

Gospel on Trial

Acts: More than a Movement, Part 2

Acts 25:1-26:32

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Setting the Scene (25:1-22)

This morning we'll pick up where we left off in Acts, starting in chapter 25. Last time, Paul was on trial before the Roman provincial governor Felix. In today's passage, this legal drama continues with another blockbuster episode. It's like a courtroom drama as we cut from scene to scene, tension building as we approach Paul's day in court. The previous episode ended with Paul in prison and a "To be continued..." at the bottom of the screen. This one begins with "Two years later." For two years Paul has been waiting in prison for his case to be decided. Governor Felix, you'll recall, was more interested in using Paul to get money or influence than actually doing justice. But this episode opens with the arrival of a new governor, Festus. Maybe he'll be different.

Three days later... Jerusalem. Enter Festus. He's come to meet with the leading men of the Jews and see what the deal is with this Paul. They want to silence Paul the old-fashioned way. They say, "Just bring him to Jerusalem and we'll take care of this problem before he even arrives, if you know what we mean."

New governor, same plot by the Jews to kill Paul. But Festus tells them to come down to Caesarea and present their charges. Maybe he's not as corrupt as Felix, not so ready to exchange favors.

New scene ten days later... Caesarea. A courtroom. Festus sits on the bench. Enter Paul and his accusers. They bring charge after charge, but they can't prove any of them. Paul appears to be innocent. But Festus turns out to be cut from the same cloth as Felix. Wishing to do the Jews a favor, he says to Paul, "Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?" Well, if Paul fell for lame tricks like that, he would have died in season one. He knows exactly what to do. He appeals to Caesar. He wants an audience with the emperor. And Festus agrees. "To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go." Paul is going to Rome. But not yet.

New scene a few days later... Festus's palace in Caesarea. Enter King Agrippa, the latest of the wretched line of the Herods, whose father had killed James and arrested Peter but was eventually eaten by worms, and whose great-grandfather tried to kill baby Jesus. That Agrippa. Along with his wife Bernice, who also happens to be his sister. Festus fills them in on the "Paul problem," of course telling the version that makes himself look the best. No mention of the whole "doing the Jews a favor" business. But Agrippa wants to hear from Paul himself. "Tomorrow," says Festus, "you will hear him."

The scene is set. The tension has been building. We're ready for Paul's moment of truth. But this is where the analogy breaks down. If this is a courtroom drama, it's a strange one, because we already know Paul is innocent. In fact, he was never even accused of a real crime. Look at what Festus reported in verse 18: "When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed." Well what was all the commotion about then? Verse 19: "Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive."

Now we know what this drama is all about. It's not about Paul. In a sense, it's not Paul who's on trial; it's Jesus and the belief in his resurrection. The gospel is on trial. Paul's just a witness.

And if you believe in this gospel, then you'd better stay tuned. Because the producer of this show (God) wasn't aiming to entertain. He's telling this true story so that you would be ready. You might never find yourself in court for believing this gospel, but nonetheless, you've been called to the witness stand. You've been called to testify.

The Gospel on Trial (25:23-26:32)

In the rest of our passage today, the gospel is on trial. We'll look at the example of Paul and seek to answer this question: What sort of witness does the gospel require? Please follow along with me, starting in verse 23.

Acts 25:23-26:32¹

²³So on the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. ²⁴And Festus said, "King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. ²⁵But I found that he had done nothing deserving death. And as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him. ²⁶But I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write. ²⁷For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him."

^{26:1}So Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense:

²"I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, ³especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.

⁴"My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. ⁵They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. ⁶And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, ⁷to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! ⁸Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

⁹"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blasphemous, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

¹²"In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. ¹⁴And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' ¹⁵And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

I will appear to you, ¹⁷delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles--to whom I am sending you ¹⁸to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

¹⁹“Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. ²¹For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. ²²To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: ²³that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”

²⁴And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.” ²⁵But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. ²⁶For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. ²⁷King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” ²⁸And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” ²⁹And Paul said, “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am--except for these chains.”

³⁰Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. ³¹And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, “This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.” ³²And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

The question that this passage addresses is “What sort of witness does the gospel require?” As I’ve said, this is a question we need answered, because we too have been called to testify.

To answer it, we’ll divide our passage into three parts, the who, what, and why of witnessing for the gospel. These sections form a chiasm, so we’ll start with the outside edges of our passage, and each section will move us closer to the center of our text.

WHO MUST A WITNESS BE? (25:23-27; 26:30-32)

First, the who. Who must a witness be? In other words, what kind of character is required to bear witness for the gospel? This passage reveals two things about Paul’s character that make him an effective witness.

Innocent of Wrongdoing

The first is that Paul is innocent of wrongdoing. He’s above reproach. Our author Luke really wants to get this point across, because he repeats it all over the place. We can see this throughout chapter 25, in all of the lead-up to Paul’s big speech. Festus wants to see if there’s anything “wrong about the man,” but there’s nothing. As Paul says in 25:10, “To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well.” Festus then reports to Agrippa that the Jews “brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed.” He was expecting Paul to be guilty. He probably wanted Paul to be guilty; after all, he was looking to do the Jews a favor. But, Festus concludes in verse 25 that Paul “had done nothing deserving death.” Paul is headed to Caesar, but Festus has no charge to present to Caesar, so he hopes that maybe now when Paul gives his testimony before Agrippa he’ll somehow incriminate himself. Verse 26: “Therefore I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write.” That’s what we read before Paul speaks, but at the very end of our passage in 26:31, the

conclusion of Festus and Agrippa remains the same: “This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.”

Our passage starts with Paul’s innocence and ends with Paul’s innocence. The message is that Paul is obviously, unquestionably innocent. Even his enemies can’t come up with anything legitimate to accuse him of. Of course, Paul was a sinner like you and me. But Christ had so transformed Paul’s life that he was above reproach to the watching world.

And that’s precisely why Paul is able to speak so much about Jesus. If Paul had been guilty of some crime, or if he really was stirring up trouble, he may never have gotten his day before the king. He would have been convicted and that would’ve been that. But he’s innocent, so he’s able to spend a lot more time defending the gospel than defending his own actions.

If we’re going to be effective witnesses, that needs to be true of us as well. As I’ve heard Pastor Josh say, the gospel must be adorned. We have to speak the gospel, but we also have to make it believable and beautiful with our lives. Does your life confirm your testimony about Jesus or contradict it? You don’t have to be perfect, but your life should be proof that Jesus is alive and it makes a difference. You’re more likely to earn an audience to speak about Christ if you live like Christ.

Not Defensive

There’s one other way in which Paul’s character—who he is—enables him to be a witness. He’s not defensive. Just take notice of Paul’s demeanor throughout this entire passage. It’s striking to me that Paul is not defensive. Even though he’s being slandered, even though he’s been in prison for two years on false charges, he doesn’t bite back. He’s calm; he’s respectful; he states his case, but he doesn’t slander his opponents in return. Paul defends himself, but he’s not defensive.

Here’s the definition of “defensive” that I’m talking about from Dictionary.com: “excessively concerned with guarding against the real or imagined threat of criticism, injury to one’s ego, or exposure of one’s shortcomings.” In other words, defensiveness is all about protecting me. An overly defensive person doesn’t remain calm when they come under attack, they get agitated and they attack back. The best defense is a good offense, right?

Defensiveness (and offensiveness) is sort of the hallmark of public rhetoric in our day. People are easily offended and quick to offend in return. People rarely debate ideas; they attack one’s character. If someone disagrees with me, they must be a bigot, or unintelligent, or something worse. But maybe this is nothing new. Some of the other characters in our passage today are foils for Paul. The Jewish leaders and Festus are far from innocent, and they’re also defensive. The Jews have repeatedly brought false charges against Paul, tried to murder him, tried in any way possible to silence him because he’s teaching different theology than them. And Festus responds to Paul’s ideas by saying he must be out of his mind. But Paul doesn’t get agitated; he continues to proclaim the truth.

If you’re faithful to bear witness for Christ, you’re likely to one day receive some criticism. You might be accused of being a bigot, being intolerant, being hateful, or being unintelligent. When that happens, will you be more concerned about defending the gospel or defending yourself? If we have God’s approval, we don’t need to get worked up about not having the approval and respect of human beings.

I'm preaching this to myself as much as to any of you. Because as I look back at my early years as a Christian, I think I was one of those people who got into apologetics for all the wrong reasons. Apologetics is about giving a reasonable defense for our faith. That's a great thing. But I wonder if I was more interested in defending myself than defending the gospel. I just wanted to avoid the embarrassment of losing a debate or looking foolish because of my beliefs. So just a word to people like me: If you're more concerned about avoiding embarrassment than leading people to the truth, then you're likely to do more harm than good.

But when we're not so concerned about protecting our own ego, we're free to speak about Christ in a way that's much more likely to be received. We're not defensive. We're not afraid of disagreement. We're not threatened by questions. And having that demeanor—that sort of calm confidence—might just convince someone that we actually believe in the God we talk about. It might make us the kind of people who others want to listen to, even if they disagree.

And that's more important than ever. Now more than ever, we've got to earn the right to be heard. There are lots of beliefs out there. Why should anyone listen to us? Well it's not every day that they run into someone of true integrity and someone who's calmly confident, not defensive, not excessively concerned with protecting their ego.

If we're going to be witnesses for the gospel, then who we are matters. Make sure your conduct confirms your testimony and your manner magnifies it.

WHAT MUST A WITNESS SAY? (26:1-8, 22-29)

We've now seen the who of being a witness for the gospel. But being a witness isn't just about who you are; it's also about what you say. A witness is someone who's called to the stand to speak. So what must a witness say? Let's move towards the center of our chiasm, and we'll see two things that Paul says.

Testify About Our Hope

First, a witness must testify about our hope. Three times in 26:1-8, Paul mentions his "hope." In verse 6 he says he's on trial because of his "hope in the promise made by God to our fathers." In short, he's testifying that Jesus is the risen Messiah, the Christ, the savoir king the Jews have been waiting for. As Paul talks about Jesus, he's showing that he's not the sacrilegious person the Jews accuse him of being. As they all know, he used to be a Pharisee—one of the super-devout, extra-religious, extra-credit Jews. He's not an enemy of Judaism; he's actually an obedient Jew. He believes in the same Scriptures and the same promises they do—but he knows that they've been fulfilled in Christ.

He makes that even clearer in the parallel section down near the end of his speech. In verse 22-23, he claims that he's "saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles."

Jesus isn't just one of the many crazy people who comes along claiming to be God. He's the fulfilment of prophecies dating back centuries, and he fulfilled every one of them. He did not contradict Old Testament expectations, he fulfilled them. So if Paul's accusers really understood and believed Moses and the prophets, then they too would believe in Jesus.

But this hope is not just for the Jews in his audience, and certainly not just for the king and the other elites who are present. In verse 22, Paul says he's testifying "both to small and great," and that Christ proclaimed light "both to our people and to the Gentiles." This too is simply what the prophets said would happen. The only thing Paul is guilty of is believing in the Jewish Scriptures and believing that the Messiah whom they spoke of, Jesus Christ, has risen from the dead for the salvation of all people who believe.

If we believe in the same Jesus as Paul, then we can't fully understand Jesus apart from the Old Testament, and we wouldn't want to. Because the way in which he fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies confirms that he is who he claimed to be—not just the king of Israel but the Lord of all creation, not just the hope of Israel but the hope of the world.

And that brings up another implication for us. Does your gospel sound like hope? Paul was connecting with an intense longing that the Jewish people had for something better, a sense that things aren't the way they're supposed to be. And Paul says, "You're right, God wants something better, in fact he's promised something better. And I'm here to tell you that Jesus is the end of all your hopes and longings. He rose from the dead so that we might share in his resurrection life." He is our living hope.

Hey, I know telling people about Jesus can feel scary. You can feel kind of like one of those mall kiosk guys, like you're trying to sell something nobody really wants or needs. But the reality is that we know what every soul truly longs for, and we're just redirecting their hope to the only one who can provide resurrection life. Being a witness starts by listening to people and knowing them, knowing what they long for, and showing that Christ is far better than anything else they could hope in.

Persuade with True and Rational Words

Of course, some people will still think we're crazy. It's probably Paul's belief in the resurrection that makes Festus think he's "out of his mind." Twice he says this in verse 24. Paul answers "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words."

Here's Paul's second example of what a witness must say: A witness must persuade with true and rational words. Paul is presenting the gospel in a logical, reasoned way. Like some of Paul's other speeches in Acts, this speech follows the form of Greco-Roman rhetoric. Festus may think that belief in resurrection is crazy, but he's kidding himself if he thinks Paul is insane. This kind of reasoned argument doesn't come from a madman. I get the feeling Festus knows that. That's why he says Paul's "great learning" is driving him out of his mind. He knows Paul is intelligent, but he calls him crazy because the argument is starting to challenge his assumptions, and it's getting uncomfortable.

Something similar happens to Agrippa. Paul knows that the king claims to be a Jew and to believe the prophets. He's also heard about this Jesus. Agrippa has all the evidence needs to believe in Christ, so Paul presses him a bit: "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe." Agrippa understands the implication, and he seems a little uncomfortable. He's feeling the weight of Paul's argument. He says something like, "What...are you trying to persuade me to be a Christian?" Paul says, "Yeah. You and everyone else here."

Paul aims to persuade. Persuasion is sort of taboo in our culture, especially when it comes to beliefs, and there are some indications that Christians are adopting the same mindset. We don't want to be

“proselytizing.” Persuading people to believe in Christ requires helping them realize that what they currently believe is at least partially false, and that’s uncomfortable. But if we really believe that Christ is the hope for all people—small and great, Jew and Gentile—then it’s worth the discomfort. It’s like what the dentist says before she pulls a tooth: “You’re going to feel some pressure.” The outcome is worth the discomfort. Of course, there’s a huge difference between a dentist who carelessly causes pain and one who, from time to time, out of necessity, applies some pressure. We ought to be like the latter—lovingly, rationally, calmly, and yet urgently pointing to the truth of the gospel, making it clear that this hope is for everyone. If Jesus really did rise from the dead, in fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies, then he can either be received or rejected, but he can’t be ignored.

That seems to be what Festus and Agrippa want to do though. They try to brush aside Paul’s testimony, but it’s not so easy. The problem is that Paul’s not a liar or a lunatic. He’s clearly innocent; it’s his accusers who are liars. And he’s not crazy; he’s speaking rational words. Well then why is he saying such things? Why is this intelligent man claiming that someone rose from the dead? He’s been in prison for two years because of this outlandish claim. Why won’t he quit talking about it?

If you’ve been paying attention to Paul’s story in Acts, you already know why. He saw something, he heard something—or rather someone—and it changed everything. He’s not a liar or a lunatic; he’s seen the Lord.

We’ve discussed the who and the what of witnessing for Christ. Now we turn to the why.

WHY MUST A WITNESS TESTIFY? (26:9-21)

Why must a witness testify? Why do it, especially if you might face opposition? Paul shows us his reasons in the center of his speech in verses 9-21.

He’s Seen the Lord

The first reason why Paul testifies is that he’s seen the Lord. You could say he saw the light. He saw the risen Jesus and it changed the way he saw everything, like flipping on a light switch in a dark room. Three times now in Acts, Paul has shared about this experience, because people need to know what he saw.

But before he can tell them about the risen Lord, they’ve got to know why he was on the Damascus road that day. See, he wasn’t always on team Jesus. He was an enemy of Jesus and those who believed in him. He locked them up; he put them to death. He would stop at nothing to punish them for spreading these false beliefs. In verse 11 he says he persecuted them “in raging fury”; that word is closely related to the one Festus uses when he says Paul is “out of his mind.” Paul was mad with his pursuit of vengeance on these Christians.

But one day on the road to Damascus, on his way to persecute Jesus-followers, he saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, and it knocked everyone to the ground. And he heard the Lord speaking to him. And he realized he’d had it all wrong. Jesus really had risen from the dead! Everything these Christians were saying about him was true!

Friends, if you’re a Christian, then you’ve got a story like Paul’s, whether you think so or not. Because you didn’t always believe. You weren’t always on team Jesus. In fact, Romans 5 says you

were once God's enemy. But somehow he revealed himself to you. Perhaps in the words of that book in front of you, perhaps through the testimony of a parent or a friend. Perhaps in a more dramatic way. But somehow or another, you saw the Lord. He became real to you. Seeing Christ ought to change the way you see everything...and everyone. It's like having your eyes opened for the first time. You can't help but tell the person next to you that their eyes are closed. That's why we speak about what we've seen.

He's Sent by The Lord

The second reason why Paul must testify is that he's sent by the Lord. The Lord said, "What I've done to you I'm now going to do through you to others." The Lord turned Paul's life around, and now he's going to use him to turn others as well. After revealing who he is, the Lord says in verses 16-18, "rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power [authority] of Satan to God."

The word "power" in verse 18 is often translated "authority." Paul has a new authority over him now. Like all of us, he was under the authority of Satan, but now he's under the authority of God. Previously he had received "authority from the chief priests," (v. 10) and he had the "authority and commission of the chief priests" (v. 12). He had been under the authority of the Jewish leaders, commissioned to persecute the disciples. Now he's under the authority of King Jesus, commissioned to make disciples.

That's why he can't stop testifying about Jesus. It's the same thing the disciples have been saying throughout Acts. "We must obey God rather than men." "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." When the world says sit down and shut up but the Lord says stand up and speak, what can you do except speak? So Paul says in verse 19, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision." If it's between obeying God or men, Paul's going to obey God. Even if he stands before men with titles and positions, and all the pomp in the world. Even if they threaten to kill him.

Well what about you? You too have been sent. If you believe in Jesus, then you have a new authority, and you have a share in the mission he gave to his church in Matthew 28: "All *authority* in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and *make disciples* of all nations" (emphasis added, 28:18-19). If you've seen, if you're under his authority, then you're sent.

Today we've seen the who, what, and why of witnessing for the gospel. I've just got one last question for you today. Do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.

If you're familiar with the Old Testament prophets, you might notice that Paul articulates his own calling in the language of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Paul is following in the footsteps of these men who were also sent to speak for God. The prophets were called by God to testify to the truth when the people around them had lost touch with reality, when they were walking around in the dark. But for these prophets, God pulled back the curtain and let them see things as they really are—the Lord in all of his holiness, and the people in all of their sinfulness. And it broke them. Isaiah and Ezekiel found themselves face down on the ground in terror. But then they were sent to tell others what they had seen and heard. They bore witness to what they knew was the only way

forward for sinful people and a holy God: repent and fall upon his grace. They knew it because they'd experienced it.

And we're called to be something like Paul and the prophets. We too bear witness to what we've seen and heard and experienced. That's why our Sunday services have a gospel shape to them: glory, grace, go. Being a witness for the gospel starts right here each week as we behold the glory of God, fall upon his grace, and go out to bear witness to what we've seen and heard. Witnessing begins with worship, and its end is worship. One day we won't have to bear witness anymore, because all will worship God. The gospel won't be news anymore. But until then, you've been called to the witness stand.