

87. Paul Told About His Life Before Christ

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to be led by the love of Christ, instead of being driven by the fear of people. Festus had to ask Agrippa to help him determine what charges to write in his letter to Caesar since Festus had no charges to write. We saw that the real problem was that Festus had tried to please the Jews instead of declaring Paul innocent and setting him free. In this topic, and the next two, we will see that Paul used this opportunity to present the Gospel to Agrippa.

Acts 26:1-3 says, “Then Agrippa said to Paul, ‘You are permitted to speak for yourself.’ So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself: ‘I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently.’” Since Festus had already introduced Paul to Agrippa in the previous chapter, we see that Agrippa now invites Paul to speak for himself.

The Lord had told Ananias about the future ministry of Paul in Acts 9:15, where we read, “But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.’” As a result, Paul knew that it was a part of the plan of the Lord for him to speak to various kings and rulers. Paul was happy to speak to King Agrippa, because he knew that was a part of the plan of the Lord for him. The Lord wants all people to have the opportunity to hear the Gospel, including all kings and rulers. That is why the Lord gives certain people opportunities to speak to rulers.

Paul said that he was thankful to speak concerning all of the things of which he was accused by the Jews. Earlier, in Acts 24:5-6, the Jews had accused Paul of many things. “‘For we have found this man a plague, a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. He even tried to profane the temple, and we seized him, and wanted to judge him according to our law.’” Felix had heard these charges but the Jews were unable to prove any of them. Festus was more concerned to please the Jews than to listen to Paul. As a result, Paul was thankful for the opportunity to speak to King Agrippa.

Paul knew that Agrippa was an expert in the customs of the Jews and was able to answer the questions of other government officials about the Jews. Festus had recognized that Agrippa had this knowledge. That is why Festus had said, in Acts 25:26, “‘I have nothing certain to write to my lord concerning him. Therefore I have brought him out before you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the examination has taken place I may have something to write.’” Paul saw this as an opportunity to present the Gospel both to Festus and to Agrippa. As a result, Paul made a request to Agrippa to hear him patiently. Paul was led by the Lord to tell about his background and his salvation.

Acts 26:4-8 says, “‘My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee. And now I stand

and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. To this *promise* our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?" Paul said that he had come to Jerusalem during the time of his youth.

The word translated "youth" talks about one who is a young adult. The word is used five times. The rich young ruler is quoted in Matthew, Mark and Luke when he says about the commandments of God, "All these things I have kept from my youth." Then, the word is used here. The fifth place where the word is used is 1 Timothy 4:12, where we read, "Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity." Timothy is still called a youth, even though he had already traveled with Paul for several years, when he would have been in his thirties. As a young man, he had to earn respect by his example.

Paul said that many of the Jews knew about him and his life during the years that he was a young man in Jerusalem. He had become well known for several reasons. Paul said that if these Jews would be willing to testify, they would have to say that he had lived as a Pharisee, which was the strictest sect within the Jewish religion. Pharisees on the Sanhedrin had demonstrated that knowledge when Paul was brought before the Sanhedrin by Felix. In Acts 23:6-7, Paul had said to the Sanhedrin, "But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, 'Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!' And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided." In fact, in Acts 23:9, the Pharisees declared Paul innocent. That verse says, "Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees' party arose and protested, saying, 'We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God.'" Since Agrippa understood the Pharisees, he understood exactly what Paul was saying.

The Pharisees believed in the resurrection while the Sadducees rejected the resurrection. Paul went on to say, "And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers." The Pharisees, on the Sanhedrin, had defended Paul before the Sanhedrin because of that hope of the resurrection. That was due to the fact that the Pharisees did look forward to the resurrection. Paul said that he was being judged because of that hope in the resurrection. He said that Jews from all twelve tribes served God night and day, because they wanted to be a part of that resurrection. Paul said that it was due to this fact that he believed in the resurrection that he was now accused by the Jews and especially the Sadducees.

Then, Paul asked Agrippa a question, "Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?" Paul saw this time before Agrippa as an opportunity to share the message of the death and resurrection of Christ and that was his great concern. Here, we see a key example for our own lives. 1 Peter 3:15 says, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear." Paul was able to share that the reason he had hope in his life was due to the resurrection. This is the same reason we can have great hope in our lives.

Agrippa was very familiar with Jewish beliefs. No one could be around the Jews without forming an opinion about Jesus of Nazareth, whether that opinion was for Jesus or against Him. Acts 26:9-11 says, “Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled *them* to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted *them* even to foreign cities.” Paul went on to say that he had done everything possible to try and stop the teaching that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ.

Paul had begun his persecution of the followers of Jesus in the city of Jerusalem. He had arrested and imprisoned many of the saints in that city. Acts 8:3 says, “As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.” Paul said that he had done this under the authority of the chief priests. Paul also said that when Stephen and other individuals were put to death that he cast his vote against them. Since the Sanhedrin was the group that would condemn a person, this is a possible indication that Paul had been a member of the Sanhedrin before he met Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul had also held the coats of those who had stoned Stephen.

Paul went on to tell Agrippa that he looked for every opportunity to punish the followers of Jesus. He said that he punished them often in every synagogue. At that time, there were about 400 synagogues just in the city of Jerusalem. From this, we see that he would go into the various synagogues and look for people who had become followers of Jesus. When he found followers, he would punish them. He would even force them to blaspheme and speak against the name of Jesus. This meant that he would force them to renounce the name of Jesus or they would be severely punished, imprisoned or even put to death.

Paul described to Agrippa what this hatred of Jesus did to him. He said that he was exceedingly enraged against the followers of Jesus. The word translated “enraged against” comes from a root word that means *to be so angry that the person seems to be out of their right mind*. This rage of Paul was so great that he had even requested permission from the high priest to arrest Jews that had become followers of Jesus in foreign cities. He will describe that activity in more detail in our next topic.

We want to help our physical and spiritual children really be able to explain the tremendous change that happened in the life of Paul when he was stopped by Jesus on the road to Damascus. In order to understand that change fully, they need to understand the rage that he had against the followers of Jesus before Jesus stopped him. The better they understand the change in Paul the more they will be able to help others. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children understand the change that happened to Paul.