

33. Paul's Defense before Agrippa: Acts 26

Acts 25 closed with Festus trying to use King Agrippa to get charges on Paul to send along with him to Rome. As noted, the Romans and Festus held Agrippa in respect. Agrippa also held the respect of the Jews, making him a good last chance to get something on Paul. Festus announced publicly that the whole Jewish community was demanding Paul's life. Festus also announced publicly that he had found nothing in Paul's actions worthy of death. As previously studied, Festus was between the figurative "rock and a hard place," seeking anything on Paul that he could write about him to send on to the Roman court. Acts 26:1 begins: "26 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself."

Paul Praises Agrippa

Acts 26:1-3

26 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself."

So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: 2 "King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, 3 and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.

Paul recognized the value of a hearing before a king who held the favor of the Jews. It is interesting that Paul says that his defense will be *against all the accusations of the Jews*, when in actuality Paul only defends his position on the resurrection of the dead. Paul made special notice that Agrippa was well acquainted with the Jewish customs and controversy, a fact that made Agrippa an excellent judge. Paul's compliments and flattery seemed aimed at getting Agrippa to listen patiently.

The Resurrection of the Dead—God's Promise to the Fathers

Acts 26:4-5

4 "The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. 5 They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee.

Paul began this defense as he had begun the one before Felix, by stating his credentials as a Jew of prominence and as a fervent Pharisee, who had persecuted the church. Agrippa would have been knowledgeable of Paul's life, prior to his conversion. Luke had previously recorded earlier events where Saul—now Paul—persecuted the church. In Acts 8:1, he gave approval to Stephen's death: "8 And Saul was there, giving approval to his death." In Acts 8:3, he was laying waste the church: "3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison." According to Luke in Acts 9:1-2, again, Paul obtained letters from the high priest to imprison Christians:

1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Acts 26:6-8

6 And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. 7 This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and

night. O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me. 8 Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?

Paul made two important points in this initial statement: he is on trial for his hope, the hope of the fathers and the twelve tribes of Israel; and it should not seem incredible that God raises the dead. The hope of the fathers that God could raise them from the dead elevates God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the twelve tribes that followed them, from a mere land promise to the promise of eternal life in an eternal and heavenly kingdom. Paul expanded the argument stated here in Gal 3:14-16:

14 He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

15 . . . Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. 16 The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ.

The resurrection of the just and the unjust dominated Paul's defenses, being the main point of the gospel. From Luke's account of Christ's own charge in Acts 24:45-47, the resurrection was central:

45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46 He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

Paul emphasized the resurrection in Acts 23:6; "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead." In Acts 24:14-15, Paul stated made the resurrection the hope of the prophets: "I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, 15 and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. " The resurrection of the dead was the sticking point with the Jews and the reason they sought to kill Paul in Acts 24:20-21:

Or these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin— 21 unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence: 'It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.'"

Paul based his defense on the firm and solid basis of Christ raised from the dead and the hope of the gospel that the righteous will follow: "O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me. 8 Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?"

Paul's Early Life as One who Persecuted Christians

Acts 26:9-11

9 "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. 11 Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

In Paul's defense before Felix in Acts 22:2-5, he had also summarized his Jewish credentials:

Then Paul said: 3 "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. 4 I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, 5 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.

Not only was Paul a Pharisee, but he was also a dedicated persecutor of Christians

Paul's Selection as an Apostle

Acts 26:12-16

12 "On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. 14 We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, '

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

15 "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?'

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. 16 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you.

This is the third time Luke has covered the conversion of Paul. The first time was Luke's description of Paul's conversion; the second, Paul's description of his own conversion before Felix; the third, this account by Paul before Agrippa. In each account, the focus is on Christ's calling Paul to be an apostle. In Acts 9:15-16, the Lord told Ananias his purpose for Paul: "15 But the Lord said to Ananias, 'Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.'" Acts 22:14-16 recorded the Lord's words, as spoken to Paul:

14 "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. 15 You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'

Paul tells of this experience as the experience from which he was born to be an apostle in 1 Cor 15:7-9:

7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

9 For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

Acts 26:17-18

17 I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them 18 to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

Here, Paul stated in powerful terms the purpose for which Christ had called him: to open the eyes of Jews and Gentiles alike; to turn them from darkness to light; to turn them from the power of Satan to God. Darkness to light and Satan to God are polar opposites establishing

both domain and power for each. Paul later described the extent and power of Satan's domain, which is often clothed in light to deceive the righteous. In Eph 2:1-2, he wrote: "2 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." In Eph 6:11-12, Christians are to fight against the evil powers of this dark world and the devil's schemes:

11 Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

The struggle will be difficult because of the deceitfulness of Satan and his ministers. 2 Cor 11:13-15 teaches:

13 For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. 15 It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

As Paul fought this battle against the Jews, he knew personally the difficulty of defeating the powers of darkness. However, for Paul and his converts, the Lord provided the way to overcome darkness with light. In Eph 5:8-11, Paul wrote:

8 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light 9 (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) 10 and find out what pleases the Lord. 11 Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.

Even in conversion, Christians, then and now, overcome darkness, according to Col 1:13-14: "13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Why the Jews Seek Paul's Life

Acts 26:19-23

19 "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. 20 First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. 21 That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. 22 But I have had God's help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen – 23 that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles."

In this passage, Paul stated the gospel message to all men, Jews of Jerusalem and Judea and all the Gentiles, in most simple and commanding terms: repent, turn to God, and prove repentance by deeds. That was what Paul preached and that is what we should preach in the 21st century. The gospel foretold by Moses and the prophets was the gospel Paul preached: Christ suffered, died, was the first raised from the dead, and proclaims light to his own people [the Jews] and to the Gentiles. That is why the Jews seized Paul and tried to kill him.

Festus and Agrippa Respond

Acts 26:24-32

24 *At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane."*

25 *"I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. 26 The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do."*

28 *Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"*

29 *Paul replied, "Short time or long – I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."*

30 *The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. 31 They left the room, and while talking with one another, they said, "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment."*

32 *Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."*

Festus—a Roman with only a worldly background—immediately rejected Paul’s teaching as that of an insane man. Paul countered that his position was true and reasonable, and turned to Agrippa for confirmation, putting the question straight to him: “King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets?” Paul’s conclusion, “I know you dom.” focused on an eternal truth: If one believes the prophets, he must believe in the Christ, resurrected, as the first born from the dead, through whom all men may have the same hope.

Agrippa deferred Paul’s question without answer by saying that Paul could not persuade him in such a short time. Paul’s final plea had nothing to do with his own freedom, but rather, it was a prayer that all men become, as he was, a Christian with hope of the resurrection to eternal life.

Agrippa and Festus concurred in their conclusion that Paul was doing nothing that deserved death or imprisonment. According to Agrippa, Paul could have gone free had he not appealed to Caesar.

In Acts 27, the scene shifts quickly as Paul and his cohorts sail for Italy.