

ACTS—WEEK 20

PAUL'S DEFENSE



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is “Paul” by Masaccio (1401–1428),
on display at Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa.*

Paul’s reaction to being arrested, and his message to the audience, is the stuff of legend. He cleverly maneuvers the conversation to the topic he’s interested in.

But then he blows it all by bringing up how God called him to preach to the gentiles.

Or did he? Paul (under the influence of the Holy Spirit) is a surprise factory, and the plot never stops thickening.

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Thank you.

Acts 21:37–22:29 — Paul’s Defense
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1 Acts 21:37–22:2a (ESV)

As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, “May I say something to you?” And he said, “Do you know Greek? Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?” Paul replied, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.” And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying: “Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.”

And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet.

By this point, Paul is an accomplished public speaker. He's fluent in Greek and Hebrew. He knows all the apologetic tricks. He's in close touch with God. So what's he trying to do here?

Remember, Paul has been clearly warned that arrest and imprisonment await him in Jerusalem. He came anyway. Now, he's been arrested. So, he asks to address the crowd. Okay, but why?

You might expect Paul to defend himself against the scurrilous and false accusations, but that's not it. Paul always wants to address the crowd; it's what he does. His purpose in addressing the crowd is always the same—to spread the gospel. Still, this does start out sounding like a defense.

Paul gets the tribune's attention by asking, in Greek, “*May I say something to you?*” This surprises the tribune because he thinks Paul's an Egyptian. He asks Paul about that, and Paul answers, slipping in the thing he wanted to say in the first place, “*I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.*”

The trick works. Paul gains the tribune's respect, and his curiosity. He wonders who Paul is and why folks are so upset. Listening to him address the crowd should be interesting—so he gives Paul a green light.

Paul uses the steps as a dais so everyone can see and hear him. Then he again plays on the shock value of speaking in an unexpected language. This time it's their native tongue—Hebrew.

And you could have heard a pin drop.

Paul's method works brilliantly, but it's not for us. He does something we likely will never do—address a large hostile crowd. Our task is normally to reach a single person.

But we have one thing in common with Paul here; we need something to get their attention. The truth is that, except for children, the people we talk to have heard all the usual gospel pitches a zillion times. How can we make this time different?

Mostly, we can't. It's up to God. Yes, it helps to love them genuinely—to show them the gospel instead of explaining it to them—but it always comes down to prayer. You have to pray and then follow His lead.

Note that it's not pray and then go; it's pray and then follow. Look for the green light.

2 Acts 22:2–5 (ESV)

And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:

“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

Paul is supposed to be giving a defense against a charge, and this beginning sounds like one. The tribune thought he was some Egyptian troublemaker. This speech begins by proving, in rather dramatic fashion, that he's not.

But though this starts out looking like a defense, and a good one at that, that's not really what Paul's doing. Defending himself against the charge is not his objective; evangelism is. Paul will go on to detail how he became a Christian.

This is a sermon.

Great saints never lose focus on the main objective—glorifying God. Paul's calling was evangelism, so everything he did was, first and foremost, evangelism. Many of the great saints were also called to evangelize or preach, thus they did this to an amazing extent when they “should” have been doing something else.

The calling of every Christian is to be a Christian 24/7, which means never losing focus on your calling. But it's a mistake to assume that your calling must be evangelism. Many churches teach that your calling isn't just evangelism; it's the confession stage of evangelism. Preparing the soil is given short shrift.

Most Christians are called to glorify God through charity and other ways of loving people. That can be interpreted as preparing the soil, but it glorifies God no matter how you interpret it.

Paul would explain this in 1 Corinthians 12:20–26.

As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (ESV)

The little “worker bee” jobs in the church are far more important (and glorious) than most folks realize.

3 Acts 22:6–16 (ESV)

“As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’ Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.’ And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.

“And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

When people are trained in evangelism, one of the first lessons is in how to give your personal testimony—tell how you became a Christian. It’s a powerful apologetic because it’s impossible for someone to challenge. You were there and they weren’t. Also, the events that led up to your conversion are interesting. Change doesn’t occur in a vacuum.

That’s what Paul’s doing here. He’s just telling everyone his life story and how he became a Christian—and his conversion was action packed. He describes a spectacular sequence of events, and he has unassailable credibility. What’s someone going to do? Say, “No, that’s not how it happened.”?

This sounds like the perfect sermon. Paul has the audience spellbound with a fantastic, life-changing story. You might expect it to end like Peter’s Pentecost sermon—converting thousands.

But God had other plans.

We often assume that unless someone converts, we failed. Nothing could be further from the truth. Getting someone ready (preparing the soil) is important. People rarely go from zero to Christ in one day.

That’s why sharing your testimony is so powerful. Everyone is qualified to do it. You don’t have to worry about converting someone (which is the Holy Spirit’s job anyway). You just testify to what you know.

Remember, the purpose is always to glorify God. What happens next can be almost anything—and we mustn’t let that distract or discourage us. Plot twists abound in God’s kingdom.

So, just be yourself and share what you know. Anything else is going to sound canned anyway. You may end up sharing the gospel, or you may not. That’s okay. Don’t push it.

It’s also okay to pray for a golden opportunity—where someone asks, “What happened?”

4 Acts 22:17–22 (ESV)

“When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.’ And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.”

Paul’s testimony has the audience spellbound. Everything’s going great right up until he quotes the Lord as saying to him, *“Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.”*

Up to this word they listened to him. After that they just wanted to kill him, saying, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.”

Paul seemed to be on the brink of converting the whole crowd, but then he slipped up and ruined it all. Or did he?

This looks intentional. This passage is all about the Jews’ rejection of Paul. He quotes the Lord as saying that He’s sending him away from Jerusalem, *“because they will not accept your testimony about me.”*

So, when *they raised their voices and* started threatening him, it perfectly illustrated what he was saying.

Paul could have then said, “You make my point.”

Paul is in the middle of making a tremendous sacrifice. American prisons are country clubs compared to Roman prisons.

But Paul is a messenger and all he cares about is the message. Even being in prison will work out for good in the grand scheme of things; Paul will do some great writing in prison.

Sacrifice is not far from our calling either, but everyone’s calling is individual. Sacrifice isn’t the point; it’s just something we must not shrink from.

So, one important task for any Christian is to periodically assess how we’re doing.

Do you know your calling long term? How about short term? Even if God has blessed you with clarity of purpose (and what a blessing that is), some serious “checking in” is always wise. Ask the Lord for direction.

What should you be paying more attention to? Who or what needs your help?

5 Acts 22:23–29 (ESV)

And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this. But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?" When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen." So the tribune came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes." The tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I am a citizen by birth." So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.

Because they crucified Jesus, we tend to think that the Romans had a capricious criminal justice system. It was anything but. Yes, it could be brutal, and yes, sometimes the guy at the top was a fruitcake.

But the lower-level administrators took their jobs very seriously—because that same brutality could land on them if they messed up. That's why the soldiers paid attention when Paul pointed out their error.

Specifically, Roman citizens had rights. Paul knew this and knew how to play it to his advantage. Now Paul was never one to exercise his right to remain silent, but he was all too happy to avoid being flogged.

Notice the expression, "*examined by flogging*." Torture works. It "breaks" people, and they spill the beans. The testimony of someone who is being *examined by flogging* is reliable. So this was a valuable part of the Roman criminal justice system, but there were restrictions.

So, as they were preparing to give Paul a dose of truth serum, he asks, "*Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?*" This shocks the centurion in charge, and he immediately kicks this up the chain of command by going to the tribune. When the tribune finds out that Paul is not only a citizen, but a natural born one (which implies a sort of aristocracy), he actually *was afraid*.

My, how things can turn on a dime.

God is the God of surprises. It's curious that becoming a Christian makes life more unpredictable. You might think that being plugged in to the one who controls the future would give us a leg up on this, but it doesn't. We want things to be under control—our control.

No deal. He controls things and we should get used to God being God. Sometimes that's easy; sometimes it's not. "*What men want is not knowledge, but certainty.*" — Bertrand Russell

The unpredictability of life in Christ is something to fear or something to enjoy. It's either intimidating or entertaining, depending on your attitude.

Unpredictability can be exciting if you look for God's hand in things.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What's a good "trick" for getting someone's attention?
2. Is there a "worker bee" in your church that could use some encouragement?
3. Have you ever seen a gospel presentation that ended before getting around to presenting the gospel? Do you recall someone preparing the soil like that for you?
4. Are you the same person you were a year ago?
5. What the biggest surprise that happened to you that, looking back, you think came from God?