

Acts 26

PAUL'S FIFTH DEFENSE: BEFORE KING HEROD AGRIPPA II AND BERNICE

The first twenty-three verses give Paul's address, outlined by Bruce

- 1. The complimentary exordium Acts 26:2ff.**
- 2. His Pharisaic heritage Acts 26:4ff.**
- 3. His former persecuting zeal Acts 26:9ff.**
- 4. His vision on Damascus road Acts 26:12ff.**
- 5. His lifelong obedience to vision Acts 26:19ff.**
- 6. His arrest Acts 26:21.**
- 7. His teaching Acts 26:21-23.**

The rest of the chapter gives Festus' interruption and the exchange between Paul and King Agrippa (Acts 26:24-29), also the conclusion of the meeting Acts 26:30-32.

Acts 26:1 Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Thou art permitted to speak for thyself. Then Paul stretched forth the hand, and answered for himself:

Thou art permitted ... As a vassal king, Agrippa was in town to honor the all-powerful deputy of Caesar, whose "five resident cohorts of the Imperial Army under his command" spoke eloquently of the dreaded authority of Rome on the Tiber. Thus, as Hervey said, "It was by the courtesy of Festus that Agrippa thus took the chief place." That this is true appears from the fact that Agrippa, with like courtesy, does not say, "I permit thee to speak," but gives the permission impersonally, "Thou art permitted, etc." This is in the 3rd person.

Paul stretched forth his hand ... This characteristic gesture of the great apostle is frequently mentioned, and there must have been something quite unusual about it. Did he make this with the arm that was encumbered by a chain? What dramatic authority of this gesture so impressed Luke that he so frequently spoke of it? Somehow, the power and nobility of that sweeping movement of the apostle's arm comes through for all who read this after so many centuries.

Acts 26:2 I think myself happy, king Agrippa, because I shall answer for myself this day before thee touching all the things whereof I am accused of the Jews:

I think myself happy ... The privilege of addressing a king and the governor was one that Paul appreciated. Paul had already been cleared of all charges of sinning against Caesar, he could confine himself strictly to things pertaining to the gospel, which things alone were the cause of the hatred of the Jews ...

Accused of the Jews ... "The Jews" ... Paul did not mean "the whole nation of the Jews,". Alexander Campbell translated this expression simply as "Jews," both here and in Acts 26:7, as having in both passages the meaning of "certain Jews."

Acts 26:3 Especially [because I know] thee to be expert in all customs and questions which are among the Jews: wherefore I beseech thee to hear me patiently.

Especially ... Not only was Paul glad for the opportunity of addressing a man who, unlike Festus, was knowledgeable of the Jewish religion, the Holy Scriptures and the prophecies which foretold the Messiah; but also, the chance to speak to these last representatives of the Herodian kings must have thrilled Paul's heart ... but, beyond this, he hoped for an opportunity to open the young king's heart to the truth.

Hear me patiently ... Paul made no promise of being brief, as had the Jews' lawyer, Tertullus (ter-TULL-uhs) Acts 24:4, the inference being that he would speak at length, which it may be assumed he did. This entire chapter may be read aloud in less than five minutes and when it is considered that Paul certainly must have spoken for at least half an hour, the brief outline is all that is found in Luke's record found here in the 26th chapter of Acts.

Acts 26:4 My manner of life from my youth, which was at the first among mine own nation at Jerusalem, know all the Jews;

Barnes stressed the great likelihood of Paul's having been "distinguished in the school of Gamaliel for zeal in the Jewish religion," for the same was attested by his receiving a commission against the Christians Acts 9:1. It may then be deduced that some of Paul's bitterest accusers had known him during his school days and as the young persecutor.

Acts 26:5 Which knew me from the beginning, if they would testify, that after the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.

Paul does not here disclaim being still a Pharisee, "because it was for the chief hope of the Pharisees that he was now accused."

The straitest sect ... This was a proper description of the Pharisees' beliefs, which stressed the utmost compliance with the Law of Moses.

Acts 26:6 And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers:

"the hope of the promise ..." Without any doubt this refers to the Messiah, the promised Savior who would take away the sin of the world. The relationship of the coming of the Messiah to the Pharisees' belief lay in their faith in the resurrection of the dead. That belief in

the resurrection was the foundation upon which the primitive church received the resurrection of Christ. As Paul said, cf:

Romans 1:4 And declared [to be] the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead:

By stressing this common ground between the Pharisees and the Christians, the belief in the resurrection of the dead, Paul hoped to enlist on behalf of the truth any good will that might have remained among the Jews.

Acts 26:7 Unto which [promise] our twelve tribes, instantly serving [God] day and night, hope to come. For which hope's sake, king Agrippa, I am accused of the Jews.

Twelve tribes ... Despite the widespread opinion to the effect that the ten northern tribes "were forever lost," there is no doubt that "Many of the ten tribes had at various times returned to their country," Anna, for example, having been of the tribe of Asher cf: Luke 2:36, Paul himself was of the tribe of Benjamin and Levi is mentioned in Hebrews 7:5.

For which hope's sake ... refers to the hope of the resurrection of the dead as proved by the resurrection of Christ. In fact Paul made our Lord's resurrection to be the only sure proof of that hope. Milligan said, "He taught that the hope of Israel was to be found only in Christ and through Jesus of Nazareth!" This, of course, infuriated many of the Jews; but this seemed to Paul an incredible behavior on their part.

"I am accused of the Jews ..." Here again, the proper translation would be "accused by Jews," that is, some Jews or certain Jews. Harrison agreed with Campbell on this, rendering it "by Jews." Paul's meaning was given by him thus: "It is an utterly amazing thing that Jews who have hope in the resurrection should accuse Paul for

entertaining the same hope." MacGreggor translated it as: "Jews, of all people!"

Acts 26:8 Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?

This identified Paul's principal accusers as being the Sadducees who denied the resurrection and Paul's testimony that Jesus had risen from the dead further identified them as murderers of the Son of God. Their hatred, therefore, was principally instigated by his preaching the resurrection, and preaching it "in Christ." Other able scholars give what is thought to be a better rendition of this verse, as follows: "What! Is it judged incredible ..."

Acts 26:9 I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

Having already shown that he was one with Agrippa in the hope of the resurrection which he supposedly held, Paul here moved to find further common ground with him, as having been, like Agrippa's whole family, a persecutor of the church.

I verily thought ... means that Paul truly believed, "proving that a man may be conscientious even when engaged in enormous wickedness."

With myself ... All thinking with self is by its nature self-centered ...

It is only when we center our thinking "in Christ" that we really think correctly.

"it is clear that Paul thought he was doing God service"

Acts 26:10 Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against [them].

Many of the saints ... Literally "Holy ones" Although Paul had avoided calling the Christians "saints" when he spoke in Jerusalem, here before an unbiased audience he did so, "in order to bear witness for Christ and his church."

They were put to death ... indicates that many more Christians lost their lives through Saul's activities than would be supposed from the mention of Stephen only in the New Testament.

I gave my vote against them ... There is no way that this can mean merely that "I approved." "The Greek here means, 'I cast down my pebble,' ... They literally cast their pebbles into the urn, white for acquittal, black for condemnation." This clause is equivalent to: "I was one of those who in the Sanhedrin voted for their death." From the fact of Paul's being in all probability a member of the Sanhedrin.

Acts 26:11 And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled [them] to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted [them] even unto strange cities.

Here the English Revised Version (1885) is superior to the KJV text which seems to say that some of the Christians were caused to blaspheme; "but the tense of the Greek word indicates that Paul failed in this"; he only attempted to cause them to commit such a sin.

Even unto foreign cities ... is quite a revealing phrase, indicating a much more extensive range of Saul's persecution, which obviously included operations against the church in many places besides Damascus. Again, the brevity of the Holy Scriptures is noted.

Acts 26:12-16 Whereupon as I went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, 13 At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. 14 And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and

saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? [it is] hard for thee to kick against the pricks. 15 And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. 16 But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee;

Both in Acts 9 and Acts 22, there are given accounts of Saul's conversion and all that is said in those chapters is said here with ... a number of interesting supplemental bits of information. We are indebted to Boles for this summary of additional information derived from this third account:

The light was brighter than the sun Acts 26:13.

The light enveloped the whole company Acts 26:13.

The whole company fell to the earth Acts 26:14.

Jesus spoke in Hebrew Acts 26:14.

He said, "It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks" Acts 26:14.

There is a fuller account of what Jesus said Acts 26:16 &18.

Regarding the last of these additions, it appears that some of the things told Paul by Ananias were also spoken to Paul directly from heaven, by the Lord. This would account for the full and immediate trust which Paul placed in Ananias' words. He knew they were also the words of the Lord.

Hard for thee to kick against the pricks ... Critics allege this is a Gentile proverb not in use among the Jews ... but how would they know? There is no reason to limit the use of it. Every agricultural country on earth has either this or a similar proverb, and certainly

nobody had to explain it to Paul. As the Lord was sending Paul to the Gentile nations, it was appropriate that such a Gentile proverb should have been used.

Many commentators on Acts have expressed sentiments similar to those of Boles, who said, "The variations in the three accounts impress us with the truthfulness of the narrative." The variations are so natural and spontaneous as to place the stamp of validity upon all three narrations.

Of the things wherein I will appear unto thee ... This is a promise by the Lord of repeated appearances to Paul, as in Acts 18:9ff; Acts 22:17ff; and Acts 23:11ff.

Acts 26:17 Delivering thee from the people, and [from] the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee,

This verse was the Lord's solemn promise to Paul that he would be protected, not only from "the people," meaning the Jews, but from "the Gentiles" as well. Paul was repeatedly endangered from both sources. Only by such assurance could a man have acted with the courage Paul displayed throughout his career.

Acts 26:18 To open their eyes, [and] to turn [them] from darkness to light, and [from] the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.

Remission of sins ... That men should receive this blessing was the principal burden of apostolic preaching, the great need of humanity having ever been that of reconciliation with God and the restoration of fellowship with the Eternal Father. In a vital sense, this is the only blessing that matters. With remission of sins, all of the hardships of life, all of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, all of the

disappointments and sufferings, all of life's frustrations and sorrows, resolve at last in eternal glory for the redeemed.

But without remission of sins, the most favored and successful life, the most powerful and famous, the most affluent and popular, must inevitably resolve into a hopeless grave and a resurrection to everlasting shame and contempt. "Remission" is one of the great New Testament words.

Sanctified by faith in me ... This, like so many references involving "faith" in the English Revised Version (1885), is a bad translation. As Alexander Campbell noted, it should be translated: "Sanctified by the faith respecting me." The most conspicuous fault of the KJV and English Revised Version (1885) along with all modern translations lies in this very omission of the Greek article translated "the" before "faith" ... "the faith" is correct.

What Paul was affirming in this expression was not the popular heresy that people are saved by "faith only," but that the remission of their sins is available by means of "the faith in Christ", through New Testament Christianity.

Acts 26:19-20 Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision: 20 But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and [then] to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.

I was not disobedient ... This has the effect of saying: O king, you could not expect me to have violated a voice from heaven.

Damascus, and at Jerusalem ... Paul's words here are not exactly clear; because Paul's use of the word "first" does not always denote a chronological order, but has the meaning of "the first thing I want to mention." In view of this, one may only smile at the radical critics

who, evidently not being in on this little characteristic of Paul's, come up with shouts of "contradiction."

It is therefore certain, then, that Paul did not use the word "first" here in any chronological sense at all. Incidentally, this little Pauline trait of so using the word "first" reminds one of that tiny "M" on the Morgan dollar, certifying absolutely the name of the designer. This verse here confirms absolutely the Pauline authorship of this address, removing one of the crutches of liberalism which likes to suppose that Luke composed this speech and put it in Paul's mouth. Never! In a thousand years, Luke would never have come up with a wild-card "first" like that of Paul here and elsewhere in his epistles.

Gentiles should repent and turn to God ... This is exactly the statement of God's redemptive plan for believers, as given in Acts 3:19 and here, as there, it means "repent and be baptized." As William Barclay observed (discussing what believers should do), "The first demand was the demand for repentance ... the second demand was the demand for baptism."; cf: Acts 2:38

Doing works worthy of repentance ... Such a plank as this in the platform of God's will would have a special pertinence to Agrippa and Bernice. As Root said, "The dissolute Agrippa needed to be told, 'Live as men who have repented should.'"

Acts 26:21 For these causes the Jews caught me in the temple, and went about to kill [me].

The Jews ... means, in a sense, their nation as represented by its highest authorities.

Acts 26:22 Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come:

“obtained help of God ...” In view of the marvelous deliverances Paul had already received, protecting him against the skill and cunning of his powerful enemies, even his foes must have been baffled that God had helped him.

Acts 26:23 That Christ should suffer, [and] that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles.

“none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come ... the Jews refused to receive Isaiah 53 as Messianic, therefore denying that the Christ was prophetically represented as a sufferer, which is of course true; but in this very blindness to what their prophets so emphatically foretold lay the secret of their rejection of the Lord Jesus Christ. As to the question whether or not the prophecies of Isaiah, and others, actually foretold Jesus' suffering, Christ taught that they did; Stephen affirmed it; Paul believed it; the primitive church accepted it; and any Christian may read it for himself in the glorious chapter of Isaiah 53.

This insistence of Paul that the new institution was, indeed and truth, fully identified with that divine institution set forth typically and prophetically in the Old Testament is evident in all of his writings.

He should be the first that should rise... There is a genuine sense in which Christ's resurrection was first, despite instances of raising dead in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. As Milligan said, "He was the first that rose above the power of death. Lazarus died again." Hervey cautioned against a misunderstanding of this verse, saying:

Christ was the first to rise, and he will be followed by them that are His.

Acts 26:24 And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad.

"Festus had advertised his ignorance at the beginning of the hearing; but in this interruption, he headlined it." There is no light to the blind, no music to the deaf; and "This poor fool thought that because he could not understand Paul's sermon, no one could."

With a loud voice ... is "another detail, revealing the eyewitness of the scene described."

By this loud cry charging Paul with madness, Festus betrayed the total lack of spiritual discernment which is always the mark of the carnal man. A typically cynical official of Rome, he decided to break up a meeting with which he had no sympathy at all. It must have been a great shock to him that his royal guests were getting the message, and that they were deeply and favorably impressed with it.

Acts 26:25 But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness.

I am not mad ... Paul was the sanest man in the hall where he spoke, along with Luke and his quiet, firm denial bore the stamp of truth.

How inexpressibly beautiful is this reply! how strong! yet how decent and respectful. Madmen do not call men by their names and titles of honor. Thus, Paul refuted the charge.

Acts 26:26 For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner.

This was not done in a corner ... That earthquake which accompanied the Son of God in his visitation of our planet is still sending shock waves around the earth. The fact of his birth split human history into

BC and AD. His crucifixion bruised the head of Satan himself; his resurrection brought life and immortality to light through the gospel; His teachings monitor the deeds and thoughts of all men; and His word shall judge the living and the dead at the Last Day. Done in a corner? Yes, in a little corner of the universe known as the Planet Earth; but that earth can never forget him, or get rid of him. As some of the Sadducees and Pharisees were able to see while he was among them: "The world is gone after him" John 12:19.

Acts 26:27 King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.

Agrippa was doubtless embarrassed by this question. His pagan host would laugh at him if he replied in the affirmative; and yet there is a possibility that he came very near to doing so. At least Paul seems to have thought so.

Acts 26:28 Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

Job 19:23-27 Oh that my words were now written! oh that they were printed in a book! 24 That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever! 25 For I know [*that*] my redeemer liveth, and [*that*] he shall stand at the latter [*day*] upon the earth: 26 And [*though*] after my skin [*worms*] destroy this [*body*], yet in my flesh shall I see God: 27 Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; [*though*] my reins be consumed within me.

Isaiah 26:19 Thy dead [*men*] shall live, [*together with*] my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew [*is as*] the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead.

Daniel 12:1-2 And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation [*even*] to

that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book. 2 And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame [*and*] everlasting contempt.

All the scholars admit that the text is difficult to translate; and the diverse renditions prove conclusively that they simply do not know how to translate it. Note the following examples:

Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian (KJV).

You are trying to make me play the Christian (Bruce).

In brief, you are trying to persuade me to make a Christian out of me (Williams).

In a short time you are persuading me to become a Christian (RSV).

In a little you are persuaded to make me a Christian (The Codex Alexandrinus).

In brief, you are confident that you can make me a Christian (Weymouth).

You are in a hurry to persuade me and make a Christian of me (Goodspeed).

Much more of this and you will make me a Christian (Phillips).

In a short while, thou wouldest persuade me to become a Christian (Douay Version).

It will be seen from the above that scholarship does not know how to translate Agrippa's remark. None of the renditions above equals the vigor of the KJV, unless it is the Douay; and therefore we shall construe the words as having essentially the meaning assigned in

those two historic versions. Paul's reply to Agrippa, in fact, confirms those versions as having properly translated the passage.

Acts 26:29 And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds.

Paul's reply shows that he believed Agrippa's response was that of one half-converted, hence the insistence of this appeal. The very use of the honored and holy word "Christian" by such a one as Agrippa is in itself weighty.

There is no historical evidence that "Christian" was ever used with an unfavorable connotation.

Acts 26:30 And when he had thus spoken, the king rose up, and the governor, and Bernice, and they that sat with them:

If the king had not been deeply moved and "almost persuaded" by Paul, would he not have risen when Festus tried to break up the assembly with that loud cry? Of course he would have. The very fact that he kept on sitting there shows that he wanted no part of Festus' rejection of what Paul was saying. Courtesy demanded that no one leave until the king did so; therefore Paul was enabled to continue somewhat even after Festus' interruption.

Acts 26:31 And when they were gone aside, they talked between themselves, saying, This man doeth nothing worthy of death or of bonds.

Thus, in succession, through five defenses, the verdict has been in favor of Paul's innocence, without exception.

Acts 26:32 Then said Agrippa unto Festus, This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar.

Thus a Herod testifies to the innocence and sincerity of the apostle Paul; and, although there is no evidence that Agrippa was ever any more than half-persuaded to be a Christian, this favorable verdict from him is nevertheless of great significance.

This verdict rendered by Agrippa II could be the reason for the providential blessing of God which attended this ruler's life. He was confirmed in his kingdom after the Jewish war and lived on until the year 100 AD.

By contrast look at those officials who either persecuted Paul or denied him justice:

Ananias "the whited wall" was murdered by his own people within a decade.

Felix was recalled within two years; and he and his family perished in the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 A.D.

Drusilla perished with her husband Felix and her son in the same eruption.

Bernice fell into public disgrace in Rome.

Festus died within two years of denying Paul justice.

The Sanhedrin was destroyed forever by the Jewish War ending with the sack of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple in 70 AD, only about a decade after the events related in these chapters.

Nero (who later executed Paul) died wretchedly, and in disgrace. On and on the list might go; but Herod Agrippa II alone continued until the second century. He alone fearlessly gave an unequivocal verdict of Paul's innocence.

In further pursuit of this theme, reference is made to the writings of Lactantius (LACK-tan-tee-uhs), who devoted twenty pages to the

record of the judgments, punishments, disasters, miseries and sudden death which came upon the great heathen persecutors of Christianity, giving in detail all the horrors that befell such men as Nero, Domitian, Decius (DESH-us), Valerian, Aurelian, Diocletian (di-o-CLEE-shun) and others. All of this was in direct and circumstantial fulfillment of what Jesus assuredly promised his apostles:

Luke 18:7 And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them?

History answers that God did indeed do so.

The words of Jesus' prophecy Luke 18:7 were literally fulfilled in the calamities which overtook the Jews and the chief heathen persecutors of the Christians.

Here is concluded the record of Paul's five defenses made in Jerusalem and Caesarea; and with his appeal to Caesar, his case was transferred to Rome. This involved him in a long and dangerous voyage which was unfolded by Luke in the next two chapters.

The thing that stands out in all of Paul's defenses was the speaker's innocence and sincerity in preaching the unsearchable riches of the crucified and risen Saviour.

Sources: KJV Bible, theWord.com, Burton Coffman, BW Johnson, Adam Clark, FF Bruce, McKnight and JW McGarvey, George Faull Commentaries, Wikipedia, and World Conquest.