

Trial Before Agrippa

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[0 : 00] It's great to be here. Today is actually very important in terms of the book of Acts. Today is actually the climax of the book of Acts. After this week, after the following chapters, they're interesting, but it's kind of winding down.

But tonight, or this morning, Acts 26, Paul's final trial speech is really, really pivotal in the book of Acts that I hope you'll see. I want to begin with a bit of a show and tell. I like to do this.

I know that you know this book. You're probably not better than me. John Dixon's book, Promoting the Gospel. He's an Australian Christian historian and he speaks very persuasively about the truth of Christianity, the evidence for it.

And this book's about how Christians should share their faith. And there's a very great quote in the book. I'll read it to you. He says this, And this requires some imagination.

If for just a moment we could lift the curtain of heaven and see the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, if just for a moment we could lift the curtain and see that reality, Dixon says, Do you see that? See what he's saying?

[1 : 27] We would see things as they really are, with God and his Messiah at the helm. One day this curtain will be lifted for everyone to see. Until then, believers, that is us, are to live as those who know what lies behind the veil.

See, that's a very good summary of the Christian life, that there is a curtain over heaven and it's, by faith, it's invisible that God and his son Jesus are at the helm.

But we are to live in such a way that that is true. If we could only see it, all causes for Christian coyness and embarrassment would vanish, I think.

I think that's right. Our bosses do not rule heaven and earth. Our professors do not rule heaven and earth. Our politicians do not rule heaven and earth. The media do not rule heaven and earth.

God and his Messiah are at the helm. You may ask, well, it's by faith, it's invisible, we can't see now. Where is the evidence for this? And I want to say, there is evidence and the evidence is bound up in this.

[2 : 37] Jesus was risen from the dead. When you see the proof for that and the evidence for that, all things fall into place. All things fall into place.

And the New Testament is very clear that our faith appreciates evidence. Our faith needs the evidence that point to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as the world's true Lord and King.

It's not true to say that faith is something you believe in the absence of evidence. That's not how it works in the Bible. Faith is in something invisible. That's right. It's in what's unseen. But there is compelling evidence that the Apostle will give us in today's speech in the book of Acts.

We're in the year 59 AD and Paul is standing as an old man before a young king, King Agrippa. And Agrippa is what's called a vassal king or a client king over Judea.

That is, he's running a puppet monarchy on behalf of Nero, the Roman emperor. And so he's not really the king of this place and therefore the only way he really gets his power is by the sword.

[3 : 51] And so Paul has a lot to fear as Paul stands before him that he could be killed very easily. And earlier in chapter 25, Luke gives us a very grand picture of Agrippa entering the room and it's quite intimidating.

Chapter 25 verse 23. On the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp. Now Bernice is his sister, probably his twin sister.

They're quite a diabolical political pair. And they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. This is probably in the audience hall of the palace of Herod the Great, one of the great kings of the Roman Empire.

He was Agrippa's great grandfather. This was the guy who went crazy and tried to have all the boys killed in Bethlehem to try and get Jesus when Jesus was born in about 4 BC.

And so there's a lot in this room. All the civic leaders are there. There's a lot of regalia and there's a lot here for Paul to be intimidated by. I'm sure I would be. I'm sure you would be, right?

[5 : 04] But anyway, Festus the governor tells Agrippa that Paul is wanted dead by the Jews, but he can't find anything wrong with him.

And Paul has appealed to Nero, but he can't send him to Nero without anything written by way of accusation. This creates something of a paperwork problem for Festus.

And so Agrippa says to Paul, chapter 26, you have permission to speak for yourself. And thus begins one of the great speeches of Christianity, one of the great speeches of the book of Acts.

And we know the custom, we saw it last week, is to begin with some words of respect to those in authority. And so Paul says, I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, that I am to make my defence today against all the accusations of the Jews, because you are especially familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews.

And therefore I beg of you to listen to me patiently. Now, Paul has a real connection, it seems, with King Agrippa.

[6 : 15] Paul is sort of saying to King Agrippa, you are a Roman king, and yet you are familiar with the customs of the Jews. Like the Apostle Paul, King Agrippa is a man caught between the two worlds of Rome and of the Jews, and stuck in those two worlds.

And so although Paul is an old man in prisoners' rags, and Agrippa is in majestic regalia, there seems to be a connection between the two men. And Paul really hones in on him in this speech.

And by the end of it, of course, Agrippa is like, you are trying to convert me to Christianity, aren't you? And Paul says, yes, I am. And so there is a real connection there. And Paul's speech is a masterful summary of not only his life, but of the gospel and of the evidence for the resurrection, to make it not only believable, but compelling.

So here is the speech. All the Jews know my way of life from my youth, a life spent from the beginning among my own people and in Jerusalem. Unlike the kind of modern testimonies today where we say, you know, I had a really misspent youth and that I met Christ.

He's saying, I had a really religious youth. I was really moral. I was very obedient to my faith. The Jews have known for a long time, verse 5, if they're willing to testify that I belong to the strictest sect of our religion.

[7 : 43] I lived as a Pharisee. And that's well known. Paul's well known as a public religious figure. And now I stand here on trial on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors, that is the Jews.

A promise that our 12 tribes, that is of Israel, hope to attain as they earnestly worship day and night. It is this hope, your excellency, that I'm accused by the Jews.

Why is it thought incredible by any of you, any of you, that God raises the dead? That's a critical question. Why is it thought incredible that God raises the dead?

See, what is Paul saying? He's saying that resurrection is unusual, but just because it's unusual doesn't make it impossible.

What was true in Paul's day is also true today. Dead people don't rise. Dead people stay dead, especially if they've been in a cold tomb for three days.

[8 : 50] You do not expect dead people to rise. I'm taking a funeral tomorrow. I don't expect to hear any knocking inside the coffin. Dead people stay dead. But if God is God, if God is the creator God who gives life, who sustains life, then he could raise the dead if he wanted to, right?

It's not impossible. It's not incredulous that God could raise the dead. To add to that, Paul actually says, not only is it possible for God, he takes it one step further.

He says, Agrippa, you know the Bible. You know that's the word of God. In the Bible, that is the Old Testament, God has said that he would raise the dead.

God has actually promised that he would raise the dead. It is actually the hope of Israel that there would be a resurrected king. And so, not only is resurrection possible with God, he's promised it.

So, it's probable. In fact, it's only a matter of timing. It's only a matter of when this would happen. Paul takes it one step further, this sort of line of argument.

[10 : 04] Not only does God's power make it possible, not only does his promise make it probable, the time has come. God has done it because Paul has met the resurrected king.

And Paul is an eyewitness of the resurrected king. God has done it and Paul has seen it. And so, he goes on with a bit more background in verse 9. Indeed, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

See, when Paul had heard about Christians going around saying Jesus was risen, he hated that and he tried to shut them down. He tried to kill the movement as a whole by killing the leaders.

And so, this is what I did in Jerusalem with authority received from the chief priests I not only locked up many of the saints, that is the Christians, in prison, but I cast my vote against them when they were being condemned to death.

You get a sense here that it's more than just Stephen and James. In the book of Acts there have been two martyrs but you get a sense that Paul had actually over-supervised the death of many Christians.

[11 : 14] He hated Christianity. Paul hated Christianity. He's a public figure and that is well known. That is well verifiable in that courtroom. By punishing them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme and since I was so furiously enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities.

So, the Apostle Paul had a crusade against Christianity and it was well known that he had a crusade against them. But what happened? What happened to Paul that he went from torturing, killing Christians to actually becoming one of them?

Why would there be such a dramatic conversion in this man? Why would such a public figure change his tune on Jesus of Nazareth? Everyone agrees that he lived and he was crucified under Pontius Pilate.

That's there in the historical records. But why would Paul go from hurting Christians to being hurt for them? Well, the answer, of course, is because he met Jesus and it's true that Jesus rose from the dead and if it's true, Paul had to change his tune.

This is what happened. With this in mind, I was travelling to Damascus, verse 12, with the authority and commission of the chief priests when at midday along the road, Your Excellency Agrippa, I saw a light from heaven brighter than the sun shining around me and my companions.

[12 : 46] When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, that is, the king of the Bible, the king of the world, speaking to this zealous Hebrew who's killing Christians, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

And here is something, this is the third testimony of Paul in Acts, but here is something we haven't read yet in Acts. Jesus said to him, it hurts you to kick against the goads.

What do you think that means? Well, a goad is a very sharp stick for goading animals, for basically kind of spiking an animal to push it along, you know, a donkey or a horse or a cow to push it along and if the donkey kicks back at the goad, it's going to get ten more spikes, you know what I mean, to move it along and that really describes, Jesus says, that's what you're trying to do, Paul, you're resisting me, you're running from me but I'm coming after you and it's only going to hurt you more and it's irresistible and eventually you're going to give in and Paul does give in and bows the knee to Jesus as Lord and worships him as Saviour.

The purposes of God are irresistible and I think Paul is actually here sending a bit of a message to King Agrippa. He's saying, you, King Agrippa, are persecuting Christianity but you will not be able to resist it.

It's only going to hurt you to kick against the goads and you Festus and you Nero and you Jerusalem, you cannot resist this because Christianity is being led by the risen King who reigns heaven and earth.

[14 : 32] You cannot stop Christianity and I think this is also one of the great proofs or one of the great evidences that all the resources of Rome and of Jerusalem couldn't destroy the movement and they really tried.

They tried with all their forces to kill Christianity but they could not do it because they were just kicking against the goads. In 10 years time from this event in 1870 just as Jesus predicted that Jerusalem will be destroyed and then in 250 years time the Roman Empire will become Christian.

Amazing. Paul would never have imagined that but you see they're only kicking against the goads. They're only resisting the risen one. You cannot do it. You cannot do it. That is why Christianity is still flourishing today.

You cannot stop it because the Lord Jesus Christ is behind it. Well, Paul goes on and he speaks of his special appointment as an eyewitness to the Saviour.

Here's what Paul says or here's what Jesus said to Paul. Get up stand on your feet I have appeared to you for this purpose. Here is Paul's special role to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you.

[15 : 56] So Paul is a special eyewitness and Jesus will appear to Paul at least one other time in the book of Acts and his job is to be the eyewitness or a eyewitness to be an apostle to that reality.

I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles to whom I'm sending you. That is Paul is going to send Paul is going to be sent into the fire of persecution and Jesus will rescue him so that he can witness in that context and then he'll be sent into another fire and another persecution another trial another trial all the while being used as a special instrument of the risen Jesus and here's what will happen to those who hear Paul's message to open their eyes verse 18 so that they may turn 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.

You see Paul's special role is to be an eyewitness to show the evidence that Jesus is risen. You see if you would like God to appear to you to prove himself to you that's probably not going to happen.

In fact it doesn't need to happen because God has entered our world in Jesus and Jesus chose his eyewitnesses and if you were born 2,000 years ago you would have seen him but you weren't.

You see God had to pick a time to do it didn't he? To achieve the incarnation and the resurrection of the king. He had to pick a time he chose 2,000 years ago that was a good time but we weren't born then and even if you were born then you probably wouldn't be chosen as an apostle.

[17 : 46] Only 12 blokes got that job do you see? So God had to choose who would the eyewitnesses be but now that they are chosen you can read their testimony and that's the proof that's the evidence that it's happened.

You see what God is saying to us today is believe in my son through the chosen eyewitnesses Paul and the other apostles who wrote our New Testament and when you read their eyewitness account there's a promise from Jesus that eyes will be opened people will turn from darkness to light they'll go from being under Satan to being under God that they'll be forgiven of their sins.

You see what advice would you give someone who says to you I want to know God what do I do? Where will you send them? If you want to know God if you want to go from darkness to light you don't need to go in like a spiritual retreat at Bush you don't need to find some guru who knows all this special stuff you don't even need to meet Jesus yourself on a road all you need to do is read the eyewitnesses he's chosen and by doing so eyes will be opened people will turn from darkness to light going from under Satan the power of Satan to the power of God and forgiveness of sins will be given.

There's even an extra special kind of blessing here that we overlook because he says those who do turn get two things they get forgiveness of sins which we talk about a lot and another equally good thing a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me I don't think we treasure that as much that when you become a Christian you not only get your sins forgiven you get a place among the people of God that is here today a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Christ you are given the privilege of belonging to the people of God I don't think we treasure that gift as much as we ought well Paul in describing himself in this way he's really using the language of Jeremiah Ezekiel other Old Testament prophets in their own commission he's saying he and the other apostles are the equivalent of the Old Testament prophets they are the ones who reveal the word of God and the events of salvation now if you're a cynical person

I don't blame you if you are there's lots of good reasons to be cynical you might still say what if Paul's making this up Paul could just be lying through his teeth don't people do that all the time don't religious people lie in order to get religious power well remember friends where Paul's come from he was already at the top of the tree in Judaism he already had religious power he threw it all away to serve Jesus he threw it all away for a despised group called the Christians and what Paul witnessed to is independently corroborated by the other apostles and their time with Jesus at the resurrection there's one and Paul himself alludes to this line of evidence by talking about his own suffering actually in verse 19 to 23 he says after that King Agrippa I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision but I declared first to those in Damascus and then in

[21 : 32] Jerusalem throughout the countryside of Judea and also to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance for this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me so I'm suffering for this message I'm not making it up I'm suffering for it and it's very interesting that the way Paul describes his life it's according to the strategy that Jesus set at the start of Acts he said you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem Judea ends of the earth and Paul says well I was converted in Damascus I went to Jerusalem I went to the outskirts and then I went to Gentiles exactly Jesus mission strategy Paul is Jesus apostle he's Jesus eyewitness and similarly he says I declared that everyone should repent and do deeds consistent with repentance God just doesn't want an assent to belief he doesn't just want a faith in him that does nothing he wants real repentance he wants people to turn to him and obey him and follow him which is exactly by the way

Peter's message in Acts 2 when he said Jesus is risen Lord and Christ and his audience said well what shall we do we killed him Peter said repent that's exactly Paul's message repent and do deeds consistent with repentance to this very day says Paul I have had help from God you can't stop me really you can kill me but you won't stop me and so I stand here testifying to both small and great saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place now listen carefully to this because it echoes something Jesus said that the Messiah must suffer and that by being first to rise from the dead he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles not only is Paul saying the same message as Peter at Pentecost not only is he following the strategy of Jesus in Acts 1 he's also doing the thing that Jesus said would happen at the end of Luke's gospel now remember at the end of

Luke's gospel Jesus himself said thus it is written the Messiah is to suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning in Jerusalem that's exactly how Paul described his own ministry Paul is Jesus man Paul's ministry is the embodiment of what Jesus said to do when he came out of the tomb in resurrection glory well at this point the trial is interrupted Festus is embarrassed because he notices that Paul is getting very preachy he's proselytizing he's evangelizing he's trying to convert people Festus says to him you're out of your mind Paul too much learning is driving you insane and Paul says I'm not out of my mind I'm speaking the sober truth the sober truth indeed the king knows about these things and to him I speak freely for I am certain that none of these things has escaped the king's notice for this was not done in a corner see what is

Paul saying he's saying that all these events happened in the public eye Jesus Christ was crucified in a very public place in fact I would argue that Jerusalem in the first century is the most public volatile place in the world not unlike today and God very wisely had the gospel had Jesus sent there Christianity was birthed and grew in a public transparent fashion it was not done in a corner and so Paul challenges the king in verse 27 do you believe the prophets king Agrippa I know you do I know you believe them Agrippa said to Paul are you so quickly persuasive me to become a Christian and Paul replied and this is a classic moment really the pinnacle of the book of Acts really Paul replied whether quickly or not I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as

I am except for these chains except for these chains well they end up concluding that Paul could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor in fact in this whole trial before Agrippa three times Paul's innocence is declared three times just like in Luke's gospel Paul Jesus innocence is declared three times when he is on trial Paul is like his saviour before him well friends let me conclude in your lives you carry a testimony to the power of the risen Jesus in answered prayer in peace with God in your own experience but even and that's powerful but even more compelling than that is that of the historical biblical evidence this resurrection of Jesus is a turning point of history if Jesus did rise from the dead he is the true lord of the world and everyone must come to grips with him the possibility is this that the all powerful

[27:13] God can raise the dead combine that with his many promises that he would send his king and raise him from the dead this is compelling evidence for faith in the fact that Paul of such religious stature threw it away to suffer for Jesus and the fact that Christianity could not be killed in the cradle the people could only kick against the goads but they could not stop it Jesus is risen from the dead he is the world's true lord he has fulfilled all the hope of scripture and so today the Lord Jesus demands from every one of us him and to repent and to do deeds consistent with repentance I love this line from John Dixon he's got this great line where he says because Jesus is lord wherever we go Jesus owns the room

Jesus owns the room certainly true of this room but wherever we go because Jesus is resurrected lord he owns the room you may stand before kings with great and intimidating pomp and ceremony you may stand in rooms where you are pressured to glue your mouth shut about your faith but remember Jesus owns the room right Jesus owns the room you may speak to people great or you may speak to people small Jesus owns the room you may feel bold about your faith you may feel fired up or you may be shaking your boots you may be your maybe chattering Jesus doesn't matter actually Jesus owns the room the people you speak to may mock Christianity and despise it or they may have their eyes opened whatever the case Jesus owns the room so let me close with the quote

I began with our bosses professors parents friends politicians and the media do not rule heaven and earth if for just a moment we could lift the curtain of heaven and see the glory of God and Jesus at the right hand of God all causes of Christian embarrassment would vanish in an instant they would vanish in an instant we would see things as they really are with God and his Messiah at the helm one day this curtain will be lifted for all to see until then our job is to leave him until he realized the that of him and he his and him will