

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

Paul Before Agrippa Part 1

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Acts 26:1-32

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 26:1; that’s on page 935 in your pew Bibles. We are in the final phase of the Acts of the Apostles. Paul is no longer a travelling missionary planting churches all across the Mediterranean region; he is now a prisoner, making a defence of Christianity before Senators, Governors, Kings and eventually, the Emperor of Rome. Last week we looked at Paul’s defence before Governor Felix; this week we will look at his defence before King Agrippa.

Governor Felix had kept Paul in prison for 2 years – we are told about that in Acts 24:27. That made the Jews happy because they thought that with Paul in prison his influence would be cut off, which we know wasn’t the case. When Felix was recalled to Rome, he left Paul in prison as a favour to the Jews and handed the entire matter off to Festus – the new governor of the territory. The Jews saw an opportunity in this transition, so they asked for Paul to be transferred to Jerusalem where they hoped to have him assassinated. Paul sniffed out the plot and appealed to Caesar, as was his right as a Roman citizen. And so now Festus has to create a summary of the charges against Paul to forward to Rome and so he asks for assistance from King Agrippa.

King Agrippa was very familiar with the entire Jesus movement; in fact, you might say he was **MAXIMALLY FAMILIAR**. It was his grandfather who had tried to kill the baby Jesus in Bethlehem; it was his father who had arrested Peter and who had killed James the brother of John

and it was his uncle who had beheaded John the Baptist and who later participated in Jesus' trial – so there was probably no one in the Roman Empire better suited to assist Governor Festus in this particular task. So Paul is summoned and asked to provide a summary of the Christian message and why it is that his message is turning the Jewish world upside down – and not just the Jewish world, but now the Roman world as well. What in the world is going on here? What exactly is this Gospel that you are preaching?

That's where we jump back into the story. Hopefully you have your Bible open now to Acts 26:1; we'll read the entire narrative, all the way through to verse 32. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

1 So Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense:

2 "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, 3 especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.

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. 5 They 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. 6 And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 7 to 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! 8 Why 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. 10 And 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. 11 And 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.

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.’

19 “Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. 21 For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 22 To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: 23 that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”

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.” 25 But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. 26 For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” 28 And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” 29 And Paul said, “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.”

30 Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. 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.” (Acts 26:1-32 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Well that’s a long speech – in fact it is the LONGEST of the court speeches recorded by Luke in Acts – but thankfully, Paul tells us what the heart of the matter is. Look again at verses 6-8; he says:

And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 7 to 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! 8 Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? (Acts 26:6-8 ESV)

So the heart of the matter, Paul says, is THE HOPE OF THE JEWS. I believe that those hopes have been realized in the person and work of Christ. I was like you – I was persecuting the Christians – but then I met the resurrected Christ on the side of the road to Damascus and in that moment everything changed. I changed. I went from a persecutor to a preacher. I went from an antagonist to an Apostle. You witnessed that transformation. You know who I was and you know who I am and this change that you have observed is due to my reckoning with a single fact: the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead. That means he was who he says he was. That means that the hopes of all Israel have begun to come to pass. That means that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

I'm on trial because I believe that.

I'm standing over here, defending myself before you, King Agrippa, because I believe that. But the big question is not, why am I standing over here, the big question is WHY ARE YOU NOT?

“Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” (Acts 26:8 ESV)

That's the speech, and for us to properly appreciate that speech and to be properly edified by it we need to try to answer three questions this morning:

- 1. What was the hope of the Jews?**
- 2. How does Paul believe those hopes have been realized?**
- 3. Why was that so hard for the Jewish people to believe?**

We'll start with the first one:

1. What was the hope of the Jews?

By the end of the Old Testament era the hope of the Jews was being defined in terms of resurrection; we see that beginning to happen during the time of the exile. During the Babylonian exile the people were looking forward to the time of their RELEASE. Remember, God had told

them that their time out would last 70 years, so as they came near to the end of that time period they began to be excited. “We’re going to go back to the land!! Everything is going to be great.”

But the prophets took a deeper view. What good will it do us to go back to the land if we haven’t been healed in our hearts? If we go back to the land as the same stubborn sinners that we’ve always been, won’t we just find ourselves in another cycle of pride, idolatry, apostasy, deception and defeat? Is going back to the land really going to solve our problems?

The prophets were beginning to think that for Israel to have a future they would need MORE than a return to the land, they would need a RESURRECTION.

You can see that hope most clearly in passages like Ezekiel 37; so if you have your Bible open in front of you, just flip over to that passage now; Ezekiel 37 is on page 724 in the church bibles.

Ezekiel is an EXILIC PROPHET; he is one of those guys sitting in Babylon thinking about what it will take for the people of Israel to have a future – a future they can hold on to. A future where they can possess and enjoy the promises of God forever. As he is thinking about those things, the Lord comes to him in a vision. Ezekiel 37:1 says:

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. (Ezekiel 37:1 ESV)

The dead bones, of course, represent the nation of Israel. They are not a sick people – they are a DEAD PEOPLE. That’s the truth and the people of Israel needed to face that truth, so God takes the prophet out and shows him. And then he asks him a very interesting question. He says:

“Son of man, can these bones live?” (Ezekiel 37:3 ESV)

Is there any HOPE for the people of Israel? That’s what he’s asking. And Ezekiel, very wisely, says back to him:

“O Lord GOD, you know.” (Ezekiel 37:3 ESV)

That's a good answer. It certainly looks impossible. Dead things generally don't back to life, but if God wills it, then it's more than possible, it's an absolute certainty; and so in the vision, God shows him these bones coming back to life. Ezekiel sees a GREAT RESURRECTION. And then just so that there wouldn't be any misunderstanding, an interpretation is given to Ezekiel at the end of the vision. Look at verse 11:

Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' 12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. 14 And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD." (Ezekiel 37:11-14 ESV)

So at some point in the future God is going to RAISE ISRAEL FROM THE DEAD! God's going to raise them up, he's going to heal their hearts and bring them into the land. This is going to be a whole new start. When they are raised from the dead, they're not going to have the same soul sickness they had when they died. Look at verse 23:

I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God. 24 "My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. 25 They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever. 26 I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. 27 My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 28 Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore." (Ezekiel 37:23-28 ESV)

So I'm going to HEAL them and I'm going to LEAD THEM. I'm going to be with them as their GOD for all eternity and THEN the NATIONS WILL KNOW that I am the Lord. So this

resurrection is going to be a blessing to ISRAEL and also to the NATIONS. The HOPE OF ISRAEL is going to become the hope of the world!

Thanks be to God!

The Apostle Paul believes that. He believes every word of that, and he believes those hopes have been realized through the person and work of Christ. Let's talk about that.

2. How does Paul believe those hopes have been realized?

Flip back in your bibles now to Acts 26 and zoom in on verses 22-23. Paul says:

“I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: 23 that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.” (Acts 26:22-23 ESV)

The Old Testament is a story in need of a conclusion – you know that if you've ever read it. In fact it's even more obvious when you read the story in the original Hebrew Bible. The arrangement of books in our English Old Testaments follows the order of the LATER GREEK EDITION – but in the original Hebrew Bible the last book of the Old Testament was II Chronicles – which meant that the story ended the nation in exile, the land in ruins and temple being burned to the ground by the army of Nebuchadnezzar.

It was over.

Now, there is a word of hope spoken at the end of that story – the last paragraph in 2 Chronicles speaks of a proclamation being made by King Cyrus authorizing the Jews to return to the land – but in the Hebrew Bible, by the time you read that, you've already read the prophets – you've already read Ezekiel and so you know that simply returning to the land isn't going to cut it. You know for Israel to have a future, for Israel to EVER enjoy the blessings of God as they were created and intended to do – they are going to NEED a DEATH AND RESURRECTION. The

system is so jammed up that it has to be unplugged for an extended period of time and then plugged back in – it needs a total reboot.

That's how the story ends – and Paul here is saying – that's what Jesus came to this world to do! He is Israel!! That's why he went down to Egypt as a child and then came back out.

That's why he was in the desert being tempted for 40 days. He is RECAPITULATING the entire story! He's picking it up and then he is taking it DOWN, DOWN, DOWN into the very depths of hell. And then on the third day, he will rise victoriously from the dead.

This is the death and resurrection that we need!

His death on the cross pays for our sins and kills our iniquity. He knew that we could never possess the promises of God while our hearts were possessed by sin. So he made effective and lasting atonement.

Hallelujah!

He removed the burden from our backs that was sinking us down to hell – and then to prove that all of this was effective and to show that there could be a future for all those who put their trust in him – on the third day he rose from the dead!

Jesus did that!

He is the resurrection and the life!

He is:

“the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” (1 Corinthians 15:20 ESV)

He is:

“the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.” (Colossians 1:18 ESV)

The hope that Paul extended was the hope of BEING IN CHRIST. According to the Apostle, if you are in Christ then because God has raised HIM from the dead, he will RAISE YOU FROM THE DEAD to enjoy the presence and the blessings of God FOREVER!

“That is the hope of Israel!! That is the hope of the world! And that is the Gospel that I preach”, Paul says. “Now, why should it be thought incredible by any of you that our God should raise up the dead?”

That’s the gauntlet that Paul throws down before Agrippa, and by extension before all of his Jewish accusers.

“Why should you, of all people, be so slow to recognize that the promises that were made through the prophets are being realized in the person and work of Christ?”

So, let’s talk about that. Why was this so hard for the Jewish people to believe?

3. Why was that so hard for the Jewish people to believe?

They should have been the FIRST people to celebrate Christ’s rising from the dead. There should have been a parade for him down the streets of Jerusalem on the morning of the third day. Given all that they had suffered, and the number of times they had spiraled down into apostasy and disaster, they should have been the first people to line up for the total healing, total transformation, and total resurrection that he was offering.

And of course some were; that needs to be said. The ground floor of the New Covenant community was entirely Jewish, but by the end of the first generation, that had begun to change. The Romans were flooding in, and the Jewish people were beginning to harden toward the Gospel.

Why is that?

Well of course, there is an element of Providence at work here. Paul says in Romans 11:25:

I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. (Romans 11:25 ESV)

So in the mysterious providence of God, the hardness of the Jewish people towards the Gospel has actually served the cause of the Great Commission. Had Christianity remained an essentially Jewish movement, the peoples of the nations might never have come in. They would have always thought of themselves as second class – and so a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

But that's not the whole answer is it? Because God doesn't HARDEN people who are running towards him, he hardens people who have already turned away from him, so it leaves us with the question: why did they turn away in the first place?

Based on what we see in the New Testament, I think we can offer a partial answer to that question. First of all, they turned away from the Gospel of Jesus Christ because:

i. They didn't like the underlying implications

The first words out of Jesus' mouth in the New Testament are:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17 ESV)

REPENT! Admit your problem. Stop doing what you're doing and realize that you need rescue from God.

The Gospel begins with the fundamental assumption that you can't save yourself. You need to stop. You need to admit your hopelessness. You need to understand that you are blind, deaf, dumb and in need of total resurrection - and the Jewish people didn't want to hear that. They were offended by that. Paul talked about that in his letters, he said:

“when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.” (1 Corinthians 1:23 NLT)

The Gentiles have no idea what we're talking about, but the Jews do – they understand the implications and they are offended.

They understand that if the Son of David had to die on a cross for us to be saved, then what does that mean? It means that God thinks we are hopelessly ensnared in our sin. It means that God has no confidence that we will ever be able to obey his commands or fulfill our commission in our current state.

Exactly that.

Exactly that.

That is EXACTLY what the cross of Jesus Christ means. It means we're fundamentally broken. It means that "help" will do us no good. It means we need a drastic intervention and that's what the cross is.

Do you understand your need for that?

Because if you don't, then you cannot be saved. Paul says that salvation is only for the person:

who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness (Romans 4:5 ESV)

So Paul says that the only people who can be saved are the people who KNOW that they are DEAD and who look to God for total resurrection.

That's the Gospel of Jesus Christ – and in general, the Jews found it very offensive. "We're the good guys! They're the bad guys; they might need this, but to suggest that we need this is offensive." And so they turned away.

And then secondly, many of the Jews turned away from the Gospel of Jesus Christ because:

ii. They didn't like the order of operations

The Jews were focused on THE LAND, first and foremost. “Give us the LAND!!! Get rid of the Romans, and we'll take care of the rest.”

But that was to miss the fundamental point being made by the prophets: What good will it do you to possess the land if your hearts are still possessed by sin and wickedness?

The prophets had seen enough history to know where that would lead. They understood that for Israel to ever enjoy all the blessings and promises of God, including the land, they'd need to be resurrected and restored FIRST.

That's the order of operations in the Gospel: heal the people, then give them the land.

And so of course, that's how the New Testament ends. In Revelation 21:1-5 the prophet says:

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth ... I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God ... He will dwell with them, and they will be his people” (Revelation 21:1-3 ESV)

You get the land at the end, brothers and sisters, not at the beginning.

Can I tell you something?

There will never be peace in the land – there will never be peace in Israel, Gaza, Ukraine, Russia, or Orillia – until human beings have been HEALED, RESURRECTED and RESTORED through the person and work of Christ.

That's the message of the Bible in a nutshell! The people of God cannot enjoy the blessings of God apart from the Son of God.

That's it.

It's simple – but OH WHAT A MESSAGE THAT IS! Because when you understand that – when you understand that the life you were created to live is WAITING FOR YOU IN CHRIST ON THE OTHER SIDE – it changes how you deal with challenges and problems in your life on this side. According to Paul, it even changes how you think about being defrauded by friends and neighbours. Don't worry about it! Do you not know that the saints will judge the world!

Relax!

All the promises of God are yes and amen now for you in Christ.

The hope of Israel – the land, the prosperity, the peace – and most of all, the privilege of seeing God's face and enjoying his presence forever – all of that, is yours now, if you have put your faith in Jesus Christ.

He is the conclusion the Old Testament narrative demands.

He is the answer.

He is our hope.

That is the message that the Apostle Paul was on trial for preaching. That is the Gospel – to the Jew first and also to the Gentile, thanks be to God.

Let's pray together.