

WAYS TO GO

ACTS 22:1-22 DECEMBER 16, 2020

Wrong way driving cause hundreds of traffic deaths each year.¹ Though they account for only 3% of car crashes, one study showed that wrong way accidents can be 27 times as lethal as others.² Surprisingly, wrong way accidents are on the rise in multiple states. Arizona saw a significant rise in 2019. And something's going on in Wisconsin: in 2018 police recorded 500 wrong-way driving incidents, compared to 300 incidents in 2015, 2016 and 2017 *combined!*³

In the 14th chapter of Proverbs we are presented with a chilling verse:

Proverbs 14:12 - ¹²There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death.

If our lives hang in the balance, it natural for us to want to know the *right* way to go. The way that leads to *life* instead of death. Luckily, actually, *lovingly*, God not only gives us a warning, He also help us with instruction. He *comforts* us with many verses like:

Psalms 73:24 - ²⁴You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me up in glory.

Psalms 32:8 - ⁸I will instruct you and show you the way to go; with my eye on you, I will give counsel.

When we left off, Paul found himself on a staircase, saved from a violent mob who was trying to beat him to death. With his life in the balance, Paul asked to speak to the crowd. Tonight we will see him give a personal testimony of how he was on the road that led to death but was now going God's way. In other words, he recounts his origin story to them.

It won't turn out to be very effective for this hard-hearted crowd, but for us it is helpful and inspiring because in Paul's story we see how a person *starts* to walk with God, to go God's way rather than the human way, which leads to ruin, destruction and death. And it is particularly instructive to us since it was Paul himself who said: "Imitate me as I imitate Christ."⁴ That can seem like too high a bar sometimes. Because, after all, Paul was an apostle. He was uniquely used by God to change history. He was a miracle-worker and had visions of the risen Christ. Though we don't expect those elements to be a part of our own experience, it's good to remember that Paul was a man like us. He didn't always know *what* to do in his walk with the Lord. He was led just as we are to be led. In the end we know that he finished well and made it to the glorious destination that we are aiming toward. So, seeing that change from taking man's way to taking the Lord's way should rouse our hearts.

We begin in verse 1.

Acts 22:1 - "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense before you."

His friendliness almost makes us forget that these people, just moments earlier, were savagely beating him to death. Paul had an immense love in his heart for his fellow man, even his enemies. He

¹ https://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/intersection/other_topics/wwd/

² <https://carmanah.com/resources/wrong-way-driving-overview/>

³ *ibid.*

⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:1

sees them as family. Sometimes he reminds me of Dug in *Up* who had that wonderful line, “I just met you and I *LOVE* you!” Paul’s affection reminds us that the way of God *is* a way of love and grace. The more excellent way. God’s way is not one of hatred and resentment and division. It’s the way of love and grace.

Acts 22:2 - ²When they heard that he was addressing them in Aramaic, they became even quieter.

You’ll hear a buzz-term in Christian circles: “Engaging culture.” It’s the topic of conferences and seminars. No one ever really nails down what it means, but as you listen you get the distinct impression that the message of the Gospel *probably* needs to change in order to become more palatable to a secularized world. I think we see an excellent example of “engaging culture” right here. Out of the languages Paul *could* speak, he spoke with the one that everyone would understand. He didn’t preach to them in Latin, which would’ve been foreign. Or Greek which would’ve excluded many. But he also didn’t fashion the Gospel to their tastes. The Gospel is meant to be *counter* cultural. To engage culture means to communicate the once-delivered truth of the Scripture in a way that will, hopefully, save people *out* of their bankrupt culture.

But a second insight here: This important message wasn’t delivered with everyone shouting over everyone. Our culture right now is a yelling culture. No one wants to listen. Social media has tossed common courtesy out of the window. It does no good to blow up at people and rage at them. That’s not the way to convince people they’re wrong about life.

Acts 22:3 - ³He continued, “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strictness of our ancestral law. I was zealous for God, just as all of you are today.

Before he was a Christian, Paul was the pinnacle of human achievement. Intellectually, educationally, religiously, culturally. He was the smartest, most disciplined expert in the room. He was a *brilliant*, enthusiastic nationalist - a Jedi Knight of Judaism. What was the result of his unmatched, advanced devotion to his way of life?

Acts 22:4-5 - ⁴I persecuted this Way to the death, arresting and putting both men and women in jail, ⁵as both the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify about me. After I received letters from them to the brothers, I traveled to Damascus to arrest those who were there and bring them to Jerusalem to be punished.

Death. Like Anakin Skywalker or Harvey Dent, the one who was supposed to be the *best* hero took his road and ended up a killer. Elsewhere Paul talks about how, in his fury, he compelled people to *blaspheme* God. How he hunted them and hurt them and acted in whatever way he could to destroy.

Man’s roads lead to death. Eternal death for the individual and death for people around them. Now, as Christians, we still want to take some notes from Saul’s example. Legalism does not lead to growth but to devastation. Saul was the *most religious* person on the planet, yet he was the greatest enemy of God at the time. In our own lives, if we turn from the path of grace to the path of legalism it will kill compassion in our hearts, it will dismantle mercy, it will destroy spiritual fruit.

Now, since we know Paul’s story, we also know that his life isn’t just a cautionary tale, it is one of the greatest redemption stories of all time. He had been the chief crusader, sent out to annihilate God’s

people through whatever means he could and now he has completely turned around, is on a new road, not only headed toward heaven, but a road full of peace and compassion toward others. And in this we see one of the most important contrasts between man's way and God's way. On man's way the mentality is: "Join us or die." But that's not how we act on God's way. Don't get me wrong: The choice *is* a life and death decision. But as we go God's way we don't act like crusaders. We don't bulldoze anyone who stands in our way. We don't try to crush opposition. What did the Christians do in Acts? They presented the Gospel, they endured persecution and escaped it when possible, but they never militarized *against* those who weren't with them. Think of when Paul went through Cyprus. He preached to the governor of the island and the man was saved. They didn't then establish a commission to outlaw unbelievers or go to war with them. Because our mission *isn't* to destroy, it's to build. Our marching orders are to *rescue* not *retaliate*.

Acts 22:6-8 - ⁶“As I was traveling and approaching Damascus, about noon an intense light from heaven suddenly flashed around me. ⁷I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ ⁸“I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ “He said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting.’

Paul thought himself enlightened, and (according to man's way) he was. But that was a total darkness in comparison to the light of Jesus Christ. On the road to Damascus Paul was brought to the stunning realization that, even though he had dedicated his *entire life* to honoring God, he had completely missed the mark. He didn't even *recognize* the Messiah when He came.

Looking at our Lord in this scene we can notice some tender things about Him. First, He still identified with us. He called Himself “Jesus of Nazareth.” As far as I know, when *Journey* performed Steve Perry didn't come out and say, “Before we get started I want you all to know I'm from HANFORD!” But our Lord will remain the GodMan, God *with* us, forever and ever.

Second, in this encounter we see Christ's astounding mercy. Remember who Saul was and what he was doing. There was no greater enemy of Jesus than this man on planet earth. In our way of thinking, the Lord *should've* met him with a lightning bolt or some plague. But instead He met Saul with mercy and invitation.

Imagine, for a moment, that SEAL Team 6 made it into Osama Bin Laden's compound that night in 2011, broke in, knocked him down, then said, “We want you to come with us. We're going to grant you American citizenship and fill your account with an inexhaustible supply of resources. And then we're going to make a place for you in the US Government.”

Our crimes against God deserve nothing but capital punishment. Yet He extends mercy and love.

Acts 22:9 - ⁹Now those who were with me saw the light, but they did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me.

There were witnesses to what had happened. The way Paul walked with God was rooted in reality and truth and revelation. He didn't base his spiritual life on trends or false prophecies or worldly philosophies packaged to *look* like religion. It was based off of the true revelation and reality.

Acts 22:10 - ¹⁰“I said, ‘What should I do, Lord?’ “The Lord told me, ‘Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told everything that you have been assigned to do.’

Right at this beginning moment of Paul going God's way we see that he was assigned and commanded. So far, he had been going his own way according to what he thought would be best. But, from this point on, he was going to be *directed* by God.

Going God's way means we must *obey*. He leads, we follow. Paul recognized that he was under the authority of a *Master*. He acknowledged that Jesus was *Lord*. To go God's way does not mean we choose to make God a 'mentor' to us. It means we *acknowledge* what is true: That He is King and we are His servants. The rest of Paul's life would be under the direction and command of his Lord.

Ephesians 2:10 - ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.

Like Paul, these are things we *must* do. And so we accept that we are no longer the chief executives of our lives. We never were, but we're *especially* not now. You are, instead, called to be a willing participant in the will of God, following as *He* leads according to His purposes and timing.

The Bible demonstrates that God's people *can* leave the path of His will. Think of Moses killing the Egyptian. Or John Mark abandoning the missionaries. Peter going fishing after the crucifixion. Rather than assume we know best for our lives, we must continually be led by the Lord in what He would have us do. He said to Paul, "You'll be told everything." And so will we. We've been given the Word to guides us. We've been given the Holy Spirit to indwell us. We've been given fellow Christians to assist us and encourage us. Give the Lord the helm to your life and then follow in His ways.

Acts 22:11 - ¹¹"Since I couldn't see because of the brightness of the light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and went into Damascus.

Paul was still a genius, but the Lord was teaching him that, on this *new* way, he would have to be led. God wants to lead us by the hand, too.

Psalms 139:9-10 - ⁹If I live at the eastern horizon or settle at the western limits, ¹⁰ even there your hand will lead me; your right hand will hold on to me.

We *don't* always know which way to go in life, how to respond to different situations. But the Lord does and we can trust Him to lead us. The question is not *whether* He will lead, the question is whether we're interested in *following* His guiding hand.

Acts 22:12-13 - ¹²Someone named Ananias, a devout man according to the law, who had a good reputation with all the Jews living there, ¹³ came and stood by me and said, 'Brother Saul, regain your sight.' And in that very hour I looked up and saw him.

Paul had described the Jews as "zealous." It was a term all wrapped up in politics and nationalism and agitation. But he described Ananias as "devout." It means circumspect and Godly. We see that he was *not* a man who went around making enemies. Even facing persecution he *still* maintained good relationships with the Jews around him. And he, too, was a man *led* by God. Led to do something completely unpredictable, completely inadvisable, something he was, frankly, unqualified to do, and yet - because he went God's way in faith - he was used to change the course of history.

Thinking about how all this played out we're reminded that God's way is a way of *restoration*. God has overcome the world, but His victory is *more* than just putting down His enemies. He *restores*

people and transforms their lives. Looking back, we don't want a blind, powerless Saul. We want an unstoppable Paul! But that requires grace and Christians willing to be *agents* of grace.

Acts 22:14-15 - ¹⁴And he said, 'The God of our ancestors has appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One, and to hear the words from his mouth, ¹⁵since you will be a witness for him to all people of what you have seen and heard.

This general calling: To know God's will, to hear God's word, to follow the Messiah and testify about Him to others, that's our calling as well. The specific obstacles and opportunities each of us are presented with will vary, but *this* is the way of God that we're to walk in. It's a way that requires faith and trust, but it is a path every single one of us *can* make progress on as we move through life.

Notice, the assignment wasn't, "Go figure out how to make a successful Gentile church." God already knew how to do that. No, the assignment was, "Follow the Lord's navigation. Go *with* Him as He leads you and bring others along if they are willing."

Acts 22:16 - ¹⁶And now, why are you delaying? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'

Don't be troubled into thinking that this verse is saying baptism is necessary for salvation. It isn't. There are a lot of linguistic reasons. But we also know that there were about 10 baptisms in the book of Acts and, often, salvation and Spirit-filling *preceded* baptism. The New Testament is clear that salvation is by grace, through faith, not of works.

So, what about baptism? Well, water baptism *is* commanded by Jesus. In one sense it's like getting a new job and filling out that W-4 form. It's part of the job, right? Baptism is important and wonderful and a significant part of *doing* that witness work we're called to, but it does not remove your sin.

Acts 22:17-18 - ¹⁷"After I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸and saw him telling me, 'Hurry and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.'

They wouldn't receive his testimony. Does that mean Paul had *failed* in his assignments? No. As we go God's way we are responsible for ourselves. We're to be *burdened* for others, but, in the end, we cannot force people to join us.

Acts 22:19-20 - ¹⁹"But I said, 'Lord, they know that in synagogue after synagogue I had those who believed in you imprisoned and beaten. ²⁰And when the blood of your witness Stephen was being shed, I stood there giving approval and guarding the clothes of those who killed him.'

First, we see here that going God's way means sometimes our own wisdom will be confounded. Paul was simply wrong about how things were going to shake out. Luckily, he *believed* the Lord and submitted to His leading. It helped him avoid disaster.

Second, we see how terribly priorities get skewed when we are going man's way. There was Saul, making sure nothing bad happened to the clothes of people who were illegally murdering a man. We wouldn't want any coats to get ripped or taken, that would be wrong!

But we also can take such comfort in the fact that God can redeem and restore and transform anyone. Had Paul *not* gone God's way, verse 20 would've been his legacy. But God saved him and changed him and made something beautiful out of his life. Maybe you've made terrible mistakes in life, fallen short in your callings or responsibilities. So did Paul. And Moses and David and Jonah and Peter. God is powerful enough to bring you back and use you for a glorious, eternal legacy.

Acts 22:21 - ²¹“He said to me, ‘Go, because I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’ ”

This was not Paul's plan. It probably wasn't even Paul's desire. He wanted all men everywhere to be saved, but his heart was for his countrymen. But going God's way means surrendering your heart and your helm to His leading. Maybe you *think* you have some great plan, but be sure to ask God if He agrees. Because you want to have a *reason* for being the places you find yourself in life and in ministry. When Paul was in Jerusalem or Cyprus or Corinth he could say, “I'm here because God *led* me here.” John Mark couldn't say the same at certain points. David couldn't say that when he was hiding in Philistine territory. Lot couldn't say that when he pitched his tents toward Sodom. Going God's way means following *His* prescribed itinerary for your life. One commentator says: “The Lord views all our goings as ‘rewardable’ or ‘judgable.’ Indeed, we are eternally held accountable for every decision we make...This truth calls each of us, all the time, to a...life [driven by] God's purpose!”⁵

This reality shouldn't frighten us, but *excite* us since we know God is *ready* to lead us on His way, which is full of joy and and growth and life and meaning.

Acts 22:22 - ²²They listened to him up to this point. Then they raised their voices, shouting, “Wipe this man off the face of the earth! He should not be allowed to live!”

Men going their own way are only willing to listen to a point. Ultimately, if they want to continue heading down their own path they will either have to reject God's message or stop, turn around and go with Him, forsaking their previous path.

Their hard-heartedness came at an incredible cost. They *missed* the most valuable treasure imaginable, they turned down the opportunity of a lifetime. In going this way many sealed their fate of judgment and death. And, once again, their way led to ruin. Ruin for themselves, for others and their nation.

God's way is the way we want to go. It can seem daunting or confusing, but we see that it can be done. It's not always easy, but it is simple. We are to be *led*. Led in our movements. Led in our decisions. Led into the will of God as He accomplishes good work through us. Stay on that path, abiding in Christ, and in the end we too will lay hold of all that we truly want and all that God wants *for* us as He leads us into glory.

⁵ <https://www.preceptaustin.org/acts-22-commentary#22:21>