

Fearless Witness

Devotional Reading: Philippians 3:1-14
Background Scripture: Acts 26:1-11

Acts 26:1-11

¹ Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself.”

So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: ² “King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense 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.

Key Text

Now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. —Acts 26:6

Hope in the Lord

Unit I: Experiencing Hope

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize Paul's actions (as Saul) before his conversion.
2. Explain why Paul characterized the Pharisees as a "sect."
3. Identify the most important "takeaway" from the lesson to practice personally.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. The Rules of Debate
- B. Lesson Context

I. Paul Begins His Defense (Acts 26:1-8)

- A. What Agrippa Knew (vv. 1-3)
- B. What the Jews Knew (vv. 4-5)
- C. What the Accusation Was (vv. 6-8)

II. Paul Summarizes His Error (Acts 26:9-11)

- A. Opposed the Name (v. 9)
- B. Persecuted Christians (vv. 10-11)

Tact—The Lost Art?

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Conclusion

- A. Greatest Shame, Greatest Strength
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. The Rules of Debate

The rules of debate team were simple: one team defended a stated proposition while the other team opposed it. The rules prevented either side from changing an argument or modifying a position. A team could bring more evidence to support a position, but an unsupported argument was not to deter the debaters. By pointing out the other side's weaknesses, a team could put points on the board and hope to sway the judge's decision in its favor. It was unthinkable for a team to admit that its perspective had changed because the other team had a stronger argument! Ultimately, debate team was not about which side was "right"; rather, it was about debating skills as they contributed to winning or losing.

We often see the same focus in today's debates, which frequently come in the form of point-counterpoint sound bites on the evening news. If such "debates" ever change the mind of someone prominent, that person is dismissed as having "flip-flopped." Yet it should not be disqualifying to admit when we have changed our minds based on changed awareness of facts. If anything, the person who has shifted away from a certain viewpoint is demonstrating an openness to new information. The apostle Paul was such a person.

B. Lesson Context

The book of Acts relates one of the most significant mindset changes made by an individual throughout history. That change involved a man named Saul, who was a deadly enemy of Christianity at first (Acts 7:60b–8:3). But after an encounter with the risen Lord, Saul became Christianity's chief proponent. The specifics of how the change came about are recorded in Acts 9:1-19; 22:3-21; and 26:12-18. Today's lesson is the preface to the third of these accounts.

Saul was converted to Christianity in about AD 34. He subsequently traveled around the Mediterranean world on three missionary journeys, as recounted in Acts 12:25–14:28; 15:36–18:22; and 18:23–21:9. Perhaps desiring to leave his old identity in the past, Saul became known as Paul early in

these journeys (13:9). Shortly after the third journey ended in Caesarea Maritima, Paul traveled down to Jerusalem. There he was sighted by enemies who incited a riot to silence him (21:17-29). Paul's subsequent arrest undoubtedly saved his life (21:30-36). The year was probably AD 58.

After another riot or near-riot, Paul used his Roman citizenship to avoid being flogged (Acts 22:22-29). An inquest and a murder plot ensued (22:30-23:22), so Paul was transferred under heavy guard to Caesarea Maritima—about 75 miles road distance from Jerusalem—for trial under Governor Felix (23:23-24:26). That trial was inconclusive, and Paul was held in prison for two years until Governor Festus replaced Felix (24:27).

That change in leadership resulted in another trial (Acts 25:1-9), Paul's appeal to Caesar (25:10-12), high-level consultation (25:13-22), and appearance before King Agrippa II (25:23-27). That's the immediate backdrop to today's lesson; the year was about AD 60.

I. Paul Begins His Defense

(Acts 26:1-8)

A. What Agrippa Knew (vv. 1-3)

1. Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense:

Agrippa is short for Herod Agrippa II, the last of the line of Herodian kings. They ruled Judea as the clients of Rome. Paul had reason to fear this king: his father, Herod Agrippa I, had arrested and killed the apostle James (Acts 12:2).

But Paul was no novice at interacting with authorities. By this time, his 26 years as Christianity's chief proponent had made him a seasoned debater (examples: Acts 9:29; 13:45; 17:1-5, 16-34; 18:4-6; 19:8-10). Thus he was practiced in the habits of defending his actions, counteracting personal attacks, and dividing his opposition (23:6-10).

Paul's case was difficult for civic authorities to grapple with, somewhat like the case of Jesus was 30 years earlier. The authorities were primarily interested in maintaining law and order. But

how was order to be maintained when it involved bodily harm due to issues of personal religious belief and practice? Should the authorities insert themselves into such disputes, or should they leave it up to the Jews and their own religious authorities to sort things out (compare John 18:31; Acts 18:14-17; 25:18-21)?

Paul was well aware of this point of tension, and he used his Roman citizenship as leverage in his defense on at least two occasions (Acts 16:37-38; 22:23-23:30). We also see a personal characteristic of Paul at this point as he gestures with his *hand* in some way to open his defense (compare 13:16; 21:4).

What Do You Think?

Do Christians need to wait for an authority to give permission to talk about our faith? Why or why not?

Digging Deeper

What attitude(s) might make others curious to hear what you have to say, whether or not you have "permission" to speak?

2. "King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews,

Exhibiting deference to a judge is wise, and Paul indicates that he is *fortunate* to do so. His defense will comprehensively address *all the accusations of the Jews*. Those charges to this point in the narrative are that Paul has (1) been causing divisions among the Jews and (2) desecrated the temple (Acts 24:5-6). More accusations will be mentioned below.

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.

Paul acknowledges Agrippa's familiarity with Jewish matters, as Paul does again in Acts 26:26. Herod's family was outwardly Jewish. They made a point of following aspects of the Law of Moses. But it was equally obvious they were more interested in being loyal to Rome.

Even so, Paul showed him respect and asked politely to be heard. Paul probably knew that Agrippa's marriage to that man's own sister was not lawful. That sister, Bernice, is mentioned in Acts 25:13, 23; 26:30; therefore, she was present to hear Paul. Years earlier, Herod Antipas had had John the Baptist beheaded, at the instigation of his wife Herodias, because of John's declaration of the immoral nature of their marriage (Matthew 14:1-12). Paul does not travel down this same road!

What Do You Think?

What can be learned from Paul's defense of himself about the importance of being able to give a clear explanation of one's faith?

Digging Deeper

What opportunities do you have to practice communicating your faith with respect and humility?

B. What the Jews Knew (vv. 4-5)

4-5. "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. 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."

Paul's *way* of life in being brought up as a Jewish boy was beyond reproach. A detailed account of that upbringing is found in Philippians 3:5-6. By mentioning his upbringing in Jerusalem, Paul noted his previous status as an "insider." He had been zealous for his faith (Galatians 1:14). Although born in Tarsus in Cilicia, Paul was "brought up in [Jerusalem and] studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors" (Acts 22:3). Furthermore, Paul described himself as a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee (23:6).

The word translated *sect* is something of a chameleon, able to "change color" depending on the context. The word in the original language appears nine times in the New Testament, and it may take on a positive, neutral, or negative over-

tone in its various possible meanings of "faction," "sect," "school," or "heresy." Along these lines, the first-century Jewish historian Josephus mentions five branches of Judaism of his day: Pharisees (right-wing formalists), Sadducees (left-wing aristocrats), Essenes (ultra-right-wing purists), Zealots (militants), and Herodians (supporters of the Herods).

What Do You Think?

What are some examples of hopes and dreams your ancestors passed on to you?

Digging Deeper

How can you pass along your hope and faith to future generations?

C. What the Accusation Was (vv. 6-8)

6-7. "And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. 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."

What Paul is referring to in his three uses of the word *hope* in these two verses is found in Acts 23:6-8; 24:15: *What God has promised* is the resurrection of the dead. The *ancestors* are the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. According to Hebrews 11:10, 13, their faith in things far off was an example of faith. Resurrection was viewed as a reward that Jews were seeking, which is why they gave such devoted service to God *day and night* (Hebrews 11:35). Since what Paul is being accused of by *these Jews* is part of Jewish belief, there is no wrongdoing—at least from the viewpoint of the Pharisees' doctrine (Acts 23:8). What drew the ire of the Pharisees is Paul's claim that the resurrection of Jesus is the basis of the future resurrection of people (1 Corinthians 15).

8. "Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?"

This rhetorical question binds together even tighter the "hope" of the previous two verses with belief in resurrection. Again, the basis of Paul's

claim is the fact that the resurrection of Jesus anticipates and guarantees our own (compare Acts 25:19). In this light, Paul could mean, “Since you, King Agrippa, accept that God *raises the dead*, why is it so strange that God started with Jesus?” Or perhaps Paul is still referring to a belief in the general resurrection. In any case, Paul is seeking common ground with his audience, which is an important strategy when trying to persuade.

What Do You Think?

How does your hope in the resurrection help you face the future with optimism and peace?

Digging Deeper

How could you respond to someone who finds it difficult to believe in the resurrection of the dead?

II. Paul Summarizes His Error

(Acts 26:9-11)

A. Opposed the Name (v. 9)

9. “I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

The designation *Jesus of Nazareth* occurs more than a dozen times in the New Testament. Indeed, Jesus identified himself this way to Paul (as Saul) on the road to Damascus (Acts 22:8). People who lived in ancient times did not have last names, so they had to be identified in other ways, particularly if a person’s name was common. The name *Jesus* was fairly common, being an adaptation of the Old Testament name Joshua, meaning “save”—thus the need to use other methods to distinguish one person from another who had the same name (compare Matthew 27:56; John 14:22). The designator used for Jesus was a fulfillment of prophecy (Matthew 2:23).

Designators can be used to cast something or someone in a positive or negative light. In the case of Jesus, the designator “of Nazareth” was probably used by opponents in a negative, dismissive sense, given the poor reputation of that town (compare John 1:46; 19:19; Acts 6:14). We might also propose that believers embraced the designator

as a term of honor and devotion (3:6; 4:10). There’s also the use of this designator by a third category of people: those who think they’re on Jesus’ side, but are not (Luke 21:8).

We may also see a negative use of the name of the town of Nazareth applied to Christians in general in Acts 24:5. There, Paul’s opponents label him as “a ringleader of the Nazarene sect.” Believers, however, seemed to have preferred to be known as “Christians” (Acts 11:26) or “the Way” (9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:22).

B. Persecuted Christians (vv. 10-11)

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.

There is a subtle connection between this verse and the one just before it that we should not miss. In the previous verse, Paul spoke of having done “all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth”; that is what he is referring to when he admits the actions we see in the verse before us. To persecute or neglect Jesus’ followers is to persecute or neglect Jesus personally (compare Matthew 25:45; Acts 22:7-8; 26:14-15).

Prior to his experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9), Paul (as Saul) was eager to defend the Jewish faith against the supposed threat of Christians (7:60b–8:3). The arrest and crucifixion of Jesus had been an attempt to protect vested interests (see especially John 11:48). Additionally, a pagan attempt to maintain a *status quo* is seen Acts 19:23-41. Human nature seems rather predictable when vested interests are threatened!

Paul’s persecution of Christians was so notorious that his infamous reputation had spread at least as far as Damascus (Acts 9:13-14; compare 11:19), a road distance of some 225 miles from Jerusalem. Earlier, Paul had publicly admitted his culpability in the stoning death of Stephen (22:19-20; compare 7:54-60).

The phrase *I cast my vote against them* would seem to imply that Paul (as Saul) possessed some measure of authority concerning punishments meted out, even though he was “young” (Acts

7:58). On the other hand, this phrase could be a rhetorical device to indicate Paul's sense of responsibility in intending to highlight his role. In either case, the phrase *on the authority of the chief priests* lines up with Acts 9:1-2 in leaving no doubt that Paul had been authorized to stamp out this new belief system.

Tact—The Lost Art?

A dictionary definition of the word *tact* is “the ability to do or say things without offending or upsetting other people.” This ability seems to be something of a lost art today. This seems particularly true of posts on social media.

Influencing or correcting others is tricky, particularly regarding those who have more power and authority than we do. We want to speak the facts truthfully but do so in a way that gains us a hearing. The axiom “It’s not what you say, but how you say it” applies, although the word *just* should be added before the word *what*.

Paul’s interaction with King Agrippa illustrates this. Paul waited for permission to speak rather than interrupting. He acknowledged the king’s authority and knowledge of Jewish customs. Paul spoke with humility, admitting his own mistakes.

How might you apply this example in your life?
—A. W.

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.

To his horror, Paul had been harming people who were in the right. He was so threatening that many could not believe his change of heart at first (Acts 9:26). Paul carried the weight of this sin for the rest of his days (1 Corinthians 15:9).

How to Say It

Caesarea Maritima	Sess-uh-ree-uh Mar-uh-tee-muh.
Gamaliel	Guh-may-lih-ul or Guh-may-lee-al.
Herodians	Heh-roe-dee-unz.

This admission reveals the extent of the Jewish leaders’ plan to root out Christians; to be *punished* in synagogues was a continuing fulfillment of what Jesus predicted in Matthew 10:17. For Christians to attend *synagogue* shows they still considered themselves Jewish, even while accepting Jesus as Messiah.

The author does not clarify the meaning of *blaspheme* as used here. But examining the Greek word’s approximately 35 uses in the New Testament, we get the idea that it is equivalent to our modern word *slander*. Such speech results in the slandered person being reviled or defamed. Forcing a Christian to deny Christ was undoubtedly one of the goals of the persecution campaign of Paul (as Saul).

We may think that Paul had an odd way of defending himself before King Agrippa! What good did it do to admit to the bloody and oppressive details of his former way of life? But this method of beginning his defense at trial served an important purpose—a purpose Paul had two years to perfect (Acts 24:27). That purpose seems to have been to convince Herod Agrippa that a man who would admit doing such horrible things wouldn’t be lying about anything else.

As Agrippa listened to Paul, one cannot help but imagine that the testimony brought up memories of the persecution of Christians conducted by his father, King Herod Agrippa I, about 16 years prior (Acts 12:1-4). The son knew all too well the blood on his father’s hands. And now here was someone by the name of Paul admitting to doing much the same thing!

This fact introduced complications. If it had been OK for his father to do such things, was it not permissible for Paul to have done so as well, as long as he didn’t violate Roman law (compare John 18:31)? But more importantly, what could have accounted for such a massive change of heart—a change so profound that Paul’s men who were once colleagues were now his deadly enemies? Paul hinted at the answer in Acts 26:8 (see comments on which above). He explains the reason in the text that follows the passage of today’s lesson: Paul’s intent is to vindicate himself and evangelize (Acts 26:28-29).

On Being an Extremist

A radio commentator was heard to remark that politics in the democracy of his country was fought “between the 40-yard lines.” By this, he was using imagery from American football to illustrate the point that extremists usually don’t win elections and don’t have much influence. The area between the 40-yard lines is midfield. It is the area of “the moderates.” To engage in the political struggle in this area is to make modest, incremental changes, not drastic ones. The majority of voters usually fear extremists and won’t elect them.

Indeed, history witnesses to the failure of many extremists (examples: Acts 5:36-37). Some extremists succeed for a while as they do a great deal of harm; that was Saul before he became Paul. But some extremists do a massive amount of good; that was the renamed and recommissioned Paul.

The currents of history sometimes work against change (Amos 5:13). But sometimes they demand it (1 Chronicles 12:23, 32). When such times come, every Christian must be ready to do his or her part, whether big (as in Esther 4:14) or small (consider Jason in Acts 17:7). How are you preparing for your part? And how will you know that the timing is right in that regard? —R. L. N.

Conclusion

A. Greatest Shame, Greatest Strength

All believers who have turned to God were once God’s enemies (Romans 5:10). This means having opposed what God was doing. God desires to make peace, find reconciliation, and move forward in life’s newness. Unlike participating on the debate team mentioned earlier, we should seek reconciliation rather than victory. And we don’t have to look very hard to find it—it’s right there in the Bible. See Romans 5:11; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; Ephesians 2:14-22; and Colossians 1:19-23. Paul, the onetime deadly enemy of the church, wrote all those texts on reconciliation.

Though Paul was ashamed of his past behavior, this did not hinder his ministry. One result was a



Visual for Lessons 4 & 5. Ask learners to consider how faith in Christ anchored Paul during his trial and how that same faith anchors us.

certain set of sad ironies in that ministry. He who had had blindness inflicted upon him (Acts 9:8-9) found it necessary to inflict it on another in turn (13:11). He who beat others (22:19) was in turn beaten (16:22). He who imprisoned others (8:3) was himself imprisoned—more than once (16:23; etc.). He who approved the death of others (8:1) was eventually executed for that same faith.

Through it all, he followed the call of God to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. In what ways can you follow in Paul’s footsteps?

What Do You Think?

When have you acted out of deep conviction only to repent of your deeds later?

Digging Deeper

What did you learn from the experience that helps you avoid a repeat offense?

B. Prayer

Father in Heaven, we were once your enemies, but you sent Jesus to die for our sins. Make us skillful in communicating your reconciliation to others. Make us eager to make disciples rather than to win arguments. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

If God is for us, no one can stand against us!

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Read the following statements to the group. Ask learners to stand (or raise hands) for each one that is true of them.

- 1—I have been wrongly accused of a crime.
- 2—I'm a different person than I was 20 years ago.
- 3—Specific difficulties have prepared me for life now.
- 4—One big event changed my life.

Lead a short discussion of what causes a person to consider a certain event as a defining moment. (Caution: learners may have lots of stories to tell; don't let this drag out.)

Lead to the Bible study by saying, "When forced to defend himself, the apostle Paul referred to a singular event that changed the direction of his life. Let's see how and why."

Into the Word

Have two learners alternate in reading aloud the verses of today's text. Then form learners into three small groups of two or three to describe the life and reign of either Festus, Felix, or Agrippa, one official to be studied per group. (Larger classes can form more groups and give duplicate assignments.) Provide Bible-study resources in hard copy and/or links to online tools as necessary.

After several minutes, have a spokesperson from each group present discoveries for whole-class discussion. To enhance clarity, research in advance a timeline on each official's time in office. Draw a blank timeline on the board, and fill it in from your research as groups present their discoveries.

Next, distribute to the same groups a handout (you prepare) titled *Paul's Life, Paul's Defense*. Have the following questions on the handout:

- 1—How is Paul's use of the word *sect* in Acts 26:5 similar to and/or different from the way that word is commonly used today?
- 2—What three words would you pick to describe Paul's life while he was still called Saul, considering also Acts 7:58–8:3; 22:2–5?
- 3—Why did Paul begin his defense as he did?

Depending on the time available, you can either assign all questions to all groups or assign just one question to each group. Compare and contrast conclusions in the ensuing whole-class discussion.

Option. If you wish to consider the entirety of Paul's defense in Acts 26, distribute copies of the "A Defense and a Testimony" exercise from the activity page, which you can download, to be completed in the same small groups. During or after presentations of conclusions in whole-class discussion, write the following questions on the board:

- 1—How can a defense be a testimony?
- 2—Why was Paul's testimony more important to him than his defense?

Jot responses on the board as they are voiced.

Into Life

Give each of your groups one of the following statements. Challenge them to use today's text to help them construct a response to the statement assigned.

- 1—*Dealing with the past.* "I know you say the church is for those who need to be forgiven, not those who already have their act together. But you don't know all the sordid details about my past."
- 2—*Trying to testify.* "I try to tell my friends about Jesus, but I feel if they knew some of my secrets, they'd never believe in him. My failures are keeping me from sharing the gospel."
- 3—*Intimidated by authority.* "My boss is a good enough man, but he's not a Christian. I feel I can't talk to him about faith in Jesus. It's like he holds my future in his hands, and I can't risk losing my job."

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "My Key Takeaway" exercise from the activity page. Have learners complete it individually in a minute or less. Assure learners in advance that you will not put anyone on the spot to share with the entire class, nor will you collect the completed exercise.

After the minute is up, allow the opportunity for volunteers to share their takeaways.