



SERMON NOTES

US N°. 128

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Title: why are you surprised?

#35 in the Series on the Acts of the Apostles

1. Review

- a. Governor Porcius Festus. Appointed by Nero to govern Judea from 51-62 AD.
- b. King Herod Agrippa II. His 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. He had also been granted supreme power in Jewish religious life since the Romans had given him the right to appoint the high priest and he had custodianship of the temple treasure and of the high priest's vestments (Josephus *Jewish Antiquities* 20.213, 222). He was finally the last of the Herodian line.
- c. It was in the auditorium of Caesarea that Paul speaks to Festus, Agrippa, Bernice, the commanders of the Roman Legion, and all the prominent men of Caesarea (cf. Acts 25:23). This was a tremendous opportunity, and Paul was certainly happy for that opportunity.

2. Paul's defense: the narrative

- a. Born in Tarsus, he then moved to Jerusalem at a young age to study. He was a student of the renowned Pharisaic teacher Gamaliel. In both his heart and mind, Paul remained a faithful Jew.
- b. Prior to his conversion, Paul zealously believed that he must prosecute the heretical followers of Jesus. Some were imprisoned, some were killed, and some were forced them to renounce Jesus. So intense was Paul's opposition that he pursued Christians to cities outside Palestine.
 - i. Paul was an angry man and his great rage showed that his relationship with God was not right, despite his diligent religious observance. An "*exceedingly furious rage*" drove him to do it (the NIV "*obsession against*" is not strong enough).
 - ii. Paul later speaks of the great regret he had over his prior life as a persecutor (cf. 1 Cor. 15:9, 1 Tim. 1:15). Paul relates this from his Christian perspective when he refers to making the people "*blaspheme*."
- c. This is Paul's third and fullest account of his experience on the Damascus Road. He notes that he went on his mission with the authority and commission of the same religious leaders who now accuse him. Paul *literally* saw the light before he *figuratively* saw the light; it took a light brighter than the midday sun to show him he was wrong. Jesus commissions Paul to be a witness, not to create an experience or create the message. Jesus also described the work Paul would do, to open eyes of both Jews and Gentiles that were not yet opened physically.
 - i. Paul repeats the words from Acts 9:3-6, these words emphasize:
 1. the personal appeal of Jesus (*Saul, Saul*);
 2. the misdirected nature of his persecution (*Me*);
 3. the folly of persecuting Jesus (*Why*).
 - ii. The words of changed Paul's world as he realized that Jesus was indeed alive and not dead.

1. He now understood that Jesus reigned in glory instead of being damned in shame.
 2. He realized that in persecuting the followers of Jesus he persecuted Jesus, and in persecuting Jesus he fought against the God of his fathers.
 3. Paul had to repent not of immorality, but of misguided religious zeal and wrong ideas about God.
- iii. Jesus told Paul the four results that would come from the opening of the eyes:
1. turned from darkness to light,
 2. turned from the power of Satan to God,
 3. receive forgiveness of sins, and
 4. receive an inheritance among God's people.
- d. Thus, Paul was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, he *"declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance."* (cf. Acts 26:20)
3. Paul's defense: the core
- a. Paul clearly states why he is in Cæsar's court – *"the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers."* (cf. Acts 26:6) His trust in Jesus was an outgrowth of his first trust in the hope of the promise made by God. Paul concludes his narration by stating the point for the judge's decision, *"Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?"* (cf. Acts 26:8)
 - b. Since Agrippa was an expert in all Jewish customs and questions, 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?
 - c. Paul is on solid ground when he claims that the hope for the Old Testament saint and the Intertestamental Jew was messianic end-time deliverance. Indeed, the Jews looked forward to the fulfillment of the promises made to the fathers in the end time. As Jesus said, with God all things are possible. (cf. Mt. 19:26). Mankind also seems to have an intuitive grasp of the eternal.
 - i. Job 19:25-27, *"For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, Whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!"*
 - ii. Is 25:8, *"He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces; the rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken."*
 - iii. Hos. 13:14, *"I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. O Death, I will be your plagues! O Grave, I will be your destruction! Pity is hidden from My eyes."*
 - iv. Heb. 11:17-19, *"By faith Abraham, when he was tested... concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense."*
 - v. Many Apocryphal writings also attest to resurrection of the righteous.
 - vi. However, the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection. (cf. Acts 23:6; 24:21)

- d. The resurrection of Christ is a challenge to any human worldview. If, in general, resurrections do not happen, then what is claimed about Jesus did not occur. But if Jesus did return from the dead, then a central feature of one's worldview, their belief about what happens after death, must be radically reoriented. There is certainly a radical discontinuity between Paul's claims about Jesus' resurrection and the assumptions of Jew and Gentile alike, yet the continuity between Old Testament faith and Israel's living hope continues. Because of resurrection's saving significance, it is our defining moment for all humankind.
 - i. Agrippa would probably have been under the influence of aristocratic Sadducean thought, so God raising the dead would be unbelievable. (cf. Acts 23:8)
 - ii. Festus has already declared himself on this subject (cf. Acts 25:19). The dramatist Aeschylus succinctly captures the belief, "*Once a man has died, and the dust has soaked up his blood, there is no resurrection.*" Resurrection of the flesh appeared a startling, distasteful idea, at odds with everything that passed for wisdom among the educated. (MacMullen)
- e. One question critics may ask is if Paul has such strong continuity with pious Jews, why is there such opposition to him and his message of hope? For the most part it is due to Paul's declaration that in the risen and exalted Lord Jesus the promises have been fulfilled and the hope is now a present reality.
 - i. Furthermore, Paul preached the same gospel to Jew and Gentile alike, inviting both to receive salvation blessings in the same way: through repentance and faith in Messiah Jesus. This obliterated the religious distinction between Jew and Gentile that ethnic pride had so carefully preserved. It was upon this message that the crowd seized him in the temple and tried to kill him. (cf. Acts 21:30-31) Even today, the universal offer of salvation based on grace alone received through faith and repentance is still resisted.
- f. This is the main question for every individual, whatever his or her religious, ideological or cultural heritage: Is Jesus your hope? The Christian message asks, will you repent of your false hopes (*the American dream, the Hindu's Nirvana, the Muslim's paradise*) and let Jesus be your true hope?
- g. These were the three main points to Paul's preaching:
 - i. Jesus' substitutionary death,
 - ii. Jesus' physical resurrection (and continued physical existence),
 - iii. Preaching of gospel to the whole world, without respect to either Jew or Gentile.
- h. This seems to have been fine with Paul. He was more interested in telling people about Jesus than in his personal freedom.
4. The response, "*Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!*"
 - a. The gospel, when properly proclaimed and lived, will make some people think we are crazy. Paul put it this way: *the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing* (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18).
 - i. Paul is preaching for a decision with convincing conviction, and the only way Festus can rationalize his rejection is to declare the messenger mad and his message gibberish.
 - ii. In the post-Enlightenment secularized West religion has been removed from the arena of public discourse and confined to private feelings and opinion. Paul's defense of the gospel as

true, reasonable and historical should give us courage to bring gospel truth back into the public arena. It does make sense and it will stand up to public scrutiny. Christians have nothing to fear from such scrutiny, rather we believe because of, not in spite of, the facts.

- b. Paul's message was characterized by truth and reason, because it was based on *historical events* (such as the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus), things which were not done in a corner, but open to examination. The Bible and Jesus are historical facts.
 - c. Paul asked Agrippa, "*Do you believe the prophets?*" because he knew that if Agrippa did believe the prophets, truth and reason would lead him to believe upon Jesus. He sought to connect what Agrippa already believed to what he should believe. With this, Paul brought the challenge and a point of decision directly to Agrippa; calling the listener to decision.
 - i. However close Agrippa was to becoming a believer, it wasn't close enough. Almost being a Christian means that you almost have eternal life and will almost be delivered from the judgment of hell; but almost isn't enough. Far from being admired for how far he did come, Agrippa condemned himself even more by admitting how close he has come to the gospel and how clearly he has understood it, while still rejecting it.
 - ii. Why was Agrippa only almost persuaded? One answer could be the people there:
 - 1. Bernice was a sinful, immoral companion, and he may have rightly realized that becoming a Christian would mean losing her and his other immoral friends. He was unwilling to make that sacrifice.
 - 2. Festus, who one commentator called a man's man who thought Paul was crazy. Perhaps Agrippa thought, "*I can't become a Christian. Festus will think I'm also crazy.*" Because he wanted the praise of men, he rejected Jesus.
 - 3. Paul, evidently a strong man of wisdom and character, but he was a man in chains. "*O that men were wise enough to see that suffering for Christ is honour, that loss for truth is gain, that the truest dignity rests in wearing the chain upon the arm rather than endure the chain upon the soul.*" (Spurgeon)
 - d. Paul's direct challenge was too much for Agrippa, Festus, and the others on the platform. It was getting too close, too personal, and they felt they had to end it quickly by standing up and ending the proceedings.
 - e. We see the fulfillment of God's plan through all these events and by his appeal to Caesar Paul will now have the opportunity to preach to the Roman Emperor the way he had to Felix, Festus, and Agrippa, thus fulfilling the promise that Paul would bear My name before...kings. (cf. Acts 9:15)
 - f. The hearing is over and as they exit they agree in private discussion on Paul's innocence: "*This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment.*"
5. Take aways
- a. Paul's rage leading him to sin; angry religions
 - b. Seeing the Light and living therein
 - c. Paul is on trial for his hope in God's promise