

PAUL'S DEFENSE BEFORE
GOVERNOR FESTUS AND KING AGRIPPA
Acts 25-26

Over the course of these past 35 plus years, I have preached sermons based upon single sentences and even, at times, upon a single word. But today – for the first time – we are going to cover two entire CHAPTERS of the Bible in a single sermon!

Acts 25-26

Proverbs 22:29 reads,

"Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will stand before kings..."

Back in Acts 23:11 we read of Paul being encouraged one night while under arrest by the Lord's words of comfort to him: "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, you must testify also in Rome."

So Paul has been operating, all the way through this, with a belief that he would eventually testify in Rome. But that he would also be testifying before two governors (first Felix and now Festus) PLUS King Agrippa and his wife, Bernice...well, that apparently was not also in his vision or dream that night when the Lord spoke to him.

But sure enough, here we read of his now SECOND defense (before Festus) and then a THIRD defense (before Festus, Agrippa and his wife, Bernice).

And if Paul was like any of us, usually the more times that one goes through something, the better one gets.

Years ago, the church that I pastored had grown from having one morning service, to two services to finally having three morning services. Melanie Garland's father was part of that church and he used to chide me about being paid for just one hour of work on a Sunday morning. When the church reached the point of having THREE Sunday morning services I suggested to him that given his reasoning, it was about time the church tripled my salary!

But preaching three times was an interesting ordeal. As I preached the SAME sermon to three different groups, there was no question but that with multiple times, it improved. I can remember comparing it to going bowling. I don't know about you, but my second game is ALWAYS better than my first game. If I bowl 3 games, it usually ends up being a toss-up as to whether the second or third time is the best. But the first game is always the poorest of the three.

Well, here is Paul, and he already has had to give a defense against Tertullus and the Jewish leaders before Governor Felix. But even there, it apparently went fairly well for Paul for Felix was enough convinced by Paul that there was no way he was going to condemn him or hand him over to the Jews.

And now we read of the next governor, Festus, and again Festus is hardly convinced of the case being made against Paul. The Jews, as we read of here in Acts 25:3 were hoping that Festus might agree to have Paul sent back to Jerusalem and then, at that time, they would arrange an ambush upon him and kill him. This was, as you may recall, the same plan of some 40 men way back when Paul was first arrested in Jerusalem.

But Paul, being the Roman citizen that he was, and apparently convinced that he was not going to get any real justice in the land of Israel, had appealed to Caesar. And so that famous line of Acts 25:12,

"To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go!"

And now we have the Jewish puppet king, Agrippa, showing up. Israel, though an independent nation at this time, was still under the hand of Rome. Like other nations at that time, Israel had its own set of rules and laws and governance, nevertheless everything it did was ultimately subject to Rome and Roman law. So Agrippa was a Jewish king, in the line of the Herods that had preceded him. But he was still subject to Rome and in a twisted sort of way had to ascribe his allegiance to Rome.

And with the arrival of Agrippa and his wife, Bernice, in Caesarea (the ocean side resort town of the Roman Empire), Paul is brought before them all to tell his story. This time it seems Paul is not so much giving a defense in answer to some accusers (there being no mention of any accusers in chapter 26). Rather, Paul is just telling his story. And what a wonderful story it is...

Of how God transformed the life of Paul – a man who had previously opposed the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, having persecuted them, arresting them, and taking pleasure in their deaths.

But isn't that how God works?

When I was still a teenager, I read the book The Cross and the Switchblade by Dave Wilkerson. Pat Boone would later star in a movie of the same title. There I read of how Dave became convicted of his need to witness to members of street gangs that were taking over certain sections of New York City. Dave Wilkerson was going way out of his comfort zone to talk to these fellows about Jesus, but it paid off. For when several of these gang members (including the worst of the worst, Nikki Cruz) came to faith in Christ, they became tremendous witnesses for Christ.

Or it is like that book that my dad gave me to read when I was just a young boy of 10 or 11 years of age: The Last of the Giants by Harry Rimmer. There I read the story of Frank Higgins, a big man with an even bigger heart and how he desired to see the lumberjacks of the northern U.S. come to faith in Christ. These lumberjacks (this was back in the early 20th century) were a rough group of men: strong, tough and mean. So Higgins would come into their camps and challenge the toughest man there to a fight. Inevitably he would beat that man. Then, now often quite beaten and maybe bleeding, he would call the rest of the men around him and tell them about the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The point is that God often uses the toughest, the meanest, the most difficult, or even the strongest **OPPONENT TO THE GOSPEL** to, in the end, becoming the toughest, strongest and most out-spoken **DEFENDER OF THE GOSPEL!** That's what happened with Paul. At one time he opposed the good news about Jesus and everything having to do with it, but now here he was, before a governor and a king giving his best defense to date on why one should become a Christian.

Now, like last Sunday, let's make a number of points from these two chapters...

1. The church can learn a lot from the Roman system of justice. Look at Acts 25:16. Here we have Festus explaining to Agrippa what had happened in reference to Paul...

Acts 25:16

How different this is than what I have sometimes experienced in the life of the church, wherein, because of the accusation of some unnamed individual, a pastor or church leader, has been rail-roaded out of the church. I know of a case whereby a church leader literally BEGGED the church leaders to allow him to FACE HIS ACCUSER so as to explain his actions (believing that the charge against him was based upon a misunderstanding), but the elders would not allow it, choosing instead to demand his resignation. What was done against that man was wrong...so wrong. God will judge those elders.

In Matthew chapter 18 Jesus instructed us as to how we are to deal with problems in the church. And that process begins not with backbiting, nor with gossip, nor even with going to someone else (even a church leader or pastor) to tell them of the problem. Rather it begins by going to that person privately and talking to them FACE TO FACE. Roman justice required a FACE TO FACE interaction between an accuser and the accused. And the church should require the same.

2. Again we find the resurrection of the dead is at the heart of Paul's defense...

26:8

That is a great line. It really is. Years ago I put that line on the church sign around the time of Halloween. After all we live in this age that is seemingly consumed with notions of the presence of the dead, of zombies, of spirits and ghosts. An incredible portion of the American public believe things that go WAY BEYOND what we, as those who believe in a risen Savior, believe.

But the idea of a resurrection of the dead is at the heart of everything we ultimately believe in: that God gives life to that which has no life. We were making this point just a few Sunday's ago but there is certainly an irony in

the fact that we are putting forth the idea of God giving life to a dead body (and that is deemed absurd) while the scientific community puts forth the idea of an inanimate universe suddenly giving rise to life, and not just to life, but to life in a plethora of INCREDIBLE DIVERSITY AND SYMBIOSIS. And THAT, it is suggested to our children in the public school system, is rational and reasonable!

So the pre-theoretical types believe in zombies, while the theoretical types believe in spontaneous generation.

And all the while our belief in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is deemed incredible nonsense. Go figure!

3. There is no salvation without repentance.

26:19-20

Recently I was interacting with a younger pastor regarding the whole LGBTQ community and how the church should be engaging with them. What became obvious to me was that this pastor and I were on two very different planes in viewing these people. For while we were in agreement that many factors could lead one to be involved with or to adopt such a lifestyle, where we differed was on what we would then ask of these who desire to be part of the Christian community. This younger pastor's attitude was basically "Hey, we're all sinners. No one is guiltless. And so unless we are going to say to everyone, 'You must be spotless to be part of this church' we need to accept them as they are."

My attitude was different. It was (and is), "Yes, we are all sinners. But we each come to Christ only one way, and that is as sinners in need of repentance. And unless we are going to call ALL to repentance, we are not calling ANY to faith in Christ."

The trouble today is that repentance – a turning away from sin – has not and is not being taught and preached as it was taught in the scriptures. Some might say, "Well, people aren't preaching repentance like they used to." The issue is not how we are doing compared to how they were doing 20, 50 or 100 years ago. That's like people saying, "You don't hear sermons on hell like you used to." "Like you used to" is not our standard.

This is not a comparison of religions: of ours compared to our parents or grandparents. Someone might tout their church saying, "Well, it's not your grandparents kind of church." But who cares about our grandparents "kind of church." Our

grandparents didn't set the standard for church, for faith or for true religion.

Rather our standard is the SCRIPTURES. And when we turn to the scriptures we find

- John the Baptist preaching, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."
- Jesus shows up soon afterwards and begins his teaching ministry with the words, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."
- And then Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem and preaches "Repent"
- And then Paul, in Acts 17:30 says to those in Athens, "The former times of ignorance God has overlooked but now he commands all people everywhere to repent."

Repent...repent...repent...repent.

We cannot open the New Testament scriptures and get away from the fact that this was the message of the early church. So don't talk to me about your grandparents or the "good old days." Talk instead of how we're doing compared to the early church. Are we preaching repentance like John, Jesus, Peter or Paul preached it? If so, good. If not, we're deficient and need to change.

So back to the LGBTQ community, I am sorry for your confusion as to your own sexuality. It truly troubles me that you are so troubled. I sincerely hurt for you. I so appreciate what Pete Buttigieg has said of his own struggles, talking of his praying to God that somehow God would make him like others (not having an attraction towards other men). My prayer for Pete is that while he believes he has found some peace in just stopping his inward battle, he would yet find a true Biblical freedom found in obedience instead of in an acquiescing to his feelings.

But we all need to repent. And repentance is not just a one-day event. It is, rather, a lifetime activity.

Think of the Lord's prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread and lead us (and the implied is **lead us THIS DAY) not into temptation**, but deliver us from evil."

May God help us all to that end.

4. Christ is but the first of the resurrection.

v.23

Was Paul ignorant of the scriptures?

Did he somehow forget

- The widow of Zarephath's son, in the days of Elijah (1 Kings 17) or
- The Shunamite woman's son, in the days of Elisha (2 Kings 4) or
- The Israelite man's whose body was in the grave, in the days of Elisha (2 Kings 13) or
- The widow of Nain's son, in the days of Jesus (Luke 7) or
- Jairus' daughter, in the days of Jesus (Luke 8) or
- Lazarus (John 11)?

All of these are recorded "raisings of the dead" that took place PRIOR to Christ's own resurrection from the dead. Did Paul FORGET all these?

No. We are back to an issue that I have addressed many times and it is the difference between raisings and resurrections. When one was RAISED back to life, in the Bible, one was raised back to life ONLY TO DIE AGAIN. These raisings were temporary...like the person who is healed of some disease only to later come to have the disease again. In much the same way their facing death was but "in remission." For they would face it again.

But with Jesus we have one who was buried corruptible but who then put on incorruption, put to death with a mortal body but was raised with an immortal body, put to death with a perishable body but raised with an imperishable body.

He was, in that sense, truly the FIRST of the resurrection. That's what Paul was talking about in Acts 26:23.

5. Lastly, Paul's appeal to Caesar was not a mistake.

One might conclude that, given the final statement we read here in chapter 26...

26:30-32

The entire rest of the book of Acts is going to deal with Paul's traveling to Rome. But that could have been deleted and Paul could have continued on in his missionary journeys if he hadn't appealed to Caesar. So was it a mistake?

No. For his appeal is what secured for him the very thing that God had shown to him that one night (back in 23:11) that he was going to "testify in Rome." In the end we have no actual record of Paul speaking before Caesar but, based upon how Rome operated it would seem likely he did so.

But it was all under God's sovereign hand.

Sometimes we make decisions that later we second guess. We bought a stock, or we took a job, or we asked someone to marry us. These can be small or (in the case of marriage) very, very BIG decisions. And then something comes along – like these words of King Agrippa in Acts 26:32 – and it may leave us second-guessing what we had done earlier. But I don't believe that is how we are to think.

Like the theme of more than a few songs:

If we have been given lemons, we should learn to make lemonade

And if we made a bad decision, we should learn to make the best of it.

Some decisions can be undone.

- We can sell that house and buy another.
- There are always other cars for sale.
- That stock purchase – even if we take a loss, we still should be able to sell it.

Some decisions can be undone. But in general, we should learn to make the most of our decisions. To, as one friend said to me long ago, "Never move unless God is moving you."

Well, "To Caesar Paul appealed and so to Caesar Paul was to go." And next week we'll pick up on the rest of the story of Paul's making his way to Caesar and to Rome.