

The True and Rational Gospel of the Risen Saviour

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[0 : 0 0] But before that, we're going to turn to the scriptures, and as I said, we're back in the Acts of the Apostles, and Paul Brennan has been leading us through these chapters. We're getting really quite near the end of this extraordinary book, and we're going to pick up the story of Paul making his defense, as he's now had to do several times, this time before King Agrippa, and we pick up, therefore, at verse 23 of Acts chapter 25.

You'll see there he'd been questioned already by Festus, and then Festus discusses the case with King Agrippa, who's with him, and Agrippa says, I'd like to hear this man myself, in verse 22.

So Festus says, well, tomorrow you will hear him. So, verse 23, on the next day, Agrippa and Brennan came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city.

Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. And Festus said, King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer.

But I find that he'd done nothing deserving death. But as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him.

[1 : 3 0] But I've nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore, I brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after we've examined him, I may have something to write.

For it seems to me unreasonable in sending a prisoner not to indicate the charges against him. So Agrippa said to Paul, you have permission to speak for yourself.

And Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense. I consider myself fortunate that it's before you, King Agrippa, I'm going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews.

Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently. My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews.

They've known for a long time. If they're willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion, I've lived as a Pharisee. And now, I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day.

[2 : 4 8] And for this hope, I'm accused by Jews, O King. Why is it not incredible to any? Any of you? I'm convinced that God raises the dead.

I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem.

I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.

And I punished them often in all the synagogues. And I tried to make them blaspheme. And in raging fury against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

In this connection, I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the high priests. At midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me.

[3 : 53] And when we'd fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.

And I said, who are you, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you or show to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles, to whom I'm sending you to open their eyes.

That is, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, and that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient. I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with repentance.

For this reason, the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. And to this day, I've had the help that comes from God.

[5 : 25] And so I stand here, testifying, both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass, that the Christ must suffer, and that by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.

As he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, you're out of your mind. Your great learning is driving you out of your mind.

But Paul said, I'm not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I'm speaking true and rational words. For the king knows about these things. And so to him I speak boldly, for I'm persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner.

King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe. Agrippa said to Paul, in a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?

Paul said, whether short or long, I would to God that not only you, but all who hear me this day might become such as I am, except for these chains. And the king rose, and the governor, and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them.

[6 : 47] When they withdrawn, they said to one another, this man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment. And Agrippa said to Festus, this man could have been let free if he had not appealed to Caesar.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well, you'll find it very helpful to have Acts 26 open in front of you as we think about this over the next few minutes, so please do turn that up in your Bibles, Acts 26.

Now, in these past few weeks, we've seen that this has been a pretty tough season for the Apostle Paul. lengthy imprisonments and trial after trial.

What is it that has sustained Paul this far? What is it that sustains Christians under the harshest of suffering and the most unjust of treatment?

Why keep going? Why persevere? Well, we see the answer in this chapter. And Luke is showing us absolute clarity on what is the heart of the gospel, what is the purpose of the gospel, what's the message of the gospel.

[8 : 12] And this moment is what the previous few chapters have been building towards. This is the climax of all the trial scenes we've seen over these past few weeks. And the way in which Luke introduces this little section gives us something of an indication of the magnitude of this moment.

We have the fanfare and the extravagance of Agrippa. There, in verse 23, on the next day, Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp. They ended the audience all with the military tribunes and prominent men of the city.

This was a big gathering. This was all the show and power that he could possibly muster. This was a big event. This was a big show trial.

Key military and civic leaders would have been there to hear Paul. And amazing, really, isn't it, that Paul, despite being a prisoner for so long, could draw such a crowd to hear the gospel.

Even after two years languishing in prison, he was able to garner this huge audience. It's amazing from a human perspective. But not so amazing when we remember, as we've seen again and again over these few chapters, we remember the Lord's sovereignty.

[9 : 31] He is sovereign over everything. His plans and purposes are behind all of what we read about here. And he is doing just what he promised to do. And this is what the previous chapters have been building towards.

And what we have here in this chapter is actually the longest speech of Paul's that we have recorded in the book of Acts. It's a defense not just of himself, but of the gospel message that he is willing to die for.

The risen Savior that he's willing to suffer for. And he's willing to do that because, verse 25 of chapter 26, he's willing to do it because he is speaking true and rational words.

Paul's gospel is true and rational. And therefore, he is willing to defend it and his Savior to the very end.

And his gospel is unchanged. Even though he's speaking to kings, his words here are like to be reported to Caesar himself. That's the whole premise of the trial.

[10 : 41] Festus needs something to send to Caesar, to whom Paul's appealed to. And whoever Paul is speaking to, the gospel remains unchanged. And so Luke is writing this for us.

He's writing for Theophilus, his first reader. And all of us who read this afterwards, he's writing so that we will be clear on what is at the very heart of the gospel. That we will be clear on the message of the gospel.

Clear on the purpose of the gospel. Namely, that all would respond to the news of Jesus' death and the resurrection by turning from darkness to the light and receiving forgiveness and a place of Jesus forever.

That is what Luke wants us to take away from this chapter. Real clarity on what the gospel is all about. What's the purpose of the gospel? What's it here for? So we'll look at these four key points this evening.

First, the heart of true gospel ministry. Second, the purpose of true gospel ministry. Third, the message of true gospel ministry.

[11 : 48] And then fourth, even, the responses to true gospel ministry. The heart, the purpose, the message, and the response. So first, the heart.

What is at the very heart of true gospel ministry? We see this in verses 1 to 11. So do you have that open in front of you in chapter 26? This is where we see what's at the very heart of Paul's ministry and what has drawn the extraordinary opposition we've seen over and over again.

And what's at the very heart of Paul's ministry? Well, it's the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Look again at verse 6. Paul says, What is at the very heart of the gospel and my ministry?

It is, in fact, he says, the very reason for his being on trial. He is on trial for his hope in the promises made by God many hundreds of years before. It is for this hope that Paul is being accused by the Jews.

What is this hope? What is the hope that Paul stands on trial for? Well, this hope was the hope of Israel. The messianic hope.

[13 : 32] The hope for the coming of the Messiah. For the establishment of the messianic age. When evil would be defeated. When justice would be secured. When peace forever could be enjoyed.

That is the hope that Paul is talking about. And in the Old Testament scriptures, to which Paul is pointing. To which Agrippa himself would be familiar with.

And all the Jews he's speaking to would know. In the Old Testament scriptures, this hope of restoration for God's people. This fulfillment of God's promises is presented as nothing less than a resurrection from the dead.

Listen to Isaiah. Chapter 25. Here's what Isaiah was looking forward to. He will swallow up death forever. And the Lord will wipe away tears from all faces.

A chapter later in 26, Isaiah writes this. Your dead shall live. Their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy.

[14 : 42] The prophet Ezekiel, chapter 37, said this. And you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves. And raise you from your graves, O my people.

Well, the book of Daniel, chapter 12, verse 2. Here's what the Lord promised. Now there's a small selection.

But those are from the scriptures that the Jews and Agrippa himself knew. They'll be familiar with these promises. Hence, Paul's conclusion there in verse 8.

Look, why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? Surely you know this is true. Surely you know that the scriptures pointed forward to a resurrection. Why is that surprising to you?

In each case, those Old Testament scriptures speak of a resurrection that is bodily. A resurrection that is clearly God's doing.

[15 : 56] And that will happen with the dawning of a new age. With the inauguration of the fulfillment of all of God's promises. It's just what Luke records the Lord Jesus saying.

Teaching his disciples at the end of his gospel. Here's what Jesus said. He said, Jesus is saying, The Old Testament pointed forward to what just happened.

The death and resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection is the very heart of the hope of Israel. It is the hope of the scriptures.

You see, with the resurrection of Jesus, we see the beginning of the fulfillment of all the wonderful promises of the scriptures.

It is this hope that Paul now claims to have been fulfilled and made available through Jesus' resurrection from the dead. His resurrection ushers in the age of fulfillment.

[17 : 26] And all the blessings that entails. All the blessings that Old Testament was looking forward to. The sending of the Spirit. Salvation. Repentance.

Forgiveness of sins. Repentance. This is the hope of Israel, says Paul. And it all hinges on resurrection. But the people he's speaking to, they refuse to believe it.

Verse 8. Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises? This should not be a surprise to you. This is what the scriptures pointed forward to.

But from that point on, from verse 9, Paul continues in autobiographical mode. To show that he too once found it incredible.

In fact, he committed himself to persecuting the early Christians for believing the very thing he now stands on trial for. Look at verse 9. I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things.

[18 : 31] And opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests. But when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.

I punished them often. In all the synagogues. And tried to make them blaspheme. So at one time, Paul was utterly opposed to Christians who believed the resurrection.

What changed? Why is Paul now on trial for believing what he once persecuted? What changed for Paul? Well, it was being confronted by the risen Lord Jesus.

That changed everything. Paul knew his scriptures. Jesus Christ had died and risen.

And the reality of that turned Paul's life upside down. And his mission in life, his purpose was utterly transformed.

[19 : 39] And we'll see that in a moment. He saw with his own eyes on the road to Damascus the risen Lord Jesus. And so he knew all those promises of the Old Testament were now fulfilled in him.

The new age has begun. And that changed everything. Now I wonder if we have grasped the sheer enormity of what is at the heart of the gospel.

Has the fact of Jesus' resurrection truly transformed your life and priorities and turned it upside down? You see, with the resurrection of Jesus, all God's promises are a sure thing.

We look forward to, with absolute certainty, the coming day of salvation, where Jesus will bring us into the new creation.

A perfect heaven. A new earth. The former things shall not be remembered. There will be joy and gladness forever. Resurrection hope.

[20 : 48] And that reality shapes our purposes here and now, as it did for Paul then. It must, wasn't it? If Christ is risen, that changes everything.

So that is at the very heart of Paul's gospel message. And that, as it must do, shapes his purposes. Look on to verses 12 to 18, where we see the purpose of true gospel ministry.

So not only was Paul confronted with the risen Lord Jesus, but he was commissioned to a new task. No longer would Paul be a persecutor of the risen Jesus and his followers, but he would become a proclaimer of the risen Jesus to make new followers.

Look at verse 16. Look at verse 16. Here's the risen Jesus addressing Paul. Paul, stand. Stand. Stand. Stand. Stand. Stand. Stand. Stand. Stand. Stand. Stand upon your feet. For I have appeared to you for this purpose.

To appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me. And to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you.

[22 : 06] To open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

We see here the task that Paul has appointed Paul, that Jesus appointed Paul to. He is to be a witness to all peoples.

The fact that Jesus has risen means there is now a message to be proclaimed. The resurrection means that the promises of the scriptures are now fulfilled. This is big news.

We'll think about the content of the message in a moment, but notice the purpose, the goal of the message that Paul is to proclaim.

Paul's goal, through being a witness, is that eyes would be opened so that people, men and women, boys and girls, Jew and Gentiles, would turn, verse 18, and receive forgiveness and a place.

[23 : 16] People are to turn. Jesus tells Paul that the whole point of sharing the news is so that people who hear the news would turn. He says that they will turn from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God.

And it's this turning, this repentance that leads to receiving. You see, without repentance, the blessings that Jesus holds out cannot be grasped hold of.

There must be turning away in order to receive. And Jesus tells Paul, as folk turn from darkness and Satan, they receive wonderful gifts.

Forgiveness for sins. And a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me. What astonishing, amazing grace. Through faith in Jesus, our sins are wiped away and we have a place forever.

Utterly undeserved. We have a place among his eternal people, a place forever in his family. You see, Paul's task is the salvation of souls.

[24 : 37] Paul's goal is to see men and women repent and put their trust in Jesus. This is the primary task, isn't it? This is what we're fundamentally all about as servants of Jesus Christ.

Paul's task remains our task today. That we'll go to all nations. Opening blind eyes as we witness to Jesus Christ.

So that people would turn and receive. And it's worth asking the searching questions of ourselves as a church. When we see Paul's purpose, his goal.

The salvation of men and women. We need to ask ourselves, are we? Are we opening blind eyes? Are souls being brought from darkness to light?

Are people beginning to see the kingdom of God? Are men being delivered from the power of Satan? These are questions that we need to be asking all the time, aren't we?

[25 : 51] It is very easy. Dangerously easy to be swayed. By less urgent considerations. To be distracted. From that main task.

Of seeing people saved. This was the purpose that Jesus gave Paul. And it remains the purpose for us as Jesus Church today.

And it will remain our great purpose. Our great goal. As the gospel goes to the ends of the earth. It will remain our great goal until Jesus returns. Until he returns as judge. We are to get on with this task.

Our purpose. Is to open blind eyes through the proclamation of the message of Jesus. That's the goal. But what is the message? That's our purpose.

But what's the message? Look at verses 19 to 23. Where we see the message of true gospel ministry. And we see in these verses the absolute clarity of Paul's gospel.

[26 : 56] Which is testifying to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Look at verse 19. He says, Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.

But declared, first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea. And also to the Gentiles. That they should repent. And turn to God.

Performing deeds and keeping with their repentance. For this reason. The Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. To this day, I've had the help that comes from God.

And so I stand here testifying both to small and great. Saying nothing. But what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass.

Here's the great summary of Paul's gospel. That the Christ must suffer. And that by being the first to rise from the dead. He would proclaim light. Both to our people.

[27 : 55] And to the Gentiles. There's such great clarity here, isn't there? About how Paul summarizes his gospel message. His is a message about the fulfillment of the promises of God.

That the Christ must suffer. And rise from the dead. And that the implications of this news. Must be shared and pressed home. This is the message of true hope and light for all people.

Jew and Gentile need to hear. It is the message of the scriptures. This is the message. This is the message. That opens blind eyes to the truth.

And we're not to move from that message. And this is a message that comes with a clear implication. Verse 20. They should repent.

And turn to God. And as we've seen throughout the book of Acts. That is the unchanging message that Christians are to share wherever they go.

[28 : 58] And to whoever they speak. The facts about Jesus. His death. His resurrection. And the implications. To repent and believe. Same message wherever Paul goes.

It's the message Paul shared with the business women and slaves in Philippi. It's the same message he shared with the intelligentsia in Athens. It's the same here before governors and kings.

The same message. It's about the events of Jesus' life. His death. His resurrection. But that news is always accompanied, isn't it?

It's always accompanied by warnings and promises. An appeal to respond with repentance and faith. With warnings of what awaits those who refuse to repent.

But also the promises of salvation. Those things are not to be left out. Says Paul. We call people to repent. And believe the news about Jesus.

[30 : 03] A response. Is to be called for. And it's varied responses to the gospel that we can expect. This is the last thing we see in our passage.

Verses 24 to the end. The responses to true gospel ministry. Now there are two kind of main responses here. One is legal. Paul was before a hearing.

And the verdict was absolute vindication, wasn't it? Look at the very end of the chapter. The king and the governor arose. They discussed amongst themselves. And said this man has done nothing to deserve death.

Or imprisonment. He could have been set free. If he had appealed. To Caesar. So from a legal perspective. Paul is absolutely vindicated.

That's one. Response here. But we see also. Personal responses. We see varying personal responses. To Paul's message.

[31 : 01] As he makes his defense before Agrippa. And two main responses. One is scoffing. And the other is. A bit of a sidestep. Note first.

The scoffing. In response to Paul's. Gospel message. Paul is in mid-flow there. In verse 23. When he's interrupted. By the scoffing of Festus.

As he was saying. These things in his defense. Festus said with a loud voice. Paul you're out of your mind. Your great learning. Is driving you out of your mind. Now you remember.

That Felix. The predecessor to Festus. Trembled. In response to Paul's. Gospel message. Festus however. Seems to be a much. Harder case.

He was. It seems. Utterly. Blind. And insensitive. To the reality. Of spiritual things. At no point. In all these proceedings. Is there any indication.

[32 : 02] That his. Mind is enlightened. That his heart is softened. Not. None whatsoever. Luke's reminding us. Isn't he. He's teaching us. That we ought not to be surprised. If that is the response.

Hardened. Don't want to go there. Despite. Paul's careful. And true.

And rational. And rational words. Festus. Can only scoff. And Paul's response. That's a straight. Refutation. Isn't it? I'm not out of my mind.

Verse 25. I speak true. And rational words. Look on to the end of verse 26. What I'm saying. Did not happen in a corner. These are public events.

I'm talking about. There is ample evidence. For what I'm saying. I'm not out of my mind. And that must be. Where our confidence lies.

[32 : 59] When. Folk. Scoff. At us. Scoffing can really make us doubt. Can't it? It can make us question ourselves. No one likes to be made a fool out of.

No one likes to be laughed at. It can be so hurtful. To be on the receiving end. Receiving end of scoffing. But we are not. Out of our minds.

The Christian faith is not. Irrational. It is not. False. It is rather. Public truth. Festus is the one living in darkness. Not Paul.

Festus. Not Paul. Is the one out of his mind. You see the gospels. Are records of public events. Many other world religions depend.

Upon private messages from God. Not the gospel. Christianity relies on public events. Not private revelations. And that ought to give you and I.

[33 : 55] A steady and unshakable confidence. In the face of scoffing. What we are saying. Are true. True. And rational words. These are public events.

Not done in a corner. That's the first response. Scoffing. Second. Is the sidestep. As Paul responds.

To. The scoffing of Festus. He draws in a gripper. Perhaps realizing that Festus. Is the lost case. He draws in a gripper. And addresses him directly. Look at verse 26.

For the king. Knows about these things. And to him. I speak boldly. For I'm persuaded. That none of these things. Has escaped his notice. This has not been done.

In a corner. King Agrippa. Do you believe. The prophets. I know you believe. And Agrippa's response. Is something of. A deflection.

[34 : 48] A sidestep. He says to Paul. In the short time. Would you persuade me. To be a Christian. It's a rather. Sort of dismissive. Arrogant attitude.

Isn't it. You're not going to. You're not going to convince me Paul. I'm not. I'm not going to go for this. And Paul's response. Is essentially. Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely.

I'm trying to persuade you. You and everybody else here. This. Is. A global gospel. With massive implications. Paul's. Sole. Desire. Is that.

All who hear him. Would follow. Him. And become one. Who belongs to God's. Eternal family. To become one. Who knows. Forgiveness of sin. And has peace with God.

That is Paul's desire. That all would know that. Including Agrippa. But. The responses. Exemplified by Festus.

[35 : 44] And Agrippa. Will lead only. To judgment. And hell in the end. A consistent refusal. To acknowledge God. To keep scoffing.

To sidestep. That leads only one place. The only right. The only rational response. Is to submit. Not to scoff.

Not to sidestep. But to submit. To the message. Of the true gospel. And that is a response. That Paul would urge you. To make. If you don't yet. Follow Jesus. He says to you.

Turn. Turn away. From darkness. To light. And receive. Forgiveness. And life eternal. Put aside. Your pride. Put aside.

Confidence. In your own intellect. Your own moral framework. And consider the claims. Of the true. And rational gospel. Of Jesus Christ. That was Paul's gospel. And it's ours.

[36 : 42] True. And rational words. About the message. Of the resurrected Christ. These things were not done. In a corner. These are public. Events.

And for those here. Who do follow Christ. This chapter. Encourages us. To have absolute confidence. In the unchanging. Unstoppable. Gospel. Of Jesus Christ.

The true. And rational gospel. It's the only gospel. Through which men and women. Turn. And receive. The blessings. Of eternal life. And peace.

With God. Only through this true. And rational gospel. And we can have absolute confidence. In Paul's gospel. Which is our gospel.

So let's not move from it. Let's stick with it. As Paul did. Even under fire. Even if we're imprisoned. We don't move. From this gospel.

[37 : 39] Let's pray. Father God. I pray that. Each of us. Would come away.

From this chapter. Absolutely clear. And confident. In the power. Of your unchanging gospel. To save. Men and women. Jew and Gentile.

King and pauper. Help us not to move. One iota. From the apostle Paul's gospel. Which is your gospel.

Help us to keep proclaiming. And help us to have confidence in you. We ask. In Jesus name. Amen.