

ACTS 26: PAUL'S TESTIMONY TO AGRIPPA

Have you ever changed your mind? Especially on something of the utmost importance? Even with the same information on hand? Today Paul will share his testimony with Agrippa. This is the third time he will go through this, which means Luke is trying to get a message across to us. Paul is going to explain how he moved from the mainstream Jewish view of the day to his faith in Jesus as Messiah, but he did it with, for the most part, the same information Agrippa and all the other Jews already have. The only difference is that Jesus tied all the information together. What was already there now makes more sense. And all this centers around the resurrection of Jesus, just as does our faith today.

Paul focuses on and testifies to Agrippa, most of the time, unless interrupted by Festus.

Agrippa is well-versed in the OT. (secular history agrees)

“You know I’m a Pharisee,” and all that entails.

For the first time in a while, Paul is able to tell/ state his case to someone who can appreciate and understand his theology. He is not speaking to a Gentile governor how

can't appreciate what he is saying because they don't have the background. Yes, he has spoken to the Sanhedrin, but it was never in an environment that was conducive to listening, conversation or understanding. In this hearing, all these things are present.

1 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself."

So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself: 2 "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, 3 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.

4 "My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. 5 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. 6 And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. 7 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. 8 Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?

Verses 4-8; Paul's background and how nothing he says contradicts this background. 'If we are in the same camp regarding our history and scriptures, then you too should believe in the resurrection. I am not introducing anything new into the conversation.

The Pharisees, as well as most other sects of Judaism believed in a general resurrection at the end of the age. Therefore, Agrippa, we should be on the same page.

9 "Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 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. 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.

Verses 9-11; At one time, I was also zealous against "the Way." Once again, they should be on the same page. Agrippa should be tracking with Paul. But then something happened. Let me tell you about it. This was Paul's testimony, tailored to this conversation.

12 “While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, 13 at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. 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.’ 15 So I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 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. 17 I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, 18 to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.’

If we accept the legitimacy of the scriptures, then you cannot fault me for listening to God. And that is just what I did.

1. Open their eyes.
2. Why do their eyes need to be opened? To turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. And why is this necessary?
3. That they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified (set apart) by faith in me.

All of this, Paul's Gospel, just like Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom goes back to creation, the fall, the tower of Babel and the dispersion and divorce of the nations. The goal is to bring all of humanity back into fellowship with the one true God – creator of all things. The Gentiles have been given over to worshiping pagan gods and the Jews have misconstrued their place in the world, so as to believe that simply being a Jew grants them access to eternity with God, putting them on the right side of the final resurrection. But as Paul states here, it is only by repentance and faith that anyone can gain an inheritance into the kingdom. Only God can sanctify, (set apart) – and that is done by believing that Jesus is the Messiah. And that translates into a new life – a new lifestyle, as we shall see in the next verses.

19 “Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance. 21 For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 22 Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come— 23 that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.”

Because of this vision and mission, I was given, I obeyed. I then did what I was told. I went from Jerusalem, in ever larger circles, moving from the Jews to the Gentiles, telling them to repent, turn to God, (by definition, repenting) and to then do works befitting repentance. (Not just a mental ascent to an idea, but that this repentance should lead to a change in one’s life. ‘How can you fault me for that? What have I said or done that warrants these chains?’ I’ve said nothing that should upset Caesar, in practice (explain) or anything that goes against our sacred scriptures.

But this is why I'm here. For this, and this alone, I stand before you in chains. There are no legitimate charges against me, and none can be proven.

But because I have had help from the same God you know from the scriptures, I am still able to stand before not only the common people, but also people of power and status, such as yourself in order to tell my story and further the mission given to me by the God we both know and serve.

I say only what Moses and the prophets said would happen; that the Messiah would suffer, would be the first to rise from the dead and would proclaim light to the Jews AND to the Gentiles. If we are coming from the same scriptures, how can you find fault with me?

Festus interrupts:

24 Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!"

Festus has little if no common background on these issues. He has heard all this before from Paul, but most likely thinks of all this as just another Jewish, religious,

fairy tale. Remember, he is still looking for a good legal reason to send Paul to Caesar. He still doesn't know what charges he will send with Paul. He has none. But Paul takes Festus' outburst in stride. Without batting an eye, he responds to Festus, while turning to Agrippa and places his focus back on the one man in the room who can appreciate what he is saying.

25 But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. 26 For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe."

"I am not mad, (crazy) most noble Festus. King Agrippa knows these things to be true, because they happened within his realm. They didn't happen in obscurity.

And then Paul puts Agrippa on the spot. He places the ball in Agrippa's court with a question and a statement he can only answer in one way; affirmation.

28 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian."

This verse can be translated as a question. **“Did you really think you could persuade me to be a Christian so easily?”**

Paul has thrown his best argument on the table, but Agrippa, though he has no answers, is not ready to go there at this point. He avoids the answer. Agrippa has some personal and political issues to work through and does what many people do – he deflects, in order to buy some time and most likely talk himself out of Paul’s logic and appeals to scripture. But Paul is not put off. Maybe he never thought he had a shot at convincing Agrippa, but he has done his job. The rest is up to the Holy Spirit. But Paul is honest in his reply.

29 And Paul said, “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.”

Don’t read this in a flat manner. Emotions, energy and zeal are flowing through the room. Paul states that he wishes that not only Agrippa, but everyone within earshot would be converted and be like him, with one exception – “these chains.” (Paul interjects a little humor,

as he looks on his chains, probably holding out his hands for all to see.

30 When he had said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them; 31 and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, "This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains."

32 Then Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

And with that, things are most likely a little awkward. Agrippa doesn't want to engage Paul as to the specifics. But that is ok. In the back of Paul's mind, he still has something to which he can look forward – going to Rome and doing it all again in front of Caesar. Everyone there has heard enough. And to be honest, there was a great deal to take in and process. That is ok.

We, like Paul are there to sow a seed, not necessarily to close the deal. That is great when it happens – and we should be available for follow-up when possible, but that won't happen here, unless someone asks for another audience. But Paul has done what he was tasked with doing. The rest is up to God.

Paul has played his hand, and many may think it has failed. But this is a long game. It is a marathon, not a sprint.

Paul sought out common ground, focused his argument, in this case, on someone who could appreciate all that was being said. And he focused it on the resurrection, not the crucifixion. That changes things. It's not just that Jesus died so we can go to Heaven when we die. The fact that He resurrected, and one day we will also, shows us that even now, we are already "resurrected" to a new life. That new life means change – not only in our thinking, but also in our actions – indeed our whole lives. Why? Because, while we are waiting on a kingdom that is still to come – one where everything is as it should be, right now, as God's imagers, we are to show, at the very least, a glimmer of what that will be like. We are a new creation. That is what baptism shows.

So, let's take these lessons from Paul as an example to how we are to think and live.

God bless.

