

**ACTS 26-27 PAUL SPEAKS BEFORE FESTUS & AGRIPPA; SAILING TO ROME**



In this Bible Study, we start with Paul's speech in a more informal setting before the Roman governor Festus and the Jewish king Agrippa.

We read in Acts 26:1-3, "Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'You are permitted to speak for yourself.' So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself: '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, 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.'"

Paul began by saluting and thanking the king for the opportunity to explain his present situation.

As *The People's New Testament Commentary* brings out, "Agrippa had been brought up in the Jewish religion, professed to be a steadfast Jew, was the legal guardian of the Temple, and hence was well versed in all the Jewish customs. He was therefore competent to be a judge of an accusation of treason to the religion and law of their forefathers. Paul felt it a privilege to defend himself before one who was prepared to decide whether his preaching was contrary to Moses and the prophets, or, on the other hand, a fulfillment of them" (notes on Acts 26:1).

So Paul's defense is more polished here. Bruce mentions, "In it he undertakes to show that neither his manner of life nor his teaching should arouse hostility, especially on the part of Jews. The construction of the speech is more careful than usual, the grammar more classical, and the style more literary, as befitted the distinguished audience" (*The Book of Acts, Revised*, p. 461).

Paul continues, "My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. 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. And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. 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. Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?" (Acts 26:4-8).

Paul's defense rested on his experience with the resurrected Jesus and with it, the hope of future stages of resurrections for everyone.

Bruce comments, "Before Agrippa, as previously before the Sanhedrin and before Felix, Paul insisted that his case hinged entirely on the resurrection hope; but by it he meant that hope as realized in 'one Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul claimed to be alive' (25:19). Even Festus had grasped something of the message, despite his total lack of background. Why should those who believed in the resurrection of the dead find it difficult to believe that God had in fact raised up Jesus, thus designating him 'Son of God in Power' (Rom. 1:4). If God did not raise up Jesus, why believe that he raises the dead at all? So Paul now reasoned, but once upon a time he had reasoned quite differently" (op. cit., p. 463).

Paul goes on, "Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 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. 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" (Acts 26:9-11).

Paul openly admitted he had once denounced the very faith he was now professing. Even if he believed as a Pharisee in the future resurrection of the dead, he had thought it impossible God would have raised the crucified Jesus.

As Bruce brings out, "When the disciples insisted [God] had indeed raised him, Paul treated them as charlatans and blasphemers. Their movement, as he saw it, was a cancer attacking the vitals of Israel's life; it must be uprooted, and Paul himself eagerly took the lead in uprooting it. Armed with the authority of the chief priests, he said, he went from house to house and dragged the followers of Jesus off to jail; he went from synagogue to synagogue and enforced judicial proceedings against them, and when they were put in jail, he cast his vote for their condemnation and demanded the death-sentence against them" (op. cit., p. 464).

Paul continues, "While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, 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. 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'" (Acts 26:12-14).

For the first time we learn the language of the heavenly voice was Aramaic (a dialect of Hebrew) and it had been implied because the spelling of Saul's name in both Acts 9:4 & 22:7 was Aramaic.

Some think the mention of kicking against the goads meant Paul had guilt feelings and pangs of conscience in persecuting Christians, but he later wrote that in spite of his blaspheming, violence, and persecution of the church he was shown mercy because he was acting in ignorance and unbelief, not against his conscience (1 Tim 1:13).

Paul continues, "So I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 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. I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, 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'" (Acts 26:15-18).

Here is a marvelous explanation of the Gospel – to open the world's eyes as God allows, turning deceived people who will be called from following the god of his world (Satan) and from being in darkness to follow the light of truth so they can have an inheritance in the coming kingdom of God.

Paul then concludes, "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 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. For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 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—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" (Acts 26:19-23).

Notice here that Paul says those converted will "do works *befitting repentance*." So Paul is basically saying the same thing as James, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:20). This is why traditional Christianity has erred saying salvation is not conditioned on good works, but by faith alone. Conversion does mean obedience to God so there *will* be "works befitting repentance."

The narrative finishes with these words, "Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, 'Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!' But he said, 'I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. 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. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe.' Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'You almost persuade me to become a Christian.' 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.' When he had said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them; and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, 'This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains.' Then Agrippa said to Festus, 'This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar'" (Acts 26:24-32).

Festus thought Paul's teachings were outrageous, but the Jewish king Agrippa did not. He in fact was so impressed with Paul's handling of the Scriptures that he was almost convinced to follow him. But, of course, Agrippa knew if he did, he would have to forsake much of his wealth and power, which as a king he was not willing to do.

So both Festus and Agrippa found Paul had not violated either Roman or Jewish law, yet since Paul had appealed to Caesar, he must be sent to Rome.

Luke writes, "And when it was decided that we should sail to Italy, they delivered Paul and some

other prisoners to one named Julius, a centurion of the Augustan Regiment. So, entering a ship of Adramyttium, we put to sea, meaning to sail along the coasts of Asia. Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, was with us" (Acts 27:1-2).

So Paul, Luke and Aristarchus are on their way to Rome by sailing from Caesarea to Sidon. Barclay comments, "Two things must have lifted up his heart. One was the kindness of a stranger, for all through the voyage Julius, the Roman centurion, treated Paul with kindness...The other...was the devotion of Aristarchus...It is probable that Aristarchus chose to act as the slave of Paul rather than be separated from him--and loyalty can go no further than that" (notes on Acts 27:1).

Luke continues, "And the next day we landed at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him liberty to go to his friends and receive care. When we had put to sea from there, we sailed under the shelter of Cyprus, because the winds were contrary. And when we had sailed over the sea which is off Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra, a city of Lycia. There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing to Italy, and he put us on board. When we had sailed slowly many days, and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, the wind not permitting us to proceed, we sailed under the shelter of Crete off Salmone. Passing it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea" (Acts 27:3-8).

Barclay explains, "The voyage began by coasting up to Sidon. The next port of call was Myra but things were difficult. The prevailing wind at that time of year was the west wind and they could make Myra only by slipping under Cyprus and then following a zigzag course up the coast. At Myra they found a ship from Alexandria bound for Rome. She would be a [grain] ship, for Egypt was the granary of Italy. If we look at the map we can see what a long way round she had to take; but the strong west winds made the direct journey impossible. After many days of beating against the wind she slipped under the lee of Crete and came to a little port called Fair Havens" (notes on 27:3).

Luke's narrative of the trip is quite accurate. Bruce mentions, "It has long been acknowledged as 'one of the most instructive documents for the knowledge of seamanship.' It bears clear evidence of being the account of an eyewitness, who viewed the sea

through Greek eyes and, while not himself a seaman versed in the technical vocabulary of sailing, described his experiences in his own vigorous language" (op. cit., p. 474).

Luke then relates, "Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now dangerous because the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, saying, "Men, I perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives" (Acts 27:9-10).

The "Fast" refers to the Day of Atonement which Paul and Luke had undoubtedly just been keeping.

As David Stern notes, "It is as a matter of course that Luke writes of the Jewish holiday Yom-Kippur (the Day of Atonement). This is evidence that Paul continued observing Jewish practices, keeping the Law until the end of his life (see Acts 13:9; 21:21; 22:3). It also lends strength to the contention that Luke himself was Jewish or a proselyte to Judaism; he would otherwise be unlikely to measure time for his Gentile reader (Acts 1:1-4) by the Jewish calendar" (*The Jewish New Testament Commentary*, notes on Acts 27:9).

Samuel Bacchiocchi adds an important point, "In the light of Luke's aim to show the continuity in the Christian's use of the Jewish religious calendar, it seems feasible to conclude that Luke's incidental reference to 'the Fast' presupposes that the Christians also observed the Day of Atonement as a day of fasting and prayer. Second, if by the time of Luke's writing (about A.D. 59), the Day of Atonement was no longer observed by Christians, the time reference to 'the Fast' would hardly have been understood by the majority of Christians. Yet Luke assumes that his Christian readers understood what he meant, because he refers to 'the Fast,' incidentally, without a word of explanation. In the light of these considerations, it seems plausible to conclude that Luke's incidental reference to 'the Fast,' presupposes the observance of this important Holy Day among Christians...These allusions presuppose, as several scholars acknowledge, that Christians observed a Christianized form of the Hebrew calendar during the Apostolic Church" (*God's Festivals in Scripture and History, Part 2*, 1996, p. 192).