

Acts 26  
Paul's Call, Obedience and Assurance

Introduction

After preaching to Felix, Paul meets Felix's successor, Porcius Festus, who held the office of Procurator of Judea from 60-62AD. Festus talked the case over with the puppet Jewish King Agrippa who was ruling under the Romans. Together they hear Paul's defence and agree that, despite the claims of the Jews, Paul has done nothing worthy of death or prison. He should have been set free, but for his appeal for justice to the Roman Emperor.

Luke paints a picture of a splendid court scene. Festus, the Roman Governor, a hard-headed man of the world, wearing the red robes kept for state occasions, surrounded by tall legionaries; then King Herod Agrippa II, allowed by the Romans to rule a little of Palestine (Galilee and Perea), dressed in his royal purple robes with his golden crown.

Agrippa II's father, Agrippa I, had killed James and imprisoned Peter (Acts 12). His great uncle was Herod Antipas who had killed John the Baptist (Mark 6:14-29). And his great-grandfather was the Herod who killed all the baby boys at the time of Jesus' birth (Matthew 2:1-19). The woman at Agrippa II's side was Bernice, the shameless sister of Drusilla and also of Agrippa himself – an incestuous relationship. She became mistress of Emperor Vespasian and his son Titus, but always returned to her brother. So if ever a congregation need the Gospel, it was the one gathered in this court.

The court was assembled, and the prisoner was brought in, in chains. Tradition has it that Paul was a little man, a Jewish tentmaker, of unimpressive appearance, balding, beetle brows, hooked nose and bandy legs. Soon he was going to dominate this splendid court with his quiet, dignified, courteous but plain speech. Here was the king of preachers and preacher to kings. In the speech he gave, his defence was not so much his conversion as his commission to be an apostle.

Jesus had warned his disciples that they would be brought before rulers and authorities, but they were not to worry about what to say, **for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say** (Luke 11:11,12). One New Testament manuscript says that Paul was confident and encouraged by the Holy Spirit. This is not the best manuscript, but it is expressing what was the undoubted truth.

The commission which Paul received

Paul begins his defence by describing his Jewish upbringing (Acts 26:4,5). He was in the strictest Jewish party, the Pharisees. He hated Jesus, and persecuted His followers to prison and death (Acts 26:9). Events on the road to Damascus led to his submission to the very one he had hated (Acts 26:13). Then Christ commissioned him for future work. He was to be the servant and witness of the Lord, and God promised to take care of him and rescue him. No one would be able to silence his testimony until God

decided the task was done (Acts 26:16). His job was to go to Jews and Gentiles and **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 26:18). He did this by preaching that Christ would suffer and rise from the dead, and saying that people should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance was real by changed lives and good deeds (Acts 26:20,23).

This is to be our task too. This should be the burden of our witnessing and preaching. The Gospel tells us men and women are blind and in the dark, facing the wrong way, under the grip of the devil and under the judgement of God. We belong to a world which is organised apart from God, and desires to do the opposite of what God requires. There is enormous misunderstanding of Christian truth, emptiness in lives, and moral and spiritual weakness. We must face these fundamental facts about the world we are in and the people we live among. We need to see that the Gospel alone is the answer to man's need – a whole-hearted, unconditional turning from self and sin to God in Christ. Then man's eyes will be opened, and he will be brought into His marvellous light (1 Peter 2:10), and be freed from condemnation (Romans 8:1). Then he will hear His voice say, "Your sins are forgiven", and be set apart for God and sanctified and progressively changed into the image of God.

The secret of it all is that total child-like humble reliance which the Bible calls faith in Christ Jesus. The man of faith is so different from those around him. He is in the light. He knows the truth of God and the plan of salvation. He is emancipated. He has entered the Body of Christ and the church of the living God. He is a citizen of a new world, and is being progressively changed, heading for a wonderful inheritance. Everything hangs on that personal relationship.

What a glorious message this is. It explains the purpose of life, the meaning of life, and it meets the deepest needs of life. We are at peace now about the past; we have confidence in the present, and hope and certainty about the future. Our life is under new management, and God is in control of our whole being – mind, will, conscience and heart. He creates a revolution.

This message demands the utmost attention. We reject it at our peril. There is an enormous difference between rejecting it and accepting it. We are face to face, not with a theological system or moral code, but with a person who demands a whole-hearted response.

#### The obedience which Paul rendered

**"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 to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. But I have had God's help to this very day"** (Acts 26:19-22). Paul had responded gladly and wholeheartedly to all that God made clear to him. Happy is the Christian who can say, "I have not been disobedient to the vision from heaven". Being a Christian is not just about forgiveness of sins, but also about recognizing that henceforth I am the Lord's. I am set apart for Him, and have to live

for Him, please Him, walk in His way and His will. **“My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work”** (John 4:34). **I desire to do your will, O my God** (Psalm 40:8).

**You are not your own; you were bought at a price** (1 Corinthians 6:19,20). Dare not to take back what has been given over to Him. God is constantly making known His will about our character, conduct and career. Every part of life should be handed over to God as His right and due because of what He has done for us. Our whole self is His. So renounce all right to self. Always be at His disposal. It is a solemn matter when God makes His will known to us through His Word, circumstances, counsel of others, or inner conviction. George Muller’s counsel to a friend: “If God has given you light, you are responsible for its use. Obey Him and walk in the light. Then you will have more. If you do not, the light will be withdrawn. God’s Word is ‘use or lose’”

It is often costly. It can lead to loneliness. Life can be like an eagle’s, if you fly into higher levels and live in God’s sunshine. No bird is so solitary as the eagle. Life lived for God may forfeit human companionship, but it knows divine companionship. He will never leave you alone. Be prepared to follow the light He gives you, regardless of other’s opinions, tradition, and approval. **Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord** (Hosea 6:3 AV).

The secret of Paul’s life was that he had not been disobedient to the heavenly vision he received. It was costly. It involved sacrifice. But how blessed he was. He could testify to having God’s help to this very day. Later, when deserted by everyone at his first trial in Rome, **the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength** (2 Timothy 4:17). **For me to live is Christ** (Philippians 1:21). **Through glory and dishonour, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything** (2 Corinthians 6:8-10), knowing **the peace of God, which transcends all understanding** (Philippians 4:7).

Has God given you a heavenly vision? Do you know it? Are you sure of it? Are you clear what you have to do? Are you fearful and trembling? Do not be disobedient to the heavenly vision. He has not called you to mock you or fail you. He gives the Holy Spirit to them that obey Him. “God’s work done in God’s way never lack God’s supplies.” (Hudson Taylor).

#### The assurance which Paul displayed

So Paul finished his speech, and Festus concluded that Paul must be out of his mind (Acts 26:24). Agrippa asked, **"Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"** Paul replied, **"Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."** (Acts 26:28,29). This was an extraordinary statement from a prisoner about to be tried by the Roman Emperor that might well lead to execution.

Why such assurance from the man in chains? He had **tasted to see that the Lord is good** (Psalm 34:8): he had discovered that **God is the rewarder of them that**

**diligently seek Him** (Hebrews 11:6); he had found that **If you seek God with all your heart, you will find Him** (Deuteronomy 4:29); he had found the truth that **He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty** (John 6:35). He had grasped these truths in both hands. He believed them with all his heart. The Holy Spirit had changed him, and it was undeniable. His aching heart had been satisfied, and there was no other explanation. He had placed his feet firmly on the rock which is Christ Jesus and had absolute assurance that because of Christ he need not fear death and judgement. Being with Christ was far better. **Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day** (2 Timothy 4:8).

The favour of God was a thousand times better than the approval of men. Nothing was too much for Him who loved Paul and gave Himself for Paul. His life was knowing Christ, and spending and being spent for Him. There are few who can speak like this in the world. But those who are the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the glory of the church, can keep this thought alive. These are the people who shake the world and leave an indelible mark behind them. They have inward peace regardless of outward troubles. They can sing in prison and sleep on the edge of their grave. They are safe, and prepared to meet God at a moment's notice.

Could we say to anyone – apart from my chains (my outward circumstance, ill-health, small income, difficult neighbours, present pressures) which I would not wish on anyone, I do wish you were like the real me, the person I am at heart? The Gospel is not hearsay, but I testify out of a real and full experience, I speak not of 20-year-old experiences but present day experience, for I am personally involved with Christ. I am rooted, settled, and have a firm conviction, and wish others had the same confidence. **I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day** (2 Timothy 1:12). **For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Romans 8:38,39).

### Conclusion

Christ lives and never changes. He is able to save, receive, fill and empower. With His grace, nothing is impossible. Go on with Him to the end.