Paul’s Gambit

Acts 25:23-Acts 26:32

KV Acts 26:29 “Short time or long- I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”

Today in the passage we have the fourth trial of Paul. First before the Sanhedrin and Roman authorities. Second, before Felix then before Festus, and finally now before Agrippa. I am reminded of a story I once heard of two teenage boys who went to a diner with $7. A play on the jukebox was three plays for a $1 and so they decided to order 21 plays of Tom Jones’ “What’s New Pussycat”. The joke goes that since the end of the song is very similar to the start of the song, it took a long time for people to realize that someone had order it so many times- and after about 10 play they just unplugged the jukebox. On first read of the passage today it might sound like a rehash of the same material we have already heard Paul preach out. We have at this point heard so many, many times about Paul’s hope for the resurrection, his zeal for bringing the gospel to the gentiles, and faith that Jesus would not abandon him. But I disagree. Paul’s message today while the same in substance is actually very different in context. I have titled this message “Paul’s gambit”. A gambit is a game play, traditionally in chess, that is very risky. If the gambit play succeeds the player wins the game, and if the gambit fails the player loses game. Once the gambit play has been made no further moves matter. As I will explain, Paul’s defense before Agrippa was just such a play. Success mean converting the King of Judea, failure meant death or imprisonment. To understand this let us look at chapter 25 verse 23-27 and understand what has happened so far.

Let us recall where Paul was and what had happened so far. After returning from a missionary trip from Asia Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem by the Romans. At this time, the Romans occupied Judaea and it was under Roman law. The Jews, specifically the Pharisees had sought to have Paul killed several times. At one point they tried to ambush him. Eventually they tried a similar tactic as they had with Jesus, seeking to paint him as an insurrectionist before the Roman government. Insurrection carried capital punishment under Roman law. The Roman commander could find no lawful reason for arrest and so brought him before the governor Felix. Felix questioned Paul but again could not find good reason to have him killed. Nevertheless, Felix held Paul for nearly two years. Paul took this time to preach to Felix, but his message of “righteousness and judgment” disturbed him so he sent Paul away. After two years Felix was replaced by Festus who brought Paul to trial again. The Jews again sought him killed but Festus could not rightfully execute a Roman citizen without cause. In chapter 25 verse 11 Paul makes an appeal to Caesar. Under appeal Paul’s trial would go to the ruling official and if approved would go to Rome for adjudication by Caesar. Jesus had told Paul that he would go to Rome so perhaps Paul had faith that this would be his time to fulfill what had been foretold. In verse 13-27 Festus asks for Agrippa’s advice. To send a prisoner to Caesar he would need to specify the charges at hand. But Festus was no Jewish scholar, he did not understand the nature of the offense. Not wanting to look bad in the eyes of Caesar he consults with Agrippa who we are told was well versed in Jewish controversy. In verse 18-19 Festus says “When his accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive.”

In chapter 26 Paul makes his defense before King Agrippa. To be clear Paul’s defense is one connected text. This notwithstanding, I want to look at it in two parts. The first part is all Paul needed to be saying (given his condition), and the second part is all things Paul didn’t need to be saying- but was saying in order to convert Agrippa. Let’s look at the first part- the part he needed to say. It spans just three verses 26:3-6

*“The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem.****5****They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee.****6****And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today.*

Roman officials did not put people on trial for foreign religious dispute. Rome didn’t care as long as its subjects kept paying taxes. In these verses Paul verified that first, his conduct and innocence could be verified. Secondly, he verified the alleged crime is of a religious matter. Paul could have ended his defense here. Indeed, from a purely worldly point of view he should have. But instead he does something very risky. Paul in the next 19 verses decides that its high time that King Agrippa becomes a Christian. Paul proceeds to hijack his own trial as an opportunity to bring the gospel to Agrippa. We know that this is what he is trying to do based on verses 28-29. After Paul’s 19-verse testimony Agrippa asks nothing about the charges or the legal matter at hand. Rather he candidly asks

*“Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”*

To which Paul gives up the plan

*“Short time or long- I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”*

Let’s look at what Paul says to Agrippa in his attempt to win him over to Christ. In verses 7-8 Paul explains that his hope is the consolation of Israel: Christ Jesus. He does not use the word Christ Jesus, but the reference is one that Agrippa would have recognized from Isaiah chapter 40. Ishiah chapter 40 speaks of God’s comfort to Israel while in Babylonian captivity. Isaiah 40:1-2 says

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.*

In verse 9-11, he explains his former life as a mass murderer and persecutor. In verse 12-17, he once more tells the story of Jesus knocking him from his horse. This time Paul adds detail saying that Jesus asked, “Is it hard for you to kick against the goads?” A goad here is a farm implement attached to oxen to make them obedient to their task. The more the ox struggles the more pain it causes. From this, we understand that Jesus had been working on Paul for a while and that Paul had been resisting Jesus. But Jesus had directly intervened to make Paul obedient. Paul passes on here to Agrippa what Jesus said to him. Let’s look at verse 17-18:

*I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them****18****to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’*

There is perhaps no greater summary or explanation for what the gospel is in all the new testament. The message is clear and the message is concise: Jesus is here to turn us from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God so that we may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in him. After this Paul explains that he was “not disobedient” to the vision from heaven, explains that he now stands before Agrippa as a direct result of his obedience. Paul’s attempt to convert Agrippa is a dangerous gambit. Agrippa holds his life in his hands, but Paul has faith in Jesus. Jesus had told Paul that he would go onto Rome- so Paul believes that he will not die. Paul finishes his defense by saying “I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen- that the messiah would suffer and as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.” At this point Festus, interrupts Paul. Remember Festus did not understand the religious dispute or even any of the details. His interruption is in verse 24 “You are out of your mind Paul!” he shouts, “Your great learning is driving you insane.” It’s hard here to know if this response was on account of the absurdity of Paul’s defense on a strictly legal matter or if it had to do with the incredible things Paul preached. Regardless, Agrippa catches what Paul is trying to do leading to the verses I mentioned earlier verses 28-29

There is no evidence here or otherwise recorded that Agrippa was converted. But at this Agrippa releases Paul.

We learn here how Paul’s zeal for the gospel. We also recognize how clearly and plainly he articulated the gospel to an unbeliever. Paul’s letter to Christians are often confusing, even for Bible scholars today. Peter himself describes them as “hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16). Paul gives us a blueprint for how to preach the gospel. We should all aspire to be as Paul in our evangelism technique. We should let our preaching be plain and simple to unbelievers. Paul spoke truth as a matter of fact and his goal was to change the world.

The last few weeks have been hard and exhausting for all of us. Two weeks ago another man was killed by the police. We don’t know the whole story but we all saw George Floyd die. In response all 50 states have experienced riots. Anarchists and white supremacists seeking to spark a civil war joined to destroy property. Police buildings were set on fire. There were protests in Britain, France, Germany, and Australia. Foreign journalists were attacked by police live on air. In St. Louis, this city, 4 police officers were shot at. And all of this as a virus kills over 1000 people per day, unemployment nears 20%, and social distancing prevents us from fellowshipping with loved ones. In such a world what hope can we have? It was difficult to write this message, we all look to spiritual leaders for answers in times like this. And all I have to give is what Paul had to give: the message of Jesus Christ who said

*I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them****18****to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’*

I remember Chesterton who said that “no one doubts that an ordinary man can get on with this world: but we demand not strength enough to get on with it, but strength enough to get it on. Can he hate it enough to change it, and yet love it enough to think it worth changing? Can he look up at its colossal good without once feeling acquiescence? Can he look up at its colossal evil without once feeling despair? Can he, in short, be at once not only a pessimist and an optimist, but a fanatical pessimist and a fanatical optimist? Is he enough of a pagan to die for the world, and enough of a Christian to die to it?” Chesterton is saying that we must hate the evil of this world enough to feel compelled to stop it, and we must love the people of this world enough to find them worth saving. Paul no doubt hated the evil of Agrippa and the Romans, but he loved them about to endure trial in an effort to save them. Paul “became all things to all people” in an effort to win them over. Paul demonstrates for us this fanatical optimism that he could convert the king of Jaeda at his own trial. His faith and his dedication to the gospel is an example for us all. We often forget that we have the same Jesus who knocked Paul from his horse and told him to stop kicking against the goads is the same Jesus we all know and love. The same spirit that was with Paul during his dangerous gambit is the same spirit that we all have! In 2020 we too can do this. All of us can go forth being a source of light in a dark and chaotic world. Indeed, if not us then who? And if not now, then when?