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Acts 26:6-29 “Christianity on Trial”
(read vv.6-13, refer to his Damascus Road experience, then vv.19-29)

Intro. I used to go to an agnostic barber who loved to challenge me about the Bible and religion. One time he mentioned to me that he had a college course on mythology, and included in his textbook was a discussion of Christianity! That did not surprise me greatly. But it does bother me that many people seem to *live* as though Christianity were just another collection of myths.

The question we have before us this morning is this: Is Christianity true? Are we engaged in wishful thinking when we preach and believe in the promises of the Christian faith? Are those so-called intellectuals correct when they deny the miracles in the Bible? Or is Paul correct when he affirmed in v.25, “I ... speak the words of truth and reason.”

Such attacks on the Christian faith are certainly not new. Jesus Himself was persecuted for what He taught. He was accused of blasphemy and having a demon. The Christian faith has been attacked since the earliest days of the Christian church. The earliest opposition came from the Jews, as we see here when they assaulted Paul (v.21) and pressed charges against him (see 25:7b). And in chapter 25 we see that Festus, the new governor, had to determine if those charges were valid. The Jews wanted Paul to be brought to Jerusalem to face trial. They intended to ambush him, for they knew that they did not have a valid case against him. Well Paul knew that the Jews were out to kill him. So he felt compelled to appeal to Caesar in Rome. That meant that Festus had to decide on the charges that could be sent on to Caesar. He didn't know what to do with Paul so he sought King Agrippa's aid in helping him correctly formulate the charges. You see, King Agrippa was far more knowledgeable of the Jewish religion. He was Herod Agrippa II, the great grandson of Herod the Great.¹ So his family had a long-standing relationship with the Jewish people. That brings us up to chapter 26.

So what would Festus and Agrippa decide? Would they find that Paul was spreading a teaching that was dangerous to society? Or did he have valid reason for going around and preaching his message? In a sense not only was Paul on trial, but Christianity itself was on trial. This was one of the first times a leader of Christianity was examined in a Roman court, and almost certainly the first to be examined by Caesar. Is Christianity true? Can we preach the gospel with confidence concerning its truth? Paul gives a strong defense here concerning the validity of his faith in Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world. I hope everyone will leave this place today with a confident faith in Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. Christianity will come under attack increasingly in our society, and we need to be able to defend our faith. So notice with me how Paul does so here:

I. CHRISTIANITY WAS NOT A NEWLY INVENTED RELIGION

The Jewish accusers wanted the governor to believe that the Christian faith was something new, a troublesome heresy of recent origin. They wanted to separate Christianity from Judaism, which was a legal religion. But Paul noted that the salvation of the Christian faith was rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, the very Scriptures his accusers believed. He points out that:

¹ He was also known as Julius Marcus Agrippa or Agrippa II, born 27 or 28 A.D.

A. Salvation Was Promised Long Ago – In vv.6-7 he said, “And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. 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.” Paul wanted to point out the strange situation in which he found himself—a prisoner charged by his own people regarding a hope of salvation shared by them. To Abraham God had promised that in his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3). As God renewed the promise to Isaac and Jacob, it became more clear that the blessing of salvation and forgiveness of sins would come through a person, the Messiah. Paul believed in the promise of a Messiah, and he believed that the Messiah was Jesus Christ.

B. Confirmed by Moses and the Prophets – In the last of v. 22 Paul said that he was “saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come....” Here we are probably to understand that he quoted passage after passage from the Old Testament Scriptures which found their fulfillment in the life, death and triumph of Jesus. Now notice the particulars here:

1. The Messiah Would Suffer for Our Sins – This is stated in v.23, “that the Christ would suffer....” Most Jews did not believe in the suffering Messiah, but they were ignoring some important prophecies. For example, Psa. 22 & Isa. 53 are very specific and accurate prophecies of the suffering of the Messiah. Isa. 53:5 says, “He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities....”

Paul also stated in v.23 that:

2. Christ Would Rise from the Dead – Paul went on to say in v.23, “that He would be the first to rise from the dead....” Psa. 16:10 says, “For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.” The only way He could both die for sin, and yet live on as Savior and Lord would be through His resurrection. This was the main aspect of the promise that Paul had in mind in vv.6-8.

Then Paul referred to the prophecies that said that:

3. He Would Be a Light to All People – Paul said in the last of v.23 that the promised Messiah “would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.” The Jews were mainly offended at Paul’s desire to include the Gentiles in the salvation of God without insisting that they become Jews first (22:21-22; 26:20-21). This is why Paul was mobbed by the Jews. However, the salvation of Gentiles was *always* in the plan of God, and the Jews should have known better. Isa. 49:6 says regarding the Messiah, the Servant of the Lord, “I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.” (cf. Isa. 42:6-7). Paul had good scriptural authority for taking the Gospel to the Gentiles.

We should be glad that Gentiles are included in God’s plan of salvation from sin, for most of us are Gentiles! The fact is, the good news of Jesus Christ has reached many of the nations of the earth.

The bottom line was that there is not one thing in Christianity that is contrary to any truth revealed in the Old Testament. Instead, it is a fulfillment of the Old Testament. This is one reason why you can believe in the truth of Christianity.

So Christianity is rooted in Scriptures. It is true because it is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Now Paul also points out another reason why Christianity is true:

II. CHRISTIANITY IS ROOTED IN HISTORICAL FACT

Paul pointed out that he believed the same things the Jews did concerning the hope of a coming Messiah. The difference was that he believed that Jesus was the Messiah. The question is this, “Is Jesus the Messiah?” So look with me at the historical evidence he presents here to prove that Jesus was the Messiah.

A. The Life of Christ Was Well-Attested – In v.26 Paul says, “For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner.” The events which fulfilled the ancient promises were well-known and public; this was no secret society. The ministry of Jesus was not limited to some obscure village. Jesus ministered all over Galilee and Judea, and even beyond their borders. The ministry, miracles, and death of Christ were matters of common knowledge by thousands of eye-witnesses. The gospel had been openly proclaimed in His name for almost 30 years at this point. Agrippa could have admitted that Paul’s arguments were sane and well founded, that the gospel which he preached contained “no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come” (v.22b).

B. The Resurrection of Christ Was Historically Verified – Even the resurrection of Christ was amply attested by many eye witnesses. Now note with me that Paul first wanted to affirm that the resurrection of Christ was:

1. Not Incredible - Based on Greek philosophy, the Greeks and most Romans did not believe in the bodily resurrection from the dead. So Paul said in v.8, “Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?” Festus was probably the main one that Paul addressed these words to (cf. 25:19; “you” is plural). In Genesis we read that God took the dust of the ground and breathed into man the breath of life. So why should one think it incredible that the Lord would be able to bring back His own blessed Son from the dead?

I just don’t understand why liberals and so-called intellectuals have such a problem with the other miracles of Scripture. First, God must exist, for so great an effect as creation must have a great cause. God must be very intelligent to design the genetic code. God must be very powerful to create countless millions of stars, each with more energy that we can imagine. Now once you accept the truth of *God*, then miracles are no problem, including the resurrection! As Jesus said in Luke 1:37, “For with God nothing will be impossible,” including raising the dead!

Furthermore, the resurrection of Christ was:

2. Confirmed by Eyewitnesses – Paul tells us elsewhere that about 500 witnesses saw Christ alive from the dead (1 Cor. 15). In addition to that, but in our text today we see that he gave his own eyewitness account of seeing the risen Christ in vv. 13-15, “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. 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.’ So I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.’” So here we see that Paul himself was an eyewitness of the fact that Christ rose from the dead.

Now do you have any good reason for denying that Paul actually saw Jesus that day? If you think you do, you have to explain why Paul experienced such a radical change. A great effect must have a great cause. Paul went from being a persecutor of the church to a proclaimer of the gospel of

Jesus Christ! Notice in vv.9-11 what he used to believe, and what he used to be like. He said, “Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 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. 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.” He was the leading persecutor of Christians. He even was in favor of putting Christians to death (v.10b). He tried to make them blaspheme the name of Christ. Though Paul believed in bodily resurrection, he would not believe this could have happened to Jesus of Nazareth, a man crucified upon a cross. But what he believed about Jesus Christ changed completely. He must have seen and heard something on the Damascus road that made him absolutely convinced that Jesus was alive, and He was God’s Messiah. Paul described what happened in vv.12-18. Then he said in v.19, “Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.” The vision was so real and so authoritative that Paul could never think of disobeying it. Having received a commission from Jesus, He *had* to go and tell others what he had seen and heard. He also had to go and tell the Gentiles about a Savior. He has done nothing wrong. And why would he join up with the persecuted if he had not truly seen Jesus Christ, alive from the dead?

Brothers and sisters, you can believe in Jesus Christ with absolute confidence, in spite of what the agnostics and skeptics say! The greatest evidence of the truth of Christianity is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. His resurrection proves His deity (Rom. 1:4). It proves that God accepted His sacrifice for our sin (Rom. 4:25). It proves that he can give eternal life (Jn. 14:19b). And if you believe, you need to live like it! Do we really believe that people are lost without Christ? Do we really believe that Jesus died for our sins, rose from the dead, and is God’s Savior from sin? Then we should be doing more to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

Paul was defending his practice of sharing the gospel with all people everywhere. In the process, he explained the gospel, and then in v.27, he turned the tables, and put King Agrippa on trial! Even so, I want to close the message by saying:

III. YOU ARE NOW ON TRIAL

A. I Appeal to You As Paul Appealed to Agrippa – Notice how Paul puts King Agrippa on trial in v.27, “King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe.” The spotlight is now on the King. Growing up in Israel, he was familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures. Though he was only about 2 years old when Jesus died on the cross, I’m sure he had heard of Jesus, including His teachings and great miracles. He even heard the story of the resurrection. He knew of the dramatic growth of the Church. Paul said in v.26 that the King “knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner.” The logic of the situation was so plain to the apostle that he could hardly imagine that such an expert in the Jewish religion would not accept the obvious conclusion to repent and believe in Christ.

Now I turn to each of you. Do you deny the eyewitness testimony contained in this book [the Bible]. Don’t you believe that Jesus died on the cross as a sacrifice for sin? That’s the only explanation for His willingness to suffer and die that makes sense. His suffering was clearly in fulfillment of prophecy. Don’t you believe that Jesus rose from the dead? His resurrection was predicted in Bible prophecy and affirmed by many eye witnesses. Now if you believe these things, then you should act upon your belief by professing Christ as Savior and being baptized. Notice

what Paul said in the last of v.20, “that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.” You should also share your faith with others. That’s what Paul did.

What Paul is doing here is sharing the Gospel, and encouraging the King to believe the Gospel. He is being a soul winner. He is seeking to persuade. After all, he previously had written in 2 Cor. 5:11, “Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men....” And in v.29 we have an opportunity to see the heart of a soul winner. He sought to win souls even when his life was in the balance. In an impassioned utterance, he said, “I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains.” He expressed his longing that whether it required little or much persuasion, not only the king but all present might become as he was, a believer. However, in remembering his present condition as a prisoner, he added, “except for these chains.” What a revelation of the true nobility of spirit possessed by the apostle! He would share the best he had and refuse to wish on others what had been unjustly imposed on him.

B. The Response - Notice 2 different responses to the gospel that we see here:

1. By Festus – In v.24 Paul said, “Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, ‘Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!’” Festus just could not handle all this talk by Paul. Paul was obviously a man of tremendous learning, but in the mind of Festus, all this learning had driven him mad. After all, no man who retained his senses would have antagonized his whole nation for such philosophical ideals.²

However, what was sheer madness to the governor’s way of thinking was the plain truth and sober good sense to Paul.

Too many are like Festus, they are blinded to the truth of the gospel, and seem to think that Christians are crazy. Are you like Festus? And Christian, don’t let it bother you when people suggest that Christians are crazy for believing as we do. They accused Jesus of being crazy, and Paul, and others. This is nothing more than an old deflection of the truth that we believe.

2. By Agrippa [should this be moved to IIIA?] - Would he accept this message of salvation? Hardly! Notice what he said in v.28, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian.” In his reply he sought to get himself off the hook by calling attention to the fact that this occasion had not been set up as an evangelistic service. “Almost” is not a good translation. It’s not that he almost become a Christian. The HCSB translates it, “Are you going to persuade me to become a Christian so easily?” It was as if he sarcastically said, “Do you really think that you can make me into a Christian with ten minutes of arguments?” So instead of being persuaded, he clung to his prideful royal dignity. He clung to his sin. The cross of Christ was a stumbling block to him.

On a positive note, one lesson we can learn from this is the fact that very few people become Christians the first time they hear the Gospel. It usually takes more than just a little bit of persuasion. So people generally need to be prayed for and witnessed to several times. If you win someone to Christ the first time you witness to them, then it is very likely that they have heard the Gospel several times before.

As far as we know Festus and Agrippa never became Christians. They were confronted by one of the greatest soul winners that has ever lived, and yet they did not repent and believe.

² There is another reason why Felix suggested that Paul was afflicted with mental illness. In v.11 Paul said he was “greatly enraged” toward Christians at one time. The Greek word so translated (*emmainomai*) is an intensive verb form of the same word translated “mad” (*mania*) in v.24. He was saying, “Paul, you’re still afflicted with mania.”

Conclusion: Now it is time to give *your* response. You have heard the truth of the gospel. Have you truly accepted this message of salvation? What will it take to persuade you to become a Christian. You know in your heart that you should become a Christian. The evidence for the question faith is strong. Jesus Christ fulfilled prophecy. He worked mighty miracles. He died on the cross for our sins, just as the prophets predicted. He rose from the dead, as affirmed by many eye witnesses. The changed life of the apostle Paul is yet another evidence of the truth of Christianity. The real question is, “Are you *willing* to believe?” May God help you to not be like Agrippa, but be persuaded to become a Christian today!

I know I am mainly speaking to Christians today. I hope I have strengthened your faith in Jesus. Our faith is verified by fulfilled prophecy, by historical eye-witness accounts, and by sound reason. Let us stand strong in our faith, and may we be like Paul, and share and defend our faith!

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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