

Words and Deeds: Ear Plugs
By Jason Huff
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Ecclesiastes 5:1-2; Matthew 7:24-27; Acts 21:40-22:22

Our final Scripture reading comes from Acts 21:40-22:22. May God bless this reading from His perfect, sacred, and trustworthy Word.

“Having received the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic: "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense." When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet. Then Paul said: "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' "Who are you, Lord?' I asked. "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. "What shall I do, Lord?' I asked. "Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.' My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him. "Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'

When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking. 'Quick!' he said to me. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' "Lord,' I replied, 'these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' "Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"

Earlier this week, I had my hearing tested. Not a big surprise for someone who's listened to music in headphones all his life and has played electric guitar for years. What they found was that the level of my hearing loss was not all that bad given my age and circumstances.

The biggest thing we talked about was tinnitus, which is when you have a constant ringing in your ears as I currently do in the my right one. They don't understand a lot about tinnitus, and there are a lot of varieties. But one of the things they think is that the tone you hear in your ear is your ear trying to find the frequencies that are most missing in your hearings. It's like your brain is smart enough to turn up the volume on the part of your hearing that isn't working as well, but it's not smart enough to turn that volume down when you don't need it. So as many of us do, we just have to deal with hearing more than what we should.

It's funny because in real life, we often tune a lot of things out. We're used to tuning out background noise in a restaurant, for example. In an office loaded with other people, we often tune all that out to answer the phone. But we also have built-in biases and beliefs where we tune things out that might disagree, and it can be dangerous for us spiritually. Today's passage teaches us about Paul, about faith, and about how having spiritual ear plugs to God and His plans and His ways is something we as believers want to avoid.

As you might remember, last week is when things broke loose. Paul was accosted in the temple by Jews from the area around Ephesus, where Paul planted a church and set up shop for around three years. They yelled for help to take down Paul, whom they accused of speaking against the temple, the Jewish people, and the Law of Moses, not to mention a crime punishable by death – bringing a Gentile into the inner courts of the temple. Paul was rescued by a mess of Roman soldiers, and their commander was very impressed with Paul's command of the Greek language and his birth in the Roman city of Tarsus. Convinced that Paul isn't a direct threat, the commander lets him present his case before the mob. That's where we come in today.

We've been following Paul since Acts 9, and we've learned a lot about him. We've heard his testimony from Luke's perspective. We hear it here, and we'll hear it once again before Acts is finished. Now we know this isn't a long book; it's not like anyone who reads it from cover to cover is going to forget how Paul became a Christian. And while Luke had a patron who likely helped cover his costs of writing his gospel and the book of Acts, that doesn't stop the fact that writing a book in that era was expensive. Why would Paul's story be repeated three times?

There are several reasons why this could have happened, why Luke didn't just say, "Paul gave his testimony" and leave it at that. We don't know it from Luke, but we can make several wise guesses that all make sense. The first one is the most simple: there is no other personal testimony as important to the early church than Paul's.

Paul is absolute proof that Jesus is alive, that He is moving, and that He can radically change someone's heart and life. There are other important testimonies – Peter and his restoration after his denial of Jesus, Stephen before the court – but Paul had started churches all over the Roman Empire, especially in Gentile lands far beyond Israel. His letters filled with teachings about Jesus have spread like wildfire. (We actually have thousands of copies of them dating back to copies made within a hundred years of them writing them.)

People needed to understand who Paul was and why he was reliable. The Holy Spirit may have led Luke to include Paul's testimony so many times so that every reader, everyone who heard the book of Acts, would understand the power of God to not only turn someone completely around, but someone guilty of the worst sins imaginable – in Paul's case, facilitating the murder of innocents who did nothing more than trust in Jesus.

Another possible reason: it's important to hear Paul's story from multiple perspectives to understand not only how to reach an audience but also to know more of who Paul was. There are unique things about this particular retelling that are worth mentioning. First is Paul's background, which we really only learn here. He was born in Tarsus, which came with a lot of benefits as part of the Roman Empire – it impressed the Roman commander in Jerusalem. But that's not important at all to his audience now, an audience of faithful Jews.

Paul relates to the crowd that he was raised in Jerusalem – the holy city – and that he was a student under Gamaliel. To us today, this name means little. To the Jews, it meant everything. There were three rabbis of ancient antiquity who interpreted the Law of Moses that every Jew respected – and Rabbi Gamaliel was one of them. Imagine if you were a student of philosophy and sat under Socrates or Plato. That's how significant it was that Paul studied with him. That's how learned Paul was. Before his conversion, Paul was in an elite class already.

But that wasn't all. Paul was zealous for the faith and zealous to stop Christianity from spreading. When Luke uses his own words, he's a little more tactful about what Paul did, but Paul doesn't hold back. In his own words, he "persecuted followers of this way – Jesus' way – to their deaths." There is no Jew in his era more thoroughly Jewish and thoroughly committed to the faith than Paul. The high priests and the Sanhedrin, the council of the seventy elders of Israel, were well aware of him; had he stayed in the Jewish faith, there was no doubt that he would have been a council member, maybe one of the youngest ever to be given such a high position of authority.

But Jesus interrupts those plans. Paul relates what happened to him on the road to Damascus and how he met the Lord in this experience that blinded him. It's interesting to me that Paul quotes Jesus saying that in Damascus, Paul will be told all that he has been assigned to do. I don't love the word "assigned," you know? It sounds like something from a teacher in high school. And yet what it means is that God had a plan for Paul. God did not just have a few ideas what Paul should do. God had in mind for Paul to be the chief apostle to the Gentiles. While God does not make His plans that explicit to us, there is no doubt that God has His plans in order and they will be carried out. Either we will fight those plans, or we will surrender to His will and know the joy that can only come from being a faithful, obedient child of the King.

When Paul introduces Ananias, he makes sure that his listeners know who he was – a devout Jewish man highly respected by the other Jews in Damascus. When Ananias explains to Paul what had happened to him, he explains that "the God of our fathers has chosen you to hear and to see the Righteous One." It's not some foreign god; it's the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who sent Jesus. There is a continual reminder that Christ is the promised Jewish messiah; the salvation that Paul preaches is part and parcel of the ancient Jewish faith. Even water immersion was a part of ritual purification in Judaism, and required of converts to Judaism.

But then comes the turning point. After Paul returned to Jerusalem following his conversion, God speaks to Paul in a trance while he is at the temple, warning him to leave Jerusalem because they won't accept his testimony. It's hard to tell if Paul is objecting. Surely they'll listen to him. Paul was known to them; he was a Jew's Jew. They knew best just how he had persecuted the church. They knew he had led the charge against the Christians. Maybe they'd see him as a traitor, or maybe they'd see him as someone who really knew what he was talking about. Only God knows, and He tells Paul, "I'll send you to the Gentiles."

That's when everything falls apart. The crowd suddenly bursts into an uproar. They scream for Paul's death. The mob, impressed by Paul's discussion in their own language, sympathetic to his Jewishness, drawn into his story, changes their tune in an instant, wanting to murder Paul for his words. And what word is that? That the message of God is for Gentiles too. That sets them off so wildly that the Romans will once again have to intervene, as we'll see in next week's passage.

That's the core of what I believe God would have me speak to us about today. *What are our gospel ear plugs?* What is it that gets in the way of us fully and completely believing the gospel of Jesus and living it out in our daily lives? Now we are in a different place than Paul's hearers because I can speak for virtually all of us here that we have made commitments to Christ in our lives. And yet the gospel ear plugs we have can rob us of our joy, keep us from true obedience, and even shipwreck our faith.

For the Jews in Paul's day, though, the gospel ear plugs was the truth that the message of Christ was meant for the whole earth. The book of Isaiah mentions the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Kingdom of God no less than four times. Deuteronomy 4 says that following the Law given to Moses will bring people to the true God. The psalms command the praise of God among the nations. Psalm 22 says that "all the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before Him." Jeremiah is called "the prophet to the nations," and in Jeremiah 3 he prophesies that one day, "all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the LORD." The Scriptures made the Jewish people well aware that the Lord was for all peoples and would bring all people groups to Himself.

Yet the Jewish people of that day clung to the idea that not only were they God's chosen people – which is true – but also that they were God's only people – which is not true. Their hatred of the Romans and of the pagan peoples was so great that even though they would sit attentively to hear about Paul's experience of the risen Jesus and his conversion to Christianity, they violently bolted when Paul mentioned that a) God had said they wouldn't listen and b) God sent him to preach to the Gentiles. They took it as a slap in the face followed by a gut punch, and they weren't standing for it. It went against their prejudices and deeply held beliefs. So they missed out on their promised Savior because they wouldn't hear the hard truth.

For many of us, our gospel ear plugs are also our blind spots. We don't realize we have them until we're confronted with them. The Jews were desperate for a Messiah, and many people believed in Jesus when He walked this earth. The ones who didn't weren't those hostile to a Messiah, but those whose power was threatened. For this new generation, they wanted a Savior even more – but they wanted a Savior who would destroy the Gentiles, not rescue them.

What are our gospel ear plugs? What are our blind spots? One of the biggest ones these days is political. We think we are OK with Christ until we hear His hard teachings. On the left, the kind and loving Jesus is all well and good. But mention that Jesus didn't repeal the laws against sexual relationships outside of a man and a woman in marriage, and you'll get flack. Mention that Jesus told His disciples that the little ones were valuable and not to stop them from coming to Him, when we mention the Psalms and prophets where God says He knows us before birth and knits us together in our mother's womb, and support drops through the bottom.

We have gospel ear plugs on the right, too. In the parable on the sheep and the goats, Jesus welcomes some into His Kingdom and sends others to hell based on what they did and did not do for others – inviting in the stranger, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned. Jesus didn't make exceptions for feeding the family that snuck across the border or say that Medicare could handle the sick. Mention that Jesus said love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, or that the Proverbs call for us to feed our enemies, and we get weak in the knees.

The gospel ear plugs are strong and they're fitted to each one of us. I want to be liked. It's something I've always desired. Most of us have. So when we come across Jesus saying that His gospel will pit father against son and mother against daughter, that those whose love for their friends and family looks like hatred in comparison to their love of Jesus are not worthy to follow Him, my palms get a little sweaty. To be told that I will be hated for standing up for Jesus doesn't make me feel any better. There are times that I have downplayed or dropped the gospel because I wanted someone to like me. It's still a very real temptation.

I can't tell you what your ear plugs are, but I can tell you where you'll probably find them if you're willing and honest to look hard enough. They are the place where your human nature crashes up against the gospel. Proud people have a hard time with the doctrine that you cannot earn a place in heaven or be "good enough" without Jesus. Quiet or introverted people, or people pleasers, sometimes have difficulties with the idea of sharing the gospel or saying that someone else's un-Christian faith is wrong. If we have any particular sin we struggle with, that may be the place where our gospel hearing is weakest. It's that place, wherever it is, where we struggle with giving God control and authority over our lives.

So what can we do about these ear plugs? It depends on where we are. For those who are not believers, who have not put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, we should be praying for them. We should pray that God would pry out whatever it is that is keeping them from belief, because only God has the power to do that. God may use us to help with that process, but ultimately, it is God who saves and delivers, and He is the One who allows us to hear the gospel and believe.

If we're believers but we are struggling with those parts of faith that go against those deeply-engrained sins or pleasures or belief systems, there is hope. First, I'd make it a regular prayer that God might show us those places where He wants to act where we've got on ear muffs. Let's get our barriers out into the open so we can examine them. May God make us aware of what is keeping us from true faithfulness.

Then pray that when we *are* aware, that we would have the courage and conviction to do something about them. An examination that reveals a tumor is useless unless there's also surgery. If we examine our hearts but are unwilling for the Spirit to work in us to fix them and bring them in line with God's design, we're at an impasse. But if we will say "yes" to the Spirit and being to work on those areas where we fail or fall when it comes to the gospel, we can live as Christ intended.

And that's my hope and prayer for us today...that we would not be like Paul's crowd, who heard his incredible testimony and had hard hearts because he said things they didn't want to hear. May God soften our hearts so that we would turn to Him each day in repentance and allow Him to fix our broken hearing of His eternal message.