

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

A Compelling Defense

Acts 25:13-26:32

Intro: Remember, Festus had inherited this Paul problem from the previous governor Felix. Since Festus didn't understand the ways of Judaism much, when this case was dropped in his lap, he didn't quite know how to deal with it. He didn't understand what all the fuss was about. But, as his examination of the prisoner came to a close, Paul appealed to Caesar's court and Festus jumped at the opportunity to rid himself of Paul and granted his request. This got him out of 1 fix but put him right into another.

Now he had to send Paul to Caesar with formal documentation that explained why he was sending him. What was Paul accused of? It was the opinion of his predecessor (Felix) that Paul had done nothing wrong—nothing worthy of execution. This was the same conclusion that Festus had come to himself. So what's he going to do? Why bother the emperor with religious trivialities he didn't understand himself? What's he going to tell Caesar? "We can't figure out why this citizen has been arrested, maybe you can?" That's not the way to become popular with Caesar.

Lo and behold, King Agrippa and Bernice arrive in Caesarea to greet the Roman new governor. Festus knew that at least Agrippa understood something about Jewish law and customs and recognized this as a great opportunity to shed some light on the case. Agrippa gladly agreed to hear Paul so the scene is set for yet another defense by the Apostle Paul. If you're keeping score, this is the 4th legal defense Paul has made for himself since his arrest; 5th if you count his brief visit before the Sanhedrin

Paul had given an initial defense before the mob in the temple (22) which was delivered entirely in Jewish language and terminology. The 2nd defense (24) before Felix and the 3rd more abbreviated defense before Festus (25) were both basically Gentile in character. Now, in ch26 we have a unique defense before a ruler who was on the side of the Jews but still was obviously on very good terms with Rome. This may be why Luke records the trial so completely.

Of course, we've already heard the arguments. And, since Paul's defense is

essentially his testimony, we've heard the parts that concern his early life and conversion even more than what's provided here. You may be asking, "Why are we getting this all over again? Haven't we been over these things enough?" Apparently Luke thought this was worth repeating. And if he was right, as he must be, then the testimony that Paul gave on this occasion is something that we need to hear again too.

13-22 – We have a new character in our legal drama – Herod Agrippa II. He was the grandson of Herod the Great and the son of Herod Agrippa I, who had arrested Peter and killed James. It's not a genealogy to be proud of, but compared with his previous ancestors, he was a pretty good king. There is not too much to say about him except that he wasn't guilty of the atrocities of his father and grandfather and that, by itself, is significant. It was rumored he was living in an incestuous relationship with his sister, Bernice. But far as we know he didn't go around killing people.

Agrippa didn't rule over much territory. His was a client kingdom of the Roman Empire situated to the northeast of Fetus' province. Despite that, Herod Agrippa II still had a lot of influence in the area since the Emperor had granted him the right to oversee the affairs of the temple and the appointment the High Priest. Also, he was known as an expert in Jewish customs and religious matters and as such he understood Paul's situation. Though he didn't have any jurisdiction in Paul's case, his hearing of the matter would be helpful to Festus who found this case confusing because of a lack of concrete evidence. Of course, there wasn't enough evidence to convict Paul because Paul hadn't done anything wrong! This fact was reason enough to grant Paul an acquittal.

In Festus' explanation of the case to Agrippa, he says that in his initial meeting with the religious leaders in Jerusalem, they wanted him to rule against Paul without even hearing Paul's defense (**15**) but he wasn't about to do that. When the hearing commenced, Festus was surprised at, what seemed to him to be the frivolous nature of their accusations. It was all about a certain Jesus who died, whom Paul insisted was alive. It's funny that their entire complaint was that Paul wouldn't stop talking about this risen Jesus and they wanted Festus to make him stop!

In saying a certain Jesus, Festus shows that he didn't really know much about Jesus. The events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection had occurred

some 20 yrs before this, long before he arrived on the scene. It's good to remember that the vast majority of great and important people of Paul's day didn't know much about Jesus and they had to be told. It's no different today. That's why we must keep preaching, witnessing and living in ways that point others to Jesus, because He's still so little known. Many in our community are just as ignorant of Jesus as Festus was.

23-27 – As we can see from the text, this wasn't just a hearing – it was an event! A number of very important people were in attendance. They were important in terms of position and power and their gathering was done with much splendor and spectacle. Luke takes care to point out the people, their positions, the pomp, power, and pageantry.

There's Agrippa and Bernice, the Jewish king and queen; Festus the governor; the high-ranking officers in charge of the Roman military divisions stationed in Caesarea (5 at any given time). There were also the leading men of the city, perhaps some retired military personnel but mostly merchants wealthy enough to be in positions of influence.

There are all these powerful people on one side with all their pomp and pageantry, which was meant to communicate who was important and who wasn't. On the other side: a poor prisoner, a little Jew from Tarsus – the Apostle Paul. What a lopsided contest! And it was, but not in the way you might expect. The Greek word for pomp (**23**) is *fantasia*: referring to something light, fleeting, or passing, something of momentary interest only. The word was carefully chosen to suggest that these seemingly important things are only passing fantasies. We need to understand this.

When we see the impressive things of this world they usually seem to us to be lasting or stable. What could be more stable or more lasting than the Roman Empire in the people representing it? But Luke hints it was all fantasy, it was all in the process of passing away even then. The pomp and pageantry passed away first. It didn't even last out the day. The flags and banners were removed when it was all over. In time the people also passed away. Eventually, even the Roman Empire passed away.

But the gospel of Jesus Christ which Paul was called to bear witness to prevailed. It prevailed, not only on that day because it was the truth, but it prevailed in the decades and the centuries that followed that and the millennium after that. The gospel of Jesus Christ is with us in power even

today when Rome is just a memory. Most everyone present was wrong in their estimation as to who was important and who was not. Paul had an authority and a dignity greater than any of the “important” people at this hearing. His authority was from God; his dignity was seen in his obedience.

The assessment of Festus was that Paul was innocent and it was important for Luke to record his statement. Paul was so innocent that Festus couldn't describe or specify the charges against him.

26:1-11 – Clearly, Paul wasn't awed by the display of self-importance arrayed before him. He had been called by God and he knew it. He had been given a divine commission and he understood his commission. He had a story to tell and that story would be delivered in 3 parts. The 1st part had to do with his previous life in Judaism. Paul stresses that he was a faithful Jew. He'd been raised a Jew, receiving the Jewish traditions from his fathers. He knew the law and as far as he knew and understood it, he had lived by it according to the strict expectations of the Pharisees.

Paul makes it clear that in both his heart and mind, he remained a faithful Jew. His trust in Jesus was merely the logical outgrowth of his trust in the hope of the promise made by God. His defense was: he was only proclaiming things that were in the law; things well understood by the Jews—at least those who believed the OT Scriptures. He argued that it was for this hope's sake that he was accused by the Jews. Paul's main point was the promise of the resurrection. He interrupted his address at this point to ask wisely, “Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?” (8). The Gentiles present may have balked at the idea but Agrippa, being expert in Judaism, should've understood the idea that God can or will raise the dead, given some clear statements from the OT (**Job 19:25-27**) and the nature and power of God.

Paul isn't shocked by Jewish unbelief, seeing that before his conversion, he persecuted the followers of Jesus. In fact, before Paul was saved, he was an angry man. His great rage showed that, despite all of his diligent religious observances, his relationship with God was not right. At that time, he considered himself an enlightened man but in reality, he lived in gross spiritual darkness. He knew the Law but never realized that the purpose of the Law was to bring him to Jesus Christ. Instead, he was convinced it was God's will that he persecute the followers of this sect.

12-18 – The 2nd part of Paul’s address deals with his conversion and his commission from God. Paul was actually on a mission of hate and persecution with the authority and commission of the same Jewish leaders accusing him now but Jesus stopped him short. Paul literally saw the light before he figuratively saw the light. He went to Damascus supremely confident that he was right. It took a light brighter than the midday sun to show him he was wrong. But, seeing a light was not enough – he also needed to hear the Word of God!

“I am Jesus,” these words changed Paul’s world! He immediately understood several truths that eluded him for so long: 1) Jesus was alive, not dead; 2) Jesus reigned in glory, He didn’t die in shame; 3) persecuting the followers of Jesus meant he was persecuting Jesus and in doing so, he was fighting against the God of his fathers. Everything Jesus had said and taught was true and everyone who opposed Him did so in grave error! Paul had to repent instantly (transformation of mind leading to transformed action). Paul lived a moral life so he didn’t need to repent of immorality – he needed to repent of misguided religious zeal stemming from wrong ideas about God.

Paul’s sin had brought him low in humility but Jesus told to stand up, not that his humility wasn’t proper but because he was being sent to go somewhere and to do that, he had to rise and stand! Jesus had done the saving; now Paul had to put himself into a position of effective service. The religious leaders had sent Paul to Damascus for a purpose; now he must choose to fulfill another purpose – the purpose of Jesus! Paul was being commissioned as a minister, a servant of the things he had seen and things which would be revealed to him later. The commission of every believer is not to make the message serve us; we’re called to serve the message! We’re not called to create the message or create an experience – we’re called to witness of the message and experience it for ourselves. Paul was blinded on the road to Damascus but Jesus was sending him to open the eyes of both Jews and Gentiles.

19-23 – the last part of Paul’s defense before Agrippa concerns his service for Jesus after his conversion. His main emphasis was on his obedience. One of the 1st identifying marks of conversion is that we obey Jesus. Jesus said, “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do the things which I

say?” (Lk 6:46). If you disobey Jesus, you’re not His disciple. If you’re not His disciple, you’re not saved. People who’ve heard the voice of Jesus just don’t ignore it.

Next, Paul describes both the scope and subject of his ministry. He started preaching in Damascus because that’s where he was but then he went from Jerusalem to Judea and then to the Gentiles of the world. The subject of his ministry was the gospel – he proclaimed no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come (22). What things? That Christ would suffer; would rise from the dead; would proclaim light to Jews and Gentiles.

What’s the proper response to such a gospel? Paul explains this explicitly for the benefit of all the important people present: “repent, turn to God and do works befitting (proving) repentance.” Repent means to turn around. Turn from what? Anything contrary to or opposed to God! Thus, “repent” and “turn to God” are 2 sides of the same coin. You can’t effectively do one without automatically doing the other. Repentance isn’t turning over a new leaf – its finding righteousness and a new life in Christ. This new life isn’t just different – it’s better! It’s a life lived in and with God.

Then, to shut down any idea of cheap grace, easy repentance or “verbal” confession; Paul also says Gentiles need to prove their repentance by their actions. How do you know you’re a Christian or not? We know we’re Christians when our lives are changed and we begin to do good works. That’s the evidence—when we begin to follow after Jesus Christ and obey Him. That’s the gospel Paul preached; the most radical thing that’s ever been proclaimed. It’s centered on a risen Lord who lived in history, was crucified, who rose from the dead and now commands all people everywhere to turn from sin to God and to do works of righteousness; that’s a radical message. It cannot be ignored.

24-32 – What was the response of Paul’s illustrious audience to his message of the gospel? Festus told Paul he was crazy! He was incredulous to the things Paul was saying. Maybe he couldn’t believe Paul changed his entire life over some vision. Maybe he found the concept of resurrection incredible and intolerable. Maybe he couldn’t believe that Paul was more concerned with proclaiming Jesus than his own personal freedom. Paul states in I Cor 1:18, “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who

are perishing.” Whatever his reasons were for unbelief, Festus wasn’t buying what Paul was saying and he eventually perished because of it.

Paul knew that not only was the gospel true, it was also reasonable. God sometimes acts above reason but never contrary to reason. Paul’s message was characterized by truth and reason because it was based on factual, historical events, things which were not done in secret but were open to examination. The historical foundation of Paul’s message made it true and it simply isn’t reasonable to ignore or disregard things that actually happened. Who Jesus is and what He did must be accounted for.

Paul then puts the question directly to Agrippa, “do you believe the prophets?” Paul asked this because he knew if Agrippa really did believe the prophets then truth and reason would lead him to believe on Jesus too. He wanted to make the connection between what Agrippa already believed and what he should believe. Paul is no respecter of persons – he is challenging King Herod Agrippa to make a personal decision to accept Jesus Christ!

What was Agrippa’s response? Probably the saddest words in all the Bible, “Almost...” However close Agrippa was to becoming a Christian, it wasn’t close enough. Almost becoming a Christian means you almost have eternal life and you almost escape the judgment of hell, which means you don’t on both accounts. Instead of being admired for how far he had come, Agrippa condemned himself even more by admitting how close he had come to the gospel and how clearly he understood it, while still rejecting it! He had heard Paul recount the words of Jesus that described what a Christian is (18) and then boldly declared that he didn’t want it.

In the face of this rejection, Paul still declared his continued trust in the gospel of Jesus Christ. He didn’t back down from his stance not 1 inch. And, even though he stood there in chains, he had more freedom in Christ than all the important people listening to him had. But, his direct challenge was too much for Agrippa, Festus and the others in attendance. It was getting too personal, hitting too close to home. So, in order to put the kibosh on Paul’s preaching, they quickly stood up and ended the proceedings. They had to go out and shake off the conviction of the Holy Spirit. But, they did recognize that Paul was innocent. Though they rejected his gospel, they respected Paul’s integrity. Luke is careful to record that even King Herod Agrippa II himself pronounced a “not guilty” verdict over Paul.

Festus perished through the pride of intellect. He just couldn't wrap his mind around what Paul was saying. Agrippa though, perished through the pride of position. He understood what Paul was saying but he just couldn't humble himself, acknowledging himself to be a sinner like everyone else and receive Jesus as his Savior. He was so full of himself, he couldn't swallow his pride. These are the same things that cause the world to put up barriers and reject the gospel today – pride of intellect and position. But think of how foolish that is! Both intellect and position will pass away. We rarely retain them to the end of this life and never into the next life.

But the Word of God is eternal and all who acquire the truth of God's Word and applies it to their life, allowing it to turn you from sin to God, and empowering you to do works befitting repentance; they will also experience the glory of God for all eternity. Just be warned – your pride in intellect or position may cost you more than you are able to pay.

Paul was turned around that day on the road to Damascus. He could honestly and accurately testify of the grace of God in his transformation. If Jesus has stopped you on the road of life and turned you around, you can testify of that too, just like Paul. 😊