

Paul's Defense Of His Faith 1

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 December 1987

Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] I just want to read you part of Psalm 123, and to use that as a prayer as we gather to listen to God's word. To thee I lift up my eyes, O thou who art enthroned in the heavens.

Behold, as the eyes of servants look at the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God.

Till he have mercy upon us. Grant us the grace that we, like good servants and maids of the Lord, may look to you, that you may have mercy on us in all the circumstances of our life together, of our homes and of our personal lives.

In Christ's name, amen. I feel like the Queen of Sheba this morning.

That's an obscure reference, which I will now explain. The Queen of Sheba went to visit King Solomon, and when she got to visit King Solomon, she was quite overwhelmed by his house, his wisdom, his riches, the way he had ordered his table, the way he had ordered his household, the way he had ordered the city, all the evidences of wealth and prosperity.

[1 : 31] Now, I'm not sure quite what happened to her. But when she saw all this, in 2 Kings 10, it says, And I'm sorry, I think it's in 1 Kings 10.

I launched out nobly, and I'm already foundering. But it says of her, when she saw all this, there was no more spirit in her.

And when I look at the passage that we have to study this morning and see all that is in it, I feel that there is no more spirit in me, because there's just so much there.

And I hope that if the least I can do is to help you see the array of riches which are laid out in the scriptures for us in that passage which we're looking at today, which begins with Acts chapter 25 and verse 13 and goes on through the whole of Acts 26.

It's an amazing story. And I want just to tell you the story, and you can put your finger there, but you'll probably have to read it through afterwards.

[2 : 50] I hope that you will spend most of the afternoon reading it. That's a wild hope, but I can express it nevertheless. The passage has to do with St. Paul.

And St. Paul, when we left him last week, I think, was leaving Ephesus and heading towards Jerusalem. He knew that he was going to be in trouble when he got there.

It is supposed by scholars that he was taking the vast sum of money that he had collected throughout his journey, where he had been to Thessalon and Corinth and Athens and all those places on the Aegean Sea.

And he'd gathered this money because there was a famine in Jerusalem, and the Christians were suffering very much from the results of it. And he had asked Christians in other parts to contribute to their necessity, and he was bringing the money to Jerusalem.

And when he got to Jerusalem, he went to see James and the heads of the new Christian church in Jerusalem and presented them with the money, which, according to the record, they didn't pay much attention to.

[4 : 03] But nevertheless, that is supposed what happened. And they told Paul that he was in trouble, deep trouble, and that Jerusalem wasn't the place for him to be.

And they suggested to him that he would follow his own advice and be a Jew to the Jews. There was four young men who were Christians, presumably, and who had made vows at the temple, and the time of their vows was coming to an end, and they were going for the closing ritual that ended their period of vows.

It was interesting that the way it was designated that they had made a vow was that they grew their hair long and uncut. You may see fit to interpret that in others who you see with long, uncut hair these days.

It may be a carryover from this. But at the end of this period of the vow, they went to the temple, and they had their heads shaved. And there were certain rituals that they had to go through, and it was considered a great act of patronage by the wealthy people of the community to go with these people to identify with them and to pay for the costs of the sacrifices that needed to be made as their vows came to an end.

They had made particular vows, and now they were coming to an end, and somebody needed to pay for it. And it would be a great sign to the whole of the Jewish community around the temple in Jerusalem that Paul was still a Jew, in spite of the terrible things they said about him and about his overthrowing the message of Moses and the prophets.

[5 : 49] Well, he went and did it, but it was of little avail because once some of the Judaizing Christians recognized him or saw him, people who had seen him at work in Ephesus and up in the Roman province of Asia and who had been part of the riots in various places where Paul had preached before, they saw him and recognized him, and soon out through the crowd went the scandalous news that Paul had the effrontery to come to the temple in Jerusalem.

And so they organized a mob. They brought a charge against him because he had been seen walking the streets of Jerusalem with a young Christian convert who was a Greek, and it was suggested that he had taken that Greek into the temple and thereby blasphemed the temple.

And so they stirred up the crowd against him. The crowd closed in on him and were prepared to beat him to death, except that the nearby garrison of Roman soldiers heard about it and came down into the crowd and rescued Paul.

And they thought Paul was somebody else. They thought he really was a bandit who had caused an uprising, and so they thought they were rescuing him only to have to put him to death subsequently.

They rescued him and were surprised when Paul spoke to them in Greek. And they took him and were about to scourge him to get the truth out of him, and Paul reminded them that he was a Roman citizen and he couldn't be scourged, untried.

[7 : 31] So they treated him with a great deal more respect from that moment on. And Paul asked if he might address the crowd, which if you read in the chapters preceding this, you will see the boldness with which he addressed those very people who moments before had been out to kill him.

He was then taken into custody. Forty of the Jews in Jerusalem put themselves under a vow to put Paul to death. They were going to arrange for the Roman soldiers to bring him to the Sanhedrin to be tried, and on his way there they were going to ambush him and put him to death.

Word of this got out. Paul's nephew came and told Paul what had happened. Paul sent him to the commanding officer. The commanding officer arranged that that very night, with a large group of foot soldiers and cavalry soldiers, they would spirit him away to Caesarea, which they did.

And so Paul was rescued from the Jerusalem mob, taken to Caesarea, and when he got to Caesarea, he met Felix, who was the Roman governor, the sort of successor to Pontius Pilate, and Felix, the Roman governor, asked him a lot of questions, thought to get him to get his friends to pay a bribe to get him out of prison, spent some time talking to him, but kept him in prison for a very long time indeed.

But finally Felix, because of scandal that had been stirred up against him, one of the early political leaders who got caught in a scandal, it's not a new venture in the history of the world, he got taken out of office, and he went back to Rome.

[9 : 20] He had a wife whose name was Drusilla, and this is of no consequence at all, but it's interesting to me to know that the wife and child apparently died in the eruption of Vesuvius.

But this wife was the sister of Bernice and Agrippa, and the successor to Felix was Festus, who became the governor.

It took me all day to figure these out, so I hope you can get them all sorted out, who we are talking about. Festus has taken over from Felix as the governor.

He lives in Caesarea. Caesarea is the Roman capital, really, of the province of Judea, and there was Paul in prison, and Festus, right at the beginning of his term of office, asked that Paul's case be brought forward.

And when it was brought forward, he arranged for Paul to meet with his accusers. He brought them down from Jerusalem, and the accusers faced Paul, and Festus heard the charges they brought against him and scratched his head because he could not, for the life of him, figure out what it was that they had against him.

[10 : 36] They went on and on debating, but he couldn't see what they were debating about. So subsequently, when Agrippa and Bernice, who was his sister, came to visit and pay their respects to the new Roman governor, Festus, the new Roman governor decided to ask Agrippa if he would hear Paul and help him write the charge under which Paul was to be sent to Caesar to be tried, to be sent to Rome.

And so that's where the story opens, the story of the passage that many of you have been studying in Bible study groups this week. That's where it opens, where Paul is summoned before Agrippa and Bernice, and there the confrontation takes place.

And you read that on the morrow, Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes, the prominent men of the city, and then by command, Paul was brought in.

So it's a very imposing situation. Great pomp, that word is a word you may be familiar with. It's the root of the word fantastic.

Well, this is the pomp with which Bernice came into the audience hall, and the man in chains was brought to stand before him.

[12 : 11] Well, having stood before him, Paul is asked to present his argument, and he carefully delineates for Agrippa what the charge was.

Now, Agrippa is the great-grandson of Herod, the one to whom the wise men came at the birth of Jesus.

This is Herod Agrippa. He happens to be the last of the Herods, and he, having been born about 29 A.D., lived all through this period to 100 A.D.

He had with him his sister, and she had been married to her uncle for a short time, had left him to go and live with Agrippa in what was considered by some of the contemporary writers to be a somewhat scandalous relationship.

Subsequently, she went and married another minor king, stayed with him for a while, and then went back to her brother, Agrippa, who never had a child in the whole of his life, and that's why the Herods ended with Agrippa II.

[13 : 35] Then, having come to that place, Berenice subsequently went on to be the wife, or at least consort, of Titus, who was the Roman emperor under whom and by whom the city of Jerusalem was to be destroyed just 10 years after this encounter.

So she was a very significant lady in the history of her times. So she and her brother, Agrippa, and Festus, and all the important people of the city gathered to hear Paul make his argument.

Agrippa was a Jew by birth. He was related to the high priestly family, and when he had come as the new king, as it were, in succession, though under the authority of the Roman governor, he had gone to Jerusalem and, like Paul, had paid for the closing sacrifices of some people who had made vows, and this is how he was seeking to win favor with the Jews.

So Paul had been through the same situation that he'd been through, seeking to win the favor of the Jews, and so Paul begins his talk by saying, Agrippa, you understand the trials and the way the Jews work, and so I'm happy to be able to present this to you.

And then Paul tells the story. He tells the story of how he was brought up under Gamaliel in Jerusalem and in his own home, which was up in the Roman province of Asia, in Cilicia, in the city of Tarsus, and that he had learned to worship along with all the people of his nation, all the Jews, and he had come to believe in the promise that they prayed for.

[15 : 41] Now this is a great moment in anybody's religion. And one of the great things, I think, about Anglican worship, I don't know what your experience of it is, but I was brought up in an Anglican church and was christened in an Anglican church and went to an Anglican Sunday school and sang in an Anglican boys choir, and all of those things were part of my life for a very long time, and it never came together for me at all.

The ritual I enjoyed, the company I enjoyed, the process of the liturgy I enjoyed, the singing of the hymns I enjoyed, but it never had any meaning for me. And I tell you that because that's the experience, I think, of many, many people in the Anglican church.

A thing never comes together. And that's exactly what Paul is saying happened to him, that he learned the scriptures of his people, he learned all about the law of his people, he read the prophets, he knew all those things, he knew what they were looking for, but he also knew that they never found it.

And he came to the place where he did find it, and he said to them, is that a crime? This is what we've been praying for, this is what we've been looking for, this is the one who has been heralded, is it a crime?

And he ended his little dissertation by saying to them, why is it incredible that God should raise the dead? He did it in the Old Testament, he's done it in the person of Jesus Christ.

[17 : 20] Why is that thought incredible to you? Well, having come to that place, Paul said, went on to tell about his persecution of the Christians.

Being a very loyal Jew, he said, I persecuted them, I chased them from city to city, I consented to their death, I was raging and in fury against them.

I was so caught up in the frenzy of what I was doing. That becomes significant a little later on in his argument, that he said, I reacted vehemently towards the saints.

Then he describes his dramatic confrontation with Jesus on the road to Damascus. When he was going, breathing, threatening, and slaughter down to the Christians in Damascus, he was suddenly confronted by a great light that struck him blind, that knocked him to the ground, and he asked, who is it?

And the answer came to him, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. So that Paul himself met that, met the risen Lord, Lord.

[18 : 30] And, of course, that was the changing point in his life when he did that. He describes how he went on to Damascus, how he subsequently received his sight back again, and then, in accordance with the commission which Jesus, as Lord, had given him, he went and took the message of the gospel to all the people and to the Gentiles, because it was meant for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews.

And he says, that's what I did. I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. Well, Paul concludes his argument by telling them that, I'm not teaching anything now but what has been laid down in the scriptures.

He's referring to the scriptures of the Old Testament, to Moses and the prophets. I'm not telling you anything that is not in the book. This is not a new idea that I'm presenting to you.

This is all in the book. He tells them that, and that he's been given this commission to take this word of the good news of Jesus Christ to the Gentile world.

well, Festus said to him, Paul, you are mad. He uses the same word which Paul had used earlier when he said that he was in a raging fury against the Christians.

[20 : 14] Paul said, then I was mad but he says, now I'm not mad. And he turns to Agrippa and said, Agrippa, you believe the prophets, don't you?

And I expect there was a significant pause. Then he said, I know you do. And Agrippa replied by saying, Paul, do you think in a short time to make me a Christian?

And Paul gave the famous reply, whether short or long, I would that you were even as I am. I would that you stood even where I stand. I would that you could be what I am.

And he said that to Agrippa. Well, this was in a very real sense, a kind of summit conference because here was a king of the Jews, here was a Roman governor, and here was God's chief ambassador to the Greek world.

Greek, Roman, and Jewish, and they come together in this trial. Now, the thing that I find fascinating about it is, I think it's the way God chooses to pass judgment on us.

[21 : 31] All of us are afraid of the last judgment, and we probably have good reason to be, but you're given some happy assurance words here, that what Jesus promised in the Sermon on the Mount is what's going to happen.

The way you judge is the way you will be judged. And God has ordained in some peculiar way that he stands before us and invites our judgment upon him.

Paul sets Jesus Christ before Festus, Agrippa, Berenice, and the leading people of Caesarea, he sets Jesus Christ before them and invites them to pass judgment on him.

Knowing that ultimately the roles will be reversed, and they will stand before that one who has been appointed by God to be the judge of the quick and the dead, Jesus Christ, so that the great reversal in life is we, in all the pride of who we are and what we've attained and what we've accomplished with our lives, we stand in judgment of Jesus Christ.

And ultimately, the reality for us, each of us, is that he will stand in judgment of us. and the judgment with which you have judged, by that you will be judged.

[23 : 13] That's why the season of Advent is a season of solemn warning, because it warns us that he by whom God has chosen to judge the world is the one who has come among us in the person of Jesus Christ.

us, and he on whom we are happy to pour our condemnation is the one who rightfully and justly will condemn us.

That's the way the world works. Interesting, you see, that these three people, Berenice said nothing, but I can't help but wonder how it was that she, within ten years, was the wife or consort of the man who with tremendous shedding of blood destroyed the city of Jerusalem.

I can't help thinking about Festus, who when he was overwhelmed, I'm sure, by the argument of Paul and by the telling impact of the argument of Paul, said, Paul, you're mad, which was the only thing he could resort to.

And how often we dismiss the whole claim of the gospel by suggesting that it's people who are out of their minds. You see, Jesus had made a wonderful promise in Luke chapter 12, which if it was ever fulfilled, must surely have been fulfilled when Paul stood before these three.

[25 : 00] In Luke chapter 12 and verse 12, it says, it says, when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious how or what you are to answer or what you are to say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you are to say.

Behind Paul's talk to Festus and Agrippa and Berenice is surely the evidence of the Holy Spirit teaching him in that hour what he is to say.

The impact on that, on Festus, was that he was compelled either to believe or to ridicule, and he chose to ridicule.

the impact of this Holy Spirit inspired argument was such that Festus chose to ridicule.

And then Agrippa, and Agrippa heard the same argument and knew far more than Festus ever knew about what lay behind it, because he knew the prophets and he knew Moses and he knew that Paul could not be answered.

[26 : 18] He considered his great importance. He considered his social prominence. He considered his high standing. He considered the friends who were around him. He considered the great dignity that was conferred on him.

And he saw this man in chains standing before him and with arrogant superiority said, Paul, do you think to make me a Christian?

using the word Christian not with any respect at all, but using it as a term of sneering. It's interesting that Agrippa is remembered in history because of St.

Paul. St. Paul is not remembered because of Agrippa. But he said, do you think to make me a Christian? And turned away and left and the hearing was ended.

And I guess that's why Advent is a solemn season for us. Because it's a season in which by the witness of the gospel, by the witness of John the Baptist, by the witness of the church through the centuries, we are confronted again with the person of Jesus Christ.

[27 : 40] And we in our generation asked the question. And we may say, you're mad. We may consider ourselves so superior to the question, we with scorn and contempt say, do you think you're going to make a Christian of me?

Do you think you're going to make a Christian of me? And Paul said, yes, I do. I would that you wear even as I am, except for these chains.

May God grant that in this Advent season, we're not like Berenice who walked out without saying anything, and sank deeper into her life of immorality, gross immorality.

Or like Festus, trapped by the argument that he couldn't answer, said, Paul, you were mad. Or who with the arrogance of Agrippa answered, do you know who I am?

Could I become a Christian? Paul's answer is the answer to all of us. Yes, I would that you were, even as I am.

[29 : 08] So I thought about this, one of the practical implications of it, is I don't know if your Bible study group is becoming stale or not, but if it is, persuade a couple of non-Christians to come to it.

Because it's when you present the Christian faith to people who are right outside the Christian faith, that you begin to see the wonder and the riches of what's there. And that you feel quite overwhelmed by the reality of that gospel which broke in on the world when all the teaching of Moses and the prophets was fulfilled and Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

Amen. Amen.