

Come Follow Me
Elo Viz production
Week 32
Acts 22-28

Nearly every chapter we are looking at this week has some sort of trial or persecution in Paul's life. He is beaten, 40 people try to kill him, he is falsely accused, he is shipwrecked and is bitten by a poisonous viper snake. What an adventure, huh? We will also read about twice when he bares his testimony about his conversion. It is powerful and bold. He tells us:

9 I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things **contrary** to the **name** of Jesus of Nazareth.

10 Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the **saints** did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to **death**, I gave my **voice** against *them*.

11 And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled *them* to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted *them* even unto **strange** cities.

(Acts 26:9-11)

Paul did some awful things. Things worse than any of us have ever done. He was an outright self proclaimed murderer. And then, on the road to Damascus he sees a light, brighter than the noon day sun, and Jesus Christ appears to him saying: “**Saul**, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” (Acts 26:14)

And standing before King Agrippa he says: “I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision” (Acts 26:19)

It's a very odd conversion story, is it not? Murderer to an Apostle overnight. Or so it seems, When we look a little closer at the time line of Saul we find that it actually took him some time to become Paul the apostle. Most scholars believe that his vision on the road to Damascus happened about 34 A.D. and with a few small preachings and testimonies in the middle it wasn't until about 46 A.D. until he was given authority from the Apostles to carry the message forth unto the world as an apostle of Christ. (Acts 11). That's 12 years. For 12 years he was changing from the man he was, to the man he needed to become in order to be the powerful preacher that we all see him as today. In the grand scope of things that is not very long but if we look at our own life we seem to think that things should happen a lot quicker. I look back on my conversion story and it also took a long time. It seems to me that it was a million tiny steps towards God. At first I could see maybe a few steps forward and a few steps back but in the last several years I notice that there have been less backward steps and my strides have become larger than before. And this is how the gospel usually works for most people. Yes, of course there are situations like Paul and Alma the younger were God steps in to stop an injustice and change the life of one of His wayward children, but not always. You and I are not murderers or persecutors. And this is a great thing. We can still be as bold and powerful as Paul without

having the great vision that he had. Remember what Jesus said to Thomas after he was resurrected?: “because thou hast **seen** me, thou hast believed: **blessed** *are* they that have not seen, and *yet* have **believed**.” (John 20:29)

You and I can still have just as strong a testimony today as Paul, or any of the early Apostles that saw Jesus with their own eyes. We can know with absolute surety that Jesus is the Christ without any visions or visitations from the heavenly realm. How, you ask? Line upon line and precept upon precept. Here a little and there a little. There is a song that came out not too long ago by Matt Maher called “The in between” It is a great song about how I was one way and now I’m different and “He” meaning Jesus was the in between”. I’ll leave a link to the youtube music video in the transcript you can find on our website. It is a very powerful message.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLXsriQhO-I>

One that can outline our own stories or journeys in our life to Christ. And you might be asking yourself or questioning if you even have a testimony at all. Reasoning: Do I really know, or do I just think I know. Have I really felt the promptings of the Spirit, or was it just my imagination?

Well, In the words of President Holland: “You have more faith than you think you do.”

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2013/04/lord-i-believe?lang=eng>

But a testimony is a strange thing. We have the chance to bear it every month. Some chose to be more vocal about it than others. I love what John Bytheway taught about testimonies and how we can know if we have one. He said:

“Some have puzzled over why they have never felt the “burning in the bosom” mentioned in D&C 9, concluding that they’re somehow unworthy or incapable of feeling the Spirit. But perhaps the burning in the bosom can be anything from just a heartwarming story to an actual warmth within. And not everyone comes equipped with that type of spiritual receptor. President Dallin H. Oaks once commented: “I have heard adult members of the church claim they do not have a testimony because they have never experienced a ‘burning in the bosom’ (D&C 9:8:). If I thought this scriptural ‘burning’ only referred to caloric heat, I would have to say that I have never had a burning in the bosom either.... In this usage, it does not seem to refer to heat but rather to an intensity of feeling. For me, the witness of the Holy Ghost is an intense feeling of serenity or well-being” (Church News, 29 April 1989)

Other feelings are perhaps more common than the relatively rare burning feeling. Some have felt peace in the temple, love and comfort at a funeral, or a touch of eternity at a sealing. We may feel enlightened in Sunday School, excited and motivated at a Come, Follow Me class, or enlarged at a general conference. Feelings are, without question, one way we Hear Him but not the only way.

A few years ago, I researched general conference talks on the topic of “Testimony”, and virtually everyone I found mentioned these verses “My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:16-17).

Notice that Jesus didn't say, “Just listen, and you'll know because you'll have a *feeling* that what I say is true,” No, Jesus taught that we must *do* in order to *know*. That is a testimony not of feelings but of experience. Experience is another way we Hear Him. “More people,” Brigham Young taught, “have received testimonies in their feet than down on their knees praying for them” (Improvement Era, June 1935, 384). A testimony of experience is harder to dismiss than a testimony of feeling. As the old saying goes, “A person with an experience is never at the mercy of someone with only an opinion”

Jesus once healed a man who was born blind, sending the Pharisees into a tizzy. “Who did this to you?” they demanded, prepared to cast anyone out of the synagogue who confessed that Jesus was the Christ. First they asked the man who was healed, then they asked his parents, then they asked the man again. The Pharisees finally threw up their hands and labeled Jesus a sinner, to which the man with the new vision answered, “Whether he be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, Whereas I was blind, now I see. (John 9:25). How can you argue with evidence like that? Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught: “The fruit of living the gospel is evident in the lives of Latter-day Saints everywhere. As Peter and John said once to an ancient audience, I say today ‘We cannot but speak the thing when we have seen and heard,’ and what we have seen and heard is that ‘a notable miracle has been done’ in the lives of millions of members of this Church, that cannot be denied” (Lord, I believe” Ensign, May 2013).

Living, walking, breathing testimonies of the fruits of the gospel are all around us, in our wards, stakes, and neighborhoods, and Jesus assured, “Ye shall know them by their fruits” (Mathew 7:16)

Gratitude is a fruit of the gospel, Moroni's promise is that if we read, ponder and pray, we can know (see Moroni 10:4). But Moroni's promise is preceded by this admonition: “Remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts” (Moroni 10:3). Pondering the Lord's dealings with His children should fill us with gratitude. *Gratitude precedes revelation* and prepares the way to Hear him.

I am grateful that the gospel of Jesus Christ makes sense. A God who loves us will invite us to be the best we can be. That only makes sense. Imagine what the world would be like if everyone practiced “love thy neighbor as they self” and “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Imagine what a pleasant place the world would be if everyone kept other commandments , such as “Thou shalt not steal” or “thou shalt not bear false witness.” If you ever have a question about a commandment or standard, ask yourself, "If everyone lived like this, how would the world be different?" Living the gospel brings happiness and lightens our burdens. The gospel makes sense! None of us keeps the commandments perfectly, and

thankfully, we worship a God who forgives and invites us to forgive as well. But pondering the fruits of the commandments and how all truths work together to create a whole, that just makes logical sense, it is another way we can Hear Him, the gospel makes sense in the world that often doesn't.

As a bishop, I enjoyed asking my ward members, "what do you know for sure?" Then, one statement at a time, we would create a list together. Some lists grew into a pamphlet! Many of us have forgotten how much we really know and how many times and in how many ways we have heard Him throughout our lives. As I read their inspiring lists, mine grew longer as well. Make your own list, and as King Benjamin suggested. "Have it always before your eyes" (Mosiah 1:5). Why? Because we tend to forget how often we have heard Him, and when we Hear Him, It is vital that we remember."

This essay is modified from 'How do I know if I know?' By John by the way, 2014- Deseret book Company.

How correct brother Bytheway is: When we hear Him, it is vital that we remember.

It is the adversary that wants you to forget the hand of God in your life. There have been moments when the spirit has prompted me that that was something I needed to write down so I never forget. And I think to myself: yes, I need to write that down. Then if I procrastinate that prompting it just goes away. I recall having the thought, "something important happened that I was supposed to write down and now I can't remember what that was." When you have any experience with heaven it is vital that we write it down. Even if it is a note or an outline to remind us on our phone until we can get to our journal.

I also love what he taught that most testimonies are gained on our feet than on our knees praying for one. I feel like that is how I gained my testimony. Doing the gospel can sometimes be more impactful on our testimonies than learning about it. Experience will always trump opinion.

And because of experience, I want you to know that; I know God lives, That Jesus was and is the Christ, the Son of the living God. That He lived, died and rose again to save us all from sin. I testify that He is the way the truth and the light, and our only hope for salvation. I testify that He is present in our lives and the more we welcome Him in, the more we will see His hands working for our good. I testify that He loves you! And wants you to know and love Him.

In His sacred name, even Jesus Christ, Amen.