

Derek French:

In our studies in the book of Acts, we've come to the occasion when Paul was given the opportunity to address King Agrippa as well as the Roman governor Festus and other important commanders and officials.

You may recall, Paul had been arrested and falsely accused of wrong doing by the Jews, when all he'd done was to speak about Jesus and his resurrection. As things proceeded Paul, as a Roman citizen, had appealed to Caesar. In other words he wanted to be sent to Rome to stand before Caesar Augustus to have his case tried there. Festus knew he was an innocent man and couldn't think of any legitimate charges against Paul to present to Caesar, so he invited King Agrippa to hear Paul to see if he could suggest what to say to Caesar.

In today's programme we're going to consider Paul's own defence before these powerful men and concentrate on the first half of what he said.

We're in Acts chapter 26 and we'll be looking at verses 4 to 15, where Paul describes his life before he became a Christian believer. We've the help of Gerard and Phillippa Chrispin again, and Phillippa will read those verses for us and then Gerard will explain them. As Phillippa begins, she's reading Paul's opening words.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*“My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee. And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?”*

*“Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.*

*“While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ So I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.’”*

Gerard Chrispin:

Paul moves on from his introduction. He says that all his accusers know he is totally Jewish. Born a Jew with a traditional Jewish upbringing in Jerusalem, he became a strict Pharisee. Without detailing his Jewish credentials now to the Gentile audience, he stresses he is being judged for the promise made by God to our fathers. That promise concerns the resurrection from the dead. Every tribe of Israel wants to attain that, he says. They constantly serve God in trying to succeed. He then tells Agrippa that his resurrection-based hope has caused the Jews to accuse him. He then addresses a personal question to Agrippa. Perhaps others hearing it will apply it to themselves. ‘Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?’

Paul now will explain why the traditional Jewish view that God raises the dead, insisted on by Pharisees, has become so real and vital to him through the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul's Jewishness caused him to work for and under the authority of the chief priests on a specific and very demanding task. The other side of the same pro-Jewish coin was that Paul despised and hated anything to do with Jesus Christ of Nazareth, including his followers. Today we call them Christians but Paul rightly called them ‘saints’.

Saints are not remote figures of art in cathedral stained glass windows. Saint comes from the word meaning ‘holy’. It means someone set apart. Some dictionary definitions of ‘saint’ ignore the original meaning and are focussed on non-biblical church jargon and thinking. When a sinner turns away from his wrong-doing, and turns to the Lord Jesus Christ, he is separating himself from sin and selfishness and separating himself to trusting and following Jesus as his personal lord and master. He is set apart for Christ. He builds on that each day by seeking to grow in holiness as he spends time with God in prayer and in reading and applying the Bible to his life. It is people like that whom Paul had in mind when he called those early Christian disciples ‘saints’.

But Paul's hatred for Christ's disciples really was cruel. In Jerusalem he had them jailed. He voted for their execution in Jewish sentencing decisions. He punished them often in every synagogue, forcing them to blaspheme. Anyone whom the Jews regarded as a blasphemer would be stoned to death, as was Steven. Every faithful Christian rightly confessing that Jesus is God faced that punishment for blasphemy. If a believer renounced his faith in Christ in a moment of weakness under pressure, and so denied Jesus as God incarnate, he would thereby be made to blaspheme.

Paul's opposition to lovers of Christ made him enraged against them. Worldwide today many disciples of Jesus face a similar rage from persecutors who follow a religion which encourages hating others. Others oppose Christians rather than accept the truth that as guilty sinners before a holy God they must repent and receive Christ to be forgiven.

Agrippa and the audience now learn that under that bright midday sun, as the enraged persecutor travelled for the chief priests to Damascus to cruelly persecute Christians, Jesus Christ dramatically stopped him in his tracks. The one who is the light of the world outshone the sun at its brightest, causing everyone to fall involuntarily to the ground. As Paul relays his amazing experience to Agrippa, he tells of the voice addressing him personally in Hebrew by his old name, 'Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

Paul was bewildered. After his ruthless attempts to eliminate Christians, he experienced the acute jabs of conscience, driving him even further into guilt and despair, just as an ox is driven forward by the farmer jabbing it with a pointed ox goad. It is never far away from Paul's mind and memory that he held the coats of the vicious mob who stoned godly and innocent Stephen to death. He sensed that the voice was God's, but confused and shocked he blurted out, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord replied, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.'

Paul learned that in persecuting Christians by hounding and imprisoning them and having them killed, he has been persecuting Jesus. Paul was surely staggered to learn that Jesus was so close and lovingly caring to those who trust and know him.

But more is to come – much more.

Derek French:

Paul had been amazingly honest as he shared with King Agrippa how he'd responded to Jesus. We have to say sadly, in his early years, he hated Jesus and anyone linked with him. And further, his intention was to do all such believers as much damage as he could. Some he arrested, others were thrown in prison and some were even killed because of their faith in and commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ.

We know from other parts of the Bible that Paul came to be very ashamed of his treatment of the Lord and his followers, but as he spoke with these important men in Caesarea, he didn't attempt to cover up what he'd done, but openly admits it all. In other words, Paul was unequivocally admitting he had been dreadfully wrong in how he'd behaved, and that he was in no uncertain terms a sinful man in the eyes of almighty God. He knew he was deserving of God's fiercest condemnation.

Now, that's quite something to do! But Paul was, as we've said, amazingly honest about himself. Instead of being filled with self-righteousness and pride, Paul humbly admits his total unworthiness of any of God's blessings. In his letter to the Ephesian believers he actually said, 'I am less than the least of all God's people.' And in his first letter to Timothy he described himself as, 'the worst of sinners'.

We have to say that this is one of the hardest things for a human being to admit, but it is essential if we are going to become one of God's children. An awareness of our rebellion against and disobedience to the Lord God of heaven is a must if anyone is to become a Christian believer. This is necessary as the good news about Jesus is that he saves those who know their sinfulness and turn to him for pardon and salvation.

In our sharing of the gospel of Christ we must help our hearers to see how God considers them. To quote Paul again from Romans 3 verse 23, 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.' It is so important that we don't pretend that people's sinfulness doesn't matter, because it's of profound significance to God.

Obviously, we must not do so in a proud or arrogant way that leaves our listener thinking we are better than they are, but like Paul, humbly admitting our own guilt and therefore our own need of a saviour too.

Returning to Paul, as he shared these matters with those present that day, he was actually reminding them that all men are sinners, just as he was. He went on to tell them how, as he journeyed to Damascus to arrest more followers of Christ, the risen Lord Jesus met with him and as a result, his entire life was turned around, as Jesus was wonderfully merciful to him.