



The St J's Group

Acts 26:1-32 - A prisoner's defence Passage, Talk Notes and Questions

Please feel free to take these talk notes home with you and you may wish to find some time during this week to consider the questions below.

1. Talk Passage – Acts 26:1-32

1 “Brothers” So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defence: **2** “King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defence against all the accusations of the Jews, **3** and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently. **4** “The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. **5** They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee. **6** And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. **7** This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me. **8** Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? **9** ‘I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. **10** And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. **11** Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities. **12** ‘On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. **13** About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. **14** We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” **15** “Then I asked, “Who are you, Lord?”“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” the Lord replied. **16** “Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. **17** I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them **18** to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” **19** ‘So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. **20** First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. **21** That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. **22** But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen – **23** that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles. **24** At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defence. ‘You are out of your mind, Paul!’ he shouted. ‘Your great learning is driving you insane.’ **25** ‘I am not insane, most excellent Festus,’ Paul replied. ‘What I am saying is true and reasonable. **26** The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. **27** King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.’ **28** Then Agrippa said to Paul, ‘Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?’ **29** Paul replied, ‘Short time or long – I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.’ **30** The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. **31** After they left the room, they began saying to one another, ‘This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment.’ **32** Agrippa said to Festus, ‘This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.’

2.5 After - What changed after we and Paul became Christians? (Acts 26:16-23)

- Having been honest about his past and what changed his mind about who Jesus was, Paul now explains what happened after his life-changing meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus.
- Firstly Jesus commissions both Paul and us to be witnesses: ‘**Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me.**’ (Acts 26:16) Jesus tells Paul to not only testify to what happened to him that day on the road to Damascus but also to share what living in relationship with the living God is like. Jesus likewise commissions each of us to share our conversion testimonies with others and what it is like to live in relationship with Him.
- Secondly, he commissions Paul and us to share the Gospel. To explain to others why Jesus stepped out of Heaven and died on the cross. **‘I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’** (Acts 26:17-8).
- Paul then tells Agrippa and Festus plus all those listening to him that day that for the last twenty years of his life that is exactly what he has been doing and that is why he is standing before them now: **‘So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen – that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.’** (Acts 26:19-23)

2.6 Conclusion

- There is no guarantee that our testimony will be accepted by those who choose to hear it. Festus responds **‘You are out of your mind, Paul!’** **‘Your great learning is driving you insane.’** (Acts 26:24) and Agrippa: **‘Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?’** (Acts 26:28)
- Will we give up when our conversion testimonies are ridiculed or will we double down, like Paul: **‘Short time or long – I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.’** (Acts 26:29)
- Paul never tired of sharing his conversion story. It was central to his ministry. Hopefully, he encourages each of us to share our conversion stories more often. He wrote to the church in the Roman province of Galatia: **‘I want you to know brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.’** (Galatians 1:11-12) and to the Church in Corinth **‘For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.** (1 Corinthians 15: 3-8)

2. Talk Notes

2.1 Introduction

- We all have a story or testimony to share about how we became a Christian. If asked, how would you share your testimony? What would you say? Could you tailor your conversion testimony to fit the context into which you are sharing it? Would you be able, for example, to share how you became a Christian in 60 seconds?
- In Acts 26 Paul models for us not only how to give a snappy conversion testimony but how to break each of our conversion stories into three helpful parts:
 - i) **Before** - What were we and Paul like before we became a Christian?
 - ii) **How** - How did we and Paul become a Christian?
 - iii) **After** - What changed after we and Paul became Christians?

2.2 Context and Background

- **‘When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favour to the Jews, he left Paul in prison.’** (Acts 24:27)
- The Roman Governor Felix had already heard the case against Paul. The Jewish authorities were claiming **‘We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him. (Acts 24:5-6)** Paul defended himself by saying: **‘After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings. I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance.** (Acts 24:17-18)
- Paul was not ashamed of being a Christian: **‘I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.** (Acts 24:14-15)
- Paul reveals the real reason that he is on trial: **“It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.”** (Acts 24:21)
- **‘Three days after arriving in the province, Festus went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem, where the chief priests and the Jewish leaders appeared before him and presented the charges against Paul’** (Acts 25:1-2) Paul refutes the charges for a second time but then as a Roman citizen he appeals to Caesar: **‘if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!’** (Acts 25:11b)
- Having appealed ‘to Caesar’ Festus now needs to bring specific charges against Paul before sending him to the Emperor Nero. He is aware that the case does not hang on any specific crime but is about a man called Jesus and whether he is alive: **Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus whom Paul claimed was alive.’** (Acts 25:19)
- King Agrippa II and Bernice were in Caesarea to pay their respects to the newly appointed Roman Governor Festus: **A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus.** (Acts 25:13)
- Festus speaks to Agrippa about Paul’s case. Agrippa had quite a lot of power in Jewish religious affairs because he had been given the custodianship of the temple and the authority to appoint the high priest. Agrippa agrees to help Festus with the case and Paul addresses his defence towards him: **“King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defence against all the accusations of the Jews, and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me**

patiently.” (Acts 26:2-3)

- 2.3. **Before** - What were we and Paul like before we became a Christian? (Acts 26:4-11)
- Every good conversion testimony begins with what we were like before we became a Christian. God often puts us in situations where he expects us to witness to people with whom we have a great deal in common. Hopefully, we won’t have to share our stories in a situation like Paul’s. Paul identifies with his audience in three ways:
 - i) He reminds them that he grew up in Jerusalem: **‘The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem..’** (Acts 26:4). He knows them and has lived amongst them
 - ii) He reminds them that he is a Pharisee: **‘They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee..’** (Acts 26:5). Paul was well known and respected as an expert on religious law. He had been tutored by Gamaliel the most honoured rabbi of his time.
 - iii) He openly admits that he was vehemently anti-Christian: **‘I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests, I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.’** (Acts 26:9-11)

2.4 How? - How did we and Paul become a Christian? (Acts 26:12-15)

- Having identified with his audience, Paul now shares how he became a Christian.
- The importance of what happened that day on the road to Damascus simply cannot be underestimated. It is so important that Dr Luke, the author of Acts mentions it three times, firstly in Acts 9, secondly in Acts 22 and here again in Acts 26. Paul’s conversion not only changed his life forever but arguably changed the course of human history.
- **‘On one of these journeys, I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads. Then I asked, “Who are you, Lord?”“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” the Lord replied.’** (Acts 26:12-15).
- It is three words that change the course of Paul’s life and arguably the course of history: **‘I am Jesus.’** (Acts 26:15). In those three words Saul receives a revelation that is central to the Christian faith. Saul knew his Bible. The words “I am” would have rung bells in his head about the encounter that Moses had with God in Exodus 3 verse 14: God said to Moses, **“I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”** For Saul to hear the words **‘I am Jesus.’** (Acts 26:15) underlines in language that Saul would understand that not only is Jesus the son of God but also given that he was speaking to Jesus in person that Jesus was alive and therefore had to have been raised from the dead.
- Our conversion stories are unlikely to be as spectacular as Paul’s but they will all have their own God given power to convict others. Our challenge is, will we use them?