

I STAND HERE TO TESTIFY ABOUT JESUS

Acts 26:1-32

Key Verses: 26:22-23

But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”

In today's passage, Paul stands before King Agrippa. Paul was on trial yet again. And again he did not try to save himself. Instead, he gave a personal testimony. He testified to the grace of Jesus upon his life. It was more of Bible sermon than defense. May God help us to learn his faith in God and his shepherd's heart toward those who don't know Christ!

I. I AM ON TRIAL BECAUSE OF MY HOPE (1-18)

Look at verse 1. When King Agrippa said, “You have permission to speak for yourself,” Paul began his defense. He first acknowledged Agrippa's Jewish background. Paul said he considered himself fortunate to stand before the king to make his defense against all the accusations of the Jews, especially because Agrippa was well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies (2-3). Paul asked him to listen to him patiently. What were the key points of his testimony?

First, we have the same hope (4-8). Paul began by stating that his life was an open book to his fellow Jews. The Jewish leaders had known him for a long time. He said in verse 4, “The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem.” Before he became a Christian, he had been a devout Jew. He lived as a Pharisee, meaning his whole life was dedicated to the Jewish laws and traditions. They could testify, if they were willing, that he conformed to the strictest set of their religion (5). Then Paul said, “And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today” (6). Once again, he testified that it was because of his hope of resurrection that he was on trial, as he had done in three previous trials (23:6, 24:21; 25:19). This time, however, he testified that this hope of resurrection was also the hope of his Jewish brothers. He said in verses 7-8: “This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?” We know why the Jewish leaders were angry whenever Paul mentioned the resurrection of Jesus. They turned Jesus over to the Roman governor to be executed. Jesus was crucified. They thought that their problem of Jesus was gone forever. But if Jesus came back to life, their problem was not gone. They were in big trouble with God who raised Jesus from the dead. So they tried to suppress the truth about the resurrection. They spread false rumors about his resurrection. They tried to kill Paul who was talking about resurrection again and again. Still, Paul had a broken shepherd's heart toward them. He reminded them that he and they had the common

hope. Death is not the end of human life. God raises the dead. He wants his people to come to his kingdom for eternal life. Paul's heart was broken when he saw his fellow Jews rejecting the love of God.

A person cannot live a meaningful life without hope. You might say, "I have many hopes. I have hope of getting a good job, getting married, getting a promotion, and buying a nice car." These are small hopes we have in this world. They help us to work hard. But they cannot be our true hope. This kind of hopes disappoints us because they don't last. Our hope in Jesus Christ is different. This hope is everlasting as the kingdom of God is eternal. Paul had this hope and wanted to share it with others, even as he stood trial as a prisoner.

Second, I was obsessed with persecuting Christians (9-11). Paul said in verse 9, "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth." Paul was sorry to see his fellow Jews opposing the name of Jesus. He reminded them that he had acted the same way until he came to know Jesus personally. He said, "I've been there and done that." Actually, Paul had been obsessed with persecuting Christians. He could not stop thinking about Christians day and night. His consuming thought was to crush them. What did he do? In Jerusalem, he obtained the authority of the chief priests so that he could put many of the Lord's people in prison. When they were put to death, he cast his vote against them. He was in charge of killing Stephen who was stoned to death. Many a time he went from one synagogue to another to have them punished. He even tried to force them to blaspheme (11). We don't know exactly how. Perhaps he tortured them to deny the name of Jesus, the Son of God. He was so obsessed with persecuting them that he even hunted them down in foreign cities (11). He was like a Mossad agent who would go anywhere in the world to hunt down enemies. So why was Paul telling this story? He wanted his Jewish brothers to see what they were trying to do. He wanted them to come back to their senses. He wanted them to avoid the mistake he had made before God.

Third, my life was changed when Jesus appeared to me (12-18). In verses 12-15. Paul recounts how he personally met the Risen Christ. This story is repeated in Acts three times—Luke's narrative in Acts 9, Paul's testimony before the Sanhedrin (Ac 22), and today's passage. Each version is slightly different in details. His testimony before Agrippa tells us that his conversation with Jesus was substantial. Paul's point in telling the story again was that if this could happen to him who fanatically opposed Jesus, it could happen to anyone, especially the Jewish leaders. So what happened? It was one of the journeys he took to Damascus to arrest Christians there. He was carrying a letter of the authority and commission of the chief priests. Suddenly, about noontime, he saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around him and his companions (13). It was the light of Jesus (Jn 8:12). Paul fell to the ground and Jesus spoke to him personally. What did the Risen Christ say to him? In Aramaic Jesus said to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (14). The Risen Christ knew Paul by name. The Lord asked him "Why do you persecute me?" Paul thought he was doing God a service by crushing the Christians. But actually he was persecuting the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Then the Risen Christ said, "It is hard

for you to kick against the goads.” A goad was an 8-foot wooden stick tipped with a pointed piece of iron. Farmers used the instrument to control a rebellious animal. If the ox kicked against the contraption in rebellion, it would injure himself as the sharp metal point pricked him.

In his ignorance, Paul kicked against the goads. He hurt the Christians but actually he was hurting himself. After killing a devout Christian leader Stephen, he suffered a lot. The image of Stephen’s smiling face haunted him. Paul wondered how a person could die smiling when he was stoned to death. Inwardly, Paul was suffering more than those he persecuted. How about us? Do we ever hurt ourselves by kicking against the goads? I think so. Sometimes we become rebellious before God and refuse to follow the ways of God. We try to go our own ways, kicking and screaming. Then we would find later in hindsight that we were hurting ourselves by not obeying the word of God. We would say, “Why didn’t I just obey the word of God then? I would have grown much faster, had I obeyed him!”

Paul had been kicking the goads, because he did not know Jesus. He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” the Lord replied (15). Paul’s heart was broken because his fellow Jews were kicking the goads. If only they knew Jesus personally! Paul’s life was changed forever after the meeting. The Risen Christ changed him into a new creation. He was born again. But that was not all. His hope was changed. His life direction was changed. Jesus said to him in verse 16, “*Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me.*” The Risen Christ called him to be a witness to his resurrection. He was changed from God’s enemy into an apostle, God’s chosen servant for world salvation. From this time on, Paul identified himself as a servant of Christ Jesus. He lived the rest of his life with this clear identity.

Paul’s life was changed 180 degrees. But his dramatic conversion was followed by many difficulties. The Christians were suspicious of his sudden change. The Jews wanted to kill him for betraying them. However, the Risen Christ said to Paul, “I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles” (17a). Jesus promised that he would rescue him. When the Risen Christ says he will rescue a person, that person will be rescued. Paul accepted this promise of protection in his heart. Paul entrusted his life to the Risen Christ. From that time on, he boldly went wherever the Risen Christ sent him, with the full assurance of God’s protection.

Look at verses 17b-18. “*I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.*” The Risen Christ saved Paul to use him as a blessing to the whole world. The world is in darkness, under the power of Satan. God sent Paul to turn people from darkness to light, from Satan to God. Jesus wanted all people of all nations to hear the gospel and be saved. Verse 18 says that the Gentile believers would receive a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Jesus. This is amazing. The Jews considered the Gentiles as “pigs” unworthy of salvation. But Jesus said that anyone who believes in him has a place

in heaven, no matter what his or her race, occupation, or ethnic background may be. In his great shepherd's heart, Jesus sent his servant Paul to the Gentiles to share this wonderful news.

II. I WAS NOT DISOBEDIENT TO THE LORD (19-23)

How did Paul respond to God's calling to be a witness? He said in verse 19. "*So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven.*" He probably felt uneasy to preach the good news of Jesus Christ whom he had been persecuting. But he decided to obey the vision from God. What did he do? He preached the gospel of Jesus Christ, beginning right there in Damascus. Then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles. What did he preach? He preached that "they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds" (20). But many Jews did not repent. Instead, they became hostile toward him. He said in verse 21, "*That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me.*" Paul preached the gospel from day one of his conversion. It was not easy. He had to face many persecutions. But he was not discouraged. He said in verses 22-23: "*But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.*"

Paul wanted them to know two things. **First**, God enabled him to preach the gospel. God helped him all the way. In fact, he was standing there to testify to small and great alike, because of God's help. He testified in a letter to the Corinthians, "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1Co 15:9-10). **Second**, he was saying nothing beyond what the Old Testament scriptures prophesied. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus was prophesied in the prophets and Moses. The scripture also said that the Messiah would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles. If only the Jews would study the Bible with open hearts, they would hear the voice of the Lord just as he did! Paul was saying to the Jewish leaders, "Don't listen to me because I am a clever guy. Listen to me because what I am saying is rooted in the scriptures that you hold so dearly." Once again, he appealed to them to accept the love and mercy of Jesus who suffered and died for their sins and who rose from the dead as the firstfruit of their resurrection.

III. PAUL'S SHEPHERD'S HEART FOR AGRIPPA (24-32)

At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane" (24). The Roman governor couldn't understand why Paul used this opportunity to talk about resurrection, forgiveness of sins and a place in heaven, instead of trying to save himself. Paul's

defense did not make sense to him. What did Paul say in response? He said, “I am not insane, most excellent Festus.”

Paul was accused of being crazy. Jesus was also accused of being crazy. Actually we are all crazy about something such as video games, TV shows, or sports. Right now, NCAA basketball tournament is going on. They call it March Madness. Why? Because people are crazy about it. According to a recent report, companies lose nearly \$4 billion in lost revenue as their workers watch the games during work hours. The thing is that if you are crazy about sports or other hobbies, people would say that you are a passionate person. However, if you are crazy about Jesus, they would look at you like you are really crazy. Festus called Paul insane because he talked about Jesus with such passion.

What else did Paul say in his reply? He said, “What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do” (25-27). We can see that Paul considered King Agrippa as his Bible student. He really wanted him to come to know Jesus as his personal Savior. Perhaps Paul knew that Agrippa had a tough life. He was only 17 years old when his father died, eaten by worms because he took God’s glory for himself. No one took the junior seriously. He didn’t become king until he was 30. And he would be the last king of the Herod Dynasty. Paul wanted Agrippa to make a decision of faith to accept Jesus as his Savior. Agrippa realized this. He said, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” *Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains”* (29). What an amazing statement! Paul had a broken shepherd’s heart for King Agrippa and all those who were there. Where did his shepherd’s heart come from? It was from remembering the grace of Jesus who saved a man like him from his sins and who gave him a mission vision.

In today’s passage, we learned how Paul stood trial before King Agrippa. Rather than trying to secure his own freedom, he testified to the death and resurrection of Jesus. He had a broken shepherd’s heart toward his Jewish brothers, including the king. Once again, he shared his hope of resurrection. Then he said, “I pray to God that all of you may become what I am, except for these chains.” Things of this world will all perish, spoil and fade away. We cannot have true hope in anything in this world. May God help us to have true hope in the kingdom of God!