

Fearless Witness

Lesson for June 30, 2024

Unit I: Experiencing Hope

Adult Topic: Hope in God Transforms Us

Scriptural Background: Acts 26:1-11

Printed Text: Acts 26:1-11

Key verse: *“And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today.”* (Acts 26:6, NIV)

When we are called to witness to others about Jesus, we often shrink away from even saying His name. Has this ever happened to you?

Paul models for us the importance of telling our story. Some elements to incorporate into our story are admitting our wrongs, finding forgiveness in Jesus, and how this experience has changed our lives and made us authentic genuine Christians. We also learn that not everyone will believe our story!

Unifying Principle

Our actions and life-choices may seem strange to others who observe us from a distance. What are we to do when those in authority question our actions and motives? Paul boldly bears witness to King Agrippa of his hope in God’s promise to his ancestors. (*Sunday School Commentary, 2023-2024*, Townsend Press, p. 387)

Lesson Background

The book of Acts is the second of a two-part work, both traditionally attributed to Luke. The introduction to Luke (Luke 1:1–4) also explains the purpose of the book of Acts: to create an orderly record.

The summary of the book of Acts is provided in Jesus' words in Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” In Acts 2:1–13, the Christ-followers receive the Holy Spirit. Acts 2:14–7:60 describes the rapid growth of the church in Jerusalem. Chapters 8–12 find Jewish persecution inadvertently spreading the gospel throughout Judea and Samaria. And in chapters 13–28, Paul and his companions spread the good news throughout the Roman Empire.

After being held in custody for two years and, again, hassled by the Sanhedrin who want to kill him, Paul appeals his case to Caesar (Acts 25:7–12). Before he travels to Rome, however, Governor Festus has Paul give his testimony before King Agrippa II and the noblemen of Caesarea Maritima (Act 25:23–27). When Paul is finished, they realize they should have set him free before he appealed to Caesar (Acts 26:30–32). But he must go to Rome, surviving a violent storm and a shipwreck along the way (Acts 27–28).

The Sanhedrin continues to cause problems for Paul. They want to kill him because he preaches that Jesus rose from the grave (Acts 24:21). Two years before, they tried to have him assassinated (Acts 23:12–15). When their plans were foiled by Paul's nephew, they tried to convince Governor Felix to execute him. Though the charges were spurious and unprovable, Felix kept Paul in custody as a political favor to the Sanhedrin (Acts 24:5–6, 27). Two years later, when Festus replaced Felix, the Sanhedrin tried again (Acts 25:1–7). Like Felix, Festus wanted to accommodate the Jewish leaders, but he couldn't summarily convict Paul because his Roman citizenship protected him. Festus tried to convince Paul to meet him half-way, and Paul responded by appealing his case to Caesar (Acts 25:8–12). Festus must send Paul to Rome, but he has no charges, so he's invited King Agrippa II, the king's sister/lover Bernice, and the military and civil leaders of Caesarea to hear Paul's story and help him determine what, if any, crime Paul has committed (Acts 25:23).

In Acts 26:1–11, after acknowledging that Agrippa will understand the cultural and religious distinctions of his story, Paul describes his life before he started following Jesus. This defense of his ministry against the Jews' accusations followed an extended house arrest for appealing his case to Caesar.

Lesson in Depth

I. Now! (Acts 26:1-8)

What a scene it must have been, with Paul standing before this august gathering of celebrities and leaders. They, having arrived and seating themselves, with all due dignity and solemnity; he, in his chains, accompanied, no doubt, by one or more guards. It was not to be as dramatic as in days yet to come, when the Romans would watch the Christians be devoured by the lions, but some of this same spirit may have prevailed. After all, this gathering was, at best, an informal hearing, a favor to Festus, and probably a matter of curiosity to those who attended. So, it seems to have been for Agrippa. Paul was hardly to be taken seriously, nor did anyone come hoping or expecting to be converted. But perhaps hearing Paul would at least help them to understand the mindset of Judaism, and thus some of the cause for all the uprisings and disorder they were constantly fomenting.

For some men, this hearing would have dazzled them, standing before such a large gathering of “shakers and movers” of that day. Some might have entered into this occasion with apprehension, perhaps contemplating how to make the gospel more tolerable to such pagans as were gathered. For Paul, it was just one more of a long sequence of hearings, where his conduct, his ministry, and his gospel were scrutinized by public officials for some sign of wrong-doing. Here is his appeal.

Then Agrippa said to Paul: Paul stood before the man whose great-grandfather had tried to kill Jesus as a baby; his grandfather had John the Baptist beheaded; his father had martyred the first apostle, James. Agrippa's family history made him unlikely to receive Paul warmly.

I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you: Though he was a prisoner, Paul *was* **happy** to speak before Agrippa. First, because he was pleased to have the evidence of his case examined closely by the highest officials, but also because he was pleased to preach the gospel to kings and rulers. Agrippa was a man with much experience and knowledge pertaining to Judaism. Paul believed him to be a Jew who, himself, believed in the Law and the Prophets (Acts 26:27).

In the auditorium in the city of Caesarea Paul spoke to Festus, Agrippa, Bernice, commanders of the Roman Legion, and all the prominent men of Caesarea (Acts 25:23). This was a tremendous opportunity, and Paul was certainly *happy* for that opportunity.

My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem: Paul was born in Tarsus, several hundred miles from Jerusalem. Yet at a relatively young age he came to live in Jerusalem.

According to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee: Not only was Paul a faithful Jew, but was known as a faithful man among the Jews, living according to the strictest sect of the Pharisees.

Now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers: This was not a trial, but an unofficial hearing, to help Festus determine what charges he should include on his report to Caesar. Paul is not trying to prove his innocence, to much as he is trying to explain the reasons for the opposition of the Jews to him and his ministry

Paul made it clear that in both his heart and mind, he remained a faithful Jew. His trust in Jesus was an outgrowth of his trust in **the hope of the promise made by God** and he argued that **for this hope's sake... I am accused by the Jews**.

Paul is guilty of hoping and believing in the promise which God gave to the twelve tribes of Israel, and which they think they are still looking for, as they go about their religious rituals of worship. It is for the same kind of hope and expectation—a hope which includes as a vital part the resurrection of the dead—that Paul is now being accused. Paul argued that it was absurd to be persecuted for proclaiming the same hope the Jews believed.

The promise of Messiah and the promise of the resurrection, and eternal life for the Christian is all the same. Paul says here, because I believe that Jesus Christ was Messiah and believe and have hope in the resurrection, “I am accused of the Jews”.

Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead? Since Agrippa was an *expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews* (Acts 26:3), he should have understood the belief that God could, or would, raise the dead.

Why should it be thought incredible that God can do *anything*? As Jesus said, *with God all things are possible* (Matthew 19:26). Yet it should be especially easy for Agrippa to believe **that God raises the dead**, given some clear statements in the Old Testament (such as Job 19:25-27), the nature of God, and the intuitive grasp of the eternal among mankind.

If belief in the resurrection of the dead is a fundamental premise of Judaism, how is it that the Jews condemn Paul for believing in the resurrection of Jesus?

Here is the key issue, the bone of contention between Paul and his Jewish opponents—the doctrine of the resurrection, and especially the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is the fuel which fired the opposition of the Jews against Paul and Christianity

II. **Then!** (Acts 26:9-11)

The failure of the Jews to be consistent with their own faith was not foreign to Paul. As an unbelieving Jew, Paul found Christianity and the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus, an abhorrent thing, something to be violently and rigorously opposed. Could Paul understand and explain the opposition of his Jewish peers? Of course. He had done the same thing himself, before he was saved, and as a high calling thrust upon him by his own Judaism.

Paul felt obliged to attack and to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth, who was worshipped and followed by Christians as the risen Messiah of Israel (verse 9). He practiced his opposition in Jerusalem and far beyond, even to foreign cities (verse 11). With a vengeance, he sought to force Christians to renounce their faith in Jesus as Messiah, by blaspheming. Many, he cast into prison, and others he enthusiastically voted for their execution, as heretics. In his opposition to Jesus, he worked closely with the Sanhedrin and with the cooperation and support of the chief priests, the very ones who now took the lead in opposing him.

Paul understood his opponents well, and well he should. He understood them well because what they were to him, he once was to many other saints. His opposition to Christianity, to the gospel, was the result of his own misguided Judaism. This error was only to be exposed and corrected by a direct encounter with the risen Jesus, which Paul now goes on to describe as the turning point in his life and in his understanding and practice of Judaism.

I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth: Before his conversion, Paul believed he **must** persecute the followers of Jesus. Some he imprisoned (**shut up in prison**), some he killed (**they were put to death**), and some he forced to renounce Jesus (**compelled them to blaspheme**).

Paul later speaks of the great regret he had over his prior life as a persecutor (1 Corinthians 15:9, 1 Timothy 1:15). Perhaps the fact that he compelled them to blaspheme weighed especially on his conscience.

I cast my vote against them: This clearly implies that Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin, having a **vote** against Christians who were tried before the Sanhedrin (as Stephen was in Acts 7).

If Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin, it also means that at that time he was married, because it was required for all members of the Sanhedrin. Since as a Christian, he was single (1 Corinthians 7:7-9), it may mean that Paul's wife either died or deserted him when he became a Christian.

Being exceedingly enraged against them: Before his conversion, Paul was an angry man. His great rage showed that his relationship with God was not right, despite his diligent religious observance.

Lesson Summary

In this week's lesson the Apostle Paul emphasize the importance of personal testimony, respectful engagement, faithfulness, hope, recognition of God's power, and the acknowledgement of past mistakes in living a life of faith and integrity.

1. Importance of Personal Testimony:

- **Verse 1:** "Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'You have permission to speak for yourself.' So, Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense."
- Personal testimonies are powerful tools in sharing faith and beliefs. Paul begins his defense by sharing his personal experience, demonstrating the importance of personal stories in making a connection and conveying the truth.

2. Respectful Engagement:

- **Verses 2-3:** "King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently."
- Respectful and patient engagement with others, even when under accusation, can create a more conducive environment for dialogue. Paul shows respect towards King Agrippa, acknowledging his knowledge and position.

3. Faithfulness to Belief:

- **Verses 4-5:** "The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee."
- Consistency in one's beliefs and actions over time can serve as a powerful testament to the sincerity and truth of one's faith. Paul's life is a testament to his commitment and faithfulness to his beliefs.

4. Hope in God's Promise:

- **Verses 6-7:** "And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me."
- Hope in God's promises is central to faith. Paul's trial revolves around his hope in the fulfillment of God's promises, illustrating the core of Christian faith - trust in God's word and promises.

5. Perception of God's Work:

- **Verse 8:** "Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?"
- Recognizing and believing in God's power, even when it surpasses human understanding, is crucial. Paul challenges his audience to broaden their perception of God's capabilities, particularly concerning the resurrection.

6. Acknowledgement of Past Mistakes:

- **Verses 9-11:** "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests, I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities."
- Acknowledging past mistakes and wrongdoings is essential for personal growth and credibility. Paul openly admits his past actions against Christians, demonstrating humility and the transformative power of faith.