

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Paul's Climactic Defense

Acts 25:1–26:32

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Good morning church! It is good to be in the house of the Lord this morning. If you have a Bible with you this morning, would you please open it up to Acts 26:1. Over the next 4 weeks, Lord willing, we are going to make our way through the last four chapters of Acts. We have taken the last couple of weeks away from Acts and so, before we dive back in this morning, I wanted to take some time retracing our steps. This morning, we are looking at Paul's final defense before the Roman authorities. Paul's speech in Acts 26 is his climactic defense of the Christian faith in the book of Acts. And to properly appreciate all that we are seeing in this passage this morning we have to understand how we got here.

So, keep a thumb or a finger on Acts 26 and flip back one page or so in your Bibles to Acts 25.

If you remember from a couple weeks ago, Paul had been brought forward to the Felix the Governor of Judea by the Jews who sought to see him put to death. They failed to bring any convicting charges against Paul despite their lies and manipulations. But, despite Paul's innocence, Felix kept Paul in prison. He was hoping that Paul would get desperate and bribe him to get free and, failing that, he figured he was earning some favour with the Jewish leaders by keeping Paul in Prison. Eventually Felix is succeeded by a new Governor: a man called Porcius Festus.

So that was where we were two weeks ago. We are going to continue to move quickly through the narrative here. To that end, look slightly ahead in your Bibles with me to Acts 25:6.

When Festus takes control, he pays a brief visit to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, and they ask for Paul to be brought to Jerusalem for a trial because they hoped to ambush him on the way. Festus unwittingly thwarts this plan by keeping Paul in Caesarea and he invites the leaders among the Jews to come and lay their charges against Paul in Caesarea.

Which they do. We find this in Acts 25:6 which reads.

“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. 7 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. 8 Paul argued in his defense, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.” 9 But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, “Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?” 10 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. 11 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.” 12 Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.” (Acts 25:6-12 ESV)

This is a significant moment. Yet again the Jewish leaders are unable to bring and substantial charges against Paul and he is able to proclaim and defend his innocence. But notice what happens in verse 9. Festus is unwilling to anger the Jewish leaders by declaring Paul innocent. So, he asks Paul if he would like to be tried in Jerusalem instead.

Paul is no fool. He knows that he is unlikely to receive a fair trial in Jerusalem. So, he proclaims “I am in a Roman court, where I belong. I have done nothing against the Jews, and I have done nothing worthy of imprisonment or punishment. If I had, you would have had cause to punish me.”

Yet, despite his innocence, despite proving his innocence time and time again, Paul is aware the Festus, much like Felix before him, does not want to declare Paul innocent and anger the Jewish leaders. So, Paul appeals to Caesar.

This is a big deal.

You see, Paul's appeal to Caesar does two very important things. It removes his case from the power of the lower courts which have repeatedly demonstrated that they are prioritizing political positioning and power over upholding justice. Secondly, it allows him to travel Rome which he has desired to do, and which God told him he must do in Acts 23:11.

God is working here. In his sovereign power and providence, he is using the corrupt and broken Roman systems to accomplish his good purposes. He uses this moment to bring the gospel to the very heart of the Roman empire.

Nothing in this world, no power of hell, no scheme of man, can ever stop God's good purposes from being accomplished. Nothing can do that.

We will get into that more next week, but it is a good reminder to see here in this story as well. God is in control my friends, rest in that.

Now, while Festus was making arrangements to send Paul to Rome, he is visited by King Agrippa and his sister Bernice. King Agrippa is actually King Herod Agrippa II the son of King Herod who died in Acts 12.

Festus tells Agrippa of his predicament with Paul in verse 25 where he says to Agrippa:

“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. 26 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. 27 For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him.” (Acts 25:25-27 ESV)

Agrippa would have been much more familiar with the Jewish laws and customs and Festus thought that Agrippa might be able to provide insight into what he could write as charges against Paul. In response to this request, Agrippa and Bernice, with much pomp and ceremony, fill a large audience hall with many military men and prominent men of the city to hear what Paul has to say for himself.

That is where we pick up the story in Acts 26:1. All of these last couple of chapters in Acts have served to set the stage for what we are about to see in Acts 26. Therefore, that is where we are going to focus our attention this morning.

Here now the Word of the Lord beginning in Acts 26:1.

“So Agrippa said to Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself.” Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense:

2 “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, 3 especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.

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. 5 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. 6 And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 7 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! 8 Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

9 “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 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. 11 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.

12 “In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 13 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. 14 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.’ 15 And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 16 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, 17 delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you 18 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 26:1-18 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Paul’s Climactic Defense

We are going to pause here and look at three of the defining features of Paul’s speech here.

There are a number of key elements to Paul’s Climactic Defense of himself and the Christian faith that I believe Luke is trying to highlight. The first of these is that:

1. Christ Is The Fulfillment Of Judaism

This is a recurring theme in the book of Acts and one that has been covered well already so we won't spend too much time on it this morning. But I think it is worth noting that, once again, in this climactic moment in Acts this theme comes to front.

Because it is significant.

Paul says in verses 6 to 8:

“And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 7 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! 8 Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” (Acts 26:6-8 ESV)

I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our Fathers. Paul is alluding to the fact that Jesus is the FULFILLMENT OF EVERY OLD TESTAMENT PROMISE. Judaism pointed to Christ. All of it. Every aspect of Judaism pointed to and is fulfilled in Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and second coming.

Christ is the FULFILLMENT of Judaism. The language here is important. Christianity, therefore, is not something completely separate from Judaism. It is not a complete departure. Neither is Christianity a continuation of Judaism. It is the completion of Judaism; it is the fulfillment of Judaism. It is the new covenant that was promised in Jeremiah 31:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. 33 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:31-33 ESV)

Christianity is the new covenant. It is the redeemed, restored, renewed, fulfilled and completed Judaism. That is the trajectory that the Apostles demonstrate in Acts time and time again and Paul drives it home once more in this climactic speech.

We cannot “unhitch ourselves from the Old Testament” as some may suggest. While we may all agree with this sentiment, it is harder to live out in practice. Many Bible readings plans that that are out there have us reading some passages from the Old Testament and some from

the New each day. And I am sure that there are many of us who simply try to “power through” the Old Testament readings so that we can get to the “good stuff” of the New Testament.

I’m sure I am not the only one who has felt that way at times.

The problem is it is ALL GOOD STUFF. All of the Old Testament, every word, every law in Leviticus, every census in Numbers, EVERY SINGLE WORD is a thread in the tapestry of the Old Testament that is threaded together to inform, guide, and shape our expectations of Jesus.

All of it is God-breathed and profitable and worthy of our time, our attention, and our affection.

The New Testament does not replace or remove the value and Beauty of the Old.

Rather, the Old Testament enhances and expands our ability to see and treasure Christ. And there is nothing more valuable than that.

But I said we won’t spend too much time on this so let’s move on to the second major element of Paul’s speech which is that:

2. Encountering Christ Changes Everything

In the portion of Paul’s speech that we read a few moments ago, he recounts his life before Christ, his conversion upon the road to Damascus, and his life after Christ. Paul recounts his opposition to Christianity which he goes so far as to describe as a “raging fury against them”. Paul wasn’t simply someone who disapproved of Christianity. He burned with a fierce hatred towards Christianity, he was as much an enemy of Christ as is possible.

And yet he encounters Jesus on the road to Damascus and everything is changed. Here Paul gives an expanded and more detailed account of what Jesus spoke to him on the Road. We read that in verse 14 which reads:

“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.’ (Acts 26:14 ESV)

I love the way that John Polhill describes the use of the phrase “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” in verse 14. Polhill says

“In the many instances where the proverb occurs in Greek literature, it always has the meaning of resisting one’s destiny or fighting the will of the gods. That meaning fit Paul’s situation. In persecuting Christ, Paul was fighting the will of the One who had set him apart from birth.”¹

“Paul was fighting against the will of the One who had set him apart from birth.” Isn’t that good?

Isn’t that also our story as well? It is true of all of us. Before we encountered Christ, we were dead in our trespass and sin. We were enemies of God. That is exactly what Romans 5 tells us:

“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. ¹¹ More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” (Romans 5:8-11 ESV)

Look at how Paul’s life is changed by encountering Christ. He tells us in verse 19:

“Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but 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. ²¹ For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.” (Acts 26:19-21 ESV)

Paul went from the greatest enemy of the Church to one who was instrumental in spreading to gospel of Jesus Christ and planting Churches all over the known world. Now we’re not all the apostle Paul but that principal that is on display in his life is true for every single one of us.

An encounter with Christ has the power to completely transform your life. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17 ESV)

¹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 503.

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

When you encounter Christ, when your eyes are opened, and you see Christ for who he is. When you behold the Lord of all creation, the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, the rider on the white horse, the lion of Judah, and the lamb that was slain, when you behold and encounter Christ, your life is forever changed.

The old passes away. The new has come.

Jesus Changes Everything.

That is my earnest prayer for each and everyone of us. Every day, it is my prayer that we all might behold Christ; that

“we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV)

Encountering Jesus has the power to absolutely transform your life, if you let it. If you put your faith in him and turn from your sin you will be transformed from one degree of glory to the next.

So, come.

“The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.” (Revelation 22:17 ESV)

Come, Behold Christ. Take and taste water of life without price. Let your heart be forever changed by God’s free grace through faith in him.

That is what we see here as the second element of Paul’s speech: the life-changing power of encountering Christ.

The Third Element of Paul’s speech can be found by reading the rest of chapter 26. Look in your Bibles with me to verse 22. We will read from there to the end of the chapter. Paul continues his speech in verse 22 saying:

“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: 23 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.”

24 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.”
 25 But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. 26 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. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” 28 And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” 29 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.”

30 Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. 31 And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, “This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.” 32 And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar. (Acts 26:22-32 ESV)

This ending section of our text this morning highlights the third and final element of Paul’s climactic speech, which is that:

3. Christ’s Resurrection Is The Heart Of The Christian Faith

Once again in verse 22 Paul is drawing a line from Judaism to Christianity.

As David Peterson puts it

“his main concern in the speeches in Acts 23–26 is to establish the resurrection of Jesus as the means by which the hope of Israel is fulfilled.”²

Paul is connecting the dots, establishing the connection between Judaism and Christianity and landing all of it upon the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead as the fulfillment of the hope of Israel and the foundation of the hope of the Church. All of Judaism pointed towards the climax of Jesus death and resurrection and all of Christianity looks back upon it as our firm foundation.

² David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 661–662.

The resurrection is the heart of the Christian faith. And it must be reckoned with. Notice that it is at this proclamation of Jesus' resurrection that Festus stands up and proclaims that Paul is out of his mind!

This is the part of the Christian faith that caused the Jewish authorities to be so upset with Paul. He proclaims in Acts 23 and 24 that "it is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today." The resurrection offended the Jews, and it offended Festus.

It is one of the most offensive parts of the gospel. Not because it is unsavory or distasteful in any way but because, if you accept that it is true, it changes everything.

It is the heart of the Christian faith. The Apostle Paul says that very thing in 1st Corinthians 15 where he says

"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Corinthians 15:17-19 ESV)

But if the resurrection did happen, if it is true, then Jesus is who he said he is, and he did what he said he would do. He is the Son of God, he lived the perfect life, he took our place upon the cross, he paid the penalty for sin, and he defeated death. That changes EVERYTHING.

The resurrection is a PARADIGM-SHIFTING, LIFE-ALTERING, WORLD-CHANGING EVENT.

It is the most incredible aspect of our faith.

It is the heart of the gospel and the heart of Christianity.

Have you come to terms with it? Has your life been transformed by the resurrection of Jesus? Have you accepted that Jesus is the promised Messiah? Have you accepted that your sins are forgiven by grace through faith in him? Have you pledged your life to live for him?

Festus didn't. He reacted as so many do, in outrage and anger.

Agrippa didn't. He reacted as many others do, in quiet dismissal.

You see, knowing that Agrippa had a familiarity with Judaism and its teachings Paul puts the pressure on Agrippa asking him "Do you believe in the prophets."

That put Agrippa in a tight spot because, if Agrippa said he didn't believe the prophets then he would have offended the Jewish people which he ruled over, and if he said he did believe the prophets then Paul would ask him why then he didn't accept Christ as the fulfillment of the prophets. So, Agrippa, feeling the pressure dodges the question. And, in doing, so paves the way for one of the Apostle Paul's best lines:

And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?"
29 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 26:28-29 ESV)

I long that all who hear me this day might become such as I am. That is the goal of the Christian life, isn't it? That should be our heart's desire; that those who know us might become as we are. That their eyes would be opened, their hearts softened, to behold Jesus and accept him for who he is, as Lord and Saviour. That is how Paul's speech ends. It is the last of his recorded words to any Roman governor or official and it is the fulfillment of Luke 21:12 where Jesus told his disciples

“But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake.” (Luke 21:12 ESV)

I think it is important to see here that, in Paul’s fulfillment of this prophesy, in his desire that people may be saved, he emphasizes the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the heart of the gospel message. It is the heart of the Christian faith.

It should be the heart of our understanding of the gospel and the heart of our gospel message to the world. When you share your faith with others you ought to ensure that the resurrection is at the center of the message. It is the foundation of our hope. It is the source of our assurance. It is the heart of our faith.

As we move towards the end of the text, we see that: ultimately Paul’s defense is successful. He proves that he has not broken any laws or done anything worthy of imprisonment. Notice how the chapter ends:

30 Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. 31 And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, “This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.” 32 And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.” (Acts 26:30-32 ESV)

This man could have been set free. There is a comparison here to Jesus that Peterson picks up on well. He highlights that

“Paul (like Jesus) will three times be exonerated by Roman justice (compare Luke 23:4, 15, 22)’.”³

Paul, like Jesus, is innocent.

Paul, like Jesus, is declared innocent by Roman authorities.

³ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 656.

Paul, like Jesus, prioritizes the gospel over his freedom.

Paul's ultimate priority is not to preserve his own life or safety. Paul's ultimate priority is that all who hear him, all who come in contact with him might come to see the truth of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, that they might encounter Christ and be forever changed for the glory of God. The most important thing in Paul's life is the spread of the Gospel for the Glory of God.

Oh, would that be true of us as well. Would we be people who are willing to lay down our rights, privileges, and lives for the sake of the kingdom.

Oh, God help!

Let's pray together.