

Text: Acts 26.1-8

Acts 26 contains Paul's hearing before Agrippa and Bernice. We set the stage with the last few messages. In today's message we will look at the first eight verses, containing Paul's preamble and opening challenge.

Scott Kellum, one of my commentaries, makes these points about the speech:

- Last and most detailed speech by Paul
- Contains nearly nothing that addresses any Roman legal issues
- Essentially, it is a defense of Christianity (in the apologetic sense)
- The first presentation of Christianity to the elites of Rome
- Paul confronts rather than accommodates to Greco-Roman society

"Jesus ... is the crucified and risen Messiah, and the legitimate heir of Judaism, each a stumbling block for educated Greeks to receive the gospel ..."¹

- I will add, Paul's message causes *most* Jews to stumble also

As we think about what Paul says on this occasion, I think we can find something reassuring to our own faith in Christ and insight into one of the great difficulties we face in evangelism.

For anyone who doesn't yet know Christ, these things ought to point the way to forgiveness of sin and eternal life.

Read Acts 26.1-8

Proposition: The resurrection of Jesus Christ pivots forever away from religion expressed in deeds to religion expressed by faith.

This idea is *The Transforming Issue* that connects Christianity with Judaism, but transforms and transcends everything Judaism represented.

I. The religion of Herod Agrippa [with inherent problems] (1-3)

A. The formalities as Paul begins (1)

1. Not a trial, a hearing
2. Felix allowed Agrippa to preside

¹ L. Scott Kellum, *Acts*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2020), 285–86.

3. Herod offers the floor to Paul

4. Paul, with a salute, accepts it

The brief words of v. 1 summarize a somewhat formal opening. They show that Paul is conversant with the formal customs of the Gentile world.

B. The expertise of Agrippa considered fortunate (2-3)

1. Agrippa's "expertise" prompts Paul's observations

a. Agrippa is "an expert in all customs and questions among *the Jews*" (3)

b. One of his prerogatives was the authority to appoint the chief priests

c. For this he gained considerable insight

1) In the "public Judaism" of the elites

2) In the politics of the temple (sometimes deposing one priest in favor of another)

3) In the rituals and customs of the Jews

a) Though Herod the Great was an Edomite, his descendants mostly Jewish

b) Despite secular ambitions, the Agrippas, at least, carried on an outward conformity to Judaism

c) Built an apartment adjacent to the temple to enable ease of access for the rituals

2. Paul's good fortune

a. No cultural barrier between his auditor and his message

b. Political insight would immediately understand the basis of the charges

3. Thus, Paul is glad to "make my defense" before Agrippa

a. ἀπολογέομαι — "to make an ἀπολογία" *i.e.* "to make a defense"

b. Used once by Agrippa (1) and once by Paul (2)

c. Transforms the presentation from a personal trial to:

“a defense of the Christian faith with Paul not playing the defendant, but witness for the defense”²

C. An evaluation of Agrippa and religion

1. Agrippa is a sophisticated and cultured Roman official
2. Religion forms part of daily life, and especially for him, is part of power politics
3. A man like Agrippa knows a lot about religion, but uses it for his own ends: makes no (or little) moral/spiritual impact

Nevertheless, Paul has some hope to make a connection, so he says:

therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently

II. The religion of traditional Judaism [and its failing perceptions] (4-5)

A. Paul’s well-known biography in Judaism (4)

1. We had this root in 1 Peter recently (βίος, biography, day-to-day life)
 - a. Here it is a similar form, βίωσις, meaning “manner of daily life” (used only here, and not in secular Gk, might be Paul’s or Luke’s own term)
 - b. Paul was well-known enough that his whole past record was known among the Jews
2. Paul states that he grew up immersed in Jerusalem Judaism

Ac 22.3 ¶ “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today.

Paul is emphasizing his solid connection with all things Jewish (even more solid than Agrippa’s)

² Kellum, 285–86.

B. Paul's record as one of the most zealous followers of Judaism (5)

1. Conditional statement [in reverse order]: "if they would testify, they could tell you" (3rd class cond. "but they probably won't")
2. The content of what they could say of him: Paul's strict Pharisaism
 - a. Most zealous of all the Jews (ancestors of the current Orthodox party)
 - b. Strict in every detail of Jewish observance
 - c. Paul elsewhere calls himself "a Hebrew of the Hebrews"

Phil 3.5-6 circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee;⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

He will get to more of this biography in the next section of the message.

C. The Jewish zeal for their traditions (7)

I want to look ahead to v. 7 here

1. The Jews themselves share this zeal
2. They serve "night and day" — a reference to the daily religion of the temple
 - a. The old Jewish religion is a religion expressed in deeds
 - b. Paul's implication is that this zeal isn't enough.

D. Paul's continuing connections with his religious past

1. "my own nation" (4)
2. "our religion" (5)
3. "our fathers" (6)
4. "our twelve tribes" (7)

Paul clearly emphasizes his connection with the Judaism Agrippa knows.

The further implication is the beginning of Paul's argument:

- Far from dividing himself from Israel, he sees himself connected to Israel
- Yet, the old way no longer attains, something else supersedes it, something better than everything the Jews labor for

III. The new religion of living faith [depending on the old promise] (6-8)

A. The focus of religion is promise, not politics

This marks a divide between Paul and Agrippa (and so many sophisticated people today — such religion as they have is a means for advantage in this life).

1. The promise God made to “our fathers”

a. Isaiah

Isa 25.6-12 ¶ The LORD of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, *And* refined, aged wine.⁷ And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, Even the veil which is stretched over all nations.⁸ He will swallow up death for all time, And the Lord GOD will wipe tears away from all faces, And He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; For the LORD has spoken.

⁹ ¶ And it will be said in that day, “Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.”

¹⁰ ¶ For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain, And Moab will be trodden down in his place As straw is trodden down in the water of a manure pile.¹¹ And he will spread out his hands in the middle of it As a swimmer spreads out *his hands* to swim, But *the Lord* will lay low his pride together with the trickery of his hands.¹² The unassailable fortifications of your walls He will bring down, Lay low *and* cast to the ground, even to the dust.

b. As held even in Maccabees

^{2 Ma. 2.18} As he promised in the law, will shortly have mercy upon us, and gather us together out of every land under heaven into the holy place: for he hath delivered us out of great troubles, and hath purified the place.

2. Paul points out that he is on trial for this hope

- a. That which the Jews strive for (7a)
- b. Is essentially the ground of the whole accusation (6, 7b)

B. The promise finds fulfilment in the resurrection (8)

1. Paul doesn't mention Jesus specifically here [but of course, that is what it is all about]
2. Paul raised the question of resurrection repeatedly in this dispute
 - a. First, as a testimony

^{Ac 22.8} "And I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.'

b. Then as an issue

1) Before Sanhedrin

^{Ac 23.6} ¶ But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul *began* crying out in the Council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!"

2) Before Felix

^{Ac 24.15} having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.

3. The resurrection (esp. of Jesus) brings the hope of Israel to its conclusion: This is what it is all about
 - a. Hope beyond the hopelessness of this mortality

- b. Hope beyond the endless ritual of religious performance
 - c. Hope beyond the cynical religious politics of the elite
4. Judaism comes to its conclusion in the birth of Christianity

“The true Jew must become a Christian in order to remain a Jew”³

Conclusion:

Proposition: The resurrection of Jesus Christ pivots forever away from religion expressed in deeds to religion expressed by faith.

This testimony reassures us: we are on the right track by faith.

This testimony enlightens us about our evangelistic challenge: the self-satisfied religionist must come to faith; the cynical politico-religious must surrender their pride.

But here, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the only hope of the world.

³ Hans Conzelmann, Eldon Jay Epp, and Christopher R. Matthews, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 210; quoted in Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 714.