

EPIPHANY SUNDAY**Acts 26:12-18, 22-23 — SEE IT NOW ?**

While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus [from Jerusalem] with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads"

So I said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me."

. . . Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come—that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."

Have you ever had an "epiphany"? I'm talking about something that you just couldn't see and couldn't see, but then, as if someone turned on a light, suddenly it became clear?! "Epiphany" means to "shine out, to make manifest, to become evident."

During Epiphany Season, we consider ways in which Jesus was made manifest, made evident, as the Son of God and our Savior. His miracles were little epiphanies of His true identity—changing water into wine etc. On Epiphany Sunday we consider the Wise Men. Jesus was made manifest to the Wise Men by the light of the special star. Jesus Himself is the Light of the World (John 8:12). He reveals the path to heaven – trusting in His payment for sin, yours and mine. I have visited with people, particularly older people, who sometimes come straight out and say, "I really don't sin—or don't sin much. I live here all alone." It's a bit of any epiphany for them to see that they are sinners. "You're going to die, aren't you?" "Yes." "Well, death is the wages of sin—whether sins inside or out, big or little, against other people or against God. You are a sinner." Harsh. But then there is a pleasant epiphany—seeing that in Jesus all the unworthiness is washed away. "Forgiven! Pardoned! Not Guilty!" It's a special moment when the light "saved" goes on.

Today we see the Apostle Paul at a hearing before King Herod Agrippa (related to the other Herod's). Paul was telling of his conversion to Christianity. He related his own twin epiphanies of guilt and pardon. Paul (Saul) had grown up a loyal Jew, in fact a very strict Jew, a Pharisee, who worked mightily to keep all the hundreds of Old Testament laws—moral laws (right and wrong for all time), civic laws (for nation and government), and religious laws (law for the intricate worship life of the Old Testament sacrifices, festivals, and daily diet). Such Pharisees were self-satisfied and thought they were "self-saved," good enough to get resurrection and eternal life from God. Jesus was an affront to their self-pride and self-satisfaction, jabbing at their internal sins against God. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man comes to the Father, but by Me" (John 14:6). For the Pharisees Jesus was bad medicine; all who followed Him were likewise bad medicine. The Pharisees pushed the attack against Jesus, putting Jesus to death, squelching the reports that He was alive again, and persecuting all His followers with imprisonment and death. Do you remember Stephen the Christian being stoned for his preaching of Christ?

Paul (Saul) had been such a Christ-hater and Christian-hater. He wanted to rid the earth of everything Christian. On a trip from Jerusalem to Damascus to arrest Christians, Paul had an epiphany—two epiphanies. At midday, with the sun surely bright and intense, a light even brighter than the sun! knocked him and his companions to the ground. If such a light appeared inside the church this morning, we would all duck for cover. Who would dare to stand before such light that reveals everything? Adam and Eve hid themselves in the Garden, when the Lord arrived after their sin. This supernatural light was not just a quirk of physics. It was a manifestation of a personal being. A voice spoke. Saul heard and understood. It spoke in Hebrew, the historic language of the Jews. It addressed Saul by name. The voice knew Him and was calling him out! "Why are you persecuting Me?!" Saul asked who it was.

The voice said, "I AM Jesus!" Do you remember how the Lord identified Himself to Moses at the burning bush? "I AM who I AM. I AM sends you to your people" (Exodus 3:14). And remember what Jesus said to the argumentative Pharisees? "Before Abraham was, I AM." This voice was the voice of God, this voice was the voice of Jesus, "whom you are persecuting." "It is hard for you to kick against the goads (ox goads, cattle-prods, "hotshots"). In other words, "You are heading in the wrong direction. You have hated Me and hate My followers!" This was a jolting epiphany to Saul. Now it was, "I am in trouble! Jesus was true. Jesus is God. I have been arresting and leading His followers to their death. I have smacked His face repeatedly. I am in trouble!" Such an epiphany! "I am a skunk!" For the next three days Saul would be blind and take not food, chewing-on what he had done and how he stacked up before God. His pride had to say, "I have done wrong. God have mercy on me a sinner."

I wonder about myself and each of you. How many things, that you or I think are OK, are an offense to Jesus? Are the words that you say and promptly excuse, are the activities that you are involved in and quickly rationalize as being OK, are the recreation activities you enjoy displeasing to God, are the interests in your heart and ego abominable to God? I believe we would each be surprised if given such an epiphany, to hear God's take on our lives: "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting!" And we answer, "I am in trouble."

But Paul (Saul) had another epiphany that day. He heard, *Arise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you.* Without any credits of his own, Saul's grievous sins and offenses against Jesus were forgivable and forgiven. Jesus let him know that his sins had not barred Him from the love of God. Saul would be sent as a servant (minister) and as a witness of the wonderful grace of God. He would tell all the things he already knew about Christ and the things God would yet reveal to Him. He would go to both Jews, his bloodline brothers, and to non-Jews, the Gentiles, sharing that in Christ sins against God are forgiven. The Lord told him He would keep him safe from all attacks upon Him. Jesus forgives sinners. Three days later, when God sent Ananias, to Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, receive your sight. The Lord has sent me to you. . . . Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). Wash your sins away in Jesus' Name! Amazing! What an epiphany!

Thus Saul would be privileged to share the same epiphanies of guilt and pardon, sin and grace that he had received from Jesus, as an epiphany to be shared with others. *I send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.* From dark to light, from the darkness of wickedness and rebellion against God and the condemnation it deserves, to the light and comfort of being acceptable to God and rescued for heaven; from the death grip of Satan to the more powerful grasp of God's arms of love, to receive forgiveness, a clean slate, in Jesus. Instead of being disinherited and written off by the Lord, he had the riches of the inheritance of eternal life in heaven. Such gifts for the children of God, those *sanctified*, set apart as righteous and holy by trusting in Christ's atonement and payment for sin. It is indeed a privilege to be an epiphany provider, the one bringing the revelation of forgiveness to another. A parent at home experiences similar joy when son or daughter finally "gets it," a teacher at school when the lights in eyes go on and the student understands it, a pastor presenting and explaining God's pardon in Jesus to searching sheep and lambs.

Paul explained to King Herod Agrippa even further exactly what his point was. He used the opportunity to reach into Herod's own heart and mind: *Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come—that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles!*—you, King Herod are included! We have the same opportunity. You and I have seen Jesus, the Light of God! Who is there around you who does not need to hear this message? Is there anyone who does not need this epiphany? The epiphany message is for everyone! It is hard to get the sinful flesh to promote it, but for the New Man it's simple to share: "Jesus suffered for your sins on the cross. Jesus rose from the grave, your debt paid in full. By faith in Him you are forgiven and cleared!" What a sweet revelation and epiphany for sin-sick and dying souls. Show them THE LIGHT!

Amen! So be it!

Pastor Kanzenbach---