

Acts 26:1-32

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[0:00] Good morning, church. It's good to be with you on this Lord's Day, away from the doldrums of work and regular life to come together to sing and proclaim the glories of the Lord and the truths of the Lord.

What an encouragement it is to be with you. Today, our text for this morning is Acts 26. So as you get there, you will see that this chapter is right in the middle of an ongoing story.

To better understand what's happening with the three main characters, speaking characters in chapter 26, they are Paul, the apostle of Jesus, Festus, a Roman governor, and Agrippa, a Rome-appointed king.

We'll back up to Acts 21 and do a quick flyover up to Acts 26. So, you can flip through and follow along if you'd like to.

So, in chapter 21, Paul goes to Jerusalem, meets with the church elders there, and tells them about the great work that the Lord is doing among the Gentiles. After about a week of this, of Paul being in Jerusalem, some influential Jews stir up a crowd against Paul based on some assumptions of his actions that actually were not true.

[1:17] So, this crowd that they stir up brutally beat Paul to the point where he has to be carried away by the soldiers back to the barracks. And then on the doorsteps of the barracks, Paul turns back and he asks to address the crowd that has just beat him.

That address starts in chapter 22. Paul tells them about his former life and about how God dramatically transformed his life by the righteous one, that is, Jesus.

He started to share about his commission to the Gentiles. But the crowd erupted again at that idea and the soldiers take him back into the barracks. And the tribune, whose name was Claudius Lysias, who was in charge of the soldiers, continues his assessment of the situation.

His assessment and plan drastically change when he learns of Paul's Roman citizenship at the end of chapter 22. That piece of status that Paul possessed made a lot of what had been done illegal as well as what the tribune was planning.

Either way, the tribune wanted to further understand why this ruckus happened in the first place.

So, he takes Paul to before the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin. And that's, we get to chapter 23.

[2:27] So, after being unjustly struck by the servant of the high priest of the Sanhedrin, Paul tactfully makes the issue before the council about the broader concept of resurrection.

This causes a big disagreement between the two parties of the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. And that disagreement gets chaotic enough that the soldiers pull Paul out of there altogether.

And so, right after that chaotic scene, we get Acts 23, verse 11. The following night, the Lord stood by him, Paul, and said, Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.

After this command and inherent promise, Luke tells us about a group of 40 Jews that plan to assassinate Paul. Thankfully, the Lord ordained for Paul's nephew to hear about the plot and notify Lysias.

Lysias regarded the threat as credible and then dispatched about half, or likely half, of the Roman soldiers in all of Jerusalem to ensure Paul's safety. Lysias sends Paul to Felix, who is the governor at the time and the predecessor of Festus that we'll see in chapter 26.

[3:42] Paul presented his case first before Felix, and they conversed regularly for about two years. Luke tells us some detail about their

conversation in verse 25 of chapter 24.

And as Paul reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity, I will summon you. These certainly would be alarming topics for anyone to discuss if they were not secure in Jesus Christ. Felix did not hand Paul over to the Jews, but he did keep him in prison for two years in Caesarea.

Felix was then succeeded in the governorship by one of our characters today, Portius Festus, or just Festus. This brings us to chapter 25, getting the final pieces in place for our events in chapter 26.

So there's this new governor, Festus, and the Jews petition him to bring Paul back to Jerusalem from Caesarea so that they could kill him on the way, as was their original plot.

[4:47] Festus agrees to renew the trial, but the Jews would have to come with him to Caesarea. He would not send Paul back to Jerusalem. The Jews allege and do not prove serious charges.

Then Festus asks Paul if he wants to finish the trial in Jerusalem. Paul declined and appealed to Caesar for judgment, as was his right as a Roman citizen.

Then we are introduced to our other character, Agrippa. In chapter 25, Festus is seeking Agrippa's counsel, admitting that Agrippa has a better understanding of Jewish culture.

Festus lays out the case, and Agrippa says that he wants to hear from Paul directly. So they set it up. Everyone comes into this new audience hall to hear what Paul has to say. Chapter 25 ends with Festus giving an opening summary, essentially saying that he wants to know what to write as he sends Paul along to Caesar.

So that's our quick flyover. So with all that context, we will finally have our characters, Agrippa, Festus, and Paul, all together. And that brings us to today's text in chapter 26. Before we start into chapter 26, please join me in a word of prayer.

[6:00] Dear Lord, thank you for this recorded testimony of your faithful followers, that we can see the testimony of Paul and his faithfulness, that we can be encouraged to go and do likewise, that we would be bold in the face of trials of various kinds, whether that's legal, like as Paul is going through here, that's familial or personal.

But Father, whatever it may be, may those trials help us to spread your gospel, your truth for your glory. Please bless this time. And it's in your Son, Jesus' name that I pray. Amen.

So our first section, verse 1 through 11, we're going to be looking at Paul's ancient hope and deadly ambition. But first, we're going to start with verse 1 through 3 with his initial address.

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 is before you, King Agrippa, that 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. So first, Agrippa opens the floor and gives Paul formally the floor to make his defense. Then Paul addressed Agrippa before beginning some of his own personal history in the subsequent verses.

[7:25] Paul's tactful word selection about Agrippa is well worth noting. Agrippa was known to be a sly politician, as the Jews were his to politically oversee. He would know the culture and current events very well.

Paul is not affirming in any way a genuine faithfulness within Agrippa, but Paul is grateful that the Lord has put him before a man familiar with the situation and the Jewish culture than Festus.

For a little extra context, Agrippa is the great-grandson of Herod the Great. So he is in that chain. His full name is Herod Agrippa II.

So we've seen other Herods throughout the gospel, first that sought to kill Jesus, and then actually with Herod and Pilate oversaw his trial for his crucifixion.

So this is now a descendant of those Herods. So next we see Paul's pharisaical foundation starting in verse 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.

[8:33] 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. So Paul describes the pertinent information of his upbringing.

He grew up in the most strict party of Judaism as a Pharisee. Not only is Paul describing his upbringing in these terms, he is saying that it is a known fact that the Pharisees are the strictest, by anyone that would be willing to tell the truth.

In Acts 25, 7, just right before this, Luke tells us that many false charges were brought against him by the Jews. Verse 7 says this, 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.

Paul's implication here in verse 5, that these Jews may not be the most honest and truth-telling, certainly has some support. So Paul tells Agrippa that he was taught about something beautiful within that strict upbringing, the hope of resurrection.

Let's continue in verse 6. This is not the only time in Acts that Paul references this promise made to the Jewish people. This is not the only time in Acts that Paul references this promise made to the Jewish fathers.

[10:08] In Acts 13, 32 through 35, Paul says to those in the synagogue of Pisidia, And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us, their children, by raising Jesus.

As also it is written in the second psalm, You are my son, today I have begotten you. And as for the fact that he has raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.

Therefore, he says also in another psalm, You will not let your holy ones see corruption. So in rapid succession, Paul quotes Psalm 2, 7, Isaiah 55, 3, and Psalm 16, 10 to support his claim to the Jews of Pisidia.

Paul's claim to Agrippa is that this hope of the resurrection is a central point of the Jewish faith. It is what all 12 tribes hope to attain, worshiping earnestly night and day.

Paul also makes it the central point of the conflict in the trial. He says at the end of verse 7 into verse 8, And for this hope I am accused by the Jews, O king. Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

[11:25] The force of this rhetorical question is why so many faithful Christians argue, formulate, and defend the existence of God. If an all-powerful, eternal, all-knowing, perfect creator God exists, what could possibly prevent him from raising the dead?

The boulder in front of Jesus' tomb was clearly not enough. There are many philosophical arguments to dispel disbelief in God, that they are seeking to answer fundamental questions. The cosmological argument, how do we get here in the first place? The fine-tuning argument, even if all this stuff was here, how did it get so precisely arranged to allow our lives?

The teleological argument, what is the purpose of everything? Where are we going? The moral argument, what is the foundation for objective moral values and duties? And there are more than that. The argument from contingency, the ontological argument.

And then there are specific formulations of these arguments, more than the mere questions that I have just raised. And then beyond the philosophical, there is historical, prophetic, and archaeological evidence that build cases as well.

[12:33] And then in addition to the individual persuasiveness of any of these arguments, there is also the cumulative case, each argument building on top of the other, further proving the foolishness of our sinful hearts that say there is no God.

Psalm 10.4 says, In the pride of his face, the wicked does not seek him. All his thoughts are, there is no God.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 10, verses 3 through 5, In Romans 1, 19 through 20, Paul writes, Christians should know very well how to point to creation and show these attributes, God's eternal power and divine nature, which God has made plain.

Now, it's certainly impossible for all of us to know every detail of creation that showcases God's power and nature. For example, Katie Dome would most likely be far more equipped to describe to

you God's wise design for beautiful flowers than I would.

But we all have our focuses and those things that we can point to to show and tell others about God's wise creation and perfect power.

[14:23] Through Christ, God has rescued us from our sin and darkness. Now, God has chosen that the church would continue to be his vessel to tell the world that he is real, they are hopelessly dead in their sin, and that Christ's life, death, and resurrection are sufficient to restore them to new and unending life.

So this hope of resurrection Paul has was not God's promise that his people had possessed for hundreds and hundreds of years. Paul tells Agrippa that this ancient hope's true fulfillment is why the Jews have sought this trial against him.

This brings us, continuing now, to verse 9, seeing Paul's deadly ambition. 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 I tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them, I persecuted them, even to foreign cities.

Paul will be the first to tell us that earnestness, that convincing, that convinced that he was doing the right thing, is not the litmus test for truth.

[15:49] There are plenty of examples in our present day, and all throughout human history, of people being zealous for undeserved, to even horrific causes. Celebrities, sports teams, politicians, climate alarmism, false religions, cults, and abortion are all reasons people will get very worked up to defend their position and attack the other.

wholly convinced that their side of the issue is the correct one. Now please hear me clearly, I am not advocating that the correct position on any topic is whatever is in the exact middle of the extremes.

It's always a grievous evil if a human baby is killed no matter its stage of development. Cult leaders that twist scripture and abuse their followers in the name of Jesus need to be stopped, and the Lord will judge them and hold them to account.

But here, in this section of verses 9-11, Paul does not spit upon his accusers. He sympathizes with them. He very clearly says that he did what they are now doing, zealously persecuting the church, chasing them from town to town.

And from this place of telling his accusers that he stood where they stood and did what they are doing, he tells them of God's miraculous mercy towards him.

[17:08] So that goes into our next section, Paul's empowered obedience. We'll go from 12-23, reading first, just 12-18, where we'll see that Paul was transformed for a purpose.

In this connection, I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and the 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. And I said, who are you, Lord?

And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, but rise and stand up on 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 that they may turn from darkness to light, 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.

You may have noticed that this account that Paul gives of his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus is a bit different than the account Luke narrates in Acts 9. After reading some different opinions as to why I am most persuaded by the position that Paul is giving a truncated account to King Agrippa to focus on his mission to the Gentiles and the gospel itself.

[18:46] Paul focusing in on these two aspects would have the most relevance in the case that Agrippa was hearing in relation to the charges that were being brought against Paul.

Another view that can be complementary to that, to what I just said, is that Paul here is recalling specific details that did occur in the original events but they were just not duplicatively recorded. So coming back to verses 12 and 8, 12 through 18, excuse me, Paul opens this section by connecting it to the previous, in this connection. That pharisaical zeal that he had in persecuting the church is what fueled him to travel to Damascus.

He was doing so with the authority and commission of the chief priests and he had a distinct purpose that he firmly held. He carried this banner of purpose and zeal with white knuckles on his way to Damascus to root out more followers of Jesus that he thought were blasphemous and dangerous.

And there, in the midst of his enmity toward Jesus Christ, Jesus meets him. Jesus asks him why he was persecuting. Who are you, Lord? Paul says in response, the white knuckles released.

[20:05] And then Jesus tells Paul his divinely appointed purpose. I'll read again. This is in verse 16. And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but rise and stand up on 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, 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.

So let's pull out some specifics of Paul's purpose that is being spelled out to him. Part one, get up. You got to get ready to go somewhere. Part two, Paul will be a servant of Christ and a witness to what Jesus has done and what Jesus will do.

Part three, Jesus is sending Paul to the Gentiles specifically. And I'll answer it here kind of a part two and a half. Jesus tells Paul that he's going to need to rescue him from the Gentiles who are his specific mission field.

I think to many of us that would be a not super encouraging note that, hey, you're going to these people and I'm going to have to save you from them because they're going to try to kill you. But that is part of the testimony of Jesus caring for his missionaries, his disciples.

[21:33] And then part four, Paul is going to the Gentiles so that they may turn from darkness and Satan to light and God and receive forgiveness of their sins and receive a place and inheritance among God's people.

This is the radical idea that by faith in Christ, the Gentiles will be grafted into the people of God and receive an inheritance with the rest of God's people.

That by faith in Christ, the promises given to the faithful in God can be expanded out to include the formerly faithless Gentiles. Agrippa would have known that Paul was ministering with Gentiles.

That was one of the core accusations against him. And Paul's focus in this account is that his purpose was directly given him by the Lord. It is this divine appointment that Paul has in mind as the hinge to go into verse 19 where he says, therefore.

So now we'll see him, Paul being supernaturally empowered for that purpose. Let's start in verse 19. Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem, and then 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.

[22:56] For this reason, the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 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.

So Paul says, he did it. I was commanded to go to the Gentiles and I did it. It was divinely commanded to him and he was obedient to that. And he did what Jesus commanded him to do. He went to those in Damascus, Jerusalem, Judea, and the Gentiles to tell them to repent and turn to

God, followed by faithful works that follow true repentance.

And it is because he was faithful to this divine injunction that the Jews first seized him and tried to kill him and have brought him now through this trial process spanning over two years.

Verse 22 and 23 are so beautiful. I'd like to read them again. To this day, I have had the help that comes from God. And so I stand here testifying both to small and to 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.

So Paul gives all the credit to the Lord for bringing him to this point that he could testify before such a group of people. This section ends with Paul saying that he is not saying anything new.

[24:32] Again, this is the ancient hope. It is only the fulfillment of what Moses and the prophets said. And the Christ did suffer, he did die, and he did rise from the dead to proclaim light to the whole world.

The uninterrupted and unchallenged reign of death since Adam came toppling down. This is the greatest news. Paul had to say it.

We must feel not just the same command, but the same need. So our last section, starting in verse 24, we see Paul's faithful invitation.

And sadly, the first response we see is an immediate dismissal. Verse 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. So the Roman governor, Festus, interrupts Paul to tell him and everyone present that Paul has gone insane. He has read and studied too much and has broke his brain.

[25:42] He's lost it. But Paul does not turn back. He calmly doubles down on the claims that he has made. Let's look at verse 25. But Paul said, I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words.

This is an excellent example for us to learn from. When we share the truth of Christ, the gospel, we will often be dismissed, reviled, and persecuted. This should be no surprise.

This is the example that we see in the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles. And all of those instructed us to expect dismissal, revilement, and persecution and to endure it.

So what we see here from Paul is exactly how Peter instructed the church to conduct ourselves in 1 Peter 3, 14-17. But even if you should suffer for righteousness sake, you will be blessed.

Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.

[26:49] Yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good if that should be God's will than for doing evil.

When we look at Acts 26, we can see every aspect of this instruction being lived out by Paul. He is not scared of his accusers. He is honoring Christ, and he is giving a defense for his hope of resurrection with gentleness and respect, even after being called insane.

Next we see the direct question. So Paul transitions his address back toward Agrippa in verse 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 quarter. So he made the transition back to Agrippa, and he asked him this direct question in verse 27.

King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe. It is worth the time to make clear exactly what Paul is asking Agrippa, because the interjection of Festus could make us lose some of the precision of the question.

[28:06] So back in verse 22 and 23, Paul says that the prophets and Moses said that the Christ would come, suffer, and rise from the dead. This was the last thing Paul said before Festus' interjection.

And now, following up on that statement, Paul asks Agrippa if he believes what the prophets said. Does he believe that the Christ has come, suffered, and has now risen from the dead?

I know that you believe, is the follow-up on the question in verse 27. Agrippa was known to put his Jewishness on display for the people.

He oversaw them and wanted to be sure that he was seen as, or at least thought of as a faithful Jew. However, if we see some of his grandparents and his fathers before him, there is not a chain of faithfulness there and that does not change with the life of Herod Agrippa II.

Agrippa was known to be in an ungodly relationship with his sister Bernice who is attending this council as Luke records. It would be likely for a man in Agrippa's political position to live a life of moral compromise as well.

[29:17] You scratch my back, I scratch yours, regardless of any kind of justice. Those points aside, Agrippa likely would have liked to say that he followed the Torah.

Yeah, no problem. I follow the law, no problem. But as we know, when it came down to it, he refused to submit his life to the wisdom and righteousness of God. So we read in verse 28 his answer to Paul.

And Agrippa said to Paul, in a short time, would you persuade me to be a Christian? So I understand from the ESV study note, footnote, and others that the original Greek of this verse is complicated.

Maybe TJ or Zach could explain better why it is so complicated. Regardless, it's debated whether Agrippa was truthfully or earnestly saying something to Paul like, you almost persuaded me to be a Christian in this short time, or something more sarcastic reading as, did you really think that you could persuade me to be such a Christian in a short time?

Either translation is ultimately a rejection of Paul's question and invitation. Personally, I do favor the sarcastic reading in light of Paul's wordplay and punny answer in verse 29.

[30:30] 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.

Instead of returning any sarcasm, I picture Paul here saying this with an honest smile. Whether it's short or long, I want everybody to be as I am except for these chains.

So next we see a cold departure. Luke records a short epilogue to our primary drama in these last few verses, starting in verse 30. 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.

So the council, primarily Festus and Agrippa, agreed that Paul had done nothing to deserve further imprisonment. So they show some pity that he should have taken an option that would prolong this process and now he has to go to Caesar and be imprisoned any longer.

[31:35] They're saying, well, that's too bad for this guy. But these men think that they should pity Paul for this but they do not know what God told Paul in Acts 23, 11.

I read it earlier, I'll read it again. The following night the Lord stood by him and said, take courage for as you have testified about me in Jerusalem so you must testify also in Rome.

The Lord is still working but these men are blind to it. They've rejected the clear gospel and they do not know the plan and will of God. So what should we make of all of this in light of the rejection of the gospel that we see here?

I think there are three truths that those in Christ can apply from this text. Before we walk through those points of application for the believers, I think there are a couple points of application for non-believers to first consider.

Number one, do not dismiss the gospel without consideration like Festus. every part of our sinful flesh wants to see and hear the gospel and dismiss it as crazy talk.

[32:46] Second, do not give lip service, mere talk to God's kingdom like Agrippa. Genuinely and fully commit your life to the Lord.

God's kingdom and the first of the three aforementioned truths. It brings God glory for the gospel to be proclaimed.

Ofentimes, we can get caught up on results and numbers. Now, of course, results and numbers in this case refer to, they certainly matter because they refer to humans which God loves.

But as we go, as we share the gospel with coworkers, neighbors, family members, children, anyone which the Lord brings, we should know and believe that God is glorified in the proclamation of the gospel because we are telling others of his holiness, his mercy, goodness, justice, and love. The proclamation of the gospel as Paul has done here in Acts 26 also demonstrates for the hearers God's ancient plan for salvation, thereby showing his wisdom, power, and faithfulness to accomplish that plan.

[34:04] What great aspects of the Lord that we can proclaim as we share the gospel faithfully and that brings him glory. The second truth that we can know and apply is that we ought to desire for all people to become faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

When Paul responds to Agrippa's rejection and dismissal by saying that he wishes that Agrippa and all others present would become as he is, I would put forth to you that he does not merely mean that people would make professions of faith, but rather that they would all become fervent, determined, sharers of the gospel of Jesus, that they would become faithful, fruitful members of Jesus' church, as he is, except for the chains.

Lastly, we must prepare to share the gospel well. We must know who God is, what we have done to separate ourselves from him, and what Christ has done to restore us to him forever.

Last week, we sang a song together, The Horse That Draws the Plow. It is a sweet and faithful prayer to our Lord. This is its final verse. Lord, make your servant hopeful as the horse that draws the plow.

He bends his shoulders to the ropes and churns the stubborn ground. His toil will yield a harvest rich, although he knows not how. Lord, make your servant steadfast as the horse that draws the plow.

[35:39] We ought to work diligently in this preparation. We ought to make the time to study God's word well, individually, and communally. We ought to make the time to pray fervently for the lost in our lives, for our focus, for our boldness.

We ought to be steadfast in our ministry to those in our lives, our family, friends, and children. And we can know that we do not labor in vain.

we trust in a rich harvest, though we may not know how. Join me in prayer. Let's go.