

Paul's final defence

Littlebourne - 7th January 2024 - Acts 26:1-32

Way back in November, we had our last sermon from Acts, looking at the second half of chapter 25. The last five chapters have all concerned Paul going to Jerusalem, being arrested and then offering his defence several times to different people in different circumstances. When we left off, Paul had talked to the new governor Festus, and appealed to Ceasar - he wants his case to be tried before Ceasar, which gives him a free, if uncomfortable, ticket to Rome. Jesus has told Paul that he would testify in Rome, and Paul, having spent several years in custody at this point, seizes the opportunity to be sent there.

Festus was glad to be off the hook - he can just send Paul away now, doesn't have to make any decisions, it's out of his hands. The last chapter left us with the expectation that Paul would be off to Rome soon. For the final time now, we have Paul again offering his defence, this time against a less hostile audience.

He's before King Agrippa and his sister Bernice, who have arrived in Ceasarea, and thus far, Festus has explained to them what is going on. Now we hear from Paul.

v1-3

So Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense:

2 "I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, 3 especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.

You'll remember that we have seen a Herod Agrippa before - when we looked at the end of chapter 12, where King Herod Agrippa died and was eaten by worms.

There are four Herods mentioned in scripture, so this can get a little confusing:

1. Herod the Great - the Herod that wanted to kill all the infant boys when Jesus was born. He ruled all Judea.
2. Herod Antipas - who, like his other brothers, inherited a quarter of his father's kingdom. He's thus referred to as Herod the tetrarch, meaning ruler of a quarter, and he ruled Galilee. He was the Herod that went up against John the Baptist, and who Jesus was sent to by Pilate the night he was arrested.
3. Herod Agrippa I - nephew of Antipas, this Herod was able, as friend of the Roman emperor Caligula, to gain all the territory of his grandfather Herod the Great, and rule all Judea. This is the Herod of Acts chapter 12.
4. Herod Agrippa II - the son of Agrippa I, this the Herod we see in our passage today.

Herod Agrippa II's reign started six years after Agrippa the first died. He was seventeen at the time his father died, and the Romans thought him too young to rule, so they installed a Roman procurator in the area for six years in between, whilst Agrippa stayed in Rome. Then he was given some authority, and over time, his kingdom was enlarged by the Romans.

Agrippa will wind up in trouble as things fall apart in Judea - Josephus records that he tried to prevent a war with Rome in AD 65/66, and as tensions rose, in AD 66 he was rejected by the citizenry of Jerusalem and expelled from the city for good. Despite being a Jew, he joins the Romans in the war, and being on the winning side, manages to live a long life afterwards.

At this time, maybe AD 59 - 60, Agrippa is King of a fairly large territory, but not of this area of Caesarea. You'll remember from the previous chapter that there is a new governor in town, Festus, who wanted to quickly deal with Paul, this prisoner he inherited. Agrippa and sister Bernice arrive, in "great pomp" (25v23), to meet the new governor, likely to make sure they're friends with the ruler next door.

Herod was a Jew, and a very influential one - the King would appoint the High Priest at that time. But he was not popular with the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem, because of his incestuous relationship with his sister Bernice, and his favouring the Romans.

However, despite being unpopular with the Sanhedrin, he is, as Paul says, "familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews". He knows about the scriptures, and Paul is looking to use this to his advantage.

v4-8

4 "My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. 5 They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. 6 And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 7 to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! 8 Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?"

Paul's presentation is again much like we've seen before - he recounts how he was a Pharisee, strict religious zealot. He took religion very seriously.

This time, Paul links his former Phariseism, including his belief in the scriptures, to his belief in Christ. He says that it's because of the promises of God, as outlined in Old Testament prophecy, that he believes what he now believes.

In particular, Paul references the idea of resurrection - he says "why is it thought incredible that God raises the dead?". The implication here from Paul is that we should look at the Old Testament and see that the Messiah being raised from the dead is foretold - that resurrection is something we should expect from what we read there.

Paul is effectively saying to Agrippa "Isn't this the God you believe in?". "Aren't you a Jew, familiar with the scriptures, so can't you see what I'm saying is in line with them?"

I'm sure that Luke has not recorded for us all that Paul talked about - he may have referenced specific scriptures to back up his case. We do know that the Pharisees in particular, and Jews in general believed in the resurrection. So Paul is not presenting anything all that new - just that what they already believed has been fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

V9-11

9 “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. 11 And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

Again, we hear Paul say how he was opposed to Christ and Christianity. He persecuted Christians, he was once in agreement with his now accusers.

He was once someone that understood the scriptures, who knew them well, but was blind to the truth that Christ fulfilled them. He was just as knowledgeable as anyone, but couldn't see it. In fact, he raged against the possibility of it.

So what changed?

v12-18

12 “In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. 14 And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, [a] ‘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. 16 But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, 17 delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you 18 to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

We've heard this story twice already in Acts, now for the third time we see what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus.

I trust we all know the story by now, but the account in this chapter does differ a little from the accounts of chapters 9 and 22. There's a couple of things added that are not present elsewhere.

The first obvious difference is this inclusion of the phrase that Jesus says to Paul: "It is hard for you to kick against the goads".

This was a Greek proverb, but it was also familiar to Jews, and anyone who was familiar with agriculture of the time. A goad is a sharp pointy stick for prodding the animals that drive the plough. The farmer would use this to steer and drive his Ox to do the hard work of ploughing.

But sometimes the animals would kick back against the goad, and do themselves more damage than was necessary. The more the Ox rebelled against the farmer, the worse it was for them.

So for Paul, the more he rebelled against God, persecuted Christians, the worse it was for him - Jesus is pointing out how he is, in his rebellion, making his life worse. The more he resisted the gospel, the more he was hurting himself.

Another difference we might notice is how Paul describes what Jesus tells him he will do. Chapters 9 and 22 tell us that Jesus told Paul to go to Damascus and see Ananias. Here, Paul says that the Lord told him that he is appointed as a servant and a witness, that he will go to both his own people, the Jews, and to the Gentiles, to open their eyes.

The aim is that their eyes would, just like his, turn from darkness to light, and they would turn from the power of Satan to God, receiving forgiveness of sins and a place amongst those sanctified by faith in Christ.

v19-23

19 "Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. 21 For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 22 To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: 23 that the Christ must suffer and that,

by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”

And the result of what happened to him on the road to Damascus is that he did exactly what Jesus said he would do. He went and proclaimed the message, bore witness to what Christ had done, to both Jew and Gentile.

Again, Paul also makes the point that what happened regarding Jesus Christ was exactly what the Old Testament prophets said would come to pass. What happened to Jesus is no secret - none of what happened to Christ in the last days leading up to his death was done in a corner, all of it was clear, especially to Paul's most ardent opponents, the Sanhedrin. And in his rising from the dead, Paul makes clear elsewhere that this was witnessed and public - it was not something that could be missed or made up. It really all happened, and it really happened as the Old Testament predicted, if we have eyes to see it.

v24-29

24 And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.”
25 But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. 26 For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” 28 And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” 29 And Paul said, “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.”

We see two responses to Paul - Festus and Agrippa have quite different reactions to what he is saying.

Festus contends that Paul is insane. He's not interested in this argument between Jews - especially in this instance where the argument Paul has outlined is centered around the Jewish scriptures.

Paul's response to this shows that he's not too interested at this point in what Festus has to say - he's speaking to Agrippa, and directly turns things back to the King, and asks him straight up whether he believes the prophets.

Agrippa's response is very mild in comparison to Festus - he doesn't really give any opinion. Paul's question to him is one that he finds politically hard to answer anyway.

If Agrippa says that he doesn't believe in the prophets and the scriptures, he angers the Jews. He would make life more difficult for himself with the Sanhedrin, and the people he's meant to be ruling. But if he says yes, he's admitting that Paul has a point - and knows Paul will rather pointedly ask him to believe exactly what they say and has shown points to Christ. Whichever way he answers, he's going to get himself in hot water.

Thus, Agrippa's response is a delaying tactic, a non-answer. He in effect says that this short defence is not enough time to consider this properly. And conveniently, time is up, the King decides that's enough.

v30-32

30 Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. 31 And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment." 32 And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

The conclusion of the final defence from Paul is that he is found innocent. Throughout the last few chapters, we've seen that every time Paul is put in front of some authority that hasn't already pre-judged the situation, he is found to be falsely accused.

Another important aspect of these trials that Paul has faced, is that he always brings it round to the gospel - he always uses these situations to tell people about Christ. This is the longest account he gives - more detailed, more evidenced.

Faith is not blind

Sometimes faith is treated as if it's just blind trust - that you just have to accept things that there is no evidence for, or that can't be proved in any way. This is often a critique of Christianity and religion in general. But that's not really faith - that's credulity or superstition.

Festus doesn't believe Paul - he says he's insane. But what nobody was saying was that there was no evidence on Paul's side, or that Paul was making a case for blind faith. Paul's argument to Agrippa is that what he believes and what he wishes Agrippa to believe are things believable on the evidence.

The testimony of Paul, as we see here and in his letters, is that what happened in Jerusalem when Jesus died, was buried and was resurrected, was a public act. Paul says in 1 Corinthians that Christ appeared to not just the apostles, but to more than five hundred others at the same, many of whom at the time of his writing were still alive, and thus could corroborate this.

Christianity did not begin in mystery, not in secrets. The manifestation of the Son of God was a public matter, and our faith should be based on things that are solid and historical.

Why do people not believe?

The logical next question we might have is, if there's all this evidence backing up Christianity, why don't more people believe it? Why doesn't everyone who understands the evidence become a Christian?

First, we can see from what Christ says to Paul as Paul recounts from his Damascus road experience, that when someone becomes a Christian, there is more going on than mere intellectual assent.

Jesus tells Paul that it is hard for him to kick against the goads - that he might well have the prodding stick of evidence and knowledge encouraging him to turn to Christ, but he rebelled against it. Not just true for Paul of course, but for everyone - our natural state is rebellion against God.

Then Jesus' words to Paul about what will happen - his witnessing will lead to people being turned from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God. So it's not a case that everyone is seeing the same thing with the same clarity - it's not that everyone is standing in the light, sees the same things, and decides intellectually. No, people are in darkness, and light needs to shine upon them. They are under the power of Satan, and need to be set free to live for God. In our sinfulness, we love the darkness, rather than the light - we need to be transformed to love the light.

So rather than it being the case that Christians are the ones with blind faith, it's those that are not followers of Christ that are spiritually blind, blinded by sin. Evidence and logic are an important part of coming to know Christ, but it's not the part on which things turn - it's not the part that makes the essential difference. The essential difference is that the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of some to see what is plainly in front of them, and transforms them to love the Christ that they see.

Conclusion

To conclude, we have learnt a lot from Paul's defences in these last chapters.

We have seen that Paul makes a logical and evidenced defence - he appeals to the scriptures that those opposing him claim to follow, and he appeals to the evidence of his own public experience of Christ, as well as the evidence of Christ's resurrection some years before. He is not asking anyone to accept something vague. We too should make sure we have a reasoned defence for what we believe.

We also see how every time Paul makes his defence, it's not convincing to many. Really, they've decided what they believe beforehand. They've dismissed Christianity before Paul started talking. They are blinded, deafened to the gospel, already. We also have seen that Paul was one such person - undoubtedly knowledgeable about Christianity in the intellectual sense, before he turned to Christ, but rejecting Christ up until his first hand direct experience of Christ. We too must recognise that people becoming Christians is a work of God - we are used by God in this, and should, like Paul, be public and open about our faith, seeking to convince people, but ultimately, the Holy Spirit is the one who brings people out of the darkness, into the light, so they can see clearly.

Lastly, we also see that true faith is more than just understanding the facts. True faith is a living faith, trusting in Christ, and making a difference in our own lives. Paul was thoroughly transformed when he met Christ. Paul tells Agrippa that he preached repentance. Jesus told Paul that those that are brought into the light will receive not just forgiveness of sins, but "a place among those who are *sanctified* by faith". This light doesn't just reveal to us Christ, though that's the most important thing - it also lights up ourselves and allows us to see clearly our own sinfulness.

Our prayer should be like that of Paul's - that whoever hears the message of the gospel should become as he was - transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, living for Christ.