

The Hope of the Resurrection

Acts 26

At the end of Acts 25 Festus, the Roman governor of Judea, found himself in a very awkward position. On the one hand he was sending Paul to Rome because he had appealed his case to Caesar. On the other hand he believed that Paul was innocent of the charges against him. He would look rather incompetent if he sent a letter to Caesar saying, "Here's an innocent man named Paul." Since he couldn't figure out what to write, he asked King Agrippa to hear Paul's case.

Chapter 26 records Paul's defense before Agrippa. You may have noticed a theme that is woven throughout this passage, namely, ***the hope of the resurrection***. In Scripture, hope is a confident expectation. The hope of the resurrection is the confident expectation that since Christ was raised bodily from the dead, those who are in Christ will also be raised bodily from the dead. In this life we are raised spiritually to a new way of life; and at the return of Christ we will be raised bodily from the dead. Salvation through Jesus is so comprehensive that it will one day extend even to our bodies.

This morning we will see from Acts 26 three complementary things about the hope of the resurrection. But before we do, I want to acknowledge that we're probably in different places when it comes to "the hope of the resurrection." If you are a disciple of Jesus - if you believe that he died for your sins and was raised on the third day, and you're following him - you have experienced the hope of the resurrection. I trust that today's passage deepens your convictions about the resurrection and your experience with the risen Lord.

If you aren't yet a disciple of Jesus, I'd like to encourage you to do what might seem like a risk this morning. Be curious about the resurrection of Jesus. Be open to the possibility that the resurrection of Jesus is a very tangible evidence of God's love for you. You might even breathe a prayer, "God, if Jesus really died for me and rose from the dead, I want to believe and experience the life he offers."

The hope of the resurrection is an ancient, biblical hope. Acts 26:6-8, 22-23

It turns out that the idea of God raising the dead isn't something that Jesus or Peter or Paul invented. Rather, the hope of the resurrection is an ancient, biblical hope. This matters because teachings that are ***ancient*** and ***rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures*** are credible. New teachings are suspect; ancient teachings have credibility and are worth considering.

In verse 2 and 3 Paul tells King Agrippa that he felt "fortunate" to be making his defense before him because he was "familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews." That's because even though he was a Roman king, Agrippa was Jewish. Since he was steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures Paul knew that he would track with his argument. Down in verses 6 through 8 Paul says this:

6 And now I stand here on trial because of **my hope in the promise made by God** to our fathers, 7 to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king!

In other words, Paul was being accused of believing something that his accusers should have believed. He says to Agrippa, “And for **this hope** I am accused by Jews, O king!” In verse 8 Paul asks the question that makes clear what promise he had in mind:

8 Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

If you’ve read and believed the Hebrew Scriptures, why do you think it is in-credible (or un-believable - ἄπιστος) that God raises the dead? If the resurrection of the dead was at the heart of the hope of Israel, they shouldn’t think that Jesus being raised bodily from the dead was a strange concept. [See also 24:15.]

Paul makes the same claim in verses 22 and 23.

22 To this day I have 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: 23 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.”

Paul said, “When I talk about the Messiah dying and being raised from the dead, I’m only saying what the Hebrew Scriptures promised would come to pass. I have the authority of Scripture on my side.” That was (and is) a compelling argument.

So where in the Old Testament do we see the promise of God raising the dead? Let me give a couple of examples [See also Hosea 6:1–2.]. We don’t have time to set up the context. I mainly want to show that the idea of a bodily resurrection was a hope rooted in the ancient texts of the Hebrew bible. Daniel 12:2-3 reads:

2 And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

Isaiah 25:19 reads:

19 Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead.

The concept of being raised bodily from the dead was established in the Hebrew Scriptures. When the risen Christ appeared to his disciples, Luke 24 records that he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, that “the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead” (Luke 24:46). If the Messiah **had to die** to pay for the

sins of the people, he also **had to be raised from the dead** in order to reign on the throne of David forever.

The hope of the resurrection an an ancient, biblical hope. This truth doesn't prove that that Jesus was raised from the dead; but it does give context and credibility to the resurrection of Jesus. Paul and the other New Testament authors stress that the death and resurrection of Jesus are the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies.

This is reason #57 why we should study the Old Testament: it points you to Christ and deepens your understanding of the death, resurrection, and enthronement of Christ. You may remember back in Acts 17 that when Paul went to the town of Berea and taught that the Christ had to suffer and be raised from the dead, the Bereans "examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so." Consequently, many of them believed.

We don't simply study the Bible because we're supposed to. We study it because it's God-breathed and therefore profitable in many, many ways.

The hope of the resurrection is a transforming reality. (Acts 26:4-18)

The hope of the resurrection is a reality. In other words, the resurrection of the dead is actually true. And it's a transforming reality; this reality actually changes us. I feel compelled to make this point explicitly because I've talked with people before who use Bible terminology, but don't see a reality behind that language. One person specifically told me, "Whether or not Jesus literally rose from the dead is beside the point. To me resurrection symbolizes new beginnings and 'life out of death' and second chances." That is NOT what Luke is describing or what Paul believed.

In these verses Paul first recounts that he was raised Jewish, he became a Pharisee (the "strictest party" within Judaism), and eventually persecuted followers of Jesus. He hunted them down, had them imprisoned, and voted for their execution when he had the chance. He tried to make them renounce their loyalty to Jesus.

Beginning in verse 12, Paul describes that what happened on his way to Damascus changed everything. He saw "a light from heaven, brighter than the sun." What could possibly shine brighter than the sun? A better question is **who** shines brighter than the sun?

14 And when we had all 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.'

Jesus didn't ask, "Why are you persecuting my people?" He asked, "Why are you persecuting me?" He is so identified with his people that to persecute them is to persecute him.

A "goad" was a stick used to prod an animal to go a certain direction. If the animal "kicked against the goad" it resisted the will of its owner, which would prompt the owner

to use the goad more forcefully. Jesus was basically telling Paul to stop resisting the will of God.

15 And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.

At that moment Paul knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God raises the dead. When you experience a light brighter than the sun and you hear a voice calling you by name. . . and you ask “Who are you, Lord?” . . . and the answer is, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” . . . you believe what they say. **Paul knew he was talking to Jesus risen from the dead.** The resurrection of Jesus was a reality. And that reality transformed Paul from a person who tried to kill Christians into a person who was willing to die as a Christian.

16 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, 17 delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you

Notice in verse 18 how Jesus describes the salvation people would experience when they believed the things Paul had seen and would see in Jesus.

18 to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and 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.’

Salvation through faith in the risen Christ involves three things: opening, turning, and receiving. **Opening.** First, God opens blind eyes. Back in Acts 9 Luke records that the light of Jesus blinded Paul for three days; his physical blindness mirrored his spiritual blindness (he was 100% blind about who Jesus was and what his crucifixion accomplished). When God restored his sight he now saw Jesus clearly. God still opens the eyes of people who are willing to see who Jesus is.

Turning. When your eyes are opened, you respond by turning from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. The entire orientation of your life is different.

Receiving. God himself gives you forgiveness of sins and a place in his family. When you receive forgiveness from God, your sins are no longer a crushing debt you can never repay; no, the debt that you owed was paid by his Son on the cross. And when you receive “a place among those who are sanctified by faith in [Jesus]” you now belong in God’s family/household. You are no longer an outsider; you have the same status and blessing as every single believer.

Paul’s experience made clear that **the hope of the resurrection is a transforming reality**, a reality that will change you forever. Think with me about this pattern of God opening blind eyes and people responding by turning/repentance and receiving from

God. If this is what the risen Christ said would happen when people believe the gospel, then this is what we should expect to experience.

First, if you have never had your eyes opened to who Jesus is and what he accomplished for you, cry out to God to do so. Once your eyes are open, turn from darkness to light and from Satan to God. And receive his grace: receive forgiveness of sin and a place in God's family.

Second, if you are already a believer, let this pattern of opening, turning, receiving fuel your discipleship. At every stage of maturity we need God to open our eyes to things in our lives that need to be changed; we all have blindspots (which, by definition, we cannot see). Once we see clearly we can repent and receive from God.

When was the last time you prayed, "God, expose my blindspots. . . the things I think and say and do that are at odds with your will. . ." Then pay attention to your life and repent as needed. And experience fresh forgiveness and a renewed sense of satisfaction in your place in God's household.

The hope of the resurrection is good news for everybody. (Acts 26:19-32)

These verses make clear that Paul believed that the hope of the resurrection is good news for everybody: the small and the great, Jews and Gentiles, kings and queens, everybody. We each need to be convinced that the gospel is for each of us and for the people who know and love who need forgiveness and a place in God's family.

Let's pick up the narrative in verse 22. Paul shows his hand when tells King Agrippa that he was standing there "testifying." He wasn't primarily defending himself against charges; he was testifying (or bearing witness) about Jesus.

22 To this day I have 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:

" . . . testifying both to small and great. . ." You may think you're "small," a nobody and that God doesn't have time for you; that simply isn't the case. Or you may think you're a big deal and that you're above all this talk about bowing the knee and following Jesus; that simply isn't the case either. The gospel is good news for everybody.

23 that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people [Jews] and to the Gentiles."

When he mentioned that Christ was "the **first** to rise from the dead," he was suggesting that more resurrections would follow. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul referred to Jesus' resurrection as the "first fruits," the beginning of the harvest (see 1 Cor. 15:20). All (both Jews and Gentiles) who are in Christ will also be raised bodily from the dead and will be given a resurrection body akin to his.

At this point Festus interrupts Paul much the way a judge might interrupt an attorney who is being argumentative or who is trying to introduce inadmissible evidence.

24 And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.”

The idea of Jesus “being the first to rise from the dead” seemed ludicrous to someone like Festus who didn’t know the Scriptures. The Romans believed in the “immortality of the soul” (that our souls live forever). But Paul taught that our **resurrected bodies** are immortal and imperishable. Festus thought that Paul had studied so much that he’d lost his mind. Paul’s response is priceless:

25 But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. 26 For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner.

Now he turns from Festus to Agrippa (who was Jewish), asks a rather bold question, and then makes a rather bold statement.

27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” 28 And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?”

Agrippa was taken aback when he realized that Paul was trying to persuade him to believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Bowing the knee to a crucified Messiah seemed beneath him. “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” Paul says, “Exactly.”

29 And Paul said, “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.”

That’s the heart of God, that great and small, Jews and Gentiles, kings, misfits, you, me all become as Paul (true disciples of Jesus). Down in verse 32 the account ends with yet another statement of Paul’s innocence.

32 And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

The hope of the resurrection is good news for everybody. It is for you and for everybody you know. You may be wondering what Agrippa was wondering, “Wait a minute. . . are you trying to persuade **me** to be a Christian?” The short answer is, “Exactly.” ***The hope of the resurrection is good news for everybody.*** Since every person is sinful by nature and by choice, every person needs a Savior. Since every person is created in the image of God, the hope of the resurrection is for everybody.

We all have family and friends who need to experience the hope of the resurrection. In our natural way of thinking, however, we often think that would be impossible. We know

their objections, the stands they've taken against Christ and his people, the barriers they face, etc. And we despair of seeing them come to Christ. But the mind of Christ is that the Father is drawing people to himself: people like Saul who was a persecutor and violent aggressor; people like your friends and family. Therefore, pray, live a transparent life, share, and pray some more. Be part of what God is doing in the world today.