

Paul's First Defense

Acts 21:37–22:29

Studies in Acts #27

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How often have we heard from Mormons at our door about their burning in the bosom confirming that Mormonism is correct or from well-meaning evangelical Christians about their personal conversion story in which their life before conversion was the worst in history and how wonderful life is after? This really resonates with our hyper-personal culture. In response, what do we as Reformed believers do? We go the opposite and say all that matters is the objective Word.

Of course either side is imbalanced. We are personal beings but we serve an objective God. And here in Paul's first defense before his fellow countrymen shows us how to defend the faith but also how to weave together our personal story with the objective realities of God's Holy Word.

In the context Paul has returned to Jerusalem. The elders of the church have praised God because of the wonderful things done through Paul among the Gentiles. Yet the word on the street about Paul is that he was supposedly teaching that Jews who lived among the Gentiles were to turn away from the Law of Moses, were not to circumcise their children, and were not to follow the customs of their people. So to give Paul an opportunity to dispel this false rumor, the church asks him to go into the temple complex with four men making Nazarite vows, pay for their expenses, and then present himself to the temple priest to participate in the purification rites. Paul was to live as a Jew to win

the Jews to Christ. This led to a riot and Paul's near death. And as he is saved by the commander of the Roman garrison he asks to address the people, for whom his heart's desire was their salvation (Rom. 10).

The Impotence of his Legal Life (vv. 3–5)

Paul's defense begins with his testimony using three verbs to describe his being ***born in Tarsus in Cilicia...brought up in this city***, and ***educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day*** (v. 3). This was a rather conventional way for a Jew to describe his upbringing. His education probably meant his coming to Jerusalem as a teenager to study in the pharisaical tradition under the famous Rabbi Gamaliel. Paul sheds some further light on this for us in Galatians 1, when he notes: "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers" (v. 14). Despite learning the faith first hand from one of Israel's giants, the famous Gamaliel, looking back at his life from the vantage point of saving faith, Paul can see that all of this was preparation for this very moment. But not only did Paul have the right pedigree and diplomas, he had a great resume: ***I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women*** (v. 4). This also comports with Paul's autobiographical comments in Philippians 3. "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness,

faultless.” Not only was Paul, bred and trained to be a Pharisee, his own zeal to stop the infant church in its tracks was certainly well known to many in the audience, including **the high priest and the whole council of elders** (v. 5).

But none of this mattered in terms of saving his soul. When you talk with people about the Lord do they get a sense from you that you are a Christian because you are better than them or despite who you are and what you have done? That's a question I want you to ponder tonight.

The Invincibility of Christ's Conversion (vv. 6–11)

What mattered was Christ's grace. And we see that as he testifies of *the invincibility of Christ's conversion*. As we saw in chapter 9, he describes here his experience on the Damascus Road as he was preparing to persecute even more Christians. He saw **a great light from heaven** (v. 6), fell to the ground (v. 7), and heard, **“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”** (v. 7) And when he asked whom it was who was speaking to him, the voice said, **“I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting”** (v. 8). And what is the response of one who hears Christ and is converted? **“What shall I do, Lord?”** (v. 10)

This illustrates people's problem with Jesus. Is the biggest problem facing you in your witnessing that people are partying on the weekends? Is it that they are homosexual? Is it Chargers tickets? The biggest obstacle we face, better yet, what those we speak with face is their own hard hearts that refuse to bow the knee in humble acknowledgement of Jesus' Lordship over them. The remedy is the invincibility of Christ's

grace. He wields that power. We are just to pray he will unleash it! And you see what happens when he does: The Jesus whom Paul regarded as a threat to Israel and the faith of his fathers, was the very one in whom the God of his fathers had acted to save Israel! The ferocious wolf of the church was now immediately transformed into a shepherd of the church.

The Importance of God's Ancient Promises (vv. 12–21)

Paul's defense moves from him, to Christ, and now to the ancient Scriptures as he explains *the importance of God's ancient promises* in verses 12–21. We go to Damascus with Ananias who tells him, "**The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard**" (vv. 14–15). It is not Zeus or Baal who orchestrated Paul's conversion and his calling to preach the gospel of free grace to the Gentiles, it is **the God of our fathers** who has done this. Israel's God has chosen Paul, the zealous persecutor of the way, for this mission. Indeed, this is why the Messianic title, the "**Righteous One**" is used, for it is none other than the Messiah himself who appeared to Paul in the blinding light and it was the Messiah's voice that Paul heard. The implication of all of this is clear to those in the audience. Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter's son who caused so much trouble and was put to death nearly thirty years earlier is the **Righteous One** foretold by the Old Testament. It is Jesus who died and rose again from the dead, and it is the same Jesus who appears to Paul, and commissions him to be a preacher of the gospel, and who sends him far away to the

Gentiles. And it is Jesus who commands Paul to get up, be baptized for the forgiveness of his sins, and to call upon his name. And then he calls him to **“get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me”** (v. 18) and therefore to **“Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles”** (v. 21).

What we learn here, then, is that in Paul’s defense of the gospel as in our own defense and testimony, our personal narrative matters because that is the life God has led us through. And this life has crossed the intersection of Jesus Christ’s powerful grace. But this is no mere subjective experience; this is in accord with the written Scriptures from of old.