to confirm the charge of the Asian Jews:

Ac 21.28 crying out, “Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.”

B. The crowd, in a fury, demands his death

1. Away with him

2. Such a fellow doesn’t deserve to live

3. Their outcry accompanied by strange gestures and confusion (23)

Their reaction confirms the Lord’s message:

- It seems Paul still hoped his testimony might make some difference
- Yet unbelief is strong: even in the face of incontrovertible evidence, men will not believe

⁴ Robertson, *Word Pictures*, Ac 22.22.

“Voltaire is reported to have said, ‘If a miracle occurred in the market place of Paris and in the presence of two thousand men, I would rather disbelieve my own eyes than the two thousand.’”⁵

There are men who simply *will not* believe.

C. H. Spurgeon gave an illustration of a sinking ship:

“After a terrible tempest, a wreck is all that remains of a once fine vessel. And on the wreck, lashed to the mast, I see clinging a number of mariners, almost frost-bitten with the cold, and drenched through and through with brine. But there goes the lifeboat, so I trust they will soon all be rescued from their perilous position. I am absolutely certain of one thing with regard to all those who are clinging to that poor wreck of a ship: that there is not a man among them who will raise any objection to being saved. No; whatever may have been their previous position in life, or their habits or tastes or anything else, they will all be equally glad to welcome the friendly lifeboat, and to be taken on board the vessel of mercy.

“Yet is it not a strange thing, dear friends, that when poor humanity has become a total wreck, and poor souls are clinging to the sinking ship with hopes that must certainly be disappointed, and when Jesus Christ appears within hail, willing and able to save unto the uttermost, there are multitudes who raise all sorts of objections to being saved by him.”⁶

⁵ “Apologetics” in Michael P. Green, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, Revised edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989).

⁶ *Preaching Themes: Foolishness, Salvation* in Charles H Spurgeon, *300 Sermon Illustrations from Charles Spurgeon*, ed. Elliot Ritzema and Lynnea Smoyer (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017).

Conclusion:

Proposition: Unbelief in the heart of man persists despite convincing proofs: only God's grace through the Word can overcome it.

Now, I don't want to leave this sermon here. I haven't dealt with the second part of my proposition: "only God's grace through the Word can overcome unbelief"

How can we overcome unbelief? When Jesus remarked that the rich man can scarcely enter the Kingdom of God, his disciples asked,

Mt 19.25 When the disciples heard *this*, they were very astonished and said, "Then who can be saved?"

How can they be saved? The Bible answers that, too:

Rm 10.17 So faith *comes* from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.

We must simply keep on preaching, giving out the word of God, because some *will* believe.