

## INTRODUCTION

In his trial before King Agrippa the Apostle Paul had two roles – as the accused, and as the ambassador of Christ. He had two tasks – to defend himself from the charges made against him, and to convey the message of Christ to this human ruler (as Christ had foretold).

## PERSONAL TESTIMONY

He spoke of his early life and his beliefs in order to expose his accusers as contradicting themselves. His beliefs were also their stated beliefs. The hope of resurrection was at the heart of his faith and theirs. It was Jesus who had risen from the dead, therefore he was the Messiah whom God had promised. When they criticised him for saying so they were going against their own religion.

This was also a message to his hearers, an introduction to the gospel that he intended to tell. Agrippa would have been familiar with the difference between Sadducee and Pharisee, so would not be taken aback by the reference to resurrection (a bone of contention between the two strands of Judaism).

Paul rehearsed his earlier persecution of Jesus' followers thereby preparing for the magnitude of the change that took place in his outlook.

He spoke of a divine revelation, of Jesus as speaking from heaven, in divine glory, the firstborn from the dead, and Lord of all. He spoke about the commission Jesus gave him – to tell what he had seen and so to open the understanding of his hearers. The message would have an effect – dispelling spiritual ignorance and hopelessness and bring people out of the grasp of a murderer into the life of God.

“I was not disobedient”, he said. And that was the explanation of how he lived.

## THE MESSAGE

Paul used his defence as an opportunity to convey the message of Christ. It has two parts.

The first part was that “Christ must suffer”. The Scriptures taught that, just as Jesus indicated to the disciples on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:25-27). Isaiah 53 made that explicit. The sacrifices implied it, for they represented the coming Christ. Abraham saw it when the Father provided a substitute for Isaac on Mount Moriah (John 8:56). The fact that Scripture predicted his suffering does not explain the need for it. Suffering was not part of creation but was the result of the Fall. It is what sin deserves, and is its inevitable consequence. For Christ to save us he had to bear our sins and put them away by suffering their penalty. The innocent suffering as a sacrifice can only be justified if the person is bearing the sins of others to whom he belongs (so what belongs to one belongs to the other also). Thus “the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6).

The second part of the message was that Christ was “the first to rise from the dead” and consequently “proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles”. Although others had been raised (e.g. Lazarus) this was the first time a person had been freed from death for this reason. Christ returned to life because the reason for death had gone. He had put sin away! He is therefore the firstborn from the dead, and the head of a redeemed humanity. All whose sins he put away have the reason for death removed – what they will experience is “sleep in Jesus” and they will waken to a glorious resurrection.

Since he put sin away and rose again he shows that hope can take the place of despair, and life take the place of death. "He has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light" ( 2 Timothy 1:10).

### GOSPEL CHALLENGE

Paul did not stop there. The gospel is more than a belief system, it has profound practical implications.

In an unusual move Paul the accused became Paul the ambassador. Agrippa the judge became the subject of Christ compelled to hear Christ's message. "King Agrippa. Do you believe the prophets? I know you believe."

If someone believes what the Bible says about Christ they must act on it. if they believe that God judges sinners but has given sinners a saviour, then they must flee to Christ for mercy. To do nothing is absurd. The only sensible response is to turn to God confessing our sin, welcoming his Saviour, asking for mercy, and living as his child.

Some, such as Festus, have not heard. Others, like Agrippa, have heard and do believe the teaching. Whenever we are reminded of Christ (as Agrippa was by Paul) is Christ calling us, and we must respond.

Paul did not end with this appeal. He opened his heart to Agrippa and others, stating that he longed for everyone to be "as I am" except for his position as a prisoner, nothing compares with knowing the love of Christ, unless it is seeing someone else come to know it. That reflects the longing of heaven (Luke 15).