

Paul Before Agrippa – The Light of the Resurrection Acts 26:1-32

Scripture Reading: Psalm 71:17-24

Introduction

How many of you watched at least a part of the Senate confirmation hearing of Judge Kavanaugh?

I didn't watch any of it live but I did see some clips of highlights from it on the internet

And as I watched him sitting there before the senators and their staffers I thought about just how intimidating that experience would be

I noticed how the senators were sitting somewhat higher than Judge Kavanaugh and how from that point of advantage some of the senators said some pretty harsh things about the judge and how they fired questions at him regarding some pretty deep and difficult matters and then repeatedly interrupted his answers to engage in more speechifying

Those hearings were very serious and Judge Kavanaugh's career and in some measure his reputation lay in the balance as any of his answers could be used to trip him up and end his quest to be on the US Supreme Court

How do you think you would fare under such harsh scrutiny before a largely hostile yet powerful assembly?

Most of us would be intimidated and few of us would even be coherent let alone sharp in those circumstances

Background

As we look at our text this morning we are going to see that Paul found himself in a situation much like that of Judge Kavanaugh only in Paul's case it was even more serious – his was a matter of liberty or imprisonment, it was in many respects a life or death situation

Last week we saw how the new Roman governor, Festus, had agreed to hear the charges against Paul from his Jewish accusers and how after hearing them he realized that their dispute with Paul was theological in nature and that Paul was innocent of any violation of Roman law

Festus should have set Paul free immediately upon learning of his innocence but he was afraid of what the Jewish leaders would think so he put forth what he saw as a reasonable compromise

He offered Paul the opportunity to return to Jerusalem to stand trial again before the Sanhedrin under his watchful eye regarding the religious questions

But Paul, no doubt recognizing the danger inherent in returning to Jerusalem, used his right as a Roman citizen and appealed to have his case heard before Caesar in Rome

Suddenly Festus found himself in an even more precarious spot than being between Paul and the Jewish leaders as he now found himself between Paul and Caesar because he had no charges against Paul that would warrant his being sent to Rome and Festus risked being seen for the novice in handling legal matters that he was

But just then Agrippa and his sister Bernice arrived in Caesarea to meet the new governor and Festus saw his way out as he arranged to have Paul make his defense before Agrippa who was well versed in Jewish law and customs

Festus hoped that Agrippa would thereby be able to advise him what to write to Caesar concerning Paul's charges

We saw how Festus wasted no time and he hastily set up the hearing inviting not only Agrippa and Bernice but also the commanders of the Roman troops and all the leading men of the city

It was a grand affair and everyone was richly attired as they entered the court with a great deal of pageantry and readied themselves to hear what this fellow Paul might have to say

Festus was desperate to get off the hook of his own poor performance and Agrippa was merely curious as Paul was led in and made to stand before this room full of notables

And as we see in **verse 1** Agrippa gave Paul the floor as he said "You have permission to speak for yourself."

I think Paul was in a situation that most of us would find daunting to say the least

But as we are going to see he was far from intimidated as he faced the largest, perhaps most influential audience God had given him

As we work through the passage we are going to see how Paul **uses his opportunity**, how he **targets his message**, and then **calls for a decision**

I. Paul Uses His Opportunity

Look with me at **verses 2-3** as Paul begins to speak and sets the stage for his message – Paul says:

“I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, 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.”

Paul was pleased because he knew that Agrippa was an expert in the “customs and controversies of the Jews” so he believed that Agrippa would understand what he was about to say far better than Festus possibly could

Paul was there before Agrippa to defend himself against the charges brought against him by the Jews

But as we are going to see Paul doesn't so much defend himself as he takes the stand but rather uses the opportunity to defend the gospel

When we looked at **Acts 24** we saw Paul **use his opportunity** to address Felix and his wife Drusilla

We saw how he met them where they were by speaking to them about **righteousness, self-control**, and the coming **judgment** and showing them how the gospel addressed their needs

And he might well have taken a similar tactic with Agrippa and Bernice

They were a **grossly immoral pair living together in an openly incestuous relationship** so Paul could have easily talked to them about the same subjects as he did with Felix and Drusilla

But Paul was a master at reading his audience and he knew that what he could address in private was far different than what he could address in public

Because to shame Agrippa publicly before such an august assembly would cause Agrippa to react in self-defense and to summarily reject Paul's message

From this we see that we must also know our audience and tailor our message to that audience for maximum effect

It's not that the facts change but our emphasis and our approach must strike a chord with our audience

We must continually strive to know who we are addressing and what will resonate with them

We must work from the circumstances in which we find ourselves as we look for a “hook” to share the gospel with others

Paul taught in the synagogues by showing from Old Testament prophecy and its fulfillment that Jesus of Nazareth had to be the sought for Messiah

He taught Gentile audiences who were steeped in philosophy from the perspective of the creation and sustaining of the earth to show them who God is and to point to Christ

He talked to Felix and Drusilla about how God had made provision for their moral failings

And in the next and largest section of our passage we will see how Paul **targeted his message** as he spoke to an expert in the things of Judaism and walked him along step by step showing that what he was preaching was in perfect continuity with Judaism and was actually perfectly logical

II. Paul Targets His Message

Paul began by establishing his Jewish heritage by telling of his life before conversion to Christianity

Follow along as I read **verses 4-11** –

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. 5They 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. 6And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 7to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! 8Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

9“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10And 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. 11And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

Paul begins by stating that his Jewish heritage is well known and he solicits testimony to it from whoever is willing. He says he started life as a Jew of the dispersion among his people and that he was raised in Jerusalem and that he followed the strict moral code of the Pharisees.

He made much the same claim in **Philippians 3:5** which states -

[I was] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee

Paul claims that his **pedigree**, his **education and upbringing**, and his **life up to this point** have been impeccably lived as a devout Jew.

He has lived a life of public piety from birth to this day and his actions have always been in the center of Jewish orthodoxy and there are people who have known him for a long time who could attest to that fact.

Then in verse 6-8 Paul gets to the central issue that has him standing before them today – his belief in the resurrection of the dead.

And Paul states that his belief in the resurrection is also at the center of Jewish orthodoxy.

Israel has always looked forward to the end-times resurrection and it is well attested in the Old Testament Scriptures.

Daniel 12:2 is perhaps the clearest, best known example of this sure and certain hope as it speaks of the two ends of all mankind:

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

As a side note, the word “many” can cause some confusion because we expect the word there to be “all” but what is meant is not “many” as opposed to “all” but “many” as in the great numbers involved.

Romans 5:19 is another example of the word “many” being used to mean “all”

For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.

The general resurrection of the dead in the end times is in view in Daniel.

Isaiah 26:19 also plainly refers to the resurrection –

Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead.

As does **Psalm 71:20** where David clearly expresses confidence in God raising him from the dead –

You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will revive me again; from the depths of the earth you will bring me up again.

We won't look at all of these but we could also cite: Psalm 49:10, 15; Psalm 16:10, Job 19:25-26 and many others

Let's look at one more, **Deuteronomy 32:39** where God says:

See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

With this verse we need to look at the position of the verbs because it is critical to our understanding

When the verse says "I kill and I make alive" we need to understand that in the same way as "I wound and I heal"

The first action comes before the second and the second action is necessary because of the first

So clearly what is being expressed is that God claims to be able to make that which is dead alive once more

Confidence in God raising the dead has consistently been a part of the fervent corporate worship of the Jews

And Paul's logic then is that since God **can** raise the dead and has said he **will** raise the dead no one should be

surprised that God **does in fact** raise the dead – **and by extension has raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead**

Paul then offers proof to show that he wasn't pre-disposed to believe in the resurrection of Jesus either

In verses 9-11 Paul details the scope and intensity of his opposition to the idea that Jesus of Nazareth was Messiah

He was the **fervent persecutor** of those who followed Jesus and, by extension, of Jesus Christ himself

Paul was a **Pharisee** who in the general sense believed in the resurrection of the dead unlike the Sadducees who denied the very idea of a resurrection

But he simply couldn't accept that resurrection had occurred in the case of Jesus so he saw it as his moral obligation to do all that he could to oppose those who were claiming that it had happened

So Paul could understand the reluctance of his accusers – he had once been like them to the point that he went after the followers of Jesus like a wild animal persecuting them beyond Jerusalem and Judea "even to foreign cities"

Having thus set the stage Paul then describes his experience on the road to Damascus in verses 12-18

***12**"In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. **13**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. **14**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.' **15**And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. **16**But rise and stand upon 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, **17**delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you **18**to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and 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.'*

We don't need to go through this account on a point by point basis because we've seen two earlier accounts already

But we do want to note that Paul's emphasis in this relating of his encounter is that this Jesus, who up to that point he had considered to be a dead messianic pretender and whose followers he was harming all he could in order to make them renounce their claims, was alive!

Jesus was not only alive but he overpowered Paul and showed him that he was waging a battle that he could not win and that would only cause him pain as long as he continued

Jesus used the analogy of an animal kicking against the pointed stick used by the farmer to move them along which only caused them pain but did nothing to halt their being prodded along

One summer years ago during one of my many layoffs I worked on a pig farm

People say that pigs are smart but you would not have known it by this farmer's pigs because when moving them we often used electric prods to keep them moving and some of those pigs could have 30 yards of open ground in front of them and still back up into the prod just to keep from going where we wanted them to go

And that was what Paul was like in his resistance to the truth

He had no philosophical reason not to believe he just was being pigheaded in his disbelief

I also want to point out the multiple uses of the metaphor of "light"

We see the word light repeated twice in this section – in **verses 13** where Paul describes the bright light that knocked him down and in **verse 18** where the idea of light is used to indicate life with God as opposed to darkness without him

Paul uses the word "light" again in **verse 23** with the idea that the message of the gospel provides the light of salvation

If you've ever been on a commercial airplane you've sat through the safety announcement given at takeoff

And you've heard the flight attendant say, "In the unlikely event of a loss of cabin pressure a panel will open revealing oxygen masks..."

And a bit later on the flight attendant gives the instruction to put your own mask on before helping someone else with their mask

In a similar way, Paul reveals that he had been shown the light so that he might spread the light to bring people from the darkness into the light

We are all saved for a reason and Jesus himself told Paul the reason for his salvation was so that he could open the eyes of Jews and Gentiles alike so that they could "turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God"

And we have seen all along as we look at Paul in Acts that he has been devoted to that mission

Paul next turns to his response to his Damascus Road encounter and what happened as a result

It's not surprising given Paul had come face-to-face with the risen, exalted Christ that he was not disobedient!

As we saw when we looked at Acts 9 and beyond to this day Paul immediately got busy spreading the light to everyone he could which resulted in the Jews trying repeatedly to kill him – most recently in the incident in the temple at Jerusalem

And the hatred of the Jewish leaders provides Paul with a proof of his rightness because God had continued to protect Paul and if God was helping him then everyone would have to understand that he was on God's side

Lastly then Paul again expresses that everything he believes and said and done is in perfect continuity with Moses and the prophets who pointed to a suffering servant who would be killed and rise from the dead to bring salvation to the entire world

Paul was clear in his testimony and what he expected was also clear to those in the room

Paul was preaching for a decision and everyone knew it

Festus was the first to react in **verse 24** –

***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."*

Paul had laid out a compelling, first-person account of the resurrection of Jesus and the decision it demands is clear and convicting

So Festus reacts in the only way he can think of to avoid becoming a Christian on the spot and he declares that Paul is a maniac and that his testimony is the rambling of a madman

By turning to an ad hominem attack, Festus was able to rationalize his rejection of Paul's message – who could be expected to listen to someone who was obviously out of their mind?

Notice though that Paul's response was measured and respectful

Paul didn't lash back at Festus

He calmly states that his words have been nothing but true and rational and therefore are reliable

He had even invited witnesses to come forward and confirm his testimony and now in **verse 26** Paul looks to Agrippa to verify what he had said about the Old Testament and the resurrection of the dead

Remember, the resurrection of Jesus was an historical event that was attested to by many – even though the Jews, Paul included for a time – had decided to reject it and to try to cover it up

Paul's ministry was also well-attested as many would no doubt line up to describe what Paul had been up to

Everything Paul had testified to was well known

In all likelihood there will be people who are also going to call us crazy when we present the gospel

Like Paul, we must have the courage to call for an impartial and fair assessment of the facts of history because we have nothing to fear from intense scrutiny

Faith is not belief in spite of the facts; faith is belief because of the facts

III. Paul Calls for a Decision

Having laid out the facts and dealt with Festus' interruption asserting that he was out of his mind, Paul turned to Agrippa and **called for a decision**

Look with me at **verse 27** where we see Paul turn with intensity to address Agrippa and ask –

“King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets?”

That simple question put Agrippa in a very tough spot because Paul doesn't ask for a decision regarding his own guilt but for a decision concerning the validity of his message

Suddenly, the questioner has become the questioned and Agrippa who was there to hear Paul's defense in suddenly on the defensive

To say that he doesn't believe the prophets would be completely unacceptable

But to say that he believed would mean accepting Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah unavoidable

You can almost hear the plaintive tone in Paul's voice as he says to Agrippa, “I know that you believe” urging him with every fiber of his being to accept Christ in that moment

But rather than accept, Agrippa asked a question meant to get him out of the spot he was in

In **verse 28** he asked Paul – *“In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?”*

Agrippa was close to being persuaded – Paul had gotten to him and his question implies that not much more conversation would be needed to convert him

And Paul replies that he is willing to take as long as it takes if it will lead to Agrippa becoming a Christ-follower because Paul wants everyone to be a Christ-follower like himself and he will do whatever it takes to make them one

While we can't determine the tone of Agrippa's question for certain the fact that he used what was at that time a derogatory term for a follower of Christ only used by detractors seems to indicate that he asked his question in a way that was meant to be insulting and dismissive

And that may have led Paul to try a small joke to lighten the moment as he mentioned he wanted everyone to be like him except for his chains

The end of the matter

And with that Agrippa signaled the end of the meeting as he hastily rose to leave

Agrippa had come close to being persuaded; close to eternal life, close to having his sins forgiven, close to reconciliation with God, close to being delivered from hell

But, as they say, close only counts in horseshoes and hand-grenades

And Agrippa's words and actions only further convict him as he showed that he understood and was close to accepting but chose instead to reject what Paul offered

Look with me at verses 31-32 as we see God's hand again as he uses another official to declare Paul's innocence

***31**And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment." **32**And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."*

It was clear to all that Paul was innocent and Festus had not gotten anything to write to Caesar as he had hoped

There is no charge against Paul that can be supported by evidence

Still, it seems that having appealed to Caesar Paul can't be set free

Whether that was because the appeal couldn't be retracted or it was because Festus lacked the political will to set Paul free and face the wrath of the Jews we can't be completely sure

What we do know is that God has promised Paul that he must testify in Rome and it seems that Paul is headed to Rome because of his appeal and Festus and Agrippa put the blame for his continued incarceration on Paul

Conclusion

I want us to take some specific lessons from this passage

1. Paul was more interested in defending the gospel than in defending himself

Paul was, in many respects, in a fight for his life and yet he chose to present the gospel to his audience rather than mount a defense for himself

Partially, this may have been because he knew he had done nothing wrong and therefore would not be found guilty in a just court of law anyway

But I think it was also because **Paul truly believed in the resurrection of the dead**

Therefore he knew that this life was not all that there is and that he would one day live again in the presence of God forever and there was nothing the authorities could do to change that

Paul truly believed what he wrote in **Philippians 1:21** – "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" and what he wrote in **Romans 8:28** – And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Far too often we find that we quote those passages and others like them and we claim to believe them

But our lives tell a different story as we fret and worry over this life and cling to it and our satisfaction and safety in it the same as those who don't claim to believe in the resurrection

For Paul, self-preservation took a back seat to gospel presentation – Paul kept his priorities straight

We need to live accordingly as we rely on the promises we claim to believe

2. Paul took the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 seriously and he was intent on carrying out the mission that Christ had personally given him on the road to Damascus

Paul was diligent in making certain that he witnessed wherever and whenever he had opportunity and he adjusted his message to fit his audience so that it stood the best chance of having maximum impact

I was once accused somewhat tongue in cheek of preparing a “testi-phony” when I was asked to give my testimony in a particular setting and I said I was working on fitting it to the occasion

Almost as if I were going to make things up to make it appealing but what I was doing was calculating the aspects of it and considering how best to present it

And that’s exactly what we will do if we are wise –

We need to study our audience and find out how to tell them the facts in a way that will resonate with them and then be faithful in the telling

3. Paul remained respectful even as he was being resolute

We have been given the task of making disciples which includes sharing the gospel so that people will be saved

To do that we need to be firm and unyielding in sharing what the Bible teaches but we need to do so in a way that doesn’t drive people away – we need to be winsome

Far too often believers seem to be focused on winning arguments more than on winning souls

We must never compromise on the truth but we must also always present the truth in such a way that it is the only thing that offends

4. Paul lived life with a clear conscience

And if we are to be successful we must endeavor to do the same

We are all going to mess up from time to time but we need to be quick to correct our errors, to apologize, to make restitution

Again, we need to be sure that the only thing any outsider could ever have against us is that we believe in Christ so that others will look at them and say as was said repeatedly about Paul, “I can find nothing to say against him”

Let’s pray