



Session Twenty-Six

The Book of

Acts, Pt.10

Acts 24-26

This week's readings focus on the legal proceedings against Paul, first before Felix, then Festus, and finally Agrippa. In each case, Paul's defense consists largely of a recounting of parts of his story, which means that much of what you read here you have encountered before. Accordingly, questions this week are less about specifics of the narrative than about broader issues that they raise—issues which transcend the historical moment in question and are as important to followers of Jesus today as they were in Paul's time.

I urge you to read these 24-26 completely and then consider what follows below.

1) A reality faced by the church and followers of Jesus today is that people make decisions not to believe in God or to follow Jesus based less on Scriptural and theological reflection than on personal expediency. In other words, many (perhaps most) people who decide not to believe in Scripture or Jesus or God don't do so because they've made significant effort to understand them and made an informed decision. More often, they know very little about what Scripture actually says or what belief in a sovereign God or commitment to following Jesus as Lord actually means. Belief in a Supreme Being simply isn't convenient. It's a threat to beliefs and ways of living that, frankly, seem more useful. I urge you to reflect on how this may have been true—or perhaps still is true to one degree or another—in your own life. What did such decisions gain you? What did they cost you? How was your life different (if it was) when you didn't believe (or didn't believe as strongly) and now?

2) Agrippa points out (26:32) that had Paul not insisted on being sent to Rome to be tried before the Emperor—his right as a Roman citizen—he could've been set free. Paul was found innocent by lower courts—why, then, did he insist on being tried again by the highest court? The answer, of course, is that it wasn't about guilt or innocence but about Jesus' will that Paul go to Rome. What was true of Paul is—or should be—true of all followers of Jesus, which is to say that we should live ever-mindful of those times when decisions we make impact our participation in the playing-out of God's will.

I urge you to think about this relative to your own life. Be careful: I'm not saying that everything that happens to you is God's will. Nor am I saying that the playing-out of God's will is in any way dependent on you. What I'm saying is that we can choose to align ourselves with God's will as we understand it, or not—and both decisions have consequences.

3) Look at 26:8: *“Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?”* These are significant words not only for Paul's defense but, more broadly, for our understanding of what it means to call Jesus Christ Lord and Savior. Indeed, as we've discussed before, the historicity/Truth of the resurrection is central to the Christian faith—so central that I want us to spend time reflecting together on why this is so, beginning with the fact that no New Testament writer recounts the resurrection itself, only the empty tomb and, later, the resurrected Jesus. This suggests that important as the resurrection is even more important are the results of the resurrection, results that give meaning to so many of the bedrock convictions of the faith, including the Divinity of Christ, grace, atonement, redemption, destruction of the power of death and the reality of life everlasting, community, and individual identity. In anticipation of our conversation, I urge you to spend some time thinking about how each of these convictions is dependent upon the resurrection.

4) Festus tells Paul that too much learning is driving him—Paul—insane (26:24). This is a reminder of the vexed relationship between rational thought and faith. As one scholar has put it, “Today's society is cultivated by scientific sophistry, convinced that all claims to universal truth must be assessed by empirical investigation. The principal disposition toward anything religious...is one of deep suspicion of its intellectual integrity.” Yet Paul, in all his defenses of his ministry, seems one way or another to tell us that embracing the centrality of God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit to the Gospel requires a “reasonable yet radical leap of faith.” Is that a leap you've *really* made and, if so, what specifically did the leap involve for you? Would you have responded to this question differently before your time in this class?