

Study 38: Acts 26

Introduction

Paul fulfilled the Lord's promise of bearing His name before Kings. He had the opportunity to preach not only to King Agrippa and Governor Festus, but many of the prominent men of the city of Caesarea.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

Content: *What are the major events?*

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Body of the Study

How does Paul begin his case?

What was Paul accused of?

How does Paul outline the case?

How did Paul "cast his vote against them" in vs 10?

How does Paul describe his conversion?

What was Paul's response to the vision?

What are the three arguments that Paul uses?

What was the response of Festus?

Paul's conclusion to Agrippa

The verdict on Paul's case

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *How similar is the reaction of Festus and Agrippa to the gospel, to people today? What do they do, and why?*
- *What was Paul's desire to preach the gospel, and how does he bring it about in this situation – how does he use the opportunities presented to him?*

Read chapter 27 in preparation for next week

Notes for study 38: Acts chapter 26

Introduction

Paul fulfilled the Lord's promise of bearing His name before Kings. He had the opportunity to preach not only to King Agrippa and Governor Festus, but many of the prominent men of the city of Caesarea.

Timing: When did these events occur?

The chapter follows immediately behind chapter 25, and covers only a few hours during Paul's appearance before Agrippa and Festus. Consequently, the timing is still around mid-year AD 60.

Content: What are the major events?

Paul appears before Agrippa, and recounts the events of his conversion. Agrippa declares "*He has done nothing worthy of death, and might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar*".

Cast: Who are the major players?

Paul, Agrippa, Festus (Jesus by implication).

Body of the Study

How does Paul begin his case?

Paul's speech before Agrippa was masterly as he presented his case to the King, and provided a defense of the gospel – outlining not only what he believed, but also exactly why it is that he believed it.

Paul immediately began by recognising King Agrippa's appropriateness to listen to what he had to say. Agrippa was very well versed in the customs of the Jews, and understood much of the background. (As discussed in the previous study). He addressed the usual respect towards Agrippa as he began, but noted that Agrippa was "...*expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews...*" (26:3 NKJV).

This reveals quite a bit of prudence (perhaps luck, and perhaps divine providence) on the part of Festus to have used the opportunity of Agrippa's visit to Caesarea. Paul was at least sure of getting a fair hearing under Roman law by someone who also understood the Jewish issues. Up until this time, his trial was either by the Jews who had pre-meditated to kill him (just like they had to Jesus many years before); or by the Romans who knew that he had not done anything worthy of death. The Romans had no issue with anything that he had done under Roman law, but were confused by the Jewish issues – and essentially couldn't understand what all the fuss was about.

Paul was also quite strong in his opening towards Agrippa "...*I beg you to hear me patiently...*" (26:3 NKJV). It might have been possible for Agrippa to dismiss Paul before he had fully presented his case. Paul's presentation was not just a defense of his case, but also a defense (*apologeia*) of the gospel. (This is not an *apology* for being wrong (as the word apology is commonly used today), but rather an assertion of being right). Paul had been told that he would bear Jesus' name before Kings, and right here he had the means and opportunity of doing just that.

What was Paul accused of?

The accusations were not repeated here, but over the previous two years, Paul had been accused of:

- Being the cause of disturbance wherever he went
- Being a ringleader of the christians
- Profaning the Temple
- Teaching men to ignore the Law of Moses

How does Paul outline the case?

In his usual style, Paul began a long way back at the beginning – in this case his upbringing in the Jewish religion. Not only was this a *logical* place to start, but it also showed his utter and complete respect for the Jewish religion and culture – which he was now being accused of breaking.

- From my youth, my whole manner of life has been thoroughly “Jewish”
- All the Jews know this (they would most certainly be aware of his being educated under Gamaliel – one of the greatest teachers of the leading body – the Sanhedrin)
- I have always lived as a Pharisee – this is the strictest sect of Jewish religion (Agrippa would be well aware of the *strictness* (legalist) approach of the Pharisees. The implication directed towards Agrippa is that seeing I have lived – and always lived – according to such a strict way of keeping the Law, how could it be that I am accused now of breaking it?)
- If you go and check with my very accusers, they could confirm that this is the case - *if* they were willing to testify.
- I am now accused because of the very hope that all of our fathers have had – that of the promise made by God to the fathers (especially the seed promise to Abraham “*In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed*” for this was the very promise that was fulfilled in Christ. But there are far more messianic promises to which the Jews looked for the hope of the messiah coming to redeem Israel.)
- All of the Jewish tribes were eagerly awaiting – “*night and day*” and hoping to receive these very promises.
- It is because of exactly this hope that I am accused. (In fact it is because of the fulfilment of the promises, Paul’s acceptance of them, and the Jews rejection of their fulfilment that he is being accused. The promises had already been fulfilled in the person of Jesus the Messiah, but the Jews were still looking *and hoping* for the Messiah to come).
- Say, King Agrippa – why do you think that the resurrection of the dead is anything incredible? (Well, incredible it is, but not impossible – *for with God all things are possible*. Festus had already introduced Agrippa to the “facts” and questions about the resurrection in 25:19. Whilst Paul was not there at this briefing (and it is interesting to speculate how Luke acquired his knowledge of what Festus had said), Paul had evidently been briefed on what Festus had told Agrippa).
- As a strict Jew, I thought that I needed to *stamp out* this new religion, and to do many things that were against the name of Jesus of Nazareth
- Consequently, I pursued the christians in Jerusalem, and had many of them put into prison.
- I even had the authority from the chief priests to do this.
- When they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. (Paul is arguing very strongly towards his zealous understanding – and keeping – of the Jewish Law).
- Even beyond Jerusalem, I pursued them to foreign cities, punished them often in every synagogue, compelled them to blaspheme, and had an exceedingly strong rage against them. (Paul’s argument so far is to demonstrate his zealous keeping of the Law, far beyond that of the people who were accusing him. And it should not be a surprising thing that he himself (as a christian) is being accused – for that is exactly what *he* had been doing to the christians. He is about to show that his zealous deeds were based on a false understanding of the Law in the first place – and the Jews that are accusing him have that exact same false understanding).

How did Paul “cast his vote against them” in vs 10?

The Greek term used has reference to a voting stone. Either a black stone (guilty) or a white stone (innocent) would be cast – most likely anonymously into a bag. By contrast, and using exactly the same terminology Jesus says that when we are tried, and we overcome (remain faithful) that he will cast a white stone in our favour (Rev 2:17). Even though our enemies might want to put us to death, Jesus grants us (eternal) life!!!

This raises an interesting observation about Paul. Was he a member of the Sanhedrin? It was only the members of the Sanhedrin who were able to *vote* on the determination of guilt or innocence. A literal reading of the passage would suggest that Paul had been a member of the Sanhedrin, since he voted against the christians. The opposing view would argue that Paul was still *a young man* (7:58) at that time, whilst the Sanhedrin were made up of 70 of *the elders of Israel* (Ex 24:1). A less literal reading of the passage would have Paul saying to Agrippa “*When I brought them to Jerusalem (to the Sanhedrin for trial) I gave evidence against them so that they would be found guilty*”. We need to be careful in jumping to conclusions, as either way requires speculation.

How does Paul describe his conversion?

A full discussion on Paul’s conversion can be found in Study 13 (p.82). At this time, he outlines the facts to Agrippa to substantiate why it was he changed from being a persecutor of the christians to being one of them – and the greatest advocate of it at that!

- As I travelled on one of my journeys to pursue the christians, I was heading towards Damascus.
- At midday, I saw a bright light come down from heaven (The fact that this happened at midday, and that it was brighter than the sun, shows that it cannot be explained by any natural means.)
- This event was observed by those around me (Those he describes are the Jews who were going with Paul on his zealous persecution of the christians. Their witness and testimony must be recognised, not as christians who would support Paul’s conversion – but as Jews who were supporting the persecution. Therefore there can be no denying the facts of the events that Paul describes.)
- All of us were fallen to the ground as a result of such a great light.
- I heard a voice speaking to me (The others also heard the voice, but could not understand the words that were spoken (9:7 c/f 22:9) It is clear that they were aware of the events, saw the light, and heard the voice speak.)
- The voice said to me:
 - *“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting”*
 - *“I have appeared to you for the purpose of making you a minister and a witness of things that you have already seen, and of things that I have yet to show you”*
 - *“I will deliver you from the Jewish people”* (Paul’s career in the Jewish religion was to come to an end, and he was to put his labour into a different area – as one of the very people that he had been persecuting! Jesus also promised that Paul would be delivered from exactly the situations of persecution by the Jews that he was now facing).
 - *“I am sending you to the Gentiles, and I will deliver you from them also”*
 - *“You will open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, that they might receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance amongst the sanctified”* (This is an important point in the case where Paul had been accused of essentially “associating with Gentiles”. His very commission from the person that he zealously set out to persecute directed him towards the Gentiles).

Paul was left in the position of either denying what had happened to him (that was a tough ask, as he was blinded by the light – needed someone to guide him by the hand – and then three days later was instantly healed of his blindness by someone putting his hands on him in Jesus’ name. How could he deny the power?).

Alternately he could acknowledge the Power but walk away after he had been made to see and go on with the task of persecution. But no man of good conscience could do that, and Paul *always* acted in good conscience, even when he was persecuting the christians, putting them in Jail, having them tortured, and having them put to death!

What was Paul's response to the vision?

- Therefore King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the call that I was given. (The use of the double negative *not disobedient* is significant. To say that Paul *obeyed* could support an argument that God's grace was irresistible and Paul could do nothing but obey it. On the other contrary, Paul says that *he could have* disobeyed and resisted God's grace, but he chose to be obedient).
- I declared immediately in Damascus and Jerusalem that Jesus was the very Christ
- I also went throughout the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles. (This is exactly what Jesus had directed Paul to do – to bear his name to the Gentiles, but the gospel was to go *to the Jew first*).
- It was because of this that the Jews seized me in the Temple and tried to kill me.

What are the three arguments that Paul uses?

Paul used three arguments to support his position. The first was his unquestionable zeal in the Jewish religion. The second was the revelation of Jesus to Paul – and the undeniable circumstances of the resurrection (if the resurrection is true, then Jesus is the Messiah. – The whole of Christianity stands or falls on the resurrection (Rom 1:4)). Paul began his third argument – that of *his response* to Jesus as the Messiah. If Paul was not absolutely convinced of the correctness of Jesus being the Messiah, then he would not have gone through the sufferings and persecutions for the cause of the Lord (2 Cor 11:22-33).

- I can only stand here by the help of God (There were many times where Paul escaped the stoning, shipwrecks and persecutions by far more than natural means).
- Even right to this day, I stand here and witness to both the small and the great (He was addressing the Kings, but also the servants who were stationed there serving the Kings – for God (and Paul) made no distinction between them).
- The only things that I proclaim are the very things that Moses (and the prophets) said would come to pass.
 - The Messiah was going to suffer (The Jews could not conceive of such from the Messiah, although that is what the Old Testament says – so they had failed to comprehend the significance of Jesus, and in doing so rejected Moses and rejected God).
 - He would be the first to rise from the dead. (There were others such as Lazarus who had risen from the dead, but they all died again. Jesus was the first to rise from the dead never to die again).
 - He would proclaim light to both the Jews and the Gentiles. (Again, the Jews could not accept the Gentiles as a part of God's grace. Every time Paul spoke about the Gentiles in Jerusalem the Jews reacted to kill him. Their hatred was so strong, that it was as much as for his work amongst the Gentiles that Paul was persecuted by the Jews, as it was for his proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah).

What was the response of Festus?

Paul was interrupted in his speech, "...Festus said with a loud voice "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!"..." (26:24 NKJV). We need to remember that Festus had very little understanding of the Jewish history and culture – and to accept the resurrection from the dead would confirm Paul as mad (to a Roman). On the other hand, Agrippa was very carefully considering and was understanding *exactly* what Paul was saying.

Paul responded to Festus "...I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason..." (26:25 NKJV). Paul focused towards Agrippa who understood what he was

talking about “...these things were not done in a corner...” and he was well acquainted with the things that Paul was presenting.

Paul's conclusion to Agrippa

At this point, Paul’s arguments were concluded, and the interaction with both Festus and Agrippa suggested that it was time to stop *lecturing*, and start more *interaction*.

Paul directed a question directly to Agrippa. He was well acquainted with the Law of Moses – but the question is whether he believed it or not. “...King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do...” (26:27 NIV). Paul knew that he believed it, but to have the *academic knowledge* of belief and to have a *practical and saving faith* (belief) were two different things. The latter requires the believer *to do something* about what he believes in. Agrippa’s response was “...You almost persuade me to become a christian...” (26:28 NKJV). The language is not clear whether this response is sarcastic, or whether he really was almost persuaded. An alternate reading of the text is “...Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian? ... ” (NIV), which suggests a more sarcastic reply.

Paul’s response suggests that Agrippa might have been serious rather than sarcastic “...I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains...” (26:29 NKJV).

The verdict on Paul’s case

Agrippa decided that the hearing was over. Like Felix, the conviction of Jesus as the Messiah might have been getting to him, and *he walked away* rather than accept Jesus. Festus, Agrippa and Bernice left to discuss what they had heard “...when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves...” (26:31 NKJV).

The case against Paul had again been fairly heard, and the conclusion was that he had done nothing worthy of death, or even of being kept in chains in prison. Lysias, Felix, Festus, and then Agrippa had all heard Paul’s case and had all concluded him to be innocent “...This man is doing nothing worthy of death or chains... Then Agrippa said to Festus, “This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar”...” (26:31-32 NKJV).

The problem was that Paul had appealed to Caesar. The appeal needed to be heard by Nero, and only Nero could find him guilty or not guilty. However Festus had been given the responsibility of writing the briefing letter concerning the case to Nero. Based on the hearing before Agrippa, there is no doubt that Festus (trying to clean up many of the wrongs of Felix) would have written the letter saying that he had this innocent man who had been imprisoned for several years under Felix ... and explained the facts clearly leading to the conclusion that Paul was innocent under Roman Law.

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