

Derek French:

Last time, we left Paul in Rome awaiting his trial, where he was under house arrest. He'd called the Jews to his lodgings and they set a date when they would come and hear what he had to say about following Jesus. Their desire to hear about Jesus was a good one, but what really mattered is how they responded to Jesus after they had heard about him.

We're in Acts chapter 28 and today we'll consider verses 23 to 29. We've the help of Gerard and Phillippa Chrispin again and Phillippa will read those verses for us, and then Gerard will explain them.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*'So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening. And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved. So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word: "The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers, saying,*

*'Go to this people and say:*

*"Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand;*

*And seeing you will see, and not perceive;*

*For the hearts of this people have grown dull.*

*Their ears are hard of hearing,*

*And their eyes they have closed,*

*Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears,*

*Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,*

*So that I should heal them."*

*"Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!" And when he had said these words, the Jews departed and had a great dispute among themselves.'*

Gerard Chrispin:

The day arrives on which Paul and the Jewish leaders residing in Rome meet again at Paul's custodial lodgings. Paul is a Jew with a heart to see fellow Israelites saved by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. He's also the apostle to the Gentiles with a special God-given burden: to reach out with the gospel far beyond his Jewish circles.

To witness to the Jews, he starts where the Jews are. His basis of explaining and testifying about the Kingdom of God and how it relates and points to Jesus Christ is based fairly and squarely on the Law and the Prophets. Those words describe what today we know as the Old Testament. All the scriptures that the Jews and Paul now discuss are found in the Old Testament as we have it now, though placed in a different order.

Paul's patience and endurance for the sake of the gospel is remarkable. He speaks with them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets from morning till evening. All day long he seeks to get across the message to them of forgiveness of sins through the saviour. He mirrors the concern of his Lord, of whom Isaiah wrote, To Israel he says, 'All day long I have stretched out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.'

Paul's main task is still that given to him by the Lord Jesus Christ on the Damascus road. The most important thing about his meeting the glorious, risen Lord there is that it led to his conversion to Christ. His faith is in the One who died for him and who rose again, turning his hell into heaven, his name from Saul to Paul, and changed the whole direction of his life.

The second most important thing resulting from his meeting Jesus is that the former arch-enemy of Christianity, Saul of Tarsus, has become Paul the apostle. As such, he has God's authority to personally pen the Word of God, as the Holy Spirit leads him. We still read and submit to this teaching from God today.

After conversion, God gives him the unique signs of the apostle. These unique gifts distinguish him as a man under God's authority, with God's authority and through whom God's authority is channelled to others in order to build the living stones of born-again sinners into the church of God.

Paul has also become a compelling evangelist for Jesus and a gifted teacher of God's truth with a great heart for people. Jesus' promise to Paul, as shared with King Agrippa, is indeed happening. 'So I said, "Who are you, Lord?" and he said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand on your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose – to make you a minister and a witness, both of the things which you have seen, and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. I will deliver you from the Jewish people as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance amongst those who are sanctified by faith in me."

'Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles that they should repent, turn to God and do works befitting repentance.'

But Paul is a persuader. He does not stand high on his platform of apostleship and talk down to his hearers. He is capable of preaching to large numbers at one time, when he will need that ability to capture attention, which the preacher has when speaking with God's authority and with God's help. However now, his all day witness to Christ is not like that. We read that he is persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets. He knows that God saves people, as the Holy Spirit performs his work to convict the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgement.

Paul seeks to get a listening mind by persuasion so that the Holy Spirit can work on the truth shared and bring the hearer through conviction of sin to conversion to Christ.

The criticism of Paul by the hostile mob in Ephesus was, 'Paul has persuaded and turned away many people, saying that they are not gods, which are made with hands.' Agrippa complained to Paul, 'You almost persuade me to become a Christian!' Paul tells the Corinthians, 'Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men.'

How persuasive are Christians today? How concerned are we to try to persuade? Is our growing understanding of the Bible enough to enable us to persuade others, God helping us? We should do more than simply present the gospel, we must seek to persuade people to turn to Christ now, because now is the accepted time. 'Behold, now is the day of salvation.'

Whenever the gospel is preached, there are two main responses. We see it here again. 'And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken and some disbelieved.' There are only two basic classifications of humanity that apply both now and throughout eternity. Either we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ or we do not. Either we are persuaded that Jesus is God incarnate, who lived a perfect and righteous life, died on the cross in our place for our sins and to take our punishment, and rose again to be our Lord and Saviour, or we do not believe that.

We are either heaven-bound or we are hell-bound. Either we are on the narrow way leading to eternal life or we are on the broad way going to everlasting destruction. Either we are saved and have eternal life or we are lost and face eternal wrath. Which are you?

God leads honest seekers to find him, but make no mistake that you are lost until you become saved. Verse 24 reminds us that we are either persuaded believers or perishing unbelievers. It should move believers to share the wonderful gospel of forgiveness with as many as possible, and spur unbelievers into urgently repenting for their sins and receiving Christ.

Paul's Jewish hearers disagree among themselves as to whether to believe the Old Testament-based New Testament gospel of sins forgiven, peace with God and a home in heaven. Paul has shared and discussed it with them. He has used all the persuasion he can muster to help them come to Christ.

There is a time to be very frank and make things very clear for the good of the hearers. There is no merit in a doctor holding back an unfavourable diagnosis of an illness that can be cured by urgent and radical action, just because he does not want to upset his patient. Paul believes the time has come to make these Jewish hearers know that the issue here and now is eternal life or eternal death. He quotes from the Old Testament prophet of redemption, Isaiah. He confirms that it is not Isaiah but God's Holy Spirit who spoke through him to the Jewish forefathers. The Lord told Isaiah that although he must go to the people and give them God's word, they would be deaf, blind and dull of heart towards that message of repentance and faith. Otherwise they would see with spiritually opened eyes, hear with ears open to hear the voice of God in their souls, and understand through having hearts open to God and his word. Then they would turn to God and he would heal them of their deadly disease of unbelief, rebellion, hard heartedness and sin.

The Jews perpetual, up and down relationship with God is reflected here by Paul's quoting their own prophet. But now it is far worse! They have now also seen, observed, heard, rejected and crucified the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God and anointed Messiah. They have ignored or rejected the glorious fact that he rose from the dead. They will not bend the knee and bow the heart to him as Lord. Some individual Jews, like some individual Gentiles, have repented and trusted Jesus, but the Jews know and can say that Jesus is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and we hid, as it were, our faces from him. He was despised and we did not esteem him. They will not recognise or trust him.

Paul will continue to witness to Jews, but his prime, God-given burden now is to reach gentiles. That is why God has placed him in Rome rather than in Jerusalem. He now tells his fellow Jews, 'Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it.' Solemn words for Jews, good news for Gentiles.

Derek French:

Paul's eagerness to tell others about the Lord Jesus never diminished over the years, and he was as keen to share this good news at the end of his ministry as he was at the beginning.

The challenge for us is simply this – do we share the same burden? If you're a pastor or church leader, then that passion to point lost men and women and boys and girls to Jesus should be the same. Our responsibility is to faithfully tell our world what Christ has done for sinners and by God's grace seek to persuade all to believe.