

The Choice is Yours - Acts 26:1-16

May 20, 2018

INTRODUCTION

- Paul had been in prison for two years following his preaching in Jerusalem back in Acts 22. Power had shifted from Felix to Festus during this time. Festus is now the Roman governor of Judea.
- The Jewish religious leaders want Paul dead. Festus is trying to be fair to Paul while still trying to keep the peace among the Jewish religious leaders.
- Paul asks Festus to that he be sent to Rome to be put on trial before Caesar.
- Before going to Rome, Paul is going to give his defense before King Agrippa.
- Agrippa's family has a long, notorious history with Christianity. His great-grandfather had tried to kill baby Jesus. His grandfather had John the Baptist beheaded. His father had martyred the first apostle, James. Now Paul is about to give his defense before King Agrippa.
- King Agrippa still has some power, but not as much as the kings before him.
- The trial is a power play for Agrippa. It's a show for all the important people to attend so they can see how powerful Agrippa is. However, the stars of the show turn out to be Paul and Jesus.

VERSES 1-3: THEN AGRIPPA SAID TO PAUL, "YOU ARE PERMITTED TO SPEAK FOR YOURSELF." SO PAUL STRETCHED OUT HIS HAND AND ANSWERED FOR HIMSELF: "I THINK MYSELF HAPPY, KING AGRIPPA, BECAUSE TODAY I SHALL ANSWER FOR MYSELF BEFORE YOU CONCERNING ALL THE THINGS OF WHICH I AM ACCUSED BY THE JEWS, ESPECIALLY BECAUSE YOU ARE EXPERT IN ALL CUSTOMS AND QUESTIONS WHICH HAVE TO DO WITH THE JEWS. THEREFORE I BEG YOU TO HEAR ME PATIENTLY.

- Paul stretches out his hand before speaking despite being chained. This was a common posture of public speakers during this time. Paul made the same gesture in Acts 21 before addressing the Jews. It could also be seen as a sign of respect to his audience.
- Paul has multiple objectives in speaking to Agrippa.

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- Paul needed to defend himself so that Agrippa might be able to aid Festus in transmitting a true account of his case to the Roman emperor.
- On former occasions, Paul made his defense before Roman magistrates who knew very little about Jewish customs and history. Paul was happy to be able to speak before Agrippa because he was an expert in Jewish customs and was familiar with the Old Testament.
- But Paul's main objective is to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ in an auditorium full of people. His hope is that those in attendance would accept the Gospel and be saved.
- As Zac taught a couple weeks ago, our testimonies should have a pre-salvation, a conversion point, and a post-salvation.
- Paul "begs" that they would hear him patiently. We should have a long and short version of our testimony ready to go at anytime. A few years ago at the Sandwich Community Group, Pastor Seth had us each share our testimonies over the course of a few weeks. The idea was to give a quick five-minute version. I went well over twenty minutes. We're not always going to have the luxury of time.
- We should be able to highlight different points of our testimony based on whom we're sharing it with. In the next few verses we'll see Paul highlight different parts of his testimony so that he can relate to as many people as possible that were in attendance.

VERSES 4-5: "MY MANNER OF LIFE FROM MY YOUTH, WHICH WAS SPENT FROM THE BEGINNING AMONG MY OWN NATION AT JERUSALEM, ALL THE JEWS KNOW. THEY KNEW ME FROM THE FIRST, IF THEY WERE WILLING TO TESTIFY, THAT ACCORDING TO THE STRICTEST SECT OF OUR RELIGION I LIVED A PHARISEE.

- Note that Paul does not hold back from taking a shot at his accusers for not showing up to testify.
- Paul begins to share his testimony. This is the third and most detailed account of Paul telling his testimony.

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- He starts at the beginning. Paul was brought up in the school of Gamaliel. He was raised a Pharisee. The most rigid and strict in both the written law of God and Jewish traditions of men.
- Later Paul will tell of all the evil things he did before knowing Christ, but here Paul begins with how good he was.
- This is the testimony of the successful man. There are people that have done a great job at life. They're moral, good parents, and successful in their careers. I applaud people like this. Through hard work, determination, and perseverance, they have been successful in a tough world. If it weren't for people like this, many of us wouldn't have jobs that we have.
- However, they still need Jesus. They still need to be grateful to God for all He's blessed them with. And because they're successful and moral, it may be hard for them to see their need for a savior. All the hard work and morality in world will not account towards forgiveness of sins. More on that later.
- For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? – Jesus (Matthew 16:26)

VERSES 6-7: AND NOW I STAND AND AM JUDGED FOR THE HOPE OF THE PROMISE MADE BY GOD TO OUR FATHERS. TO THIS PROMISE OUR TWELVE TRIBES, EARNESTLY SERVING GOD NIGHT AND DAY, HOPE TO ATTAIN. FOR THIS HOPE'S SAKE, KING AGRIPPA, I AM ACCUSED BY THE JEWS.

- Paul is saying that his crime is his hope in God's promises of a savior and the resurrection from the dead.
- God had promised the Jews a coming Messiah. God had promised the Jews resurrection from the dead. They believed and hoped for the fulfillment of these promises. They wanted the very thing that they were condemning Paul for.
- If Paul could convince Agrippa that the main accusation against him was a common belief among his fellow Jews, it would show that he had done nothing wrong.
- But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, for He shall receive me. – Psalm 49:15

- Your dead shall live; together with my dead body they shall arise.

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- Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust; for your dew is like the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead. – Isaiah 26:19
- And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever. – Daniel 12:2-3
 - The entire Old Testament speaks of a coming Messiah. The Jews were looking for his arrival and still are today.
 - The Jewish religious leaders believed in the same promises that Paul did. The issue they had with Paul was that he believed and preached that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah, and that Jesus could provide resurrection from the dead. They had the same hope as Paul, but did not want to accept that Jesus was the answer to this hope.
 - This situation hasn't changed much today. Most people hope and believe that there is life after death. About 75% of Americans believe in some form of Heaven, with the remaining 25% believe that we just cease to exist.
 - The point of contention is how do we get to Heaven. Some believe all roads and religions lead to Heaven. Some say as long as you are a good person you'll get in.
 - The Bible says and followers of Jesus believe that faith in Christ is the only way to Heaven.
 - "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it." – Jesus (Matthew 7:13-14)
 - Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." – John 14:6
 - "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." – Peter (Acts 4:12)
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- For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the

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truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus... - 1 Timothy 2:3-5

- Why only Jesus? Because only Jesus died for our sins. Only Jesus came down from Heaven, only Jesus lived a sinless life as a man, and only Jesus shed his blood for us.
- People will say that we're intolerant for having this view. The word tolerance has been hijacked. It has come to mean that we must accept, approve, and agree on everything.
- Tolerance - the ability or willingness to tolerate something, in particular the existence of opinions or behavior that one does not necessarily agree with
- As Christians we must be willing to tolerate, respect, and listen to people with different views than us. We don't have to agree with different religions, but we must tolerate different belief systems in order to show love and have open conversations.

VERSE 8: WHY SHOULD IT BE THOUGHT INCREDIBLE BY YOU THAT GOD RAISES THE DEAD?

- More specifically, why should it be thought incredible that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead?
- Why should it be thought incredible that God through Christ can raise us from the dead? God is all-powerful. He created the heavens, the earth, plants, animals, and us. If He created life, why would it be hard to believe that He can resurrect life? The act of raising the dead is not hard for God. Convincing sinful man of His plan of redemption is God's challenge.

VERSE 9: "INDEED, I MYSELF THOUGHT I MUST DO MANY THINGS CONTRARY TO THE NAME OF JESUS OF NAZARETH."

- In verses 4-5, Paul gave the testimony of the righteous man. In the next few verses, Paul gives the testimony of the wicked sinner. By doing this, he relates to everyone in the auditorium.
- Paul thought that he owed it to his country, to his religion, and to his God to oppose the claims of Jesus to be Messiah.
- Paul had believed that he must persecute followers of Jesus. He sincerely believed that he was doing the right thing.

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- This shows that a person can be completely convinced that they are serving God when in fact they are opposing Him.
- How do you know if you're serving God in way that honors Him? Ask these two questions: Is it giving glory to Jesus Christ and is it showing love to others? If you're doing these two things, you're most likely heading in the right direction.

VERSE 10: THIS I ALSO DID IN JERUSALEM, AND MANY OF THE SAINTS I SHUT UP IN PRISON, HAVING RECEIVED AUTHORITY FROM THE CHIEF PRIESTS; AND WHEN THEY WERE PUT TO DEATH, I CAST MY VOTE AGAINST THEM.

- Paul put Christians in prison. He voted for Christians to be put to death. Paul was a murderer. Stephen is the most notorious example of Paul's involvement in Christian martyrdom.

VERSE 11: AND I PUNISHED THEM OFTEN IN EVERY SYNAGOGUE AND COMPELLED THEM TO BLASPHEME; AND BEING EXCEEDINGLY ENRAGED AGAINST THEM, I PERSECUTED THEM EVEN TO FOREIGN CITIES.

- Paul forced Christians to blaspheme the name of Jesus. He made them confess that Jesus was an imposter, a fake, and a liar. What type of torture must Paul have used to cause Christians to blaspheme Jesus Christ?
- Paul was "exceedingly enraged". He was consumed with a violent anger. Paul was determined to exterminate Christians and their cause. Paul was a sick, cruel, and twisted man before his salvation.
- This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. – 1 Timothy 1:15
- Only Jesus Himself could have stopped Paul's mission to kill Christianity.

VERSES 12-13: "WHILE THUS OCCUPIED, AS I JOURNEYED TO DAMASCUS WITH AUTHORITY AND COMMISSION FROM THE CHIEF PRIESTS, AT MIDDAY, O

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KING, ALONG THE ROAD I SAW A LIGHT FROM HEAVEN, BRIGHTER THAN THE SUN, SHINING AROUND ME AND THOSE WHO JOURNEYED WITH ME.

- Emmaus redemption...thank you Jesus.
- The light came sudden like a flash of lightning. Picture this scene. They're on their journey and out of nowhere shines a light that engulfs them.
- Paul said the light from Heaven was brighter than the sun. This reminds me of Jesus at the transfiguration.
- Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. – Matthew 17:1-2

VERSE 14: AND WHEN WE ALL HAD FALLEN TO THE GROUND, I HEARD A VOICE SPEAKING TO ME AND SAYING IN THE HEBREW LANGUAGE, 'SAUL, SAUL, WHY ARE YOU PERSECUTING ME? IT IS HARD FOR YOU TO KICK AGAINST THE GOADS.'

- They not only saw the light, it knocked them to the ground.
 - Jesus spoke to Paul in Hebrew. He spoke to me in English. Jesus is multi-lingual. He can speak to any person in any language at anytime.
 - He called out to Paul by his name. Jesus is a personal God who knows us and wants a relationship with each of us individually.
 - Jesus takes the persecution of his followers personal. Every vile, evil act that Paul was doing to the Christians, he was doing to Jesus.
 - This shows how much Jesus loves us. If someone messes with my wife or kids, I would feel their pain because I love them. We see this in movies all the time. How does the bad guy get to the hero? He threatens those he loves.
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- A goad is a sharp piece of iron stuck into the end of a stick used to move a stubborn ox forward. Jesus is basically calling Paul a stubborn ox. Paul is going against God's will and he is hurting himself in the process.

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- Persecuting Jesus or going against God's plan of salvation is like stabbing yourself with a piece of sharp iron and eventually it will lead to death.
- In my late teens and early twenties, I had significant drug and alcohol issues. I was mad at God and one of my favorite topics of discussion was denying the deity of Jesus Christ. I was kicking against the goads and it was leading to my destruction. But just as Jesus had mercy and grace on Paul, Jesus had mercy and grace on me. He loved me and proved Himself real to me even though I denied and mocked Him.

VERSE 15: SO I SAID, 'WHO ARE YOU, LORD?' AND HE SAID, 'I AM JESUS, WHOM YOU ARE PERSECUTING.'

- Jesus' voice brings Paul to the realization that Jesus is alive and that He is speaking from Heaven.
- At this moment, Paul understood that he had been wrong about Jesus. He realized that Jesus did rise from the dead and that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Paul is in the process of repentance.
- "Repentance is a changing of mind that leads to a change of actions." – Pastor David Guzik

VERSE 16: BUT RISE AND STAND ON YOUR FEET; FOR I HAVE APPEARED TO YOU FOR THIS PURPOSE, TO MAKE YOU A MINISTER AND A WITNESS BOTH OF THE THINGS WHICH YOU HAVE SEEN AND OF THE THINGS WHICH I WILL YET REVEAL TO YOU.

- "But rise and stand on your feet" – move from your past and towards your purpose
- This is Jesus' command for all of us. His blood wasn't shed just for our forgiveness. He didn't rise just so we could have a resurrected life in Heaven. Jesus died and rose again to give us a mission and purpose on this earth. We are wasting our time and His time if we are just sitting around waiting for Heaven.
- "The things which you have seen" - Tell people about your past. Tell people about how Jesus saved your life. Tell people that the risen Christ can save them too.

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- “The things which I will yet reveal to you” – Jesus is going to continue to walk with us, He is going to continue to show us more. He is a God that wants a loving, active, intentional relationship with us.
- Now despite this dramatic entry of Jesus into Paul’s life, Paul still had a choice. He could have rejected the call of Jesus. He could have decided to persecute the Christian movement even harder with greater wrath and violence. But Paul decided to accept and follow Jesus. We have this same choice. Are you willing to accept His offer of forgiveness if you haven’t already? If you already are a Christian, are you willing to follow Him and serve Him until He calls us home to Heaven? The choice is yours.