



THE GREATEST TESTIMONY EVERY TOLD

SERIES: ACTS LIFE UNLEASHED

Acts 26:1–32
39th Message
Brian Morgan
April 21, 2019

It has been our tradition on Easter Sunday to have a testimony following the message. This year we will be doubly blessed to have not one but two testimonies. By special invitation, the Apostle Paul has agreed to share with us the testimony he gave before the Roman Procurator Festus and King Agrippa. *[for our readers, Paul's testimony was acted out on stage]* After three epic missionary journeys, Paul returned to Jerusalem to give a report to James and the elders “of the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry” (Acts 21:19) and to deliver the offering he had collected from the Gentile churches for the poor in Jerusalem. Shortly thereafter, Jews from Asia falsely accused Paul of defiling the temple by bringing a Gentile into it. That spark ignited the fury of the Jews, who rushed upon Paul in the temple, violently assaulted him and would have killed him had not the Roman tribune intervened and rescued him from the violent crowd.

Like his Master before him, Paul endured five trials after his arrest. The first took place before the angry mob at the temple, the second before the Sanhedrin, and the third and fourth before the Roman procurators Felix and Festus in Caesarea. Felix had “a rather accurate knowledge of the Way” (24:22) and knew there was no evidence to convict Paul, but he was unwilling to release him, “partly because he wanted to curry favor with the Jews and partly because was hoping for a bribe,”¹ which was not forthcoming. Paul refused to play Felix’s game and remained in Roman custody without another public hearing for two years until Felix was recalled to Rome and replaced by Festus, who was more inclined to follow Roman protocol of justice. “Wishing to do the Jews a favor,” he asked Paul if he wished to go to Jerusalem to be tried (25:9). Paul, knowing he would not receive a fair trial in Jerusalem, responded, “I am standing before Caesar’s tribunal, where I ought to be tried...I appeal to Caesar” (25:10–11).

Shortly after Festus’ appointment, two members of the Judean royal family, Agrippa and his sister Berenice, came to Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. Though of royal status in Judea, they are also Roman subjects and eager to make a good impression with their new procurator. Herod Agrippa II was the great grandson of Herod the Great, who “had tried to destroy the infant Jesus. His son Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, beheaded John the Baptist... [and] His grandson Agrippa I slew James the son of Zebedee with the sword. Now we see Paul brought before Agrippa’s son,”² who was given the title the “friend of Caesar.”

Accompanying Agrippa was his sister Berenice, a royal figure whose wealth and beauty secured her prominence during these years. In today’s world her glossy photograph would have monopolized the glamour magazines. She had been married twice, but both husbands suffered pre-mature deaths. Since then she lived with her brother, which led to rumors about their relationship. To quell the rumors, she married the king of Cilicia, but the marriage proved intolerable and she quickly deserted him and returned to Agrippa, which started

the rumors again. Years later she had an affair with Titus, the son of the emperor Vespasian, who crushed the Jewish rebellion and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem.

The timing of their visit was opportune for Festus, who was in a difficult position after Paul made his appeal to Caesar. In reviewing the case, he found no charges worthy of a crime, yet “how can he explain to the emperor why he is forwarding an appeal of a person who appears innocent yet cannot simply be freed?”³ Thus he solicits the advice of the Jewish king as to what he should write, which some suggest is really a ploy. As Craig Keener suggests,

If they [Agrippa and Berenice] concur with Festus’ suspicion that this was a purely a religious affair, Festus could send Paul on with a letter to that effect while everyone saved face. Although the Jerusalem leaders might complain, Paul’s appeal rescues Festus from the blame. And the Emperor would respect the judgment of a ‘Jewish king.’⁴

Being eager to strengthen his working relationship with the Roman procurator, Agrippa expresses his willingness to hear Paul. So Luke writes,

So, 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. (Acts 25:23)

You are now invited to join these high raking guests in the audience hall to hear Paul’s testimony. This is Paul’s fifth and most elaborate defense speech. It is a masterpiece of rhetoric, designed not only to acquit him of the false charges against him, but also to present the living Christ before his hearers in a rational, yet persuasive way. *[Trumpets sound and Agrippa, Berenice and Festus come on stage; Paul is escorted by a prison guard]*

Paul’s invitation to speak (vv. 1–3)

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, 3 especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.”

Paul testifies that his faith is orthodox and his character pure (vv. 4–8)

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?"

Paul testifies to the zeal of his faith (vv. 9–11)

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's encounter with the risen Christ (vv. 12–15)

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.'"

Jesus commissions Paul (vv. 16–18)

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.'

Paul's obedience to the risen Christ (vv. 19–20)

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.

Paul's summary conclusion (vv. 21–23)

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."

Festus' objection and Paul's rebuttal (vv. 24–29)

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."

Paul's innocence confirmed (vv. 30–32)

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."

What Makes Paul's Testimony Credible?

In our time together, I would like you to consider not only the content of Paul's testimony, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to ascertain the credibility of his testimony. If Paul's testimony is true, there are inescapable implications for the way we live our lives in God's universe. Therefore we can't simply ignore it; we must further investigate and examine the evidence to see if it is really true or false.

1. Every assertion could be confirmed by multiple witnesses.

The first thing to note is that is that every assertion Paul makes throughout his testimony could be confirmed by multiple witnesses. It was a foundational rule of law in Israel and carried over into the church that, "A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Deut 19:15; Matt 18:16; 2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19; Heb 10:28; Rev 11:3). Paul opens his testimony testifying that the whole manner of his life of faith and devotion was well known since his youth. As John Stott writes,

Saul must have been a familiar figure in Jerusalem when as a young man he sat at the feet of Rabbi Gamaliel (22:3). He is likely to have gained a reputation for scholarship, righteousness and religious zeal. Many Palestinian Jews still alive knew how he had lived as a child, first in Tarsus, then in Jerusalem. More than that, they had known him personally and could testify from their own experience that he had belonged to the strictest party in Judaism, that of the Pharisees.⁵

2. The authenticity of his faith was evidenced by his holy zeal.

"Zeal" has a wide range of meanings, both positive and negative. In a positive sense, it denotes a passion for one's property or for all that is right and true. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet describes the Lord's zeal that stirs him to confront his enemies:

The LORD goes out like a mighty man,
like a man of war he stirs up his zeal;
he cries out, he shouts aloud,
he shows himself mighty against his foes. (Isa 42:13)

Similarly, as Saul witnessed the spread of apostles' message about Jesus, his zeal was stirred to the boiling point. He saw this new sect as a poisonous cancer posing a serious threat to Israel's most sacred institutions—the Law and the Temple. Operating under the jurisdiction of the chief priests in Jerusalem, and fully believing he was enforcing God's Law, Saul became the chief persecutor of the church. Possessed by zeal, he hunted down, arrested and executed

believers, not only in Jerusalem, but also in foreign cities as far away as Damascus.

If someone proposes a new theory of knowledge in a field for which they have no expertise, they have little credibility and need not be taken seriously. But if a renowned scientist addresses his peers with a new discovery that revolutionizes the way we look at the universe and then backs it up with supporting data, he cannot be ignored. Paul speaks as an ultra-orthodox and ultra-zealous Jew, a true insider whose lifelong devotion and scholarship far exceeded the present day “King of the Jews” to whom he was speaking. He could not be ignored easily.

3. Paul’s change of mind was not a change of religion, but a new understanding of its fulfillment.

Paul explains that the radical turnabout in his thinking was not a change of religion, but rather a new understanding of the fulfillment of Israel’s hopes and dreams. Paul asserts that he is on trial for his hope in God’s promise, made to Israel’s forefathers and expanded by the prophets, that God would send his Messiah into the world to rescue and redeem his people. This was the hope Jews everywhere were clinging to and celebrating in their worship. From a Jewish point of view, when God returned to Zion to set up his worldwide kingdom, this would usher in the end of history, and with it, the resurrection that would open the door to a new age in which heaven and earth would be fully integrated. Addressing the crowd, most of whom did not believe in resurrection, Paul asks, “Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” After all, God is the Creator in whom we live and breathe, whether you have faith or not. Why should it surprise anyone that the “Giver of life” is capable of resurrection?

But what *was* incredible to Paul (and to everyone else!) was that God did in the middle of history with Jesus what he and most Jews had expected to occur at the end of history. Not only was Jesus raised from the dead, but he had been exalted in the presence of God, seated at his right hand, and was currently ruling the world as God’s King—“as a human being, fulfilling the destiny marked out for the human race from the sixth day of creation.”⁶ It is this understanding of the resurrection that the non-believing Jews found so offensive—that everything they were waiting for had happened in Jesus and that “*God’s new world had arrived*” fulfilling the promises to bless all nations through Abraham.”⁷ Thus, to say, “Christ is risen,” means the work of redemption is finished and the new age has arrived. This is why the early Christians changed their day of worship from the Sabbath, or the seventh day, to Sunday, the eighth day—the very first day of God’s New Creation. From the New Testament viewpoint, the present age and the age to come overlap. And those who give their allegiance to the risen King receive not just the gift of forgiveness but also the Holy Spirit, who infuses the surging life and vitality of the age to come into our bodies now. If it is true, we should expect to see signs of the restoration of the Garden of Eden before our eyes, seeing and feeling God’s presence in our lives and around us.

4. This radical reversal did not come from his study, but from a personal encounter with the risen Christ.

Given that Saul the Pharisee was initially not open to the Christian interpretation, it took nothing less than a direct encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus to transform his views. The encounter totally overwhelmed and undid him. “His

fanatical opposition was overcome in a moment.”⁸ A heavenly light more brilliant than the noonday sun shone around Saul and his companions. The entire party fell to the ground. Then they heard a voice in Aramaic, which only Paul understood, calling his name twice — “Saul, Saul” (typical of a theophany; Gen 22:11; 46:2) — and demanding to know why he was persecuting Him.

Before Saul could answer, the voice confronted him with a well-known Greek proverb: “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” “A goad was a sharp pointed stick used to prod cattle in the desired direction.”⁹ The more obstinate an animal is to his owner’s prodding, the more painful it will be, for the master will not be thwarted. How much more if the master you are resisting is God.

Years earlier, Paul’s teacher Gamaliel warned the Jewish Council regarding Jesus’ disciples to “Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God” (Acts 5:38–39). His logic was similar to C. S. Lewis’s nearly two thousand years later. And yet, fighting against God is exactly what Paul was doing. It took courage for Paul to make mention of the proverb, for it was a public admission of how wrong his life had been up to that point. His zeal without knowledge was criminal, sending scores of innocent lives to prison and death, and his guilt was only intensified when Jesus added his name to list. Normally when a defendant is testifying, he will attempt to minimize his own sins, but Paul paints them with a bold brush, declaring how he was “maddened with rage”¹⁰ in his pursuit of Christians to distant cities. Such honesty and humility adds credibility to his testimony.

5. His commission as a servant, prophet and apostle was something no one could have imagined.

Two things utterly amaze me about Paul’s commission. First, apart from a direct rebuke, God doesn’t berate Saul for his sins. Rather he merely tells him to “rise up” (*anistēmi*) to receive his new commission. It is a credit solely to God’s grace that at Saul’s moment of greatest weakness, he is immediately commissioned as God’s *servant, prophet* and *apostle* (vv. 16–18). It is something no one could have imagined. The word “servant” (*hupēretēs*) “carries the emphasis of learning what is to be done from the superior, and doing it with no prejudice to personal dignity or worth.”¹¹ “Witness” implies Paul will be an eyewitness within God’s Holy Council in line with the Hebrew prophets. No longer will Paul be giving orders to anyone. As God’s servant, he will be carrying out His orders, as one whom He is “sending” as His ambassador to Israel and the nations. With Jesus’ resurrection, the Gentiles were granted full and equal share with the privileges of those sanctified in Christ.

The second thing I find incredible is that his ministry will be identical to Jesus’ as found in Isaiah’s third Servant Song (Isa 49:1–13). In verses 6–9, God tells the servant that he will take on Israel’s role on Israel’s stage. At one point, the servant feels he has spent his strength in vain (which fits well with the disciples abandoning Jesus at the cross). The Lord responds that He will not only accomplish the servant’s original task of restoring Israel, but that He will also make the servant a light to the nations.

And he said to me, “You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”

But I said, “I have labored in vain;

I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;

yet surely my right is with the LORD,
and my recompense with my God.”
And now the LORD says,
he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him;
and that Israel might be gathered to him—
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—he says:
“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (Isa
49:3–6)

When you consider the task, it seems daunting, if not unimaginable, that a former persecutor will now become a leading ambassador, taking on Jesus’ calling to open the eyes of idol-worshipping Gentiles so that they may turn to God and be delivered from the power of Satan as new creatures, forgiven and sanctified. The fact that God must “deliver” him suggests that in carrying out the call, he will be subjected to no small amount of suffering (2 Cor 11:24–27). The terms of Paul’s new life are disclosed up front, and they will not be easy. For anyone valuing life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, this path would be tempting to refuse.

6. Paul obeyed the vision and did it with God’s help, as He promised!

Paul obeyed the vision and willingly endured the loss of everything to make Christ known. Over the three missionary journeys, he travelled approximately 9000 miles. And despite violent opposition, beatings, stoning and shipwrecks, he successfully made the message known throughout the known Roman world—in Acts 19:9 Luke writes that during the two years Paul taught in the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus, “all of the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10). How can you explain his success if his commission was not from God and the Spirit was not bringing new life?

7. Paul’s summary appeal silenced the court!

When Festus interrupts Paul from the bench and screams that his great learning has made him mad, Paul had earlier asserted that in his former life he was indeed “mad,” but now he speaks what is true and reasonable. Paul then takes the opportunity to boldly confront the king with the truth. (Using his imagination, John Stott masterfully fills in gaps).

“King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.”

The court gasps. Has any prisoner ever before presumed to address his Royal Highness with such impertinence? Agrippa is unhinged (unhorsed). Too embarrassed to give Paul a direct answer to a direct question, and too proud to allow him to dictate the topic of their dialogue, he takes evasive action with an ambiguous counter-question.

Agrippa responds: “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to become a Christian?”

The court gasps again. The king regained the initiative and a murmur went round the audience as the people wondered exactly what he meant.¹²

Paul to Agrippa: “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.”

Paul truly believed what he was saying. He longed for Agrippa and Berenice to be saved. He wanted everybody in the world to be like him except for his chains—bonded to Christ but free from physical bondage. Paul’s statement silenced the court, for there was nothing more to say. His testimony was unimpeachable.

How will you respond to it? If it is true, like Paul, equipped with the gift of the Spirit, we can play a significant role in bringing God’s New Creation to earth, as we learn to live, serve and suffer alongside people who are in darkness and lead them into the light and life of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!**

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20–21)

1. John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 362.
2. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 370.
3. Craig S. Keener, *Acts, An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 4:3515.
4. Keener, *Acts*, 4:3472.
5. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 370–71.
6. N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Easter* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 24.
7. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part Two*, Chapters 13–28 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 208.
8. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 375.
9. Keener, *Acts*, 4:3515.
10. The verb Paul uses (ἐμμείνομαι) means “to be filled with such anger that one appears to be mad.” BDAG, <https://accordance.bible/link/read/BDAG#9925>.
11. “ὑπηρέτης ὑπηρετέω,” TDNT (Abridged), 1232.
12. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 376.