

The Acts and Torah of the Apostles Study Guide

Chapter 26

In the last chapter, Paul endured a third trial brought on by false charges against him by the religious authorities in Jerusalem, spanning a period of over two years. That third trial was held at the praetorium at the coastal city of Caesarea, which was the headquarters of the Roman procurator or governor of the province of Judea. As in the case of the previous two trials, Paul's defense successfully showed that the charges against him were baseless. But Festus, the Roman procurator at that time was in a quandary because Paul had exercised his right as a Roman citizen to have his case heard before Nero, the Caesar of Rome, but there was nothing of significance to justify that legal proceeding and that would cast Festus into a negative light in the eyes of Nero and the Roman court.

So, when Herod Agrippa II showed up, Festus hoped that Agrippa could come up with something that would justify sending Paul to Rome. As chapter 25 concluded, Agrippa had heard the charges against Paul. Now, in chapter 26, Paul presents his defense once again.

26:1-11

- v. 1 – We are told that Paul made his defense. The Greek word translated as “defense” is *apolologeomai*. It is the basis for the English word, apology. But it is used in a different way than how we generally apologize. It is a compound verb comprised of *apo* (“from”) plus *logos* (“word”). Literally it means “from a word,” which has the sense of explaining something truthfully by your words. It is used today in the biblical discipline called apologetics, in which you defend a theological position in a systematic manner. And that is what Paul does here, by carefully explaining the relevant details in a factual manner, and not embellishing them with emotional speech. So, his method serves as an excellent example to us when we are called to make a defense of what we believe.
- v. 2 – Paul called Agrippa “an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews” because he was alerting Agrippa that he would present evidence that showed the error in the religious thinking of the Sanhedrin. It was like saying, “You know the real issues theologically and religiously, and so do I, so here it comes.”
- v. 4-5 – Paul gave his credentials, in terms of living as a Jew in a normal manner, and being a Pharisee, which implies training in the Torah, as well as establishing an indicator of what he believed.
- v. 6-8 – He then described his belief in the resurrection, which was the key theological distinction of the Pharisees. This is ironic because he was just being faithful to what he was supposed to believe as a Pharisee.

It is no different for Messianic believers today who hold to the things the patriarchs and the faithful men and women of Israel believed. These beliefs are biblical in nature, and thus recorded by Jewish authors under the inspiration of the God of Israel, not based on the teachings of men. Yet Messianic Jews are accused by Judaism today as holding beliefs that are incompatible with the Jewish heritage. But just as Paul had truth on his side, Messianic beliefs are more consistent with biblical faith than modern Judaism. These beliefs include:

- A real Messiah who is a person, and also God incarnate.
- Atonement for sin based on the shedding of blood.
- A day of judgment that leads to everlasting life or everlasting punishment.
- Salvation by grace through faith, not by works.
- Being faithful to Torah, without being burdened by legalism.

v. 9-11 – Paul then told the story of his life before his spiritual transformation, which was marked by having religious approval to practice hate, which is a dangerous combination.

26:12-23

v. 12-13 – Paul continued by telling the story of his encounter with Yeshua and his spiritual transformation. His reason for telling it in detail goes beyond a mere personal testimony. It gives evidence to his position on the key issue at hand – the resurrection. For if it is well known that Yeshua died on the cross, and yet He spoke to Paul afterward, that means Yeshua is alive, and that requires resurrection from the dead. Moreover, since Messianic prophecy foretold the resurrection of the Messiah in Psalm 16:10 and Isaiah 53:10, that means Yeshua must be the Messiah and everything He taught must be true. So, Paul’s eyewitness testimony is significant for a number of reasons.

v. 14 – His defense goes on to provide an additional detail of Paul’s Damascus road conversion experience that was not brought out in chapter 9. When Yeshua confronted Saul, He said, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” Goads are sticks that are sharp at one end. They are used to motivate stubborn livestock like oxen to move. Shorter versions were also placed on wagons or carts behind the animal. So when a beast resisted moving forward by kicking backward, the sharp object would deliver a painful reaction, and the animal would learn to stop resisting.

Applied to Saul, this means he had been resisting God’s leading prior to his personal encounter with Yeshua. As someone who was active in Jerusalem, it is reasonable to conclude that Saul was familiar with Yeshua’s teachings before the crucifixion. He may even have heard Yeshua speak directly, although we have no direct evidence of that. But it is likely that he knew the message that Yeshua had given, and Saul resisted it. In fact, Saul’s hateful passion to defeat the followers of Yeshua only makes sense if he understood the message and then resisted it. So, when Yeshua confronted him on the road to Damascus, it all came to a head when Saul finally stopped kicking back at the message of Yeshua that was calling him to move forward spiritually.

v. 18 – Paul also provides additional details regarding the calling that Yeshua gave to him on the Damascus Road. In Acts 9:15, Yeshua foretold that Saul would proclaim the name of Yeshua before Gentiles, kings and the people of Israel. This was the first moment that he was witnessing to a king, and we can see how God providentially brought that about through these trials, which were not desired, but it was the most efficient way of bringing it about, especially when he will stand before Caesar a bit later on. But here in 26:18, we see, for the first time, the spiritual dimension of that calling, as he was given the assignment of being Yeshua’s spokesman for opening the eyes of Gentiles, kings and Jews from the darkness of Satan to the light of God, to receive forgiveness of sins, and to be sanctified by faith. Those things would be especially important to state at that moment because he was being a direct witness to both Festus (a Gentile) and Agrippa (a king), and was hoping that they might repent and be saved.

- v. 19-21 – Paul then explained how he had taken the message given to him by Yeshua to both Jews and Gentiles. He said that the reason the Jewish leaders were trying to have him put to death is because he had called them to repentance. And, like all people, if they deny their sin and resist, they will act in the same sinful way that they are used to acting.
- v. 22-23 – Paul’s concluding statement is profound – his message has only been what is found in the Prophets and Torah in the Hebrew Scriptures. That, too, serves as an example to all of us. When we know what the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) states, we can use it to state what God has already declared. That way, the Word of God is the authority, and if someone rejects our testimony, it is ultimately their rejecting of God’s authority.

26:24-32

Festus and Agrippa had different responses to Paul’s statements. As a Roman, Festus did not believe in life after death, so everything Paul had to say made no sense and he concluded that Paul was thinking in an insane manner. That reaction is common today, as atheist or humanist people typically consider the message of the Bible to be unbelievable, and thus they have disparaging feelings towards those who do believe it.

At first glance, Agrippa appears to be positively interested in Paul’s message. But notice that he used the word Christian (Gr. *Christianos*), which at that time was a pejorative term. He also said that Paul’s argument was a short one. So, it is most likely that Agrippa was being cynical or sarcastic, saying words to the effect: “In a *short time* you will persuade me to become a *Christian*?”

- v. 29 – This verse sums up Paul’s entire purpose in life, becoming “such as I am” means being forgiven of sins and having a calling that benefits others.
- v. 30-32 – These people with authority determined that Paul was innocent of having committed an offense worthy of capital punishment or being imprisoned. But he had to be sent to Caesar anyway because Paul had invoked that right. To them, it must have seemed foolish and unnecessary. But now, from the perspective of history, this situation was part of the bigger picture of God’s plan. In order for belief in Yeshua to reach greater numbers, the message of the Good News had to reach the most influential city in that part of the world—Rome. And that called for the most skilled person to bring it about—Paul. And so, Paul would go there not to defend himself, but to testify on behalf of Yeshua.