

Resurrection Hope Defended

Acts 26:1-18

Tampa Covenant Church

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Proposition: Because God has raised Jesus from the dead, resurrection hope is not merely defended with arguments but testified to by those who've been transformed by the risen Christ and sent as his witnesses.

FCF: Placing our hope in lesser things rather than the risen Christ

RHF: In fulfillment of God's promises, the risen Christ opens the eyes of the blind, turns people from darkness to light, and grants forgiveness and new life.

(#1) Introduction:

When was the last time you got yourself into a mess? I mean one of those moments where you had to stop and think, *"How in the world did I get here?"* You grabbed your phone and accidentally texted the person you were talking about; that's a mess! Or you hit "reply all" on an email mean't for one person and now everyone's in your business; that's a mess! Or you said something you couldn't take back... or made a dumb decision that led right back to you; that's a mess. We've all been there and in those moments, our instinct is to run and hide instead of stepping forward.

For the next two weeks, we'll turn our attention to Acts 26 and look at a "mess" Paul finds himself in. Which started in chap 21 when he returned to Jerusalem and was arrested in the Temple. And from that moment, Paul didn't run and hide; rather he used those "messes" to testify to the good news of Christ's resurrection. When he was brought before the Jewish council, he was clear; *"It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial."* It caused an uproar! From there, Paul was taken to Caesarea and stood before Governor Felix; insisting again *"he was on trial with respect to resurrection"* and he remained confined for the next two years. When Festus took over, Paul exercised his right as a Roman citizen and appealed to Caesar. But before he's sent off; another messy opportunity awaited him to defend the hope of the resurrection before King Agrippa.

Last week, Lou showed us how Paul engaged the philosophers and pagans in Athens; reasoning and explaining in making the case for the resurrection. But here, he takes a different route. He tells his story. Right off the bat, we know personal testimonies are not the gospel. I remember as a young Christian sharing my testimony with a friend and when I finished he replied; *"I'm glad that worked out for you."* Unfortunately it was the dreaded infomercial; *"through Christ I got the better this, I became the better that"* but nothing about how the risen Christ met me in my deplorable condition and transformed me by his mercy and grace. Next week, we'll see how Paul gets to the gospel proper but today we want to pay close attention to his testimony and see that it's not an infomercial about how one can become a better version of themselves. Rather, he tells the unvarnished truth about who he was; his encounter with the risen Christ and his commission as a Christian witness. So as we hear Paul's story, I pray the Holy Spirit helps us to recognize the power of the risen Christ in our individual testimonies and our call to serve as his faithful witnesses.

Paul's Testimony of his Past: (vv.1-8)

So after Festus grants Paul's appeal to Rome, King Agrippa arrives in Caesarea with his sister Bernice.¹ And Festus tells him about Paul's case; that it most likely centered on points of dispute regarding their own religion... *"about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive."* Agrippa wants to hear for himself. The next day, Agrippa and Bernice entered the auditorium with great "pomp and circumstance" accompanied by military and civic leaders. This was a big deal! Now with everyone present; Paul is (#2) given center stage.

In v.1, Agrippa says, *"You have permission to speak for yourself."* And notice how Paul engages Agrippa: He stretches out his hand and says he considers himself blessed to make this defense before Agrippa, he appeals to Agrippa's expertise with Jewish customs and controversies and he begs him to listen patiently. Now Agrippa is no blank slate, Paul knows that he has enough knowledge to make sense of what he's about to say. And Paul (#3) establishes credibility right away, that from the very beginning, he was raised and trained among his own people in Jerusalem. The Jewish leaders knew his story. And if they were willing to testify, they'd confirm he was a Pharisee, part of the strictest sect of their religion. As Lou mentioned last week, Paul is once again establishing common ground. In this instance, he's speaking the language of an insider. By identifying himself as a Pharisee, he's making it clear; he hasn't come from outside their faith... he's coming from within.²

(#4) And now he gets to the heart of his defense; *"The real reason I'm on trial is because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers."* Paul is speaking of the hope of final salvation, when God sets everything right, to include the raising of the dead.³ Paul says this is the very thing Israel has always been waiting for. In fact, all twelve tribes are still hoping for it, worshiping God day and night, longing for that promise to be fulfilled. The Scriptures taught this and faithful Jews believed it; thus, it was a living hope. So if Paul shared this same hope, why is he on trial? Because Paul wasn't just saying hope is coming; he was saying it's already come. Through Christ's resurrection from the dead; God's promises have been fulfilled; thus, Israel's hope is now a present reality.

(#5) And here comes the question; *Why should any of you consider it incredible (unbelievable) that God raises the dead?* That question wasn't just for Agrippa; it was for everyone in the room. And in a gathering this size; the same question confronts every one of us in significant ways. (#6 Bank) There were the Pharisees, who believed in resurrection, yet refused to accept that those promises had been fulfilled in Jesus; like many today who know the Scriptures and affirm the truth, but their hope only goes as far as their line of sight. There were the Sadducees, who had no place for the resurrection in their religious system, so they rejected it altogether; like those who have no problem adhering to Jesus' teachings but refuse to believe that the same God who created heaven and earth, raised him from the dead. And then there were the Gentiles, outsiders to all of this, for whom the resurrection sounded strange and impossible; like those today who hear the gospel and think it simply doesn't comport with the natural world order. Regardless, if we've been walking with Christ for years, currently considering the claims of Christ or have no concept of resurrection hope; the resurrection isn't just another belief to add to your life; because of its saving significance, it's the defining moment of history that all of mankind must reckon with.⁴ As Lou indicated last week, if it's false, Christianity is a sham. But if it's true, it has a total demand on our lives. And this is what Paul discovered from his encounter with the risen Christ.

Paul's Testimony of his Encounter: (vv.9-15)

Now that Paul has everyone's attention; he doesn't start wagging his finger and launch into a tirade. Rather he turns the spotlight on himself in detailing his own (#7) transformation. He said, at one time, he was convinced that he ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And look how intensely he acted on that belief: He locked up many of the saints in prison on the authority of the chief priests, He cast his vote in favor of their deaths, He punished them in the synagogues, trying to force them to curse the name of Christ, and he chased them down even to foreign cities. Paul isn't exaggerating! This is the life he lived. He was fully convinced in his own mind he was doing the right thing but he was as far away from God as anyone could be. Yet, he was not beyond the reach of the risen Christ. And for the 2nd time during his trials, he recounts what happened on the day he was journeying to Damascus to carry out his treachery against Christ's church.

He tells Agrippa it was midday and he saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining on everyone and they all fell to the ground. (#8) And the voice said, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" *It's hard for you to kick against the goads?*"⁵ A goad was a pointed staff used to guide and direct an animal through prodding. But the issue wasn't the goad it was more so Paul's futile attempt to thwart God's plan of redemption through the good news of Christ's gospel.⁶ (#9) Paul responds, *who are you Lord?* Like; who are you sir? And the answer he receives changes everything, "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*" In that moment, two realities would've hit Paul: (#10 Blank) First, the Jesus he thought was crucified, dead and buried is indeed alive. And second, this risen Jesus so closely identifies with his people that to persecute them is to persecute him.⁷ And just like that everything he once believed about Jesus has just been overturned.

And now here he is the man who once sought to destroy the church is standing before a King, defending the very gospel he once violently opposed. Paul isn't telling this story to magnify his sin or call attention to himself; rather he's seeking to magnify the gracious work of Christ in his life. And in many ways this is our story too. Maybe not in the details but in the fact that we too were once far away from God; living without hope in this world and it all changed when we encountered the risen Christ. Paul reflected on this on more than one occasion in his letters. Nearing the end of his life he wrote to Timothy, thanking God for giving him strength, judging him faithful and appointing him to service, and what he wrote should also resonate with us as we reflect on our (#11) personal testimonies.

Paul described himself: "*a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent opponent.*" But he received mercy! And we can't miss this because the Lord could've rained down justice on Paul in giving him what he deserved but instead he granted him mercy. It's what we sang together, "*Praise the Lord, his mercy is more; stronger than darkness; new every morn, our sins they are many; his mercy his more.*" And we don't receive this mercy when we finally get our act together; Christ meets us right where we are. (#12) And notice what follows; Paul says, "*the grace of our God overflowed for me.*" Grace didn't come trickling in rather it overwhelmed his ignorance and unbelief. And produced (#13) something entirely new; "*faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*" (#14) One writer said, "*Perhaps the transformation of the disciples of Jesus is the greatest evidence of all for the resurrection.*"⁸ What's true of the disciples and what's true of Paul is also true of us who follow Christ. The change wrought in our lives didn't come from a dead man whose bones are still lying in a grave but from a risen Savior who is alive and reigns forevermore.

Paul's Testimony of his Commission: (vv.16-18)

What happened to Paul was deeply personal. His companions heard something, they saw something but only Paul encountered the risen Lord and received the message.⁹ (#15) **And the Lord** told him to *"Rise and stand on your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose: To appoint you as a servant and witness to what he's already seen and what Jesus will show him."* Next, the Lord tells him he'll deliver him from his own people and from the Gentiles; to whom I am sending¹⁰ you. This word for "send" is where we get the word "Apostle" so Jesus is saying to Paul, *"I myself will apostle you."* Paul wasn't volunteering, he was being commissioned as an Apostle to the Gentiles. (#16) **And what was he** being sent to do? To open their eyes; enabling them to turn from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God. In other words, it's a rescue out of one kingdom into another.¹¹ And with that comes the blessing of the gospel; the forgiveness of sin and a place among God's people; those who've been set apart holy through faith in Christ. And when we step back and reflect on Paul's story that's what happened to him. And for those of us who follow Christ; it's our story too. We've been rescued from the domain of darkness into the marvelous light of Christ.

(#17 Blank) **Through Paul's words**, we've learned who he was, what he believed and how he was transformed into a witness for Christ. He was zealous for the kingdom of God; trained as a Pharisee and grounded in the Scriptures and yet he had it all wrong, because his theology made no room for the fulfillment of God's promises through Christ's resurrection from the dead. And his eyes weren't opened through more information or better arguments. Rather it was a personal encounter with the risen Lord. The Scriptures tell us that when Christ calls us by name; he doesn't leave us to ourselves. He brings us into community with himself, with fellow believers and he sends us out to participate in his mission of redemption. Church, our election always comes with a purpose. We who've received the blessings of salvation by grace through faith are called to point others to the source of those blessings in word and deed.

Now we don't have the power to open the eyes of the spiritually blind, nor can we deliver them from the power of darkness into light. But we can bear witness to Christ through our testimonies. And our testimonies may not be as sensational as Paul's but they tell the same story: that Christ found us where we were; called us by name, poured out his grace and mercy on us in bringing us into the family of God and we've been appointed to serve as his faithful witnesses. What's more his grace is still at work in us for our good and for his glory. That's not an infomercial promising a better life; it's the story of how resurrection hope is received and how it changes everything.

Church, our hope is rooted in the same reality as Paul's and all the saints who've gone before us; the resurrection of our Savior from the dead. Which leaves no room for lesser hopes in our lives. Because the main question for every individual, whatever their religious, or cultural heritage may be is this: *"Is Jesus Christ your hope?"*¹² If the answer is no or I'm not sure, turn from the lesser hopes of this world and find in him your only true source of hope in this world. And as we build our lives on him, may we continue to grow as living testimonies of his love, mercy and grace in this world as we live for the world to come. And may his presence abide with us toward that end as his faithful witnesses.

¹ He was the great-grandson of Herod the Great and the last of the Herodian dynasty. Raised and educated at Rome's imperial court, he became king of Chalcis in southern Lebanon at age twenty-three in A.D. 50. It was rumored that his relationship with his sister Bernice was incestuous: Josephus' denial of that rumor is as predictable and inconclusive as Juvenal's eager acceptance of it (*Ant* 20.145; *Juv.* 6.158). David C. Braund, "Agrippa (Person)," in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 98.

² N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 13–28* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 206.

³ William J. Larkin Jr., *Acts*, vol. 5, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), Ac 26:1–8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Acts 26:1–8.

⁵ κέντρον (*kentron*), ου (*ou*), τό (*to*): goad, a pointed stick to prod animals to make move or otherwise control (Ac 26:14; Ac 9:5)

⁶ Allison A. Trites, William J. Larkin, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 12: The Gospel of Luke and Acts* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2006), 625.

⁷ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church & the World, The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 372.

⁸ Mark Water, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Leicester: John Hunt, 2000), s.v. "Resurrection," citing John R. W. Stott; cf. Robert J. Morgan.

⁹ Larkin Jr., Ac 26:9–23.

¹⁰ "ἐγὼ ἀποστέλλω σε"; the phrase is literally rendered "I apostle you." ἀποστέλλω (*apostellō*). vb. to send. *To send someone to do something; to send a message.* It appears in the nt mostly in the Gospels and Acts. Jesus speaks of being sent out (*apostellō*) or commissioned by the Father (Matt 10:40; Luke 10:16). He in turn sends out (*apostellō*) select disciples (Matt 10:5, 16; Mark 3:14; Luke 10:3), who are thus called apostles (e.g., Mark 3:14); the Greek word ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*, "apostle") is derived from this verb and means "one sent out." Hence an "apostle" is someone who has been called by God and sent out on a special mission. This is why Paul connects the fact that he is called (*klētos*) by God with his authority as an apostle (*apostolos*; Rom 1:1, 1 Cor 1:1). William A. Simmons, "Calling or Commission," in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. Douglas Mangum et al., Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

¹¹ Stott, 373–374.

¹² Larkin Jr., Ac 26:1–8.