

Gamma

Acts 21-26 (LG)

Study 18 The Trials of Paul

Facing the Jewish Mob

1. 21:30 -22:22.

a. What does it tell us about Paul that he would turn and speak to the mob when he did?

Why would he care enough for them to want to share his faith with them? Maybe after some time for Paul's anger and fear to subside, he might still want to win them to Jesus — but it is amazing that he conquered those feelings and had such compassion for people that he could call a group of men who had just tried to kill him “brothers” and then calmly and respectfully urge them to hear the message of Jesus. This is a kind of love that really is remarkable. Why would he trust enough, why would he risk his neck to share his faith with them, when the danger was so high? The only answer is that Paul saw an opportunity to talk to an assembled crowd in Jerusalem, and he knew very well that he would not be able to have this opening again. Paul was so eager and hungry for opportunities to share his faith, he was willing to risk his life in a most unpromising situation. In summary, the love and courage of Paul was enormous by this point in his life. He had reached a plain of belief in the gospel that very few others (if any) attain.

b. How is Paul's speech specifically instructive for us?

A) First, we must learn the incredible balance of Paul in communication.

1. On the one hand, there is amazing boldness that Paul showed. Paul did not have to turn and try to witness to a mob that had just beaten him within an inch of his life. So we see he had courage and was willing to take any opportunity to speak. We too then must be willing to take some initiative. We do not have to wait for someone to say, “you are a Christian — tell me all about it — please, please!” Some Christians won't take initiative unless there is that level of invitation. We need to be bolder than that.
2. On the other hand, we see Paul being enormously generous and flexible with his communication. He avoids all unnecessary offense. He clearly shows great respect for the world-view and life of his audience. He not only identifies with them, but he complements on their good points and ignores (for the moment) their bad points! At least, that is how he starts. He gives them credit for all their good motives and leaves their bad ones aside. Of course, in the end, he tells them all they should know, but he stresses the positive and the inoffensive at first, and only gradually moves to the difficult. This combination of courage and deep sensitivity is extremely rare. We either refuse to say anything, or we speak offensively.

B) Second, we learn that even the greatest effort at gospel communication can fail. Though Paul make absolutely every possible attempt to avoid offense, the crowd literally ignited (and perhaps, got worse). So we may find that, despite all our work, people still reject our message and may even be very hostile to us. If we get through our lives as Christians without ever upsetting or offending anyone, we have not ministered with integrity.

c. Have you had experiences in which someone became very offended by what you said about your faith? In light of this passage, was the reason for that mainly in you or mainly in them (or both)?

Our experiences Many of us had situations in which people were offended when we tried to talk about our faith. Often these incidents were with family members. (Thousands of college students have come home from campus to offend their parents deeply by informing them that, despite having grown up in their family church, they had only just now “become Christians”!) But there have been other incidents. To analyze what happened, ask yourself if a) you were flexible and as inoffensive as Paul, and if b) you were as compassionate as Paul. **Paul’s motive here was obviously not to win the argument, but to win the hearts.** Was that your motive? Did you work hard at “giving credit where credit was due”? After all, Paul tells this murderous crowd that he knew they really were trying to honor God. Have you given people who didn’t believe the gospel credit for what they are doing right? On the other hand, realize that even if you were as great as St. Paul, many people will still want to kill you! (Maybe, if we were as great as St. Paul, there would be more people who would want to kill you than there are now.)

Facing the Sanhedrin

2. 23:6-10. What was Paul’s tactic in this hearing? Did it work? Was Paul more concerned with his own welfare or more concerned for the truth?

Paul knew that the Sanhedrin was divided between conservative Pharisees and the liberal Sadducees. Paul now announces that was a Pharisee by training and belief, and that he stood for the resurrection of the dead (which the Pharisees accepted and the Sadducees did not. This immediately set the two parties at such odds with each other that the Roman commander had to end the meeting with a detachment of troops! Once again, the inquiry is abandoned; no charges are brought or made to stick. The tactic was brilliant in this regard.

But was Paul simply being cagey and practical? Some commentators have felt that Paul was being deceptive by calling himself a Pharisee when he really was not. He was simply playing this card for effect. That is unfair, however. The Pharisees were supernaturalists, who believed in miracles, the soul, in the resurrection, in the absolute necessity of the fulfillment of the whole moral law, in the infallibility of the Scripture, and in the coming of a Messiah. In all of these things Paul was most definitely still a Pharisee — indeed, he would say that he was more truly a Pharisee than all the others, because through Christ the entire law was completely fulfilled. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Scripture, the Messiah, and is the one who brings us to the resurrection. The Sadducees denied every one of these things, and therefore their theology was farther from Christianity.

“A Sadducee could not become a Christian without abandoning the distinctive theological position of his party; a Pharisee could become a Christian and remain a Pharisee — in the early decades of Christianity at least. It was not until 90 A.D. or thereby that steps were taken to exclude Jewish Christians from participation in synagogue worship.” (Bruce, p.453).

So Paul’s statement was not only savvy, it was a witness for the truth. Paul was genuinely concerned with true doctrine, and the anti-supernaturalist stance of the Sadducees was inimical to the gospel.

Facing Felix

3.

- a. **24:1-9. Make a list of the charges brought against Paul before Felix? What evidence is mustered for each charge?**

There were three basic charges against Paul lodged by the priests and elders through a lawyer named Tertullus.

First, they accused him of being a “troublemaker” (v.5) who “stirs up riots among Jews all over the world”. This is a reference to something that was very close to a fact. There had been numerous arguments, conflicts, and even some rioting at many cities where Paul ministered. But the implication had “serious... political overtones. There were many Jewish agitators at that time, Messianic pretenders who threatened the very ‘peace’ that Tertullus had attributed to Felix (v.2)”. (Stott, p.360) This charge was so serious that Luke himself is probably trying to refute it in this very book of Acts. He shows that the rioting and the agitation was all the responsibility of Paul’s opponents, it was not the purpose of Paul’s ministry. Luke’s account in Acts shows that competent and impartial judges repeatedly confirmed that the Christian movement was not undermining the peace of society or the law of Rome.

Second, they accused him of being “a leader of the Nazarene sect” (v.5b). The word “sect” in this usage seems to be an effort to distance Christianity from Judaism. Judaism was recognized and accepted as a protected religion under Roman law. Christians had enjoyed this same protection because they also preached the God of the Bible, and in the Roman eyes, the differences between Christians and Jews were minor. Tertullus is trying here to identify Christianity as a new, unrecognized, and dangerous religion.

The third charge was the most specific. They accused him of trying “to desecrate the temple” (v.5c). This is reference to the belief that he had brought Trophimus, a Gentile, into the temple courts, in clear violation not only of Jewish law, but of Roman law which allowed the Jews power to punish offenses against their temple laws. This is again very serious, because if it was true, Felix was obliged to hand Paul over to the Jewish leaders’ jurisdiction.

The basic gist of the accusations here and in all these trials is this: a) They charge him with acting contrary to Moses (of being unfaithful to the Scriptures and the faith of his people), and b) they charge him with acting contrary to Caesar (of being a disturber of the peace and of undermining society).

The evidence, however, is incredibly weak. The accompanying elders joined in the accusation (v.9) but Tertullus can only urge Felix to cross-examine Paul to find out the truth of these things. This means that Tertullus is pinning his case on the hope that Paul, given enough rope, will say something to hang himself. Perhaps Tertullus and company were so self-deceived that they thought Paul would admit some of these things.

b. 24:10-21. How does Paul defend himself against the accusations?

In vv.11-13 and vv.17-19 Paul takes on the first and third charge that he has disturbed the peace in general and broken the temple law in particular. “My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone... or stirring up a crowd in the synagogue or anywhere else in the city.” (v.12). In other words, the rioting and disturbance was caused completely by his opponents and attackers. He continually points out that the accusations are unsubstantiated and can easily be refuted by recourse to eyewitnesses (such as Claudius Lysias) about the incident at the temple. Then in vv.17-19 cannily challenges them to explain why they could not even make a charge stick in front of the Sanhedrin. Here he refers to his hearing before the Jewish court in early chapter 23. This is a great move. Paul is pointing out that he has already appeared before the highest Jewish court of appeal, and they failed to find him guilty of any of these things. So, in summary, if neither Claudius Lysias (i.e. the Romans) nor the Sanhedrin (i.e. the Jews) could find fault with him, why should there be any question now? The remaining objection is that Paul is the leader of a “sect” and therefore is not being true to the faith of his people. Paul will not admit that Christianity is a “sect” — but only that “they call [it] a sect” (v.14). Rather, he makes four assertions to claim that he propounding a faith that is continuous with Biblical religion and with the faith of his people. He says a) I worship the God of our Fathers, (the God he worships is not a different God but the same God that Moses worshipped), b) “I believe everything that agrees with the Law and... Prophets” (he accepts the whole Scriptures), c) I have the same hope in God (he clings to the same promises in resurrection and judgment in the Bible that his accusers cling to), d) I strive [also] to keep my conscience clear. (v.14-16). He is saying that ultimately he is not an innovator. He worships the same God, abides by the same standards of truth, and hopes in the same salvation as they

Facing Festus

4. 25:1-12. How do the charges differ this time? Why did Festus offer Paul a trial in Jerusalem? Why did Paul refuse Festus’ offer of a trial in Jerusalem and claim his right to appeal to Caesar?

The charges mentioned (v.7-8) are again regarding the Jewish and civil law, but for the first time Caesar is mentioned. Why?

“The Jews knew that the Roman governors were unwilling to convict on purely religious charges, and therefore tried to give a political twist to the religious charge” (A.N.Sherwin-White. Roman Society and Roman Law in New Testament Times. p.50) In other words, the religious leaders now realized that they could never get Paul convicted by a Roman governor on moral/religious grounds. Now they knew that they had to convince the civil authorities that Paul undermined the peace and civic order. Therefore they accused him of causing disturbances that disrupted the pax Romana, the peace and harmony in society under Roman rule. Festus asked Paul if he wanted a trial in Jerusalem before the Sanhedrin. This was within the governor’s rights, because he could use anyone, including the Sanhedrin, as his jury or as his judicial council. Festus’ offer could not have been well-meant toward Paul. If he was totally ignorant of the hostility of the Jews toward Paul, then he might have been giving Paul a chance to be tried by his own people, on his own “home turf”. But surely he could see the real situation, how the Jews wanted nothing more than to get him back. Why was Festus willing to sacrifice Paul to them? It is not hard to understand. He had just begun as governor of Judea, and the Sanhedrin was the

highest court of the people he was to rule. It would be very politic to begin his administration by doing something to gain their favor. That politics, and not concern for justice, was seen by the fact that Festus completely ignored the fact that the Sanhedrin had already tried Paul and failed to find him guilty. (23:30ff; 24:20) Paul, however, knew his danger. When he realized where Festus was going in his desire to please the Jewish leaders, he realized that his only hope was to completely remove himself from under the governor.

“If Festus began by making a concession to the Sanhedrin, he might be inclined to make further concessions even more prejudicial to Paul’s safety. Felix had been an experienced administrator of Judea when Paul’s case was submitted to him, but Festus was a novice, and the Sanhedrin might well exploit his inexperience to Paul’s disadvantage. There was one way open to Paul as a Roman citizen to escape from his precarious situation, even if it was a way attended by special risks of its own... appeal to Caesar”. – F. F. Bruce, pp. 477-478 The right of appeal to the emperor was a right that Roman citizens had enjoyed for centuries. It was not merely the right of “appellatio”, the right to appeal the ruling of a lower court, but it was the right of “provocatio”, the right to a trial in Rome. No Roman citizen could be forced into a trial by a body outside of Italy

Facing Agrippa

- 5. 26:1-23. Trace each stage of Paul’s defense by giving a one sentence argument that summarizes his point in: vv.2-3, vv.4-8, vv.9-11, vv.12-16, vv.17-21, vv.22-23. Most of us do not have such dramatic “testimonies” such as this one, but what can we learn from Paul for our own sharing of our experience?**

Trace each stage of the argument. **vv.2-3.** Here Paul is not simply flattering the king, but signalling the direction of his case. a) He is going to assume that the king know much about Biblical teaching (“you are well acquainted with Jewish customs and controversies”), and b) he is going to assume that the king has the intelligence and intellectual seriousness to listen to a sustained argument (“listen to me patiently”). Paul has, therefore, assessed the his listener and adapted his argument to him. Then by giving him such a sincere compliment he, he begins the defense winsomely. Summary: “I sense in you the intelligence to listen to a full presentation — so here goes.” **vv.4-8.** Paul opens by showing evidence that he is completely committed to the Biblical faith of his fathers. He shows that he was a “Pharisee of the Pharisees” — as versed in and committed to the Biblical truth and Law of God as anyone ever has been. Also, like the Pharisees, he was committed to the future hope of the resurrection of the just. Summary: “Despite the charges, my record shows that no one has studied and loved the Law of God or hoped in the resurrection more than I, and I have not changed!” **vv.9-11.** Here Paul brings out a second fact — his violent persecution of Christians. This important argument really makes several points. a) First, it proves again that he was very committed to the Biblical faith, and b) second, it also in a sense shows that he understands how people could be opposed to Christianity and see it as a betrayal of the faith. c) Third, this part of his record “sets us up” for the next stage of his case, since we now know that the evidence for Christ must have been very strong to turn around someone like this. Summary: “Indeed, I can understand how my brothers feel—I once saw Christianity this way myself. But the evidence for Christ was so strong it changed my mind.” **vv.12-16.** The first of the two lines of evidence that Paul uses is the reality of the resurrected Christ. Here Paul recounts his meeting with Christ on the Damascus road. That this was not a hallucination or just a personal vision is seen by the fact that “we all fell to the ground” when the

blazing light of Jesus shone on Paul and his companions (v.13-14). In this version of his experience he stresses that he was to be sent out as a witness to the Christ he met. Summary: “When I was confronted with the reality of the resurrected Christ, it changed the whole direction of my life.” **vv.17-21**. Here Paul gives Agrippa the explanation for the hostility of Jewish leaders. It is not because he is being untrue to the Biblical faith and the hope of Israel (see vv.22-23), but because he proclaiming that through Christ the Gentiles can share and be included in the Biblical faith and the hope of Israel. Summary: “I am accused not because I am unfaithful to our God, but because I teach that through Christ the Gentiles can also know our God.” **vv.22-23**. The second of the two lines of evidence that Paul uses is the testimony of the Scriptures. He argues that the Bible pointed to and looked to Jesus Christ. Everything about him was predicted, namely, that through his work, his death and resurrection, he would bring salvation (“light”) to both Jew and Gentile. Notice this careful acknowledgement of a daring truth — that the Jews need salvation from Christ as much as the Gentiles. Here, though he is treading very lightly, Paul shows the real reason he is being persecuted. Not only is it that through Christ, the Gentiles can know the God of Israel, but only through Christ can the Jews be “right” with their own God. So, though Paul is proclaiming the God of Israel through the Scriptures of Israel and pointing to the hope of Israel (resurrection unto eternal life with God), he is putting Jew and Gentile on an equal spiritual footing. They equally need Christ’s “light”, and they can equally receive it. Summary: “And when I looked at the Scripture, I found that it predicted this same Christ, through whom both Jew and Gentile can have the light of God.”

How does Paul’s testimony give us pointers for our own? There are numerous principles — here are just a few. The group can think of many others: First, Paul shares his testimony repeatedly. This is the third time it is recorded in this book. Second, Paul adapts his testimony each time. We will look at this more next week, but it is clear from a quick scan of the three accounts that there are significant differences. Why? It depends on who he is talking to. He plays up certain features and leaves others out depending on whether he is talking to secular people or religious people. Third, Paul always concentrates as much on the personal life change as on the account of the experience itself. In each case, there is great stress on his fanatical and angry “before” condition contrasted with his new “after” condition. They are described in great detail. In the same way, it is important in our testimonies to talk about the actual difference Christ makes for us. It is easy to focus on the details of how you actually found Christ. Too much emphasis on that may give people the false impression that their own process must be just like yours.

6. 26:17-23. What does Paul tell Agrippa here about a) the need for salvation (our lost condition), b) the method of salvation (how to become a Christian), and finally, c) the ground of salvation (the reason God can save us)?

We really see Paul the evangelist at work in these final verses, especially. Though the ostensible purpose of the address is to clear him legally, his purpose is to convert his listeners, especially Agrippa. The audience saw Paul as the man in chains, but Paul spoke as the free man — and as if it were his audience in chains. He wants them to be as he is (v.29). Therefore, we see him providing some very clear summary statements of the gospel.

The need for salvation

In verse 18 we have a great little summary of conversion. The first half of the verse tells us what God does for us, and what condition we are in. He “opens their eyes” and breaks “the power of Satan” over us. In other words, we are spiritually blind and spiritually enslaved (though we don’t know it). Our spiritual inability is such that God must turn us toward the light (cf. Acts 16:14).

The method of salvation

But the second half of the verse explains what we are to do. We a) receive forgiveness of sins, and b) a place among those who are sanctified. Becoming a Christian is to receive forgiveness — not to merit it or earn it. And we do not merely receive forgiveness (which is “negative” — a pardon for our failures), but we also receive a “place”, a reward, which is also “received”, not earned. This is a place for those “sanctified by faith in me (Christ).” It is common for us to think of “sanctification” as only the process of becoming more godly, and often the word is used like that. But the word “sanctified” usually means to be “set apart as holy”. Since the word is in the past tense in v.18, we see what an tremendous offer this is. The word “received” does not only refer to the forgiveness, but to the place. So, when we believe in Christ, we receive — then and there — both a pardon and a standing with God, in which he treats us as holy and sanctified.

We also must not be too individualistic in our reading of v.18. Paul is not just promising a place, but a place among. We are received into a community, a family. When we get God as our Father, we immediately and automatically get a new set of brothers and sisters.

“For the new life in Christ and the new community of Christ always go together. What was specially significant was that the Gentiles were to be granted a full and equal share with the Jews in the privileges of those sanctified by faith in Christ, that is, the holy people of God.” – Stott, p. 374

The ground of salvation

Without verse 23, though, it would be hard to see what “faith in... [Christ]” is. In verse 23 he makes it clear that it is not faith in Christ as Teacher or example (though he was a peerless Teacher and a perfect example). Rather, it is though what he did — his death and resurrection — that secures for us our forgiveness and our place. So we do not become Christians by just “living for Christ” in some general way, but by transferring our trust and faith from our efforts and work to Christ’s efforts and work. Summary: Paul is saying, “When we believe in Christ, we receive complete pardon, and we are accepted by the Father as holy and blameless in Christ.”