



“Testifying Both to Small and Great”

Series: Acts -- Worldwide Witness to the Worth of Jesus Christ

Acts 25-26

October 12, 2014

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The last we saw of Paul, he was seemingly languishing in Caesarea. Felix, the governor, had failed to rule in his case seeking a bribe, the Jewish church had abandoned him offering no support, and the unbelieving Jews still wanted Paul dead. From a human perspective it was quite the mess. His life seems to have been put “on hold” for two years. Two years he has been confined in prison. Two years he has been kept from traveling to and teaching the churches that he helped to establish. Two years were seemingly wasted because of the self-seeking, greedy, gutless actions of men. But God will bring great fruit out of these frustrations and seeming failures in this text that we are looking at this morning. Let’s look at chapter 25 as it sets the stage for the rest of the story.

“Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. “So,” said he, “let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him.”” (Acts 25:1–5, ESV) Festus, in comparison to Felix, was quite an upgrade as a governor of Judea. Felix had not merely rotated out of office as governor; he had been replaced by Rome. In spite of his cruel and barbaric attempts to keep the people of Judea in their place – and you remember that I told you last week that he was infamous for crucifying anyone who he viewed as a troublemaker – the region of Judea had become increasingly politically unstable. His failure to deal with the unrest surrounding Paul, in addition to his ham-fisted rulership, his greed, and his rampant immorality, had made him a political liability in the eyes of Rome and so Festus was appointed by the emperor to replace him.

In contrast to Felix, Festus was generally upright man, a strict but generally fair ruler and he was a man of action. Nearly immediately after arriving at his post in Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem to get a grasp on the situation there and to investigate the reasons that Felix had been recalled to Rome. Hoping to take advantage of Festus' inexperience, the principal men of the Jews – that is, the Sanhedrin – took the opportunity to renew their case against Paul and making the request to have Paul relocated to Jerusalem so they could kill him on his way.

Well, Festus may have been new to Jerusalem, but he wasn't new to the game. He understood what it would mean if he granted the Jews what they wanted – they would be calling the shots from this day forward, they would be the de facto rulers and not him and so he informs them that if they wanted to bring charges against Paul, they would be welcome to come to Caesarea and do so.

Before we move on and look at the rest of the story, I want you to think about the depth of hatred of these men for Paul. It really is astounding. Two years had passed since Felix had remanded Paul into protective custody, two years in which Paul had not been permitted to go to Jerusalem, two years in which he had not been permitted to preach the gospel in a public arena, and still they are seething with animosity toward him. They can think of nothing but watching him die. They could not rest while he was alive. His life was a continual reproach to them. Every breath he took was a personal offense. It is terrifying picture the sinfulness of sin, the power and mastery of sin, the corrupting influence of sin left unchecked in the human soul. Here were these religious leaders consumed with hatred for 2 years and plotting the murder of Paul. They would have told you that they served God, would have told you that these were unusual circumstances requiring them to break any number of the 10 commandments just this one time in order to take care of Paul – it was the only way. They were doing the Lord's work, after all. How easy it is for religious people to act in ungodly ways and then claim God's authority for their disobedience.

When men or women fiercely refuse to submit to God's word, to His truth; when the light of the truth exposes the sin in their hearts, exposes their sinful thoughts and actions and motives, the stubborn will refuse to deal with it properly by repenting and humbling themselves before God's Word, but will instead make excuses in order to try to ignore the truth staring them in the face. They will try to stuff it down or silence its conviction so they can continue to live as they please. But that avoidance can only work so long. Eventually, they can't ignore it and so they have to do everything they can to eliminate it. That's why we see these religious men

trying to kill Paul, to silence his voice and if they cannot murder him they will slander him with false accusations and lies in Caesarea in order to try to placate their consciences and justify their rebelliousness to the truth. It is an age-worn habit of fallen men and women and it needs to be a lesson to us that rejection of God's truth, that refusal to submit to God's word does not end well for anyone and let us be careful to continue to cultivate a heart that is sensitive to the truth of Christ. Having refused their request to extradite Paul to Jerusalem, we read next of Festus:

"After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove." (Acts 25:6–7, ESV) Festus took his time getting back to Caesarea, probably trying to familiarize himself with the political atmosphere in Jerusalem, as well as to gather whatever details on the case that he might. Having called the hearing to order on the day after his return and the Jews having followed him to Caesarea, Luke gives us the sense of what happened and it doesn't look pretty at all. The sense we get is that things got out of hand a little. Like a pack of wolves they surround Paul unleashing their hostility and flinging all sorts of accusations against him – presumably the same ones they had made against him two years prior. And yet in two years, they had produced no more legitimate evidence, no more legitimate witnesses than they had before – which is to say that they had no case. They could prove nothing. Luke records Paul's response.

"Paul argued in his defense, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense."" (Acts 25:8, ESV) Paul categorically denies all of the charges made against him. He had not committed any offense – not as it had to do with the Law of Moses, not as it had to do with the temple, and not as it had to do with Caesar. You can see that the Jews are really groping for something – anything -- that they could hang on Paul, but there was simply nothing there. If Paul was "guilty" of anything, it was of doing what he exhorted the Philippians to do in his letter he wrote to them saying: "Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life..." (Philippians 2:14–16, ESV) That was the extent of Paul's guilt, holding fast to the word of life, and that put Festus in a difficult position, one he will describe later to King Agrippa. He realizes that this dispute is a personal one, rooted in the peculiar hatred of the Jews for Paul. He knows that the Jews have no case but he also knows

that he needs to do something to placate them and keep things from getting any worse and so, on the fly, he offers what he thinks is a suitable compromise.

“But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, (trying to keep the peace with them) said to Paul, “Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?” (The idea is that they will go up to Jerusalem to sort all of this out, giving the distinct advantage to the Jews, but trying to comfort Paul with the thought that he will ultimately decide his guilt or innocence, but Paul will have none of it.) But Paul said, “I am standing before Caesar’s tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar.” (Paul is bold here. Even though he is in chains, even though he is the accused, he calls upon Festus to do what is right according to his conscience and according to the Roman law. Do you see it? If Paul is guilty, he is willing to die. But he isn’t and if he cannot find justice with Festus, then he appeals to have his case heard before Caesar, which was his right as a natural-born citizen of Rome. Festus, unsure what to do, speaks with his advisors and then we read.) Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.”” (Acts 25:9–12, ESV) Now on the surface, this seems like a win for Festus. He gets Paul out of Judea and gets to avoid dealing with this situation by passing it off to Caesar, but as we will see in a moment, this also presents him with a dilemma. He has to give a compelling reason why he is sending Paul to Caesar and not handling the situation himself. But he really doesn’t understand what the issue is. No doubt, he was really racking his brain over the next couple of days trying to figure out what to do. By the providence of God, the answer would come (and the door for Paul to preach the gospel) would be opened in the person of Agrippa and Bernice.

“Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus.” (Acts 25:13, ESV) Agrippa was the brother of Drusilla, who we looked at last week. And with Drusilla, he came from the same sordid line of sinners – his grandfather was Herod the Great – the Herod who killed one of his wives, killed three of his sons, and had the infant baby boys of Bethlehem killed trying to kill the newborn Jesus. His uncle was the Herod who ordered the death of John the Baptist. And his dad was the Herod that killed James the Apostle and who was struck down in Acts chapter 12 and eaten by worms for his for his arrogance toward God. When his father met his untimely and horrific end, Agrippa was only 17 and so rather than becoming King over Judea, he was allowed to govern only the northern part of Palestine and was given control over the temple treasury and over the appointment of the

high priest to the temple, but the real governing was done by the prefects, like Felix and Festus, whom Rome appointed.

As for Bernice, she was not only Agrippa's lover; she was his sister. Periodically she would be married off or leave Agrippa for another man, most notably the Roman general, Titus, and then Titus' father, but she always came back to this incestuous relationship with Agrippa. Their relationship was just plain sick. But for Festus, their arrival seemed like a stroke of luck. Now he had a relative expert in the Jewish religion coming to pay his respects to him as the new governor and hopefully, from Festus' perspective, he could shed some light on the issues at hand and help him write a summary of the case for Caesar. Festus took the immediate opportunity to lay everything before Agrippa.

“And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, “There is a man left prisoner by Felix, and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him. So when they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought. When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. (Notice this. It would seem that when Festus went up to Jerusalem, the Jews there made it sound as if Paul were some sort of terrorist. No doubt, they spun their charges in a light that made Paul seem like an insurrectionist, like a rebel to Roman rule, but that is not the case they made when they came to Caesarea. He was expecting them to present evidence that Paul was a terrorist, but Festus says...) Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar.” Then Agrippa said to Festus, “I would like to hear the man myself.” “Tomorrow,” said he, “you will hear him.”” (Acts 25:14–22, ESV)

Festus was able to present things in such a way that Agrippa became interested and wanted to examine Paul for himself. Two things I want to mention here before we look at Paul's testimony. First, I want you to notice the incredible providence of God in all of this. From a

human standpoint, we might look at Paul's situation here and think that he was the victim of Jewish sin, of incompetent Roman leadership as it regarded the governors, and political maneuvering. But that would be shortsighted. God's stated purpose for Paul in Acts 9:15 was that he would be: "a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel." (Acts 9:15, ESV) In the text that follows next, he will address all three of these groups. And this purpose of God is being fulfilled, not through one event or one person alone, but through a number of people and events. In a way that if we were to add up all of the various working parts is much more complex than we could ever orchestrate, God by His sovereign providence, is orchestrating and using people and events to set the stage for Paul's thorough and direct proclamation of the gospel.

The second thing I want you to notice is Festus' words about the conflict between Paul and the Jews. He said: they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. The way that Festus says this gives us an insight into the way that he thinks about the claims of the resurrection of Christ. To Festus, all this arguing is really no big deal, just an argument over some guy who the Jews say is dead and Paul says is alive. In contrast to the charges that he was expecting to hear, this was nothing to get excited about, just an argument over religious opinions, some superstition. To him, Jesus was nothing to get excited about, just some religious teacher who went too far and whom Paul claimed was still alive. It wasn't anything to seriously consider. But what Festus thought was just some side issue was THE ISSUE, is THE ISSUE. It was the resurrection of Christ from the dead, the transformation this truth made in the life of Paul, and the proclamation of Christ as Savior of sinners and Lord of Life, risen from the dead, authenticated as God's Son by the resurrection, reigning in Heaven, and coming one day to judge the world that caused these Jews to hate Paul so much and want him dead. Festus missed what was of most importance, the real issue, and the resurrection of Christ. Paul would not allow either Festus or Agrippa or anyone who heard him to remain ignorant.

"So on the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. And Festus said, "King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. But I found that he had done nothing deserving death. And as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him. But I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have

something to write. For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him.”” (Acts 25:23–27, ESV) Just try to imagine this scene if you can. Agrippa and Bernice show up with great pomp, like when actors and Actresses show up on the red carpet for the Academy Awards. Agrippa and Bernice would have been wearing their purple royal robes, decked out with their golden crowns, Bernice with her matching royal jewelry, probably Agrippa with a royal scepter. Festus would have been wearing the scarlet cape reserved for official state dinners and such. The military tribunes in their dress uniforms, the prominent men of the city in all of their finery. They would have been quite the sight to see, but the word that Luke uses here is perfect. The word for “pomp” is the Greek word “phantasia,” from which we get the word “fantasy.” They thought themselves great, thought themselves impressive, wise, powerful, glorious – but it was all fantasy, all make believe.

In contrast, into the assembly comes Paul in a simple tunic – who knows the last time it had been washed, and in chains. Nothing much to look at. In fact, one of the few descriptions that we have of Paul is found in the apocryphal book, The Acts of Paul and Thecla, and it describes Paul in this way: “A man of small stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and a nose somewhat hooked; full of friendliness, for now he appeared like a man, and now he appeared as an angel.”

It seems like a complete mismatch doesn't it? This contrast brings to mind immediately the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians where he writes: “For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”” (1 Corinthians 1:26–31, ESV)

From an earthly perspective, it seems like a mismatch, Paul in chains on trial before the high and the mighty of this world. But make no mistake, beloved; it is not Paul who is on trial. They were on trial and the gospel would be their judge. Paul was a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, a redeemed and beloved child of the Living God. It was not he who was on trial here, not he who should fear the coming judgment. Despite all of their pomp and earthly glory, there would come a time when all of their imagined greatness would be overshadowed by the true

glory and majesty of Jesus Christ, when they would stand before the throne of God and give an account of their lives and an account for the words of the gospel that they would hear from Paul that day. As Paul begins his defense, understand this is not so much a defense that Paul offers but the testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He did not fear what these men before whom he was gathered could do to him but rather, as Christ had commanded his disciples: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matthew 10:28, ESV) What Paul says here is a masterpiece.

“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.” (Acts 26:1–3, ESV) Immediately Paul begins by acknowledging the truth – that Agrippa, more than anyone else, as the keeper of the temple treasury, as a man who appointed the high priests, as a man who knew the Jewish religion well – would understand exactly what the issue was after Paul explained it. He starts by describing his own life before Christ.

““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 twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” (Acts 26:4–8, ESV) Paul says simply, “I am on trial for being a faithful Jew. I am on trial for believing the Word of God given in the law and through the prophets. I am on trial for actually trusting what God promised in His Holy Word. The promise made by God to the Fathers was that God would send His Messiah to redeem His people and to establish His kingdom. The Jews are accusing me because I believe the God whom they claim to serve and I hold to the hope that the 12 tribes hope to attain and the very thing for which they claim to worship God – and what was at the very heart of that hope? The resurrection of the dead to life.

God had promised that He would defeat death, which is the consequence of sin, and create a kingdom of people delivered from the power of spiritual and physical death. He promised it through Isaiah saying: “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 25:6–8, ESV)

There are two parts to this resurrection – the general resurrection of all people which the prophet Daniel spoke of: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” (Daniel 12:2–3, ESV) To that we add the testimony of Ezekiel: “Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord.”” (Ezekiel 37:12–14, ESV) God promised a spiritual and physical resurrection from the dead, a kingdom of redeemed people, delivered by His Messiah from the power of sin and death.

This is what God had promised to the fathers, to Israel. Paul was on trial because he actually believed in the resurrection and in the eternal Kingdom of God. He was facing trial because unlike these Jews who only had a theoretical belief in the resurrection from the dead, he actually placed his hope in the promise, the power, the faithfulness and the love of God. He was on trial, not because he was a criminal or a revolutionary, but because he believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the promise of his own resurrection and the resurrection of every human being to eternal life – either to judgment or to eternal joy in the Kingdom of God. It is his opponents who had abandoned the faith – not him. If the belief in the resurrection from the dead was a fundamental belief of Judaism, how could he Jews condemn Paul for actually believing in it, for believing that God had raised His own Son from the dead, as the firstfruits of the resurrection to come?

The Jews may have believed in the resurrection in theory, but they refused to believe in it when it came to the resurrection of Jesus. To do so would demand they believe in Him, and confess and repent of their sin and guilt in rejecting Jesus. That is why Paul asks: Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? Paul knows full well what keeps people from believing the resurrection – stubborn unbelief. The same stubborn unbelief that once characterized him. Paul confesses what he had been. He says...

““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. 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.” (Acts 26:9–11, ESV) Because of his own stubborn unbelief in the resurrection, Paul had been driven and compelled to do all that he could to stamp out Christianity, to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth, who was followed by Christians as the risen messiah of Israel. He had been thorough and zealous in his pursuit and punishment of Christians, doing it under the authority and with the appreciation and favor of some of the very men who were now seeking his life.

““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 all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ Goads were sharp sticks that were used to force oxen to be compliant to the will of the cart-driver. Fastened to the front of the oxcart, whenever the ox would get ornery and kick against the commands of the driver, all they would do is injure themselves. The will of the driver was irresistible. That is true of the Lord Jesus Christ; He cannot successfully be opposed. Paul was overcome. And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.’” (Acts 26:12–15, ESV) This was the seminal moment in Paul’s life, the most decisive, life altering and destiny shaping moment in Paul’s life. He came face to face with the risen Christ and in an instant, everything about Paul’s life changed dramatically and eternally. This glorious, majestic, shining, powerful being speaks to him and says, “I am Jesus.” “I am Jesus!” Paul was shattered to the core. He who had been strong and mighty, was struck down, made weak and defenseless. The one who had been self-confident and self-righteous was made to question his entire existence and to realize the horrible error of his ways. The heavens opened above him. The ground of reality shifted below his feet. His entire life was undone. The resurrection of Christ changed everything.

Christ was alive, resurrected from the dead, and not just alive but ascended to the right hand of God, not just ascended but reigning, not just reigning as God, but is God! Saul's whole life was a lie. Everything he believed, everything he had done, all that he thought he had accomplished for God – all of it a sick, grotesque, twisted lie. All the while he had been rounding up Christians, persecuting them, killing them, he had been warring against God, acting as an enemy of God, thrusting the sword into the side of the One who so identifies with His people that every blow against them is a blow against the sovereign God.

Everything changed for Paul that day. The resurrection was not just theological truth; it was absolute reality, reality declared with power by Christ's resurrection from the dead, reality that validated all that Christ had said and done. The resurrection of Christ changed everything. The resurrection of Christ from the dead proved that Jesus is the Son of God, that God had accepted His sacrifice for human sin and that what He did on the cross satisfied God's holy justice. Jesus Christ took the sin of his people upon himself and bore the consequences of it in his own body on the tree, dying for sinners and having paid sin's penalty, rose from the dead and now lives. The resurrection declared Christ's victory over sin, death and Satan. His people have become a new creation and He is their Advocate who stands before God as the sin-scarred, eternal testament that God's justice has been fulfilled for all who trust in Him and that God can show grace and show mercy and show loving kindness and will never hold anything against the Christian's account. The resurrection is the death knell to all other religions, including Judaism that does not receive her Savior and resurrected Lord. All hope can only be found in Him. These are the things that Paul came to understand and for this reason he was given this commission from the risen Lord to declare the truth.

“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, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” (Acts 26:16–18, ESV) Christ appeared to Paul and appointed Paul a witness to Jesus' resurrection and gospel truth. He delivered him from the hand of his own people who sought his death and from the hands of the pagans who would oppose him so that he would be God's instrument to open their blinded eyes, to lead them to turn from spiritual darkness and ignorance, to lay hold of Christ by faith and be delivered from the soul-killing

power of Satan to the kingdom of peace and life with God, receiving the forgiveness of sins – all of them blotted out forever, and to receive a place with everyone else as a child of God who have been redeemed by faith in Jesus Christ – in his cross and resurrection. Then Paul says...

““Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision (How could he be? This vision was from heaven and it was overwhelming. Paul’s whole life was dominated by the gospel. The controlling passion of Paul’s life was the gospel of Christ and the glory of His resurrection from the dead. He was not disobedient to the vision but was master by it and he) declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.” (Acts 26:19–20, ESV) He called all men everywhere to turn to God through faith in Christ, to repent of their sins -- JI Packer says that this change is “radical, both inwardly and outwardly, mind and judgment, will and affections, behavior and lifestyle, motives and purposes are all involved. Repenting means starting to live a new life.” And that new life has new fruit. This is the power of the gospel and the glory of the resurrection unto salvation and Paul says:

“For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.” (Acts 26:21, ESV) But they had not been successful and Paul tells Agrippa why: “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.”” (Acts 26:22–23, ESV) I’m just preaching the truth in which true Judaism finds its culmination – in Christ – in His sin-killing death and in His resurrection from the dead for the forgiveness of sins. I preach to you who are great in the eyes of the world exactly what I preach to those who are small in its eyes. The gospel is the same for all people.

“And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.” (Of course that was Festus’ response. What else would we expect him to say? He is a materialist, a man who lived his life as if this life is all there is, grasping for significance, for sensual pleasure, for power, for fame and fortune. But who is really crazy here?) But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words.” (Acts 26:24–25, ESV) To anyone whose eyes have been opened to spiritual truth, to eternal realities, they recognize that Paul was not the crazy one in the room, he alone was sane, because he lived his life in light of God’s

truth and not according to the empty philosophies of man. Passing over Festus' outburst, Paul refocuses his words to Agrippa saying...

“For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. (Then pointedly Paul asks the question) King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.”” (Acts 26:26–27, ESV) Paul goes right to the heart of it all and he calls Agrippa to repentance and faith. Paul knows that Agrippa knows he is telling the truth. All that he had proclaimed came directly from the truth, from the prophets, whom Agrippa claimed to believe. Agrippa is on the horns of the eternal dilemma. Paul is saying in effect, “You know these things to be true in your head – they have not been done in a corner – but will you believe them with your heart? Will you repent and believe in the resurrection? Will you repent of your sins and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ?” He knows the truth, but Agrippa’s pride, his life that he loves so much, his sin that he cherishes in his heart, will not let him humble himself before Christ, before Paul, and before all of these other people and repent and believe the truth – not in abstract – but with all of his heart and with a life that shows his faith in Christ. He does what so many who know the truth intellectually but still refuse to humble themselves so often do.

“And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?”” (Acts 26:28, ESV) Agrippa says in essence, “Not enough Paul. I need more in order to be convinced. You need to give me more than this. In such a short time, do you really think I will believe, do you really think I will become a Christian.” Agrippa puts him off, making like his failure to believe is Paul’s fault, but deep in his heart he knows...he knows. It’s then that Paul speaks his closing words.

“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.”” (Acts 26:29, ESV) Here Paul says in effect: “O, how I long for you that God would open all of your eyes that each of you would be raised from spiritual death and believe in Jesus, the risen Son of God for salvation. I pray that each one of you would have your eyes opened so you would see that Jesus is the long-awaited Savior Who was promised in the Law and the Prophets, that you would have your heart of stone replaced with a heart of flesh that you might be fervent and passionate believers in Jesus. I want you to be like me – except for the chains – I want you to be someone who is completely convinced that the Word of God is true and that God has provided the Savior He promised – He is here – now – believe and repent of your sins. Come to Him. Have the hope

that we had been awaiting for thousands of years. Know Jesus to be God the Only Savior, and follow Him in obedience and faith and love and joy.”

With that, the trial is over.

“Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, “This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.” And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”” (Acts 26:30–32, ESV) They know Paul is innocent of every charge brought against him and Agrippa even goes so far as to say that Paul could be free if he had not appealed to Caesar, but this only shows that Agrippa missed the point altogether. Paul was not there to make an appeal that he be declared innocent, but to make the appeal that Agrippa would be saved. He was not talking of the gospel as some academic theory, or as the means of his acquittal of the charges against him. He was proclaiming the gospel as the means by which this audience could be saved. Paul was calling on this group to repent and to believe. He was not pleading with this crowd for understanding or sympathy; he was calling on them to believe and be saved. What a scene. What do we take from it?

First, let us make sure that we are not merely religious, but saved. Let us make sure that our faith is not merely theoretical, a set of theological truths that we affirm and which are mere window dressing for our lives but that our faith is intensely practical and real, and impacts our mind and judgment, will and affections, behavior and lifestyle, motives and purposes.

Second, let us see that our calling is Paul’s calling and may we be as bold and faithful in it as he was. The purpose of Christ’s resurrection appearance to Paul still stands: “I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from the people and from the Gentiles—to whom I send you to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” This is why the gospel has come to us, and this is why it cannot stop with us. We who have received the good news are to continue to share it with the world. The gospel alone is the power of God to turn people from darkness to light, the power of God to turn people from Satan to Himself, the power of God to forgive people of their sin, the power of God to call sinners his very own and to bring them to Himself and make them, and to make righteous through faith in Christ. Is there anyone who does not need to know this? You know the answer to that question. How do we best carry this message to family, friends, neighbors, and strangers here in Salem and around the world? How can West Salem be not only

the recipients of the gospel of Jesus Christ but also messengers of the gospel of Jesus Christ? How can we best be not only beneficiaries of the grace of God but also agents of the grace of God?

Third, we are faced with a very practical question in light of all of this. Which would you rather be – wise in the eyes of the world or crazy for Christ? What is the vision that propels you forward, that defines your life? There is only one thing worthy for the professing believer – the gospel of Christ, His death and resurrection.

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