

Fearless Witness

It's like he doesn't think for himself anymore ever since he's been going to that church," said Jevonte, as he moved the clippers up the back hairline of his customer.

Jevonte was complaining about his cousin, Travone, who had once been his "ride-or-die" partner.

"The dudes I know who do go to church, go sporadically and haven't changed their street life," said Dashaud, the barber two chairs down.

Jamar was listening and praying while waiting on Jevonte to trim his hair. Being new to the city, the 31-year-old had been in this barbershop only two other times.

"The Lord certainly changed me," said Jamar. Silence came over the shop, and all eyes turned to him. "People get confused about going to church and having a relationship with God."

"You're a church dude?" Jevonte asked, unfastening the smock from his customer's neck and shaking it.

"I'm a Christ dude," smiled Jamar. "I go to church for fellowship and to hear the Word."

"Some of the biggest hypocrites and sinners are in churches," spouted Dashaud.

"I was a big sinner, but it was the blood of Jesus that saved me, the Holy Spirit who cleaned me up and is still cleaning me up," said Jamar, climbing into Jevonte's chair.

The buzz of conversations in the shop started back up again. Throughout his hair trim, Jamar spoke of the love of Christ, with Dashaud listening in.

1. *Why is it important to verbally share our hope in Christ with others?*

2. *What role does the Holy Spirit have in our sharing our hope in Christ?*

3. *Why is it important to be obedient to the Holy Spirit leading in testifying of our hope in Christ?*

Paul's Opening Statement

Acts 26:1-3, KJV

1 Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Thou art permitted to speak for thyself. Then Paul stretched forth the hand, and answered for himself:

2 I think myself happy, king Agrippa, because I shall answer for myself this day before thee touching all the things whereof I am accused of the Jews:

3 Especially because I know thee to be expert in all customs and questions which are among the Jews: wherefore I beseech thee to hear me patiently.

Acts 26:1-3, NIV

¹Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself."

So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: ²"King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, ³and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently."

When Festus became governor of Judea, he asked Paul whether the apostle would go back to Jerusalem to stand trial, but Paul appealed his case to Caesar, fearing that his Jewish peers would try to kill him in Jerusalem (Acts 25:1-12). When King Agrippa II and his sister, Bernice, came to Caesarea to visit Festus, he told them about Paul's case. Agrippa, being intrigued by the matter, agreed to hear the apostle (vss. 13-23). The following day, a formal inquiry was held in which Agrippa gave Paul "permission to speak" (26:1) in his own defense. Paul began his defense by gesturing with his hand, like an orator would do while making a speech.

The Greek verb "to defend" (vs. 2) emphasizes someone in court providing argumentation to counter accusations made against him or her. In Paul's case, the baseless charges included violations of the "Jewish law" (25:8), along with unspecified offenses against the Jerusalem "temple" and "Caesar" (see 21:28).

Though the charges were false, Paul did not speak in

a disdainful way toward Agrippa. Instead, he addressed the ruler as “king” (vs. 2). From there, Paul acknowledged how “fortunate” he was to be given the opportunity to appear in Agrippa’s presence and rebut all the charges.

Paul acknowledged that Agrippa was especially knowledgeable about “Jewish customs” (vs. 3), so Paul implored Agrippa to “listen . . . patiently” as he offered his defense.

4. *What did Agrippa give permission for Paul to do?*

5. *What was the occasion for Paul’s appearance before Agrippa?*

Paul’s Belief in the Resurrection

Acts 26:4-8, KJV

4 My manner of life from my youth, which was at the first among mine own nation at Jerusalem, know all the Jews;

5 Which knew me from the beginning, if they would testify, that after the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee.

6 And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God, unto our fathers:

7 Unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come. For which hope’s sake, king Agrippa, I am accused of the Jews.

8 Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?

Acts 26:4-8, NIV

⁴“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. ⁵They 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. ⁶And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today.

⁷This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me. ⁸Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?”

Paul noted that the Jewish leaders were well aware of his life story beginning with his childhood. This included his formative years of education, which he received while residing among his own people and even in Jerusalem. Paul told Agrippa that even the apostle's opponents knew him for many years and could confirm as witnesses in a legal proceeding, should they choose to do so, that Paul compulsively observed the "strictest" (vs. 5) regulations mandated by the Pharisees.

Next, Paul focused on one of Judaism's most contested issues—whether God raised the dead. He referred to his confident expectation in the resurrection as the promise that God made long ago to the patriarchs. More than any other issue, he was being tried for proclaiming the good news about his "hope" (vs. 6) in the Messiah. Furthermore, the apostle declared that the Lord's "promise" (vs. 7) of life after death was the same pledge Israel's 12 tribes longed for God to fulfill. Indeed, this hope led all Jews to worship and serving God "day and night."

Still respectfully addressing Agrippa, Paul strategically claimed his belief in the afterlife was the actual reason his religious peers brought charges against him. He questioned why any person, including Agrippa, doubted whether God could to raise people from the "dead" (vs. 8).

6. *What characterized Paul's life before his conversion?*

7. *About what "hope" did Paul speak to Agrippa (vs. 6)?*

Paul's Persecution of Christians

Acts 26:9-11, KJV

9 I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

10 Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison,

Acts 26:9-11, NIV

⁹"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

¹⁰And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put

having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them.

11 And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities.

many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. ¹¹Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities."

Paul acknowledged that, before his conversion, he believed it was his ethical duty to do everything necessary to stop the proclamation of "the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (vs. 9). He did that in Jerusalem with the authorization of the chief priests. He was hunting down, harassing, and incarcerating "the Lord's people" (vs. 10) according to his scrupulous observance of the Jewish law.

Before trusting in the Messiah, he voted for believers to be killed as heretics. He might have recalled the painful memory of his involvement in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54; 8:1; 22:20). Paul felt it was his duty to travel from one town and synagogue to the next, forcing Christians to "blaspheme" (or curse, vs. 11) Jesus' name. This most likely means forcing them to renounce their their faith in Him.

His zeal was so intense that he even traveled to "foreign cities" (like Damascus) to chase after and persecute Christians. It did not matter to this misguided Pharisee that he risked becoming ceremonially defiled (or ritually unclean) by entering pagan and Gentile lands. But the resurrected Savior intervened while Paul was traveling on the road heading to Damascus.

8. *Prior to Paul's conversion, what was his attitude toward Christians?*

9. *In what ways did Paul once persecute Christians?*

Hopelessness

Hopelessness consumes many hearts. When I read the news, I feel it. Families mourn after a mass shooting, communities are torn apart by gang warfare, and people in extreme poverty struggle to afford the necessities of life.

“You look dejected,” my husband said as I returned home from a frustrating day. I felt dejected too. With a smile, he reminded me that Christ can give me hope, no matter what I face. I thanked him for his encouragement. I didn’t know how to make sense of what I was feeling.

As I laid in bed that night, I prayed that God would remind me of hope. It occurred to me that Jesus came to a world that wasn’t perfect, a world that had its share of problems—like mine. I realized that Jesus had experienced the same frustrations as I. He was surrounded by illness and poverty, by greed and brutality. He faced real evil, and He overcame it. Somehow I slept more peacefully at that thought.

The next day, nothing had really changed in the world—except me. No longer did I dwell on the evil I don’t control. I lived in the hope that Christ gives. I trust that, even when I don’t see, God is at work in this world. He is in control.

It’s difficult to have hope when we look at our realities. Yet as we learn to refocus our gaze onto the face of Christ, we find a God who is with us. Our hope in God can look naive or foolish to outsiders, but we know that God is not sleeping or disinterested. God wants to fill our hearts with peace. Christ will reign as king until the memories of pain and evil have utterly fled.

10. *Why is it difficult to have hope when we focus on what we see in the world?*

11. *How should our daily response to the world’s problems reflect the hope we have in Christ?*

12. *Have you personally experienced hope in Christ?*

Chosen to Share

Remember that special feeling when your friend chose you to be on his sport team? We need to experience that same special feeling about being chosen to testify of our hope in Christ. John 15:16 says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit.” Jesus reminds us in this verse that He chose us to go into the world and testify of our hope in Him. It is not of our choosing or optional. Jesus chose us to take every opportunity given to testify of our hope in Him.

► *Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to empower you to testify of your hope in Christ daily. Throughout the next week, look for opportunities to share your hope in Christ with others. Write here the names of some people you might share the hope of Christ with.*

KEY VERSE

And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God, unto our fathers. —Acts 26:6, KJV

“And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today.” —Acts 26:6, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK’S LESSON

Week of July 1 through July 7

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross devotionals* on these passages.)

- Mon.** Matthew 6:9-15—Our Father in Heaven.
- Tues.** Jeremiah 52:1-15—Judah’s Fate Sealed.
- Wed.** Jeremiah 52:16-30—God’s People Face Exile.
- Thurs.** Hebrews 4:12-16— Boldly Approach the Throne of Grace.
- Fri.** Hebrews 8:6-13—God Will Remember Sins No More.
- Sat.** Psalm 30—Joy Comes with the Morning.
- Sun.** Lamentations 3:16-24—Hope in God’s Steadfast Love.