

Group Study Outline

Acts 26:1-32 Theme Sentence

Paul preaches the gospel before 'governors and kings'

Launching Question:

Is fear the main reason Christians don't speak more openly about what we believe? What kinds of things are we afraid of?

Fill in some of the context of the section from 21:27. This is Paul's third 'trial'. Look back at 25:23 ... what would you feel like at this point, if you were Paul?

This is Paul's opportunity to rehearse the 'defence' he'll take to Caesar in Rome.

READ Acts 26:1-32

How does Paul describe himself in 4-8? How was he being a loyal Jew?
How does Paul describe himself in 9-11? How was he being a loyal Jew?
How does Paul describe himself in 12-18?

On the Damascus Road, what is the instruction of the Lord Jesus to Paul ...
(a) in v16; (b) in v 17; and (c) in v 18?

Follow through these same three things in 19-23: how did Paul obey Jesus?
Summarise the message he preached (according to 18, 20 and 23)?

Re-read 24-32 as a three-person drama script ...
how do Agrippa and Festus come across in this interchange?
what does this interchange reveal about Paul and how he views this 'trial'?

Thinking it through

Read Matt 10:17-18; Acts 9:15; 20:22-24; 21:13.

In the light of those passages, what is really going on in Acts 26?
We've already noted the message Paul preached (from 18, 20 and 23): why do you think Paul includes this summary of the gospel three times in this 'defence'?
What is his yearning?

How is this chapter modelling his Acts 9 experience, as well as describing it?
What enabled Paul to be forthright in such a hostile environment, do you think?

What do you think most people remember about Christianity from your witness?
To what degree is Paul's commission from Jesus Christ, also our commission?

Read this quotation from John Calvin. Do you think it is accurate?
'No man is fit to preach the gospel, seeing the whole world is set against it, save only he which is armed to suffer'
Are we unwilling to 'take the knocks', and is that why we don't witness boldly?

Prayer idea: Thank God for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Ask the Holy Spirit to put within you the same burning desire that your friends come to Christ.

Acts 26:1-32



The story so far ...

If *Luke* was the story of what Jesus 'began to do and teach' (Acts 1:1), *Acts* is the story of what Jesus did next. Acts 1:4-5, 8 repeats his promise to send the Spirit (cf John 16:7) ... and explains why this will be 'better': the disciples will receive power to fulfil Jesus' commission to be his witnesses from Jerusalem, to the end of the earth ... from 'people like us', to 'people different from us' ... from Jews, to Gentiles. The Spirit guides them in this outwards-spread (eg 16:6ff) and even opposition is a means to achieve it (eg 8:1-5).

So, 'the word of God continued to increase' (6:7) all the way through *Acts* towards Rome (28:14), and Paul, 'the apostle to the Gentiles', is ambitious to travel even beyond there to Spain 'to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named' (Rom 15:20, 23-24).

The 'conversions' of Saul (retold in chapters 9, 22 and 26) and of Peter (in chapters 10-11) are the only stories each to be told three-times in this unstoppable progress of the gospel. Both these episodes are about Jews – one (Peter) a disciple of Christ, and the other (Saul) an opponent of Christ – encountering the heavenly Lord Jesus and coming to understand God's acceptance of Gentiles, in order that they might become his witnesses to them (see 9:15; 10:28, 34-35; 1:8). In the Acts 26 re-telling of this meeting, the emphasis is on **commission** – Paul defends his mission as a directive from the Lord Jesus himself (26:16-18).

[NS]

Acts 26:1-32 Theme Sentence

Paul preaches the gospel before 'governors and kings'

Application

- Paul gives us a great model of someone preaching the gospel fearlessly ... not at all intimidated by those he's witnessing to. What comes across is his driving passion to see conversions. Is that our longing?
- Paul was convinced that he should do this because he was commissioned to do so by the risen Lord Jesus: has *Acts* convinced us yet that this is the commission of the same Lord Jesus to his church in every age?
- Suffering for the gospel seems to go hand-in-hand with proclaiming it. Paul also gives us a model of enduring in that Christian ministry despite terrific hostility. Has the truth of the resurrection so gripped us that we readily give up what we cannot keep to gain that which we cannot lose? Read 1 Cor 15:58 (as the conclusion to a chapter all about resurrection).

Commentary

This passage is part of the section which begins in 21:27 (as Paul is arrested in the Jerusalem temple). It's a series of 'trials' where Paul defends himself ...

- before the crowd (**22:1-21** within 21:37-22:22)
- before the Sanhedrin (**23:1-6** within 22:30-23:11)
- before Felix, the Roman governor in Caesarea (**24:10-21** within 24:1-27)
- before Festus, Felix's successor (**25:8-11** within 25:1-22)
- before Herod Agrippa II (**26:2-27** within 25:23-26:32), son of the Herod in Acts 12, and great grandson of Herod the Great.

The outcome of all these trials is that Paul, as a Roman citizen, appeals to Caesar and so is sent by ship to Rome (27:1f).

The charge is well summarised in 25:8 ... it's a three-clause charge (Jewish law, temple and Caesar) but really claiming that Paul had acted/spoken against:

- Moses (ie a **religious** charge of sacrilege)
- Caesar (ie a **political** charge of sedition)

Before Felix, Paul is chiefly answering the first of these: his gospel is in a line of continuity with the OT Scriptures. Before Festus, he is chiefly answering the second: not responsible for any breaches of the peace, and so confident that Caesar would agree with this self-assessment, he appeals to him to clear his name. Before Agrippa, he explains why Jews want to be rid of him: because of his mission to the Gentiles (which, he claims, is out of obedience to the vision & voice of the 'Lord'). His is a three-fold loyalty: to Moses, to Caesar, to the risen Jesus.

However, we should not domesticate these 'trials' by imagining a British legal system; through it all, Paul is systematically being beaten up by a mob!

1 On the road to Damascus, Paul's commission was 'to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel' (9:15). It was always the intention of the Lord Jesus that opposition and arrest would be the way that his disciples would have the opportunity to preach to 'governors and kings' (Matt 10:17-18) ... which is just what is happening here. Paul knew exactly what he was letting himself in for (20:22-24; 21:13) but that didn't stop him!

2ff This is the start of the formal address that will travel with Paul to Rome (cf 25:12) so, in a way, this defence is the one before the Emperor himself.

4-8 **Paul the strict Pharisee**

Pharisees were the strictest, most rigorous Jews with a reputation for scholarship, righteousness and religious zeal. Paul was obviously a renowned Pharisee. As a strict Jew, it is unsurprising that all his hopes and fears are tied to the promises God made in the OT, and in particular the promise to send his Messiah. Pharisees believed in resurrection, so why should it seem incredible that a Pharisee would proclaim that God used resurrection to identify his Messiah? His point? I was being a loyal Jew.

9-11 **Paul the fanatical persecutor**

He considered that it was his religious duty to persecute Christians, by imprisoning, voting for their death, searching for them in synagogues and

further afield. His point? I was being a loyal Jew.

12-18 **Paul the commissioned apostle**

The emphasis in this third telling of the Damascus Road experience is on the 'Lord' commissioning Paul. 15b makes clear two vital things: first that the Jesus whom he believed dead is now alive enough to be addressing him; and second, that it's Christians that this Lord now regards as his own people. This same Lord tells him three things:

- **I** have appeared to **appoint you as witness** (16a), and, just as the other witnesses (1:21-22), it is to what he has seen/will see of Jesus;
- **I will rescue you** (17) which doesn't mean that suffering won't touch him, but that his testimony would not be silenced until his God-appointed work is completed;
- **I am sending you** (18 cf John 20:21) to bring about conversion (from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God): the blessings of conversion are both the new life in Christ and the new community of Christ: Gentiles will be equal members (Eph 2:19).

His point? I was obeying the vision and voice of the risen 'Lord'.

19-23 Paul's response to Christ's commission was to obey it - **sent, rescued and witnessing** to the 'by grace/by faith' gospel to all. Paul preached what the OT proclaims: a Messiah who suffered/died for our sins, was raised/exalted, and become a light to the Gentiles.

24-32 is best read as a script for three characters; it is indeed a moment of high drama between 'the bench' and 'the dock'. Far from being overawed by the show of 'pomp' (25:23), Paul audaciously sees in this situation an opportunity to personalise his evangelistic commission (29): ultimately, he wants the king's salvation, not the king's favour. So, three times in this testimony (18, 20, 23), he not only speaks about the gospel, he speaks the gospel itself. And the line which effectively ends the discussion drives it home: I do want everyone, yes even you, to become a Christian!

It may be that this helps us to see the purpose of these various trials. We read them as the story of a man having to defend himself, with his back against the wall; Paul sees this as an opportunity to fulfil his apostolic commission to preach the gospel, even before kings.

Why is the main trial of Paul repeated three times in Acts? Possible reasons:

- to show that God always fulfils his word (cf 23:11) despite opposition
- to show how Paul used every possible opportunity to be a witness
- to show the truth of 1 Cor 15:58 ... belief in the resurrection enables us to persevere in Christian work
- to hint at links to the trial of Jesus. Note these comparisons:
 - ⇒ two intended destinations (Luke 9:51, Acts 19:21)
(but the route to these destinations of heaven/Rome is via Jerusalem)
 - ⇒ two trials
(similar trumped-up charges [cf Luke 23:2], both men found innocent)
 - ⇒ each journey critical (and central to the plot-line of the book)
(for the existence of the gospel, for the expansion of the gospel)