

SUMMER 8 - Acts 16-28 - Appeal to Rome - Appealing to Agrippa

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0 : 00] against the law or Jews, or against the temple, or against Caesar himself, or all of the above.

So they're very serious charges. Maybe the Jews here were claiming perhaps the same things that the Jews in Thessalonica had claimed. Perhaps they were saying that Paul was in fact advocating that Jesus was a political Messiah.

Perhaps they charged that in speaking about Jesus that Paul was stirring up political unrest. Perhaps this political unrest would ultimately lead to popular uprising against the Roman Empire itself.

Anyway, we really cannot be certain because we don't have the exact charges. But all of those things I suspect, or some of them at least, are a distinct possibility. What we do have is Luke's record that despite the seriousness of what was being charged, there was a distinct lack of evidence.

Luke says this. Look at verse 7. They could not prove them. The summary of Paul's own defense is then given in verse 8.

[1 : 07] He says, I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar. In other words, those things I'm totally innocent of. However, this new governor, as I said, I think is anxious to please.

History had indicated that getting on the wrong side of Jewish authority was not a good thing to do early in your term of office. The Jews, you see, had connections.

And a rumor that he had released a known political agitator would not go down well with his bosses up the line. And so Festus was keen to, you know, appease them. So as verse 9 indicates, he desperately wanted to do the Jews a favor.

So he puts the only thing left to Paul in verse 9. Can you see it there? He said to him, Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on charges, on these charges?

Now, I reckon at this point, Festus has something here. That is something going for him. After all, you see, where had the crimes been committed? Whatever they were, they had been committed in Jerusalem.

[2 : 14] Perhaps it's only right that you go to Jerusalem to face trial there. However, there are other possibilities in terms of what Festus is suggesting.

You see, he could be suggesting that he preside over the trial. But it's also possible that the Sanhedrin, the religious council, might have authority in that examination because, after all, Jerusalem is, you know, a place where they hold significant power.

It's possible that Festus might allow them to look at a religious charge while in Jerusalem. And if Paul can't be caught up in a political or criminal charge, then maybe once he's in Jerusalem, then there might be some way that the weight of the religious element could be taken into account.

It's clear that whatever is going on here, Festus is trying to work things out so that the Jews might be appeased. It is not a good situation for Paul.

Let's think about it more broadly and think about some of the costs that might have to be paid here. You see, it's entirely possible that the course being suggested might not only have costs for Paul himself, but also for the gospel.

[3 : 27] Think of it this way. For example, if a charge of treason against Caesar is indeed sitting under the surface, either implicitly or explicitly, then what would a conviction mean?

Well, personally, it would mean death for Paul. That's bad enough in itself, isn't it? But it may also put under threat the gospel. I wonder if all of those things sit under the surface of Paul's reply.

So in verse 10, he bundles all of this together and he does an incredible thing. He exercises his right as a Roman citizen. Look at what he says, verses 10 and 11. Paul answered, I am now standing before Caesar's court where I ought to be tried.

I have not done anything wrong to the Jews, as you yourselves know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I don't refuse to die.

But 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.

[4 : 40] You see, Paul clearly knows the risks involved in what he's in his action. You see, he's effectively, he could end, the end result could be that he effectively flees from the frying pan with the very real risk that he's stepping into the fire.

Justice in a Roman court of the Emperor Nero was not always pure justice. At least Nero would not be so easily pressured, though, as a newly arrived provincial governor.

And if Paul were acquitted, then the impact of that acquittal could hold sway throughout the empire. Think of this for a moment. Besides that, you know, for example, if Paul was acquitted, then it meant that his faith was okay and the things that he was doing, preaching the gospel as he was doing, were okay.

It would hold sway throughout the empire. Besides this, you see, the Lord Jesus had already informed him two years earlier that he would witness to him in Rome as he had in Jerusalem. So Paul has no fear of Rome because the Lord Jesus had said that's where he's going.

Nevertheless, Paul's appeal carried a headache for Festus. After all, as Paul clearly indicates in verse 10, Festus knew the charge of treason was bogus.

[5 : 58] He knew that this was a matter of Jewish law. But you see, now he's been painted into a corner. He has no choice. As he himself says in verse 12, after conferring with his council, Paul had appealed to Caesar as a Roman citizen.

So to Caesar, he must go. No choice. That's what must happen. Of course, that would mean that Festus would also have to write a report to go with it. An explanation of how come this Jew is being brought to Rome.

Fortunately for Festus, he's about to receive a visitor who might just be able to help him in this. And that's where verses 13 and following come in. You see, we are introduced to King Agrippa.

Let me tell you a little bit about King Agrippa. King Agrippa II was the son of Herod the Great, who was the one, you might remember, who slaughtered the children at the time of Jesus' birth.

So that's some of his ancestry. But also, Herod Agrippa II was the nephew of Herod Antipas, who'd been involved in the trial of Jesus. And not only that, he was also the son of Herod Agrippa I, who had killed the Apostle James back in Acts chapter 12.

[7 : 10] There's a long lineage you can see, can't you? Also, he was married to a berenice, his sister. And it was widely rumored that that relationship was incestuous.

It was to Agrippa that Emperor Claudius had committed the care of the temple in Jerusalem and the appointment of high priests. This was a very significant man in a number of ways that Paul was going to meet.

And it's this Herod Agrippa who just happens to drop by to pay his respects to Festus in verse 13. He's a man well-versed in things Jewish.

And when he hears Festus summarize the case in verses 14 to 21, he's intrigued, you know, his interest is piqued. In verse 22 he indicates he'd be delighted to hear from this Paul himself.

And so on the very next day, Agrippa and Berenice arrive with great pomp and ceremony. In my mind's eye, they are undoubtedly wearing purple robes of royalty with, you know, gold circlets on their heads.

[8 : 13] Doubtless Festus had donned the scarlet robe which governors wore on state occasions in those days. I can imagine all the minions were there, military tribunes, leading men of the city.

And then before all this great company, they bring this, remember my account about him a few days ago, a few weeks ago. They brought this little man, if our early account is to be believed, balding with beetle brows, hooked nose and bandy legs.

He wore no crown. He had no grand gown, only the bonds and clothes of a captive before all of this pomp and ceremony.

And with this, Festus instructs the gathering in verses 24 to 27. And in doing so, I want you to notice, I've got about five points here. I want you to notice, he makes a number of very important points.

I will summarize. One, the case so far was that the Jewish community had petitioned for the death penalty for this man. Two, his findings so far, that is the findings of Festus so far, were that the charges were unproved.

[9 : 18] Paul had done nothing worthy of death. Three, however, a formal verdict could not be arrived at at this gathering, since Paul had appealed to Caesar, an appeal which Festus had granted him.

Four, therefore the nature of this present proceedings, which were going on this day, was not that of a trial, but more like an inquiry that could not produce an official verdict, just inform the court in Rome perhaps.

And fifth, the purpose therefore of the inquiry was so that Festus could instruct Caesar properly. Hence, in other words, write that report. Hence, the process was to find out from Paul what he actually believed, what he taught, what he preached, what he practiced, so that he could ascertain whether that represented a threat to the community or to the emperor.

It's a magnificent opportunity, isn't it? You see, Paul at this point doesn't have to deal with any trumped up charges. He doesn't have to argue about the freedom of the Jewish individual's conscience within Judaism.

He doesn't have to argue about whether he'd broken Roman law or not. Nor did he have to defend the right of Christian faith to exist. All he had to do was expound the Christian message. He simply had to tell people what God had done in Jesus Christ and demonstrate it was not a form of treason against Caesar or the government.

[10 : 47] In other words, Paul's task was to declare the gospel through Festus to everyone gathered. What a magnificent opportunity it is.

And so in chapter 26, Paul begins. After the proper expression of respect for Agrippa, which was characteristic of this time and the position held by him, Paul launches into his apology proper.

He begins by giving his spiritual curriculum vitae. His credentials are impeccable. He had been born, bred and brought up in the heart of the Jewish nation.

From his youth, he had been a member of the strictest of the major religious parties. His status as a Pharisee was common knowledge. And as a Pharisee, he had been educated in the doctrines and faith of Israel.

He had learned about, he'd taken on the traditional hope of the Pharisees. Now notice there, the word hope. It occurs in verse 6 for the first time.

[11 : 55] It is mentioned two other times in verse 7. In verse 6, do you see what it says about hope? It is hope in what God had promised to our ancestors.

In verse 7, he speaks of a hope that the 12 tribes, that is all of Israel, is wanting to see, is hoping to see fulfilled. Then he mentions hope again. It's a shared Jewish hope through and through.

You see, Paul then uses the word our, doesn't he? Remember he's a Jew. He uses the word our in relation to verse 7. He makes the point that central to Jewish hope is the resurrection.

Look at verses 7 and 8. Listen to him talk about the resurrection from the dead. He says, King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that Jews are accusing me.

Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? You see, what he's saying, he's saying central to the hope of Israel is that God gives life to the dead.

[12 : 57] And central to the hope of resurrection is the raising of Jesus. Paul will say more of this in verses 22 and 23. Look at it with me. Look at what it says.

But God has helped me to this very day so that 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 as the first to rise from, and as the first to rise from the dead would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.

I wonder if you can hear this, friends. You see, what he's saying is central to the hope of Israel is the resurrection of the dead. Central to this is the raising of Jesus from the dead.

You see, the raising of Jesus from the dead demonstrates that God can do it. He can raise the dead. And through his resurrection, Jesus is exalted to a position of authority at God's right hand side.

[14 : 02] He is, if you like, the first fruits from the dead. That is, he's that first little flush of fruit on a tree, the first one that ripens.

And if that is coming, then the rest will come as well. You see, can you see what he's saying? He's saying the message of Jesus is therefore clearly not a political message in its essence. And it's not treasonable to the Roman Empire.

It's about resurrection. For Christianity doesn't look to politics for world peace. It doesn't look to war. It doesn't look to military might. It looks to a dead Messiah who rises from the dead and who thereby assures a future spiritual kingdom at the end of time.

Now, let me tell you that talk of resurrection was as surprising and as unbelievable in the days of Paul as it is today. And Paul was pretty sure that Agrippa would react with incredulity.

And you can see this in the 12 of verse 9. 12, you know, was fairly sceptical as it were. But Paul questions whether the, such a reaction of scepticism, well, he questions that knee-jerk reaction.

[15 : 14] After all, think about it for a moment. If God is God, why is the resurrection a problem? If God is God, why is the resurrection a problem?

And if there is a Messiah, then surely he would be a prime candidate for resurrection. But that's the crux of the problem, isn't it, you see? For in order for a Messiah to be raised, what needs to happen?

He needs to die. And every Jew knows that Messiahs don't die. At least not the one they're expecting. And so, in some way, every Jew knows that Jesus couldn't be the Messiah.

Paul himself knew that. In verse 9, we're told that Paul himself had been convinced that Jesus couldn't be the Messiah and that preaching about him, therefore, ought to be stopped. That's why he persecuted and imprisoned so many Christians.

That's why he tried to force them to blaspheme in the name of Jesus. Later on in Galatians, he will say that, you know, his view was, well, this is reading into it a little bit as to what he says, but he's saying, you know, that anyone who hangs on a tree is accursed.

[16 : 25] So, Messiahs aren't accursed, are they? And they don't die either. You see, that's why he tried to force them to blaspheme the name of Jesus. See in verse 11 there? But then, God intervened.

And in this one event, his incredulity was turned into belief. You see, in the midst of his pursuits on behalf of God, God confronted him.

God threw him to the ground, blinded him, and then enlightened him. God opened his eyes to Jesus. In fact, you might remember even the words that came. You see, if you're a good Jew and something incredible happened like this and you heard a voice and you were persecuting the enemies of God and you heard a voice come from God, you would expect endorsement.

But do you remember what Paul heard on that road when he was struck? God said to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

Me? You see, Paul had not been intending to persecute God. He'd been intending to persecute the Christians, the enemies of God. What he finds out in that statement is that actually they're not the enemies of God, they're the friends of God and that he is the enemy of God.

[17 : 51] With his eyes opened to see reality, God then commands him to open other people's eyes and that's what he says here in verse 17. He told him to preach to the Gentiles that they too might turn from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to light.

And God's purpose was that through this people might receive forgiveness of sins and a place with God and his people. Now we're now at verse 19 and Paul draws out the implications.

Directing Agrippa, sorry, looking at Agrippa directly, he tells him what had brought him here. Since the God of his fathers had spoken so directly to him, he says, how could I be disobedient?

All he could do was carry out orders and so he did from Damascus to the Gentiles. Always with the same message, a very personal message, a message about repentance and good deeds.

It's not a political message, not a message out of keeping with the guts of Judaism. In fact, he says it's entirely consistent, a message about God and a message about relationship with God.

[19 : 00] How could Nero regard such a message just treasonable? So far, no Roman has. Only Jews. It's Jews who have opposed this message and only with God's help have they been stopped from killing him.

And yet Paul argues he has been nothing, listen to this very carefully, it's very important, Paul argues he has been nothing but orthodox. What he preaches, you see, is not a message concocted out of his own head.

It is a message that has the endorsement, says Paul, in these verses of the prophets and Moses. Friends, if you are Christian here, it is entirely consistent with the Old Testament.

That's what he's saying. It is entirely consistent with where God has been going through history. It is thoroughly Jewish in that sense. He is a true Jew is what I think he is saying.

Now look at verse 22 again. Paul makes it clear. He is saying exactly what the prophets and Moses said. They had said that the Messiah would be the suffering Messiah.

[20 : 07] That he would die. That he would be the first to rise from the dead and that he would bring the message of light to his own people and here comes the crunch and to Gentiles.

And that's where things come a cropper. Because after all it was that mention of Gentiles that had got him into trouble before. Now we've not reached verse 24 yet.

Sorry, we've reached at this point in the narrative Festus cannot restrain himself any longer. It's a wonderful comment there. Can you see what he says? He says, Paul, I'll slightly paraphrase at this point.

Paul, are you out of your mind? Don't blow it at this point. Your great learning is driving you over the edge. Driving you insane. And Paul responds.

Paul responds. And in verse 25 he's calm and composed and dignified. I'm not insane, most excellent Festus. What I'm saying is true and reasonable.

[21 : 06] And then he goes on, he points out that Agrippa is familiar with these things and that therefore he, Paul, can speak freely to him. It's as though he's saying, you know, Agrippa, let's have a little chat here.

He's convinced that none of these things have escaped Agrippa's notice. None of this has been done in a corner. We Christian Jews, he's saying, have not tried to hide anything.

He turns to Agrippa and he faces him and the Lord Jesus had promised that he'd give words and courage when his people were dragged before courts and princes and with immense courage and guts Paul addresses King Agrippa.

Can you see it there? Verse 27. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do. You can imagine, well, I imagine the gasps in the court.

I mean, you don't say this to a king, do you? I mean, you somehow find your way into Queen Elizabeth's court or whatever, right? You just speak to her face-to-face like this and you say some incredibly powerful things.

[22 : 14] Surely no prisoner dared ever before address such a king in such a way and Agrippa himself has taken aback a little bit. You see, can you see what's happening? All of a sudden the inquiry isn't into Paul but into Agrippa and all of a sudden Agrippa's under examination here and he's a bit too embarrassed to give Paul a direct answer, too proud to allow him to dictate the topic for their dialogue and so he quips back in verse 28.

Can you see it? Do you think in such short time you can persuade me to become a Christian? Anyway, you can imagine the court's amazement at this time again, can't you? Paul's been bold and smart but the king's been pretty bold and smart back, hasn't he?

He's regained the initiative and some of his dignity. Some undoubtedly saw the response as a sort of trivial jest, you know, you can't persuade me to be a Christian so quickly. Others see it as bitter sarcasm, others as a grave irony, others as a burst of anger and others as an expression of sincere devotion.

But Paul's in no doubt how he's going to choose to interpret it. He'll interpret it in such a way as to exploit it for the gospel. Look at verse 29. Short or long, I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am.

Oh, of course, except for these chains. Paul has fulfilled his brief, hasn't he? He has represented Christ before these religious Jews which is what he was asked to do.

[23 : 44] He's represented him before political Jews. He's represented him before Caesar's appointees. He has preached to them all and told them the gospel and the court has fallen silent and people begin to move out and the king gets up and as he moved out the two men, Festus and Agrippa, murmur to each other in agreement and it's clear what they think.

This is not a man of treason. He's just a preacher. He's done nothing worthy of death or imprisonment. He could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor.

But of course, we have read the text and know that this may be this incredible irony. It may be that this very mechanism is the means by which God will get him to roam the centre of the known world and from there perhaps to other places.

So there's the story and it's a story of great courage and conviction, isn't it? It's a marvellous story. It's a model of Christian discipleship for us to follow but that's not the point I want to make tonight.

I want to concentrate on two other quick points. I want to draw out two things for us. The first has to do with hope and the second has to do with witness. Let's look at hope.

[24 : 57] I wonder if some of you think way back into Genesis. Do you remember Jacob? How he goes from the promised land down into Egypt after his son Joseph and he arrives there and he grows old there and he gets to meet Pharaoh and Pharaoh brings him into his court and Pharaoh says, you know, tell us a bit about yourself and he says, my life has, this is my literal translation, he says, my life has consisted of fewness and badness.

Remember what he then told his sons to do when he died? He said, when I die, Joseph take me and bury me back in the promised land.

See, there's a great expression of hope, isn't it? He says, I know where my future is. It's not here in Egypt. It's there in the promised land where God has promised me something and I have been hoping for it.

I may not be there but you take me and bury me there because that's where my future is. You see, Jewish faith has hope at its core. It is a faith that consists in hope.

Now, with that in mind, have a look at chapter 26, verse 6. Paul is crystal clear. He is before this Roman court because he refuses to jettison his hope and the hope of all Jews.

[26 : 30] He is before this court accused before Roman authorities and to them he says, true Christian faith is a faith that consists in hope and that is true Jewish faith.

And Paul, friends, Paul's point applies to us. You see, we Christians are people of hope. We cling to hope. Hope is the heart of all we are and all we proclaim.

Our gospel is a gospel of hope. When I bury people here at Holy Trinity, I bury them in hope. And they often will smile while they die because they know that Christian faith is a faith of hope and that there is a future that waits for them.

Friends, it's true it's about morals as well. It's about acting rightly before God and others. It's about doing good. It's also about a personal and corporate relationship with God. It has religious ceremonies that it does, but if we empty the gospel of its very heart, if we make it morals and ceremonies, we take the guts out of it if we empty it of hope.

True Christianity hopes and preaches the age-long hope, the intensely Jewish and Christian hope of God's Messiah, and it proclaims him coming once to do away with sin, and it exalts in the future hope of him coming to put down evil and to judge and administer the world the world in righteousness and to establish his reign of universal justice and peace.

[28 : 12] True Christianity is about hope. Now I want to just take a look with you at Acts 26 verse 19 and following. So have a look at your Bibles again.

In these verses, Paul reaches the height of his explanation and he pushes this point about hope and talks about the hope of the Old Testament, talks about how this hope has been realized in Jesus and how that hope has driven him to proclaim the gospel to Gentiles.

And remember at this point Festus bursts in and can't contain himself. He says Paul's out of his mind, insane. I don't know about you, but that seems a little odd coming from a Roman and a Roman official.

I mean he is a Roman governor, a man who has undoubtedly watched gladiatorial shows in Rome, a man who's watched in amusement as men hack each other to death, a man who has undoubtedly ordered people tortured to extract truth, a man who's undoubtedly given his allegiance to his emperor as his God, and he's not a lunatic or out of his mind, but Paul is.

Paul, a man on a vigorous campaign to turn people to a true and living God, a man who's doing what he can to ensure that people live in pure relationship with each other and with God.

[29 : 37] And in a weird twist of logic, you call such a man a lunatic and excuse yourself. In these last two or three talks, we have seen Paul before, official after official after official, haven't we?

We know from historical sources that Felix, the previous governor, was one of the worst Roman officials of his era. He was cruel, full of lust and greed. He had no moral scruples, but Paul wasn't at all afraid of him.

He spoke to him about, do you remember, righteousness, self-control and future judgment. In other words, he probably rebuked him for his sins and called him to repent and believe in Jesus.

And this, tonight, we have seen him before Agrippa and his court officials. And again, he's made no attempt, has he, to ingratiate himself with the authorities, except for that little preamble at the beginning where he does what is commonly accepted practice.

You see, what he wants is the king's salvation, not his favour. And so he didn't stop with the story of his own salvation, he pressed on and explained the gospel and challenged the king about his own salvation.

[30 : 49] It was, in some sense, a crazy thing to do. And Festus knew it and he told him it. But Paul knew otherwise. Paul knew that this message of hope and a crucified saviour was in fact sober truth.

Now, two weeks, do you remember I told you about being a fool for Christ? Well, a couple of talks ago? I want to challenge you again along similar lines as a way of wrapping up tonight. Paul is a model for us.

We need to be people who are thoroughly convinced of the sober truth of the gospel. To be thoroughly convinced, we need to listen and weigh things up.

Then we need to allow ourselves to be grasped by these truths. And so we need to be ready to speak foolish what look to be foolish truths before the world, no matter what they think of us and no matter what they do to us.

God's purpose between the coming of his son for the first time and the second time is that we witness concerning him. That's what we learnt in the very first part of Acts.

[31 : 56] Acts chapter 1, 6 to 8. Listen to Peter speak about this in 1 Peter. If you're taking notes, jot down the reference. It's 1 Peter 3 verses 14 to 15.

But let me tell you the background. In the opening verses of 1 Peter, Peter speaks about Christians being born to a living hope through what?

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead. At the end of chapter 1, he speaks about Christians having a hope and faith in God.

But listen to him then go on to give advice to his fellow Christians in difficult times. In 1 Peter 3, 14 to 15. Listen to and listen and have Paul's encounter as the background.

He says, But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats, don't be frightened. But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord.

[32 : 57] Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

Friends, be people of hope. And always be prepared to give an answer to everyone concerning the hope you have. But do it gently and respectfully.

And do it with a life of godliness backing it up. But do it. let's pray. Father, in our hearts, please help us revere Christ as Lord.

Cause us to be always prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give a reason for the hope we have. Help us to do it rightly with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience so that those who speak maliciously against our good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

Help us to speak with a life of godliness backing our words. But beyond all else, Father, please help us in our world full of doubt to declare this great hope guaranteed by the Lord Jesus Christ by his death and resurrection and ascension.

[34 : 32] please help us to do it, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.