

## Acts 26:1-29

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Preacher: Rev. Jordan Senner

[ 0 : 00 ] Heavenly Father, we thank you for this evening! We thank you for the reminders that we are one in Christ from many nations and generations.

! And we thank you for the witness of the Apostle Paul. And we pray that the words of my mouth and the many meditations of our hearts would now be pleasing and acceptable in your sight. O Lord, our Maker and our Redeemer. Amen. May you take a seat. Wonderful joy to be here with you.

I'm looking forward to next Sunday's picnic, and I would invite you to join for that. I already have people who have challenged me to a soccer match, and I am very bad at soccer, so it's going to be a lot of fun.

It's going to be a great time. Please open to Acts chapter 26. This is the last sermon series. No, the last sermon. That'd be bad if this was the last sermon series.

[ 1 : 05 ] Wouldn't be a good sign. This is the last sermon in our Sent by Jesus series. If you remember, over the last nine months, we've had kind of a sermon series trilogy. We did three months of encounters with Jesus.

We did three months of being formed by Jesus. And we're just concluding three months of Sent by Jesus in the book of Acts. And so we come to Acts chapter 26, and we discover that Paul is on trial, and it is the fourth trial in a row for Paul.

I'm only aware of one other man who's been on trial more times than him for something. There was a man in 1996 in Mississippi who was convicted of a crime, sentenced to death, and then he was acquitted, and then he was convicted, and he was acquitted, and so on and so forth.

Six trials over 23 years for a crime he did not commit. Can you imagine how you would feel? Paul is on number four.

He's going back to back to back to back, and each time the stage gets bigger and the stakes get higher. So the first trial was in Acts chapter 23 before a Jewish council.

[ 2 : 15 ] The second, Acts chapter 24, between Governor Felix. The third in Acts chapter 25 before Governor Festus. And the fourth, Acts chapter 26, before King Agrippa.

So we get four trials in four chapters. And here's an interesting little tidbit. When you read these chapters, there are four declarations of Paul's innocence. So four trials in four chapters and four declarations of his innocence.

Four times somebody says, we found nothing wrong with this man. We found that he did nothing deserving death or imprisonment. So, it raises a lot of questions.

So let's jump in. Paul is right before King Agrippa, and he is given permission by Agrippa to state his case, to make a defense. So let me set the scene for you.

Agrippa is a local Roman king, a local Roman ruler with a deep family history. He comes from the family of the Herods.

[ 3 : 21 ] Does that name ring a bell with you at all? So Agrippa's great-grandfather tried to kill baby Jesus. And Agrippa's grandfather beheaded John the Baptist.

And Agrippa's father eventually, tradition says, murdered James the son of Zebedee. And now we have Paul standing trial before King Agrippa II.

So this is not a family that you mess with. And the circumstance is public. They are in a public hall where they have all these government officials, and they have all these military commanders lining the hall, and everybody is there to hear what's going on.

And Festus and Agrippa enter in dressed in pomp and circumstance, all the pageantry of it. They are showing that they are the ones in power. They come in with purple gowns, wearing golden crowns, and Paul comes in wearing chains and all the scars of his many years of ministry.

So what we're dealing with here is a little bit of a David and Goliath situation. It is hard to imagine a more stark imbalance of power than Paul standing before King Agrippa.

[ 4 : 38 ] And Paul begins in verse 2. He sets the tone. I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, that I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews.

Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently. Isn't that wonderful? I love this. Paul's amazing. Paul's a pretty savvy guy. Here, he does a couple of things that are quite astonishing.

He starts in a really humble and courteous way. He's honoring Agrippa's authority, and yet he is bold and fearless. He says, Agrippa, please listen patiently to this. And Paul goes on to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

And he does this in three ways. He makes his defense in three parts. And the first part is he tells Agrippa about who he was before Jesus. In other words, his pre-conversion life.

And this is verses 4 to 11. They're all about Paul's Jewish upbringing, Jewish religion, and Jewish hopes. If you look at verse 4 with me, for example, Paul says, Agrippa, my manner of life from youth, spent from the beginning, among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews.

[ 5 : 59 ] So he basically says to the king, all the Jews in this room watched me grow up. They know how I lived. And they know, he goes on in verse 5, that I was a part of the strictest part of the Jewish religion.

I was a Pharisee. They were the people that were the most serious about being devout and religious and listening to the law of God and doing it. And all the Jews here know that I was a Pharisee.

And then he goes on in verses 6 to 8 and says, And everybody here knows that I hold on to the same hope that the Jewish scriptures have. All 12 tribes have this one hope of what God promised he was going to do for his people going all the way back to Abraham.

And I cling to that same hope. And then he goes on, if you look all the way at verse 9 and following, he says, I was actually such a devout Jew that I was persecuting the Christians in the early days.

I didn't like Jesus, and I didn't like anybody that was against Jesus. Can you guys hear me okay? Or did I just go out? We're good. Great. And so basically, Paul is laying before them, before Agrippa.

[ 7 : 08 ] He's saying, Look, all the Jewish people are accusing me because they think I'm against them. But Agrippa, I want you to know that that's not true. Which means that's not the real issue.

I'm Jewish in every way you could possibly imagine. My birth, my upbringing, my education, my religious devotion, my hopes, my beliefs. I even persecuted the Christians in obedience to Jewish authorities.

And so the real issue in my trial is not my Jewishness. I'm not against the Jews. And just because I'm now a servant of Jesus and an apostle of the Gentiles, it doesn't make me any less Jewish.

It just means that I think all the promises in the Jewish scriptures and everything that the Jewish people were hoping for has been fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

And that's why he says in verse 8, Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? So the first part of Paul's defense is about his pre-conversion, his pre-Jesus life.

[ 8 : 15 ] And he says, I was devout, I was thoroughly Jewish, I was very sincere, but I was very sincerely wrong. And it shows us that it's possible to be very zealous and very well-intentioned and very religious and still very misguided.

So that's verses 4 through 11. And then Paul transitions to the second part of his defense before Agrippa. In verses 12 to 18, he talks about what happens when he encounters Jesus.

He talks about his conversion, how he met Jesus, how Jesus changed the whole trajectory of his life. He says in verse 13, I was on the way to Damascus to persecute some more Christians, and I saw a light in the skies that was brighter than the sun.

And that, and a voice emerged out of that light and said, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And I said, who are you, Lord? And he said, it is me, Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

And Paul goes on to say, not only did he encounter Jesus on the road that day in a way that he could not deny, but that Jesus gave him a mission that he could not forsake.

[ 9 : 26 ] He said, Saul, just as I am opening your eyes by the light of my presence and glory, I'm going to send you to the Gentiles, to everybody who's not Jewish, so that you can be a part of opening their eyes to the light of my glory as well.

Isn't that a marvelous thing? I love that this is the way that Jesus works. He does for us what he wants us to be a part of doing for others. He opens our eyes to the realities that he wants us to help open other people's eyes to.

In 1980, there was an investigative journalist and legal editor for the Chicago Tribune. His name was Lee Strobel. Anybody heard of that name before?

And at this moment in his time, in his life, he was an atheist, and he was shocked in 1980 when his wife told him that she had become a Christian, and her newfound Christian faith stunned him.

So he went, he set out as a journalist to investigate the claims of Christianity because he wanted to show her that they weren't really true and worth believing in. And after two years of investigating the claims of Christianity, he actually himself became convinced.

[10:42] And then out of that, he wrote a book called *The Case for Christ*, seeking to convince others who are skeptical in the same way that he is, of the truthfulness of the claims of Christ.

And he has this wonderful way in which he describes his conversion. He says, one day I sat down and realized that in light of the avalanche of evidence that points so powerfully to the truth of Christianity, it would have taken more faith to maintain my atheism than to become a Christian, than to, than to become a Christian at that point.

So he's basically saying he had a little bit of a Paul Damascus road experience over the course of two years. He encountered the truth of who Jesus is.

And that truth was so powerful and so transformative that it would have actually taken more faith for him to deny that truth and remain an atheist than for him to bow before that truth and rejoice that Jesus is alive and he is Lord.

And so this leads us to the third part of Paul's defense. The first part is Paul's pre-Jesus life. The second part is his encounter with Jesus. And the third part is the difference that Jesus makes in his life.

[12:05] If you look at verse 19 with me. Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. In other words, King Agrippa, I listened to God.

But declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea and also to the Gentiles, notice how he's following Jesus' geographical promise.

You'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth. Paul's echoing it.

He's saying, I have the same mission that Jesus gave the original disciples. And he says that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with repentance.

So the irony here is that Paul's obedience to the Lord's mission, he is saying, is the reason why his fellow Jews are against him. Because he has seen God, he has heard God, and he cannot but obey and love and follow God.

So that's Paul's story. That's the defense, his personal testimony that he tells in public court. And interestingly, it's the third time that we get the story of Paul's testimony in the book of Acts.

[13:22] It's repeated three times by Luke, and the question is, why? What is it about Paul's conversion story that is important for us? What is it about the way in which the Lord worked in Paul's life that Luke wants us to pay attention to that may have resonances with our own life?

So I just want to spend the next, say, ten minutes or so just unpacking three reasons. Three reasons why I think this passage is significant for us. There's probably a million more, but let's go with three.

The first is this. I think Luke records this trial in Paul's defense to show us that the gospel moves forward in mysterious ways. So I think here Luke is reminding us that there is a gospel shape to gospel ministry, and it's shaped like the cross of Jesus.

In other words, Jesus, do you remember Jesus? He healed people, and he cast out demons, and he taught with authority, and yet Jesus ended up getting spat on and scourged and sentenced to death on a cross.

And yet it was precisely when he was dying on the cross, he seemed to be rejected by the world, that he was accomplishing his purposes to save the world. And so the gospel goes forward in mysterious ways through the death of the Savior.

[14:38] And here we have Paul. He's healed people. He's cast out demons. He's taught with authority. And yet Paul has been arrested and accused and incarcerated, and he's on trial number four, and he's about to be shipped to Caesar.

His imprisonment seems like it's going to stop the ministry that God has given him. But in fact, it's the very means through which God is working to fulfill his purposes for Paul and through Paul.

Paul. Jesus once said to his disciples, a servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you, said Jesus.

So, somebody told me after the 730 service a great quote. He said, the gospel advances through one defeat after another. And that's what we're seeing here. The gospel moves forward through trials, through misunderstandings, through political maneuverings, through weakness, and through resistance.

Not through bold, flashy displays of power, but as humble, gentle, courageous, faithful servants of Jesus. Simply share the hope that they have in Jesus and how Jesus has made a difference in their lives.

[15:53] So the gospel moves forward in mysterious ways. And the second thing that I think Luke wants us to pick up on from this defense of Paul is to show us that, to show us a way in which we can share the gospel publicly.

So Paul told his disciples, he said, there will come a day when you have to stand before governors and kings and they will ask you, why do you believe in this Jesus person?

And you'll have to tell them why. And Jesus said, don't be afraid on that day. Don't worry. Don't be anxious on that day. I'm going to give you what you need to say before those kings and governors. It's not just going to be your words. The Holy Spirit is going to give you what you need. And that's what we see at work here in Paul. And that's what God wants to do in any of us. Now for many of us, we cannot imagine sharing the gospel with our co-worker or our fellow student or our neighbor, let alone standing before governors and kings.

But God does not want us to be afraid because he has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity but of power and love and self-control. And so the question is, how do we share our faith publicly when the Lord gives us those opportunities?

[17:06] And Paul's example here is not the only way to do it. We have to be sensitive to circumstance and culture. But Paul's way is one helpful way to think about it. So Paul gives us four steps to sharing your testimony.

Number one, this is what my life was like before Jesus. That simple. Number two, this is how I encountered Jesus. This is how he revealed himself to me and brought me to a living faith in him. Number three, this is what my life is like now because of Jesus. This is how he's changed me. This is what he's doing. Yeah, it's an unfinished work but my goodness am I different because of him. And number four, do you believe this too? And that's what Paul says before Agrippa. Did you notice that he's standing before the king and I love how Ryan put it.

He's standing before the king and he is not concerned with defending himself. And he looks the king in the face in front of governors and military officials and all the pomp and circumstance and he says, do you believe all that the prophets have said have come true in the Lord Jesus Christ?

[18:16] Now Agrippa evades the question but Paul wants him to experience what he himself has experienced. He wants to share what he has discovered in the Lord Jesus.

So the first thing that I think Paul wants us to see is that the gospel moves forward in mysterious ways. The second thing is to show us a way in which we can consider how we share the gospel publicly.

And the third thing is I think Luke wants to show us how the gospel builds resilience in our lives. Resilience. That's a tricky word. I think in the West, I'm just going to speak for the West because that's my experience.

I think one of the biggest things our current generations of Christians are experiencing is a struggle with resilience. Resilient faith and resilient ministry.

And I think those are two of the things that we most need in the church right now. Helping our young children or our youth grow up to build resilient faith and helping leaders all throughout the church and our ministers grow in resilient ministry.

[19:32] I was listening to a podcast this last week by a woman who is a dean of students at like a youth and young adults ministry college in Australia. and the podcast was why do young people leave the church and what do we need to change in order to help that?

And she shared a stunning stat in this podcast that said in Australia some 70% of kids and youth leave the church from ages 10 to 25.

And she talked about the need to build resilience. And she talked about two particular places, two particular age ranges that were key. She said there's the 10 to 12 age range.

And that is really key because that's the point where we found a lot of kids we interviewed they started having doubts about the truth of what they had been taught growing up and they wanted to investigate is what I taught really true and do I really believe it?

So is there space for me to wrestle with my doubts to ask my questions and to explore the truth of Jesus for myself? And that was a key pivotal moment of building resilience and faith.

[ 20 : 39 ] And the other age gap that was the most significant point was ages 16 to 18. And that was significant because they said oh I'm getting more autonomy now.

I have more power to kind of make my own decisions on what I want to do with my life. But at the same time there's a lot of competing claims on my life. There's a lot of things clamoring for my attention and a lot of different things I could prioritize in life.

and it's really easy to prioritize a whole bunch of other things over my faith and over the community of faith. And so that was another point where there needed to be a development of resilience and perseverance in faith.

faith. I also was reading a book this week where this applies to pastors as well. It's not just children and youth but pastors. Did you know that 25% of pastors who are active in ministry right now are actively considering leaving ministry right now?

That's one in four people. Luckily there's only two of us. So there's not enough of us here for that stat to apply. At least not yet. But that's really significant and it raises the question not only how do we build resilient faith as we grow up into adulthood but what does it take to have a fruitful faithful resilient ministry over the long haul?

[ 22 : 00 ] And I'm sure this was a question that Paul probably was asking himself by the time he was in jail for multiple years and had been stoned multiple times and had been on trial for things that he did not do.

And I think one of the reasons Luke gives us all these details about Paul's trials at the end of Acts is to show us a very particular aspect of the gospel that helps build resilience in us when things are difficult.

it's a common thread that goes through all Paul's trials when he gives his defense. Paul says he is on trial because of his hope in the resurrection.

The resurrection is the source of Paul's hope and he says that is the real reason I'm on trial. Look at verse 6 with me. He says I now stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers to which our 12 tribes so all of Israel hope to attain as they earnestly worship day and night and for this hope I am accused by Jews O king.

And then in verse 8 he connects this hope to the resurrection. Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? So for Paul in his public defense he is not fixated on the evidence against him or on the laws or how he's going to be judged.

[ 23 : 34 ] He's fixated on hope because for him the fact that Jesus has risen from the dead has changed the ball game in the universe. It has taken the sting out of death.

It has bound the power of Satan and it's canceled the debt of sin that is held against us. And because Jesus has risen from the dead Paul goes on to say in verse 18 or Jesus tells him to say in verse 18 that he can go to anyone and he can tell anyone that they can turn from the darkness that they've been living into the light of Jesus that they can turn from the power of Satan to the power of God and if they do that they will receive the forgiveness of sins and they will receive a place among those who are being set apart and made holy by faith in Jesus.

In other words if you turn to Jesus your life will pulsate with a living hope because your past is cleansed and your future is secure and your present is in the hands of God.

And Paul I think for Paul this is what builds resilience. resilience. It's not just knowing the right answers to life. It's not just being disciplined about what you're doing in life. It's not these sorts of things.

It's having a living experience of the living Lord Jesus in your life. Animating all that you are about. Reassuring you in the midst of trial.

[ 25 : 11 ] And giving you a deep purpose no matter what is going on around you. it's this encounter with the living Lord Jesus that builds resilience in Paul. And I wonder if for some of us here tonight we're feeling really thin on the resilience marker.

We've gotten to trial four and we're not sure if we can make it any further. And I think what the Lord Jesus wants to do is he wants to reveal himself to us and say I am alive I am sovereign I am reigning over your life.

You can hope in me. I will do a work that is far greater than anything you can ask or imagine. So that's part of the power and dynamism of Acts chapter 26.

Paul is on trial and Luke records it in great detail his personal testimony in a public court because he wants us to know that the gospel goes forward in mysterious ways.

He wants us to know that we can share the gospel too like Paul. And he wants us to know that the gospel will build resilience in our lives because the Lord Jesus is alive and he is the solid rock on which we stand.

[ 26 : 19 ] Brothers and sisters I speak these things to you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.