

Acts 26:1-32
The First to Rise from the Dead.

26 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, ³ especially 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. ⁵ They 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. ⁶ And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, ⁷ to 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! ⁸ Why 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. ¹⁰ And 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. ¹¹ And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

Paul Tells of His Conversion

¹² “In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³ At 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. ¹⁴ And 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.’ ¹⁵ And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶ But 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, ¹⁷ delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you ¹⁸ to 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, ²⁰ but 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. ²¹ For this reason the Jews seized me in the

temple and tried to kill me. ²² To 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: ²³ 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."

²⁴ And 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." ²⁵ But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. ²⁶ For 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. ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe." ²⁸ And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" ²⁹ And 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."

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 ³¹ And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment."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

May God add his blessing to the reading and preaching of his holy Word.

Let us pray:

Gracious heavenly Father, we thank you that you inspired the physician Luke to record these events in the founding and spread of the Christian church. We thank you for the record of the sermons that Peter and Paul preached and how they give us knowledge and understanding of Jesus Christ our Lord and his great work among the apostles and people of the early church. Now instruct us today that we may be strengthened in our understanding of Christ's great work to save a people for himself. Enlighten our understanding, strengthen our faith, encourage our Christian walk and service in this world, we pray in Jesus' great name. Amen.

You remember that the church of Jesus Christ was birthed in Jerusalem some 2,000 years ago after the ascended Lord Jesus sent forth his Holy Spirit upon his disciples and they were filled with his Spirit and their lives were changed forever and they began to serve and worship Jesus as their Lord and King. Their lives were flooded with joy as they mutually shared in the assurance that their sins had really and truly been forgiven because of Jesus' shed blood on the cross. They knew God was with them because the Holy Spirit had flooded their hearts.

And all this came about because God the Father had sent his Son from heaven who was born of the virgin Mary and grew up as a full human Jewish male and lived a sinless life because he was the Son of God. He offered himself up as a sacrificial

offering in order to pay the sin-debt his people owed to God. Jesus suffered the wrath of God in his own body so that those who believe in him will not have to suffer that wrath themselves.

These events were the pivotal events in the history of the world. The coming of Jesus Christ into the world was what the OT prophets were anticipating and predicting and it finally happened when the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and she bore the child who would be the Savior of the world. And this was the thing the world needed more than anything else. It didn't so much need a new political system or new inventions or new ways to address poverty – but what it needed then and still needs today is victory over humanity's greatest enemy – the indwelling sin in our nature and the result of that sin which is death. All men and women die because they all sin.

Unless somehow our sin can be dealt with, we have no hope, we have no salvation - our future is dark and hopeless. But as Paul declares in Acts 26:23 in our passage today, Jesus would “proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.” This light he's talking about is the light of salvation from sin that is secured through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the light that has come into the world . As the apostle John says in his gospel in Chapter 1, verse 3 and 4: ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

This preaching of light and salvation was a new and strange teaching to the pagan world of that time who worshipped various gods and goddess that were the fruit of human imagination. But it was not such a new and strange teaching to the Hebrew people because God had been speaking to them for centuries and revealing to them his holiness and majesty and glory and he was teaching them what sin was and how they had offended and rebelled against him in spite of all his goodness and kindness to them.

And in this passage today we see that this is what Paul is saying: he's saying, look at v. 6 of Acts 26:

⁶ And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers,

What is this promise that Paul is hoping in?

At the end of verse 7 Paul says, “***And for this hope I am accused by the Jews.***” What is this hope? The answer is at the end of verse 8: the hope is that “***God raises the dead.***”

Paul says at the beginning of verse 8, “***Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?***”

You see, Paul, in his proclamation of the Gospel, that is, the Good News of Jesus Christ, has been brought before King Agrippa of Judea. He is in a city called Caesarea on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, and is there before the king explaining why his fellow Jews were so enraged with him and were trying to kill him. And Paul is explaining and defending his assertion that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead three days after his burial.

And Paul says to King Agrippa as he begins his defense in v. 3, “you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews.” So it appears that not only his fellow Jews but even the king was at least familiar with the Jewish belief in the R’n of the dead.

It seems that one of Paul’s main arguments here is that you all know and believe in the R’n of the dead, so why do you think it so incredible that God raised Jesus from the dead?

I want you to understand that this is a crucial issue, a supremely important matter, to you and to me, and to every human being. Does God raise the dead, or does he not?

When a person dies, does his or her body go into the grave and return to dust and that is the end of their existence? Or maybe their body is burned and their ashes placed in an urn for the family to keep or maybe the ashes are scattered into the air or the ocean and they think that is the end of that human life – never to be seen or heard from and spoken to – all that’s left is a memory. Oh, that is so sad, I can hardly bear to speak of this. If this is the end of our precious human existence, we might as well, as Paul says, “eat, drink, and be merry,” for there is nothing beyond this life. So we should just squeeze every bit of pleasure out of life as long as we can.

But, wait! This pessimistic view of the end of human existence is not the final word. This pessimistic outlook was shattered forever when Jesus Christ our Lord rose from the dead.

With no resurrection, there is no hope for humanity. If there is no resurrection; this life is all there is. We may be fortunate to have 70 or 80 years and then we’re gone and we become only a name in someone’s genealogical record. And we may not even make it to someone’s genealogical record.

This is so sad, it is so disheartening – but thank God, it is not true. There is life beyond the grave, this life is not the end, there is a resurrection of the dead. God has ordained that the human life does not end at death but it will live on.

Earlier in the Book of Acts, Paul is making his defense before Governor Felix in this same city of Caesarea and he says that the Jewish hope has always been, based on the sacred Scriptures, “ ***there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.***”
Acts 24:15

Now these kind of assurances and doctrines and beliefs of the Jews comes right out of the OT scriptures. For example we read in the Book of Daniel, chapter 12:2 - ² ***And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.***

These kind of OT texts, and there are others also, are why the Pharisees, the conservative religious party at the time of Christ, strongly believed in the R'n of the dead. Paul explains to King Agrippa that he himself was a Pharisee, a devoted and zealous member of this religious party, and being such he believed in the R'n of the dead as strongly as anybody.

But you see, here is the issue. The Pharisees like Paul, believed most assuredly in the R'n of the dead, they had a general belief, we might say a theoretical belief, but they couldn't or they wouldn't allow that belief to be specific and concrete in a human person, especially not in Jesus of Nazareth, the former carpenter who had become a roving prophet. They didn't like Jesus, he wasn't their brand of what they believed the Messiah would be like. They wanted a mighty Military Conqueror, but he was mild and compassionate. They wanted a Ruler over nations, but he was a Redeemer of sinners. They wanted someone who would humiliate the Romans, but he humiliated himself by allowing them to crucify him.

The thing that really angered the Jewish leadership about Paul's preaching was that he contended that Jesus came to save not only the Jewish people, but also the Gentiles. They considered the Gentiles as outside the realm of. God's chosen people – they were pagans, they ate unclean foods, and they were ignorant of the Law of Moses. For them to be included in the kingdom of God, to be afforded the same spiritual privileges of the Jews, was something unthinkable to them – it was outside the realm of possibility. How dare Paul contaminate the pure Jewish race by bringing in those unclean Gentiles. They considered that Paul had gone into the camp of the enemy and that he was a blasphemer for he was ascribing divine attributes and works to Jesus of Nazareth. To their minds, Jesus was an imposter and a blasphemer for claiming to be the Son of God. Paul was making out Jesus to be the divine Messiah – impossible! – and they wanted to rid the earth of him like they had when they got rid of Jesus.

So here in Acts 26, Paul' defense before King Agrippa, I want to point out four key truths. We pretty much covered the first point already:

1. Paul is on trial because of his belief in in the R'n of the dead. v.1-8

If it were possible to bring back Abraham or David or Isaiah and tell them that their descendants were persecuting a fellow Jew because he was declaring the R'n of the dead they would have been appalled, flabbergasted!

“What do you mean?” David would say, “haven't you all read what the Holy spirit inspired me to write in Psalm 16?:

***Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices;
my flesh also dwells secure.***

***¹⁰ For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption.***

Or the prophet Isaiah, if he knew about this situation, and if he could speak, would say, "Have they not read many times what the Holy Spirit inspired me to write in Isa.63:10-11?"

***(T) when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;***

(U) the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

¹¹ Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;

Or if Jonah was called into this conversation he might say, "Did you not read about what the Lord did to me when I ran away from his will?"

Jonah 1:17:

And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Let's even go all the way back to what Bible scholars believe is the probably the first OT book written, the book of Job. Here what Job might add to this conversation:

Job 19:25-27

***. For I ^(Z) know that my ^(AA) Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the ^(AB) earth.***

***²⁶ And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
yet in my flesh I shall ^(AC) see God,***

***²⁷ whom I shall see for myself,
and my eyes shall behold, and not ^(AD) another.***

And so the OT saints and prophets and patriarchs would be astounded that they Jewish leadership around the year 33 AD would harass and even want to kill a fellow Jew would stand solidly on his belief and proclamation of the R'n of the dead.

If they could talk they would say, 'What is wrong with you people? Don't you see that all our God-inspired prophecies of the coming of the anointed One, the Christ, must have been fulfilled in this Jesus of Nazareth? In no one else have all these prophecies come to fruition and fulfillment except in this one man. What more can we have said to you? What more could God have done to prove to you that this Jesus, whom he resurrected from the dead, is the Promised One to come, the One who would fulfill all that the OT sacrificial system pointed to - the true Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? Why do you think it so incredible that God raised Jesus from the dead?"

Let's go back to our text here and look at the 2nd point I want to bring out; it is in v. 9-12:

II. Paul, before he met the risen Jesus, had believed that Jesus was a fake Messiah and his followers deluded fools.

Before Christ appeared to him, Paul was just like the rest of the unbelieving Pharisees. He despised this Jesus of Nazareth – when he heard his name he would have spit on the ground. “What an imposter,” he would say, “he has led astray so many foolish people. He has brainwashed them into thinking he is the Messiah. But we know the Messiah could not be a humble carpenter from an out of the way, unknown place such as Nazareth. And we know the Messiah would not contradict all our sacred traditions that we have developed over the centuries. We know the Messiah would come for our people and not also for those half-breed Samaritans. And we know the Messiah when he comes would throw off our backs this Roman yoke and restore David and Solomon’s great kingdom. So many of our Jewish people are too gullible – they’re committing blasphemy by believing that this upstart prophet is some divine person who should be worshipped equally with God. We need to stamp out this heresy once and for all and make these deluded people renounce their faith in him and return to sanity – even if we have to lock them up and stone them to death like we did to that man named Stephen.”

This would have been some of Paul’s thinking. But it all changed when something happened. That is the third point I want us to see in this passage:

III. 13-18 - Paul encounters the risen Christ and becomes a totally changed man.

Let’s read his testimony before Agrippa of what happened to him in Acts 26:13-15:

13 At 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. 14 And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me (A)in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ 15 And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.

The risen Jesus appeared to Paul and knocked him and his companions to the ground with a light brighter than the noonday sun. It was the risen Jesus. He said, “it is hard for you to kick against the goads.” What does that mean? A goad is a long pointed stick that was used to poke an ox to get him to do what you wanted, like keep plowing in the field. God was trying to reach into Paul’s mind and convince him that Jesus was the Messiah but Paul resisted and kept up his bull-headed belief that Jesus had not been raised from the dead and he was not the Messiah.

But now the game is up. Paul’s stubborn, rebellious mind is no match for the living God. In the glory of his resurrected person the Lord Jesus appears outside Damascus to Paul. Paul calls him “Lord” and from that moment on all Paul’s skepticism and doubt are overthrown and he is convinced without a shadow of doubt that Jesus is indeed risen

from the dead and is indeed the Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the world. We learn from other accounts of his conversion that he was blinded for three days and ate no food and then his eyes were opened and he was baptized as a believer by immersion and joined the ranks of the Christian church.

And so we come to the 4th point of this passage:

- I. V. 19-23 - **Paul goes forth to declare that Jesus is the one who fulfilled the Messianic prophecies of the OT by suffering death and being the first person to rise from the dead.**

So Paul wastes no time. He has seen the risen Jesus must like the 12 apostles. He realizes he had been totally wrong about Jesus but now he becomes totally right. He lines up with the prophetic scriptures and the irrefutable evidence that Christ was alive and well and he begins to preach Jesus in Damascus and then throughout Judea and even to the Gentiles.

His message was this: the OT scriptures described and predicted the Messiah and Jesus fits perfectly all these descriptions and predictions – his R'n proves it and removes all doubt. And to go against this revelation would be unthinkable. There is only one thing to do – proclaim what has happened in human history – the time had been fulfilled.

As Gal. 4:4-5 says, and this is Paul's writing, "**4 But (B)when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, (C)born (D)of woman, born (E)under the law, 5 (F)to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive (G)adoption as sons.**

Paul begins to preach as v. 23 says, "**the Christ (M)must suffer and that, (N)by being the first (O)to rise from the dead, (P)he would proclaim (Q)light both to our people and to the Gentiles.**"

Why did he say "the Christ must suffer?" It's because the OT scriptures said he would suffer death – see Isa. 53 and Psalm 22. And that he would be the first rise from the dead. Now there had been several cases where people were brought back from the dead in both the OT and NT, but all these people later died when their time of life was over. They all died and were buried, such as Jesus' friend Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead after laying in the tomb 4 days.

But Jesus is the first person in the history of the world to die and then rise, and never die again. As Paul writes in romans 6:9:

We know that (Q)Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; (R)death no longer has dominion over him.

No, death had no longer any dominion over Jesus – in fact, the contrary – Jesus had dominion over death. Jesus conquered death. Jesus defeated death. Jesus broke the chains of death that had enslaved God’s people since Adam. Jesus conquered death and opened the gates of eternal life into paradise with him.

This is the good news, this is the Gospel. Jesus came and died and was buried and on the third day rose from death and appeared that very day to his disciples as the one risen physically, visibly, and personally. And those who believe in him will also conquer death and rise at the last day to enter paradise, the new Jerusalem on the new earth, when Christ returns.

Applications:

- 1. The R’n of the dead is a prominent teaching in the bible and Jesus’ R’n is the first truth, the first and primary historical, verifiable, witnessed to evidence of its reality.**
- 2. In addition to the encounters of many early disciples with the risen Christ, Paul’s own testimony of his encounter with the risen Christ is additional confirming evidence.**
- 3. You must believe in Christ’s sacrificial death for sins and his R’n from the dead in order to be saved from your sins. Cf. Rom. 10:9-10**

“, if (A)you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and (B)believe in your heart (C)that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

Won’t you believe in your heart and confess him today? Confess him by coming to the waters of Christian baptism.

- 4. Jesus is the first to rise but not the last!**

²⁰ But in fact (Z)Christ has been raised from the dead, (AA)the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as (AB)by a man came death, (AC)by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For (AD)as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then (AE)at his coming (AF)those who belong to Christ. 1 Cor 15:20-23

- 5. When you share the gospel with people, you must stress the necessity of their own personal belief in Christ’s death and resurrection.**

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Dallas, TX May 22, 2022