

Acts 26 • Paul's Third Testimony

Introduction

It's interesting to note that Jesus actually experienced four trials before being sentenced, having appeared before Annas, Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, Herod, and finally Pilate. So here we have the last of the first three formal hearings at which Paul is presented before the final one to come in Rome before the Emperor. As Paul will later confirm in parallel accounts of these times in his letters to various churches, it's most important to note that because Paul cares more for Christ's name and will than his own, the priority of preaching and witnessing always takes precedence over everything else. Regardless of our personal circumstances, God is always in control and seeking to use us as an example to all those around us so that they'll see the power and resurrection of Christ at work through us.

¹Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself."

Then Paul stretched out his hand and proceeded to make his defense:

²"In regard to all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, I consider myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I am about to make my defense before you today; ³especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.

[Read v.1-3]

Q: What might be particularly dramatic about the fact that "Paul stretched out his hand"?

A: According to v.29, he was bound in chains.

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.

Philippians 1:12-14

Point: Paul saw every circumstance as an opportunity "for the greater progress of the gospel". He does not see imprisonment as a curse, but a blessing because the Word of God is being further established both personally and in all those around him, believer and non-believer alike.

Q: Since Paul is innocent, why doesn't he appear to be more aggressive in presenting his own defense? Shouldn't he show some kind of outrage or passion?

A: First of all, Paul is living out what he will articulate in Romans 13, that although you may not respect the person, God requires you to respect his office since it is God who places governments in power. But secondly, Paul is more interested in communicating the Gospel and the name of Christ than speaking a word on his own behalf. His priorities may be askew from an earthly perspective, but they're biblically correct.

Point: Paul doesn't just preach the Word, but lives according to the Word.

[Read v.4-11]

⁴"So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem; ⁵since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion. ⁶And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; ⁷the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day. And for this hope, O King, I am being accused by Jews. ⁸Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the

Q: How does Paul's personal explanation begin?

A: "I lived as a Pharisee". (v.5) In fact, he was no ordinary Pharisee, but was so well-known that he could matter of factly state, "all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up". It was such an established matter of record that it could be substantiated by calling almost any other Pharisee to confirm his testimony.

Q: What kind of Jew do Paul's descriptions in v.4-5 depict him as?

A: A Jew in the flesh.

Q: What kind of Jew has Paul become according to v.6-8?

A: A Jew in the Spirit.

dead?

⁹“So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.

¹²“While so engaged as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, ¹³at midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me.

Point: Paul is establishing how one comes to understand Old Testament Judaism as being fulfilled in Christ rather than replacing it.

Q: But what is the theological point which Paul alludes to here, which he makes sure to highlight in every public testimony?

A: The resurrection. (v.8)

Point: Paul confirmed in Acts 13:27-37 that God had promised Israel a kingdom and glory, but explained that these promises made to David were fulfilled through the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Had Israel received Christ, they would have received the kingdom. But being sure that Christ was dead, they were missing out on the fulfillment of those promises. If they couldn't interpret physical things correctly, their spiritual assertions were certainly in error.

Q: What is Paul hoping to prove by reciting his resume as a past persecutor and murderer of the church?

A: He is trying to establish that he once held the same beliefs and positions as his accusers, but was changed by the power of the resurrection of Christ. It's an example of a type of spiritual resurrection, where Paul died to the old life and rose again to a new life in Christ, fundamentally changing his interpretation of things.

[Read v.12-13]

Q: What initially changed Paul's life as a zealous Pharisee?

A: "I saw...the light". (v.13)

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.

1 Timothy 1:12-16

Q: What is the greater symbolism of being blinded by a light "brighter than the sun" at midday?

A: It physically parallels the spiritual condition of spiritual darkness. Until one has a personal encounter with Christ, they don't realize how blind they've actually been, how what **THEY** thought was light was no light at all. It's also a further illustration contrasting the life of a Pharisee who is blinded to the truth that God's Word has been fulfilled in Christ.

¹⁴And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’

¹⁵“And I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’

And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; ¹⁷rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, ¹⁸to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.’

[Read v.14-18]

Q: And what happened after Paul saw the Light?

A: “I heard a voice”. (v.14)

Point: *The Word of God is what convicts and leads to the conversion of the soul. This would be quite a testimony coming from one belonging to a sect so inarguably committed to God’s Word.*

Q: What is different about this “new” voice? What “voices” had Paul been listening to previously?

A: Paul believed that through his training and upbringing that he was listening to the voices of Moses and the prophets, but now he has heard the voice of the Son of God. It’s a kind of teaching that the only way to properly understand God’s Word is through Christ, another testimony contrasting the beliefs of the Pharisees and those refusing to accept Christ.

Q: What is the meaning of the statement, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads”?

A: Christ is comparing Paul to stubborn cattle who attempt to go their own way and are poked and prodded by the goads – long, hard rods – shepherds use. This is revealing in that although Paul was quite zealous in his persecution of Christians, they were making an impression on him which he was resisting. Examples would be the death of Stephen and the conduct of the saints he persecuted; their witness did not go completely unnoticed by Paul, contrary to the outer façade he put up.

Q: What was the greater message Paul was to preach in his calling to be “a minister and a witness” of Christ?

1. “...to open their eyes...”
2. “...that they may receive forgiveness of sins...”
3. “...that they may receive...an inheritance...”
4. And that they may be “sanctified by faith in Me.”

Point: *In reality, these were supposed to be the most important points of the Old Testament “Gospel”, if you will. To those with Paul’s kind of upbringing, they would recognize that he is stating that he is in fact fulfilling what Hebraic scholars had determined were the most important purposes of the Law.*

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves;

2 Corinthians 4:3-7

Point: *Paul realized that God was not just in complete control of individual circumstances, but had designed things with a much greater plan in mind. That we would find ourselves in less than ideal circumstances is part of God’s plan so*

that our weakness might testify to the greater power of the Gospel through us.

Application: What might be wrong with the notion that “everything has to be right” before we share the Gospel? Why might our current, personal crisis be the exact circumstance God wants to use to preach the Gospel to others?

[Read v.19-21]

Q: What is ironic about Paul’s description of his obedience to the vision by preaching that everyone “should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance”?

A: Paul has actually summarized his New Testament calling as being fulfilled by what was **EVERYONE’S** Old Testament calling.

Point: The Hebrew word for repentance – “tesuba” – means to turn back towards God. This is what the Jews, and the Pharisees in particular, should have been doing not just with each other, but as God’s designated “light to the Gentiles”. (Is. 42:6; 49:6, 9) Paul is further establishing the fulfillment of the Word through Christ instead of being a replacement of it.

[Read v.22-23]

Q: How does Paul summarize his calling?

A: “I stand to this day, testifying...”

Q: How do these 5 points summarize the life of any Christian who seeks to serve Christ?

1. “I lived as a Pharisee”. (v.4-11) [A reference to the old life.]
2. “I saw...the light...” (v.12-13)
3. “I heard a voice”. (v.14-18)
4. “I did not prove disobedient”. (v.19-21)
5. “I stand to this day, testifying...” (v.22-23)

Application: To what degree do you agree or disagree with the statement, “Faithfulness to Christ is evidence of true salvation”? How would you apply it to yourself?

[Read v.24-32]

Q: Where do people always seem to interrupt Paul in the course of his speaking?

A: Whenever he gets to the topic of being sent to the Gentiles. It was the same point at which the Jews in the temple began to riot. (Acts 22)

Point: Many Jews had a kind of “myopia” wherein they seemed to ignore the myriad of Old Testament promises that God would save **BOTH** Jew and Gentile. Their narrow interpretation of Scripture led to a major misinterpretation so that they couldn’t accept its fulfillment in Christ.

Q: Why does Paul seem to ignore Festus and instead go after Agrippa?

A: First of all, Festus wasn’t attacking Paul. Second, Agrippa was someone known to not just be familiar with Scripture, but engaged in its operation. Historical records indicate that besides holding the title “King”, he was also President of both the temple and its treasury, and the one who decided which person held the office of high priest.

Point: The more light a person has, the more responsible they are to make a right decision.

¹⁹“So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance. ²¹For this reason some Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death.

²²So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; ²³that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.”

²⁴While Paul was saying this in his defense, Festus said in a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad.”

²⁵But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth. ²⁶For the king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner. ²⁷King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do.”

²⁸Agrippa replied to Paul, “In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian.”

²⁹And Paul said, “I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains.”

³⁰The king stood up and the governor

and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them,³¹ and when they had gone aside, they began talking to one another, saying, “This man is not doing anything worthy of death or imprisonment.”

³²And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

Q: How might you re-word Agrippa’s response so as to understand his true attitude?

A: “It will take more than **THIS** to make a Jew like me into one of those hated Christians!” His response is not an indication that he might be close to becoming a Christian, but is actually full of contempt.

Point: Note that the example of Agrippa shows that it’s possible to have faith which falls short of salvation. Although he may have believed the prophets, he fell short where Christ was concerned, the very One to whom the prophets pointed.

Q: Why might Agrippa be described as an “almost Christian”?

A: He understood the Word and heard the truth, but refused to do anything about it. Although he was touched both intellectually and emotionally, his heart was quite unyielding.

Epilogue

In the last chapters of Acts, the route and conditions are traced by which the Gospel will be preached to the whole world; they don’t fit the ideal circumstances or plans for which most ministries or individual servants plan for today. How does this speak to you of your present situation, the will of God for your life, and what might be accomplished if the greater priority over planning is faithfulness?