

"So I Gladly Make My Defense!"
1 Cor. 15:1-19; Acts 23:25 - 26:32 (Reading: Acts 24)

Oct 18 2009
HPC Evening

[Intro]

Just imagine you're in some sort of legal trouble. Someone takes you to court. What do you do? The first thing is to defend yourself to try to prove your innocence. If you can't do that on your own, you need to hire a lawyer. If the case is serious, then you'll have to pay a lot to find a famous lawyer, maybe someone who has defended O.J. Simpson!! This is normally a painful and draining process. If the local court proves you are guilty, you need to take the case to a higher court, or even the supreme court. The **goal** is to prove yourself innocent and get free. You may have to spend all your money, exhaust all your energy, give up everything just to keep yourself out of jail.

Tonight, as we quickly go through 4 chapters of Acts, we see Paul was in trouble. The Jews accused him and even attempted to murder him. He was put on trial again and again and again. Before the governors and before the king, he had to defend himself. Many times he was proved innocent, but he was still in jail for years. Finally he had to appeal before Caesar.

A huge difference between us and Paul is that Paul never, ever tried to get himself out of jail. In fact, he knew that he had to go through all these trials. He knew exactly what he was doing, as he said, "so I gladly make my defense." (24:10) Getting out of jail was not his goal. Proving himself innocent was not his goal. Paul's goal was to preach the gospel, to bring the resurrection hope to Jews and the Gentiles, to religious authorities, governors and even the king. Whatever the circumstances, this was Paul's ultimate goal. It seems he's saying, "Trial, or imprisonment, bring it on so I can make my defense, so I can preach the gospel."

Paul is so radical, so persistent, so determined to achieve his goal.

[pause]

These chapters are long so I'm not going to go through all the details. You can read them on your own, perhaps one or two chapters a day as your devotion.

Two things I'd like to talk about. Number one - the centrality of the resurrection to Paul's defense. Number two - how does Paul persist despite allegation and trial?

[Context]

Let's quickly skim through the passages to get an overall picture of Paul's situation.

Last week, Matt talked about the testimony Paul made to the crowd in Jerusalem. In ch. 23, Paul gave his second defence speech before the Sanhedrin (the high court and the supreme council in ancient Jerusalem). Then the Jews plotted to kill him. So the Roman commander took Paul to Caesarea - the military headquarter for Judea. In Caesarea, Paul was in jail for two years and during that time, he faced three trials before governors Felix, his successor Festus, and King Agrippa. Luke recorded all three trials from ch. 24-26, which is our focus for tonight.

Now, let's look at the first point - **the centrality of the resurrection to Paul's defense.**

Proclaiming the risen Jesus is the core of Paul's mission. During the week, as I was reading these chapters, I was amazed. As a prisoner Paul wasn't trying to prove his innocence. Actually the Roman authority did that for him! No, Paul used the opportunity to preach the gospel. During the trials, Paul didn't try to defend himself. He gave this resurrection testimony instead. It was the central point of his trial!!

From our first reading from 1 Corinthians 15, Paul makes it clear that Christ's resurrection keeps our preaching from being useless (1 Cor. 15:14), our faith from being futile (1 Cor. 15:17) and the believer from being pitied (1 Cor. 15:19). That's why Paul must continue to preach the message of resurrection every time he gets an opportunity to speak. And that's why he is on trial and must be judged for speaking about the hope of resurrection and its fulfillment in Christ.

What exactly did Paul say about the resurrection?

In 23:6, before the Sanhedrin, Paul says, "... *My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead.*"

In 24:14-16, at the trial before Felix, he says, "*However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.*"

Then, in 26:6-8, before King Agrippa, Paul says, "*And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers 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. O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?*" then at the end of his speech, vv. 22-23, "*But I have had God's help to this very day, and so 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 Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.*"

Again and again, Paul points out the **significance** of the resurrection. He's saying, "Your forefathers and the prophets talked about Israel's hope in the future. Now in Jesus' resurrection this hope is realized."

Jesus is the Way. In Jesus, the Scriptures have been fulfilled. Being the first to rise from the dead, Jesus is like the "first born" of a large family brought to new life (1 Cor. 15:20). Jesus' resurrection is the starting point where God's people has been fully restored. So now, all God's people, both Jews and Gentiles, can worship together. We can please and honour God together, and exalt the risen Christ together.

Jesus' resurrection also points to our final destiny. When Christ returns, he will raise the dead. All of the dead will be raised - both the righteous and the wicked (Acts 24:15). Jesus was raised physically from the dead, it was physical, ours will be as well. At the final judgement, everyone will be judged. There will be an eternal separation. For those who don't believe in Jesus, there is a hell where the resurrected will be tormented eternally. However, for those who have faith in Jesus, their resurrected bodies will be imperishable, glorious, and powerful (1 Cor. 15:42-44). And they will be with Christ forever.

The Pharisees hoped for the Messiah. They were waiting for the resurrection of the dead. However, they didn't realize that Jesus is the first to rise. The Messiah had come. Jesus is the Risen Lord.

How can you miss such an amazing message? What great hope! This is the central message Paul proclaimed over and over again. He endured many trials and danger in order to preach this wonderful truth.

[pause]

We often hear about the cross. On the cross, through Jesus' death, we are justified. Our sins are forgiven. So we are right with God.

But tonight, our stress is on the resurrection. Jesus died but He came back to life three days later. Jesus' resurrection, assures us that there is life beyond this earthly existence. Jesus' resurrection assures us that as His children, we will be with God forever. Life now is a preparation for the life to come. We have hope of something better than this. Jesus' resurrection means that life now will never be empty again. Things don't happen in our life for no purpose. Life is no longer pointless.

How can we respond to this message. The Jewish religious leaders refused to respond. So did the governors. So did the king. But what about you? Don't miss out on this great hope! Don't reject this eternal truth!

[pause]

The second point - **how does Paul persist despite allegation and trial?**

The short answer is: God's sovereignty and Paul's obedience.

It was according to God's sovereign plan that Paul testified. But Paul also had to obey God's call for his mission.

This part of Acts can be called Paul's passion narrative.

Jesus obeyed His Father's will. He went down to Jerusalem, died and was taken up to heaven. In this way, Jesus fulfilled God's promises in His work.

Paul too was determined to go to Jerusalem, and he knew he eventually must go to Rome. He followed Jesus' Great Commission. He carried His cross and was God's witness in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The trials before the Roman authorities fulfilled the tasks given by God. *"Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."* (9:15)

Paul willingly responded to God's call. In 19:21, after his ministry in Ephesus, *"Paul decided to go to Jerusalem ... 'After I have been there,' he said, 'I must visit Rome also.'"* The Holy Spirit warned Paul that prison and hardship would come, but he was determined to finish his race and complete the task the Lord had given him (21:22-23). The church in Ephesus pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem, but Paul was ready to die in Jerusalem in order to fulfill God's will.

After he testified before the Sanhedrin, the Lord again spoke to him, *"Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."* (23:11)

Three trials before the Roman authorities were framed by declarations of Paul's innocence.

Claudius Lysias: "... *there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment.*" (23:29)

Festus: "*I found he had done nothing deserving of death.*" (25:25)

Agrippa: "*This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.*" (26:32)

If Paul wanted to escape the suffering, I'm sure he could have many opportunities to get himself out of the jail. But as we see clearly through these verses, Paul's primary purpose wasn't to prove his innocence. He was on a mission. He took all opportunities to preach the truth of resurrection and bring the gospel of hope to "the gentiles and their kings".

As you probably have already seen, the opposition was persistent as well. The Jews wanted to kill him (23), they sent their high priest and lawyer to Caesarea to bring him their charges (24), they requested Festus to transfer Paul back to Jerusalem so on the way they could murder him. Paul knew all these, he knew that being a messenger for the gospel there is no easy ride.

[pause]

We are God's messenger too. Although it is hard to image we could be on trial for evangelism, but we still face persistent oppositions. Just look around and think about the situation here at this church, at your work place, at uni, or where you live. There are plenty of reasons that you can say to yourself "I want to move on", "I want to find a new church." "I want to get a new job." "I need to study at a better uni" or "I need to move to a nicer suburb". But, before you do that, can I ask you to do three things.

Firstly, ask God, "Where have you called me to serve?"

Then *secondly*, consider Paul as your example, ask yourself, "how am I obeying and persevering?"

Thirdly, just imagine that you're under the worst situations, ask yourself, "Can I still confidently say to myself - "So I gladly defend the God I believe"?"