

The Heavenly Vision

Acts 26:1-18

INTRODUCTION

In this passage Paul gives a clear and powerful description of his testimony.

The occasion is not necessarily a happy one and yet Paul welcomes the opportunity to share Jesus Christ with his accusers and the Roman court. Paul is standing trial before the Roman Governor Porcius Festus and Herod Agrippa. Paul has been charged with three crimes; a personal charge (he is a plague or pestilent fellow Acts 24:5); a political charge (sedition and leading an illegal religion; a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes Acts 24:5) and a doctrinal charge (profaning the temple Acts 24:6; see *The Bible Exposition Commentary; Wiersbe Vol. 1 p.498*).

Paul has been taken by armed guard (some 500 soldiers) from Jerusalem to Caesarea to stand trial. Paul is given permission to tell his side of the story. The story of Paul's conversion is found in Acts 9—where we read about Paul's vendetta against the saints (vv.1-2); his vision of the Son of God (vv.3-9); his visitation by a servant of God named Ananias (vv.10-25).

At that time Paul was known as Saul. His testimony is amazing. It's the story of a religious Jew on a murderous mission to destroy the Church of Jesus Christ. His life is suddenly and permanently changed by a heavenly vision. He was a Jew by birth and a Roman by citizenship. In brief his conversion is best summarized by these simple statements; (1) he saw a light; (2) he heard a voice; (3) he obeyed a call.

In one sense his story is the story of every single sinner who comes to Christ. Every single sinner finds himself or herself in the dark until the light of the Gospel is given.

Paul's story is not simply the story of a religious Jew who changes his mind about the Jewish Messiah. It's a story of profound change and transformation. Paul has a heavenly vision. An encounter with Christ!

The Permission To Speak (vv.1-3)

Acts 26:1 (NKJV) Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself:

Paul has no pulpit but rather chains! The chains are a metaphor for the sufferings Paul is willing to bear in order to have the opportunity to speak!

In chapter 25 the Jewish leaders had asked the Governor to transport Paul to Jerusalem for trial. Their plan was to kill Paul en route. Festus refuses and rules that Paul will remain in Caesaria to stand trial. The Jewish leaders bring charges against Paul but are unable to prove any of the charges. Paul pleads innocent to the charges. Festus wishing to appease the Jews asks Paul to continue the trial in Jerusalem. Paul refuses and exercises his right as a Roman citizen and

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appeals to Caesar and his request is granted. The Festus receives a visit from Herod Agrippa II and Bernice. They strike up a conversation about this famous political prisoner (25:13-19) and speaks of Paul's appeal (25:20-21). Agrippa expresses the desire to meet Paul and Festus invites Paul to speak to the King.

Bernice will play an important role in the future to the Roman General Vespasian as his lover.

Herod Agrippa II was the great-grandson of Herod the Great who killed the babies in Bethlehem; and the son of the Herod who murdered the Apostle James (Acts 12). Bernice lived with her brother—and it was suspected by many that their relationship was less than pure. The Bible condemned incest in Leviticus 18:1-18 and 20:11-21. **The Roman Emperor had granted legal jurisdiction over the Temple proper to Agrippa II and so it only made sense that Festus would seek Agrippa's opinion on how best to deal with Paul. Festus felt certain that if there were any violations it had nothing to do with Roman Law and everything to do with Jewish customs or religious disputes. Festus wants the Jewish question to be answered by Jews.**

2 "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,

3 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.

Paul pleads for patience since what he has to say may take some time.

The Christian is often faced with the question—when do we speak and when do we remain silent?

Paul receives permission to speak.

Paul understands his audience.

Paul acknowledges Agrippa's understanding of the customs and questions of the Jews. He then politely requests patience on the part of his audience.

In the life of the Christian we are often given permissions to speak.

The Personal Testimony (vv.4-16)

In broad terms Paul describes his life before Christ. His was a strict life as Pharisee (vv.4-5); a very orthodox life (vv.6-8); a hostile and bitter life—in terms of his hatred and animosity towards Christians and Christ (vv.9-11). Paul then speaks of the heavenly vision and his encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ (vv.12-18).

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4*“My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know.*

5*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.*

6*And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers.*

7*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.*

8*Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?*

9*“Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.*

10*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.*

11*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.*

12*“While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests,*

13*at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me.*

14*And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’*

15*So I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*

16*But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you.*

Paul’s testimony incorporates these simple elements; “I lived the life of a Pharisee” (vv.4-11); “I saw a light” (vv.12-13); “I heard a voice” (vv.14-18) and later “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision” (vv.19-21).

Christian are you able to share your testimony?

How does Saul become Paul?

The Promise To Deliver Paul (vv.17-18)

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17I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you,

18to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.'

Conclusion

At the end of the chapter the governor Festus says with a loud voice; “Paul you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!” Paul asks the king; “Do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe” (v.27). The question was designed to force a decision—belief in the prophets require that we decide whether or not what they said about Jesus is true. Is Jesus of Nazareth the one about whom the prophets wrote?