

Acts 26

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[0:00] the stage real quick so that you can get caught up and maybe frustrated as well, along with everyone else. When Paul returned to Jerusalem from his missionary journeys, his opponents falsely accused him of treason, both against the Jewish state and against the Roman laws. So he's tried first in the court of public opinion before a mob in Acts chapter 22.

He's then tried before the Jewish council in Acts chapter 23. After a plot to assassinate him is uncovered, he's moved to Caesarea to be tried by the Roman governor Felix in Acts chapter 24.

Felix finds nothing worth punishing in him, but he's hoping to get a bribe from Paul, so he keeps him in prison for two years. But after those two years, Felix is recalled to Rome and is replaced by a new governor, Festus, who in Acts chapter 25 examines Paul.

Festus found Paul innocent in the Roman system, but he has no knowledge of the Hebrew system, and so he doesn't know how to deal with that one way or the other, those religious charges.

So we're in a quandary here, and to get the ball rolling, Paul appeals to Caesar for justice. He's been in prison for two years. Caesar's kind of like the Supreme Court in the ancient Roman world, and so he can get a hearing with him and finally get his case disposed. But Festus can't just send a prisoner to Caesar without any indication of why the prisoner is coming to him, and since he's not guilty of anything in the Roman system, he has to give him some sort of religious charge in the local laws. But again, he doesn't know what to do with that. And so he brings in Agrippa, and that's where we've come. We've already heard Paul defend himself a few times now. Why another? And we're not just slogging through another repetition of the same thing over and over again. Today, this passage is kind of a climax of sorts. You see, Paul defended himself often, but he's never been able to defend himself fully. Every other time he's defended himself, someone else has set the agenda. Someone else either directed the flow of the conversation, they interrupted, or they otherwise ran the conversation.

[2:28] Paul had never got a chance to make his full defense until now. Have you ever had something important to say in a conversation, but you just can't get it in there? You're bringing it up, you're leading up to it, and then someone interrupts or changes the topic, or a crowd walks into the room and completely just tramples over your conversation? That's what's been happening to Paul. He keeps getting interrupted. The crowd shouted him down in Acts chapter 22 before he could get to his core message. In Acts chapter 23, the council gets off into a religious debate before they ever get to hear what he has to say. They're arguing about the resurrection before he can invite them into the resurrection life with Christ. His defense before Felix keeps him busy against the Roman charges, but never gets to the reason that he's actually there. So he's been able to defend himself against the accusations, mob justice, but he's been continually blocked and barricaded from doing the thing he's actually in Israel to do. To call dying people to a living Savior. And with that in mind, he begins his address in verse 1. So Agrippa said to Paul, you have permission to speak for yourself. Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense. 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, especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently. So who is this Agrippa? And why is Paul happy to talk to him? This is Herod Agrippa II.

Now if the name Herod sounds familiar to you, you're not far off. He's the grandson of Herod the Great from Jesus' birth narrative. Not an altogether lovable man, if you'll recall from that account.

The Herod family were puppet kings instated by the Roman government to kind of placate the Jewish people. They appointed the high priests and were generally involved with keeping the populace calm through the religious control of the religious leaders. And as such, they were actually quite knowledgeable of the Jewish religion. And so he's a very capable person to hear Paul's religious defense. He represents both the Jews and the Romans. And so kind of he is the world leader in the sense here. And so that's why Paul says he's fortunate to defend himself before Agrippa. He already has the background to know whether or not Paul is teaching against Jewish law. And unbeknownst to Agrippa, it also serves as the launch pad for Paul's real mission to invite him to join him with the resurrected Savior. That's his purpose. So Paul continues in verse 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. 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. And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our 12 tribes hope to attain as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope, I am accused by the Jews, O King. Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? Paul was a Jew. He was the strictest kind of Jew.

And his belief in Christ's resurrection was in line with exactly those strict beliefs. But the other Orthodox Jews were saying that he's going off the rails. And his reply is, I'm the only one still on the rails. Why would anyone be surprised when the God who spoke the universe into being, who rules the nations, parted the seas, raised his son from the dead? Especially when that's exactly what he promised to do. What was inconceivable for Paul was that the Jews who so fervently prayed for God's fulfillment of the promises would accuse him of being faithless when he's the one who believed those promises.

[7:04] The Jews believed in the resurrection, fervently hoped for it, but then rejected Paul's conviction that it had begun in Christ. And don't we hope for resurrection as a society? Even if we don't give voice to that hope. We don't talk about it, but we show that it's on our mind all the time.

We have shrines to vitality in our spas and our gyms. We eat foods with antioxidants. We've created the heaven of retirement. We've removed death from our sight by sending people to die in hospices out of sight. We don't even say someone died anymore. We have all sorts of other words and phrases that we like to use instead. These all reveal just how much we hate death. We love life and long for resurrection.

But it's not always by distancing ourselves from it. That's what we do. Some cultures think the ancient Egyptians spend lots of energy on solving death. They build great monuments and incredible religious systems to avert death, to conquer it through their incantations. Whether we ignore it or can't stop thinking about it, either way, the hope of every human culture at every time is that immortality, is the hope of resurrection. It is in our hearts. We long for it. And what Paul is saying here amounts to this. The God of Israel has promised that he would defeat death. And now he has done it in Christ.

So how can I be the faithless one for celebrating that? That's not how Paul's life started out.

Read with me in verse 9. I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 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.

[9:18] 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.

So far from embracing the news that God had begun the resurrection from the dead in Christ Jesus, Paul originally hated him, hated his people. He spent his days trying to kill the young Christian movement. And Paul wasn't content to simply end his pursuit of Christ in Jerusalem.

He wanted to stamp out the name of Jesus from the face of the earth. And to that end, he traveled to foreign cities. But on one of these journeys, on a road to Damascus, it wasn't Jesus' name that was stamped out at all. It wasn't Christ's name that perished. It was Paul's. He explains in verse 12.

In this connection, I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 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. And when we had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Is it hard for you?

To kick against the goads. And I said, who are you, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 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, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes 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. Finally, Paul gets to say what he has been in Jerusalem and in Caesarea in prison for two years.

[11:36] This is what he came to say. Here's his message. He went to Damascus to stamp out Christ's name. But Jesus' name wasn't eradicated in Damascus. Paul's was. He traveled to foreign cities with his original name, Saul, to stamp out the name of Christ from the world. He left still traveling to foreign cities, but with the name Paul. And now to proclaim the name of Christ to the whole world.

He had hoped in the resurrection, and now he had seen the blinding glory, physically blinding glory of the resurrected Christ. And it was that light that he would spread to the whole world. The hope of the resurrection was for everyone who longed for life, real life, life that is renewed, life that lasts. And we see that hope alive and well today in our society. The answer to that life is not found in spas or gyms or antioxidants. It's found in Jesus Christ himself. In the words of verse 18, Paul had his own eyes opened to see that Jesus was the great hope promised in God's prophets. He had turned the darkness, or excuse me, Paul had turned from the darkness of Satan's plan, making war against God, into the light of God's presence. One who said, let there be light, and I am the light of the world.

He received forgiveness for his murderous sins and became holy through his faith in Christ. Paul is telling Agrippa, I went to Damascus to destroy the name of Jesus. Instead, my old life, my old prominent position, my old war against Christians, even my old name Saul, that's what was destroyed. I have a new name, a new life, a new mission. And what is Paul's new mission?

It's to proclaim this message of the risen Lord, to deliver new realities to anyone who will hear. First, to open people's eyes, verse 18, to the beauty of the Lord, to show them that he alone is the hope for new life, for lasting life, for life lived with real purpose. To tell them, secondly, to turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, only when God opens our eyes to see that Jesus is Lord, that he is beautiful, that he is worth living for, will we be able to turn away from our darkened ways towards God? When we live on our own path, we won't, we don't have the light of the resurrection life. Only when we're living to God does this light and life shine on our path.

So, if you're not a Christian today, you need to live to God for that to happen. There is no other way. And if you are a Christian today, but you're walking on a darkened path that is one away from him, you will not be experiencing his resurrection life until you return to him.

[15:09] Third thing we see in verse 18. The third new reality is that the power of sin might be completely broken in us. If you read carefully, you'll see that there are two things going on. First, that they may receive forgiveness of sins. God is completely and forever undoing the guilt of sin in those who enter into Christ's resurrection life. And secondly, a place among those who are being sanctified by faith in me. That resurrection life is a life where the power of sin no longer reigns.

I want to pause here and point out something very important from verse 14. When Jesus first spoke to Paul in verse 14, he asked a very interesting question. He said, why are you persecuting me? Paul was hurting Christians, not Christ himself. So what's going on there?

When Jesus makes you his, he identifies himself so closely with you that an attack on you is an attack on him. The metaphor the Bible often uses is one of marriage. Jesus is the groom, the church is bride, and he has wedded our fortunes together. We have his unimaginable love and riches. He has our suffering.

This means that if you're suffering today and you're a Christian, no matter what's going on and how alone you feel, you're not alone. Your sufferings are his sufferings. His tears fall next to yours.

And the redemption he is working in this world, he is going to work in you. That's the only way Paul could waste away for two years and still give this defense happily before Agrippa.

[17:23] Christian, your sufferings do not belong to you alone. They belong to Christ. Christ. Now, this isn't the main point of Paul's speech here. So we do have to move on. But if you need to hear more of this message, if this has struck a chord with you, if you're a Christian who needs more of that particular light today, or if you're not a Christian and this message is drawing you towards a God who cares enough to walk alongside you, talk to me, one of the other pastors here at Trinity, so we can explore it with you. I don't want to move on before we've said that.

But then again, that is not Paul's main thrust here today. So we are going to move to verse 19. Verse 19.

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. 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.

If you're not familiar with Christian lingo, you might not know what we mean when we say the word testimony. Typically, when we say the word testimony, we're referring to someone's story of their old life, how they came to meet Christ, and what their new life is after they've met Christ.

So it follows a pattern of, this is how I was, this is how I came to know Jesus, and this is my life now. Often, it ends with, and now life's great.

[19:41] I once heard a song that characterized it this way, saying, And now I'm sunny with a high of 75, since you took my heavy heart and made it light.

Now, there's quite a bit of truth to that lyric. Christ radically transforms our lives, so we can look at everyday situations and see joy. But, anyone who's been a Christian for more than an hour knows that that's not all our life is.

Sunny with a high of 75 is a nice sentiment, but it's our future hope. It's not always our present experience. And Paul's testimony doesn't end with, and now my life is so great.

Here's what he says. He says, Here's what I was like. Zealous for the Bible, and zealous to persecute Christians. Then he moves to how he met Jesus. Stopped in his tracks.

But he doesn't focus the end of his testimony story on, now everything's great. He focuses on, Now I obey.

[20:54] He concludes his testimony, not with how great his life is, but how he has turned from his old life, that is repentance, and lives in line with God's will.

That's obedience. Paul's resurrection life is a life of resurrection obedience. And Paul's message wasn't just about his own obedience.

It has impacts for us, because it requires us to live a life, everyone to live a life, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. That's how he says it.

So how do you know if you're a faithful Christian or not? Not because you call yourself one, or because you show up at church. We all know words are cheap. It's no special thing, doesn't take resurrection life to arrive here on a Sunday morning.

We know we're Christians when our lives are changed and we obey Christ. One pastor put it this way, one of the first marks of our conversion is that we obey Jesus Christ.

[22:03] Are you obeying Jesus? Jesus said, why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say? And I love how he puts it this way.

People who have heard the voice of Jesus Christ, just do not ignore it. We receive today the voice of Jesus Christ through Paul and his testimony.

Will you hear it? Or will you ignore it? The two men in front of Paul hear it and respond in two different ways.

Verse 24. 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. But Paul said, I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. Festus here interrupts Paul to tell him how crazy this all sounds.

[23:10] He's actually doing two things here, probably. First, he's rejecting the gospel. He's saying, you're insane, this makes no sense, I want no part of it. And that's absolutely part of his philosophy, but he's also probably doing something else too.

He's giving Paul an out. It would be truly crazy for Festus to send a madman to Caesar and waste Caesar's time like that.

That would be political suicide. So, if Paul is crazy, he can get rid of this problem altogether and just put him away. But Paul doesn't take the out.

He could be done, but he doesn't. He's concerned about someone else and their reaction to the message. Verse 26. He turns away from Festus and towards Agrippa and he says, for the king, that is Agrippa, 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. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets?

[24:25] I know that you believe. And Agrippa said to Paul, in a short time, would you persuade me to be a Christian? 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. What's interesting to note here is that Paul has stopped defending himself. He has turned the tables and he has put Agrippa on trial.

While Festus thinks the idea of resurrection is insane, Agrippa, familiar with God's promises to Israel and well aware of what Jesus did all over Israel, couldn't escape this conclusion.

Jesus had perfectly fulfilled all of God's prophecies, centuries of them, in his ministry. and finally, in Jerusalem, he had defeated death for all mankind.

But, believing that the resurrection happened is not enough. Agrippa heard these things and may have believed them.

[25:41] He didn't even try to refute them. But instead of repenting and turning towards God, he dodged the question with a question of his own. In a short time, would you persuade me to be a Christian?

He said. It's not enough to believe that Christianity is true. You can go through your whole life believing it's true and that Jesus is risen from the dead.

But if you, in verse 20, don't repent, turn to God, performing deeds, keeping with your repentance, you have no part with Christ.

If that's you today, if you know Christ is risen, I'm so scared for you. If you know Christ is risen, but you haven't repented, haven't turned towards God, aren't living a life of resurrection obedience, you are at the same crossroads as Agrippa.

God has set, he has set before you life and death. Blessing and curse, therefore, choose life.

[27:05] This was me, personally, for many years. I grew up in a Christian home. I believed that Christianity was true, that Christ was risen from the dead, that he was the Lord, that he was coming back again.

I believed that he offered life to all who would come to him, turn from themselves, turn towards him. And I didn't want to.

I wanted to live for me. In his great grace, he was patient with me. He kept me breathing until a day when he had finally softened my heart enough that I could repent.

I had the time. Will you? Paul is on trial for his life.

Festus gives him an out. Not guilty by reason of insanity, basically. But Paul is concerned with someone else. It's not his own life that concerns him.

[28:24] It's Agrippa's soul that he cares about. He throws his chance at freedom away to pursue Agrippa's heart.

He puts his life on the line to obey Christ's instruction in verse 18 to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God so that they may have resurrection life in Christ.

And the crazy thing here is here, Paul didn't like Agrippa. This wasn't oh, I'll do a favor for my buddy, I'll stick my neck out for a loved one. No, no, anything but.

Agrippa, again, he's the puppet king. He's run by the Roman government. He was a pretender to the throne of Israel and an offense to people like Paul who were zealous for the Jewish religion.

It would be like if Russia invaded the United States, Vladimir Putin installed an ex-KGB agent as our president and then he had a dynasty of presidents who persecuted Americans generation after generation.

[29 : 42] That's basically the Herod dynasty. We wouldn't think too kindly of that man standing in the shoes of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln carving his face onto Mount Rushmore.

And that's the man for whom Paul is throwing away his chance at freedom. It didn't matter to Paul that Agrippa was a pretender king.

It didn't matter to Paul that he was a puppet of the Roman government. What mattered to Paul was this. Agrippa was a man who needed his eyes opened, who needed to turn from darkness to light, who needed to turn from Satan to God, who needed to receive forgiveness of sins, who needed resurrection life.

Agrippa's soul was worth more to Paul than Paul's life was. And your soul is just as important.

It's just as precious. And I'm not risking my life here today. but I am pleading with you. Be reconciled to God.

[30 : 53] It is more important. It is more important than life and death. And if you belong to Christ today, I wonder, would you do the same as Paul?

Paul, resurrection obedience is first obedience to report the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Will we risk doing uncomfortable things to share the gospel with people we don't naturally like? or will we let that get in the way of our resurrection obedience?

Now, if you don't yet belong to Christ, you're probably asking a question much like Agrippa's. How can we believe Paul's testimony?

How do we know it's true? Resurrection from the dead is, as Festus said, insanity. There are two kinds of witnesses that I tend to believe.

[32 : 11] First, I believe something when I see its effects. We see the effects of Christ's resurrection in Paul's life. He threw away all of his prestige, everything he had.

He counted loss. He was in prison for two years just to make this speech. I think it's fair to say there was a dramatic effect of Christ's resurrection in his life.

And second, I believe witnesses whose throats are slit for their testimony. We don't read about it here, but Paul, like most of the other apostles, was martyred for their testimony to Jesus Christ.

If you're willing to tell a message that brings you nothing but pain, I'm inclined to believe you. But not Agrippa.

We read in verse 30, Then the king rose, and the governor, and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them. And when they had withdrawn, and they said to one another, this man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.

[33 : 24] And Agrippa said to Festus, this man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar. Instead of answering Paul, Agrippa stands up and walks away.

He declared Paul innocent, but the tragedy is that he didn't take the time to render judgment on himself. He heard the message of Christ, he knew its truth, and he avoided its implications for himself.

And as a result, he was in a far worse position than Paul was sitting in prison in chains.

If you're not a Christian today, I plead with you. I plead with you. Do not stand with Agrippa any longer. Agrippa. And if you're a Christian, I plead with you.

Don't be comfortable when others around you stand with Agrippa. The only safe place to stand is with Christ.

[34 : 42] Will you pray with me? Father in heaven, you have given us access to your life, resurrection life in us.

I pray that anyone here who has not heeded Paul's words, would turn to you.

From darkness to life, from themselves to you. And Lord, I pray that they would not stand with Agrippa, even if it feels comfortable, it is a crossroads, slowly succumbing to a flood that will drown them.

Lord, I pray for those of us who do know you, who do have your resurrection life. Lord, that we would be men and women of resurrection obedience, and that we would not pass Agrippa by, but seek him out, risk ourselves, to draw others into your resurrection life and resurrection obedience.

We pray these things in Jesus Christ's name, and for the sake of his glory, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[36 : 38] Would you stand and sing with me? Amen.