

Mission

"Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'You have permission to speak for yourself.' So Paul . . . began: 'And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled . . . About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun . . . Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. . . 'I am sending you to the Gentiles 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' . . . and to the Gentiles also I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. . . I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen -- that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles'" (Acts 26:1,6,13,17-18,23).

In several places in the Book of Acts (Chapters 9, 22, and here), Paul either defends himself or gives a speech, and in these he would give his testimony. Paul is also giving us, followers of Jesus, information we need to understand the Gospel and instructions what we're to be doing. So let's look at Paul's speech in Chapter 26, before Festus and King Agrippa, in Caesarea where Paul was taken to get him away from Jerusalem and the Jews there who were intent on murdering him. This isn't really a legal defense because Paul isn't charged with any crime. Pious King Agrippa evidently wants to know what this new Christian movement is all about. Paul takes the opportunity to explain it to him, and Luke records the speech for us. Above, I've copied the text from the NIV that we need to focus on.

Christianity is what God had promised the patriarchs and their descendants, the people of Israel. Christianity didn't begin with the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament. It's the continuation of the over-arching drama, and fulfillment of all that was anticipated, in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures. There's a principle here that operates all through the entire Bible, beginning to end, and it's this: God makes promises regarding the future, and the people living at that time receiving those promises are to trust God to fulfill the promises, and so to live their lives on the basis of them -- even though the fulfillment is way off in the future. Thus, Eve said when she gave birth to Cain, "I have gotten a man --the Lord" (Genesis 4:1). She thought that the son she bore was to fulfill the promise of 3:15. She was wrong, but she understood and believed the promise, and so she expressed her faith. By confidence in God's statement about the future, Noah spent 100 years building an enormous boat. Abram was promised a son, and lived a life of trust in God for many things, anticipating that promised heir. God gave Moses a sign that He was with him, that when they were out of Egypt, Israel would worship the Lord on Mt. Sinai. Moses trusted God that that promise regarding the future would be fulfilled and went to Pharaoh demanding the release of the people of Israel. The promise to David of an ultimate Son led David to write thrilling and inspiring prophetic psalms for us. And so on, to us today. God has revealed truths to us regarding the future, and we're to pursue life today based on those promises. We're not here to live as we please but to live in a way that's appropriate to all that God has revealed regarding the future. That's what faith is.

So the promise Paul refers to in verses 6 and 7 is the Messiah, Jesus. And exactly what is the "hope" in what was promised? Commentaries say the hope is resurrection. OK, but that's totally inadequate. The hope is a Person, not a program or an event; a Person who would deal with all sin and evil, who would bring the creation blessing that was blocked because of the entry of sin, who would restore Israel from Exile and from subjugation by Gentile empires, and who would bring truth, justice, love and peace both to Israel and to the gentile nations of the world. And, yes, make resurrection a reality. Paul brings in resurrection here because, ironically, the Jews in Jerusalem want Paul dead because he preaches resurrection when in fact Jews everywhere should believe in it as their great hope (from Daniel 12, for example, but elsewhere too). Paul is making clear that Christianity is really the completion of Judaism, it's the fulfillment of what began two thousand years earlier with the call of Abraham and then the establishment of Israel.

Then Paul explains what his mission is, and that's in verse 18. It's to take the truths of the Hebrew Scriptures ("light") to Gentiles. What "truths"? Lots, such as the existence of the eternal creator God, His love for all His creatures, the desire of God to dwell with and to bless His human creatures, And of course the problem of sin and the need for holiness. And especially that all that truth is in a Person, the incarnate God who gave His life as an atoning sacrifice for sin and then rose from the dead, Jesus. The Gentile nations knew none of this. They were in total darkness and had been in darkness since the Tower of Babel episode. But worse, the pagan people in those Gentile nations were all enslaved by the iron grip of Satan, to do his will and to be wicked like him. But by turning to the God of the Jews, they would be delivered from darkness and from Satan, and that would be by receiving the Jewish Messiah. If they did that, they would have sins forgiven and, vastly greater, "a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Christ." That means being taken by the Son to the Father to be in His presence forever, to enjoy and be blessed by the infinitely great Creator God. They would

join the great people of the Hebrew Scriptures, such as Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Elijah, and many others who enjoyed being in heaven because they were justified by faith.

Paul includes a reference to Satan to stress that Christianity is really God's cosmic conflict with evil. If we suppose that our Christian religion is to assure us of heaven and not be in hell, we've totally missed its transcending purposes. We're been placed *in Christ* and indwelt by the Spirit so that we are able to participate in that conflict. As we snatch others from Satan's grip by spreading the Gospel message so that others also can believe, by demonstrating sacrificial love for others, we're taking God's side in the defeat of Satan.

The essentials of the Gospel message are in verse 18: understanding ("open their eyes") and then a response of faith ("turn them. . ."), with the result of forgiveness of sins and a "place with God," that is, fellowship. Implied in understanding and repentance is conviction of the truth of the message and life-changing action based on it. Paul's use of the word "sanctification" intends the necessity of being holy so as to be with a holy God. Let's notice the sequence in Paul's mind, first understanding, then turning, and that leads to belief in Jesus -- with all that "belief" entails.

Paul then says this: "To the Gentiles also I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds." The message to the Jews and to the Gentiles is the same. (Don't miss this!) Repent [that is, abandon whatever they had thought about Jesus or about spiritual matters and instead turn to all the truth that Paul is saying about Jesus] and *demonstrate* that they had turned by their new lives. This is a necessary aspect of the Gospel that almost everyone ignores. God expects us to demonstrate our faith by how we live, how we think even as well as what we do. Just as God had to demonstrate His love for us, that is, He had to demonstrate in time and space, in history, in this physical world, His love for us in the Person of Jesus, we have to demonstrate by our present lives that we believe in Him. Love is as love does. Abraham had to demonstrate his belief in the Lord, as did all the others in the Bible. And so do we. There's no such thing as "personal faith" or "private faith." Even in an environment that's exceedingly hostile to Christianity, such as North Korea or Somalia, in one way or another, the believers there demonstrate their faith. Consider the instruction in the Sermon on the Mount, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). Or the parable of the soils: those with true faith bear fruit (Matthew 13:8). Or the extensive instruction how to live by faith that Paul gives in his letters to the churches. Or Peter's instruction: ". . . so that your faith . . . may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:7). Faith is not passive, as James compellingly argues in his Chapter 2.

Now we come to something almost everyone misses. In verse 23, Paul states that it is Christ who would proclaim light to His own people and to the Gentiles. Huh? How is it that Christ is proclaiming truth to the Gentiles? Jesus has ascended to heaven. What Paul is doing is condensing into this phrase the theology of Servant found in Isaiah near the end of that book. Paul is clearly thinking of Isaiah 53 and 49 by referring to the suffering Servant (Christ) who would be a light to the Gentiles. But in subsequent chapters of Isaiah, the "Servant" becomes "servants" (plural). In other words, there's a corporate identity of the repentant, faithful people who identify with the ideal Servant so that they become God's servants too, with the same mission, privileges and responsibilities. We now are "in Christ," and Christ is in us, so it is Christ who, in us His followers, is taking the Gospel all over the world. We are fellow servants with Christ (and with Paul). The Nation of Israel was chosen to serve as God's servant to take the knowledge of God to the Gentile nations. Jesus is the ideal Israel, the ideal obedient Servant who fulfills what Israel couldn't do, wouldn't do. The Spirit of Christ indwells us by faith to continue all thru this Church Age that same servant work, using us. That's why Jesus gave the church the Great Commission, repeated in the opening chapter of the Book of Acts (1:8). The work of the Church is mission.

Paul was a unique Apostle. He didn't just reveal truth, he modeled the Christian lifestyle and worldview for the Church. We're to be like Paul if we're a follower of Jesus. Paul said repeatedly in his letters, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ." This means we're to think like he did, believe as he did, love as he did, and serve as he did. He understood what's true from the Hebrew Scriptures, as we should also. When Paul told Timothy to "preach the Word," (2 Timothy 3:15-4:2), that "Word" was the Hebrew Scriptures! Paul's zeal needs to be our zeal, and his work our work.

Dear reader, if we're followers of Christ, we're on mission. In whatever way the Spirit leads, our life is to be focused on sharing the Gospel with those who've never heard it. That's God's revealed will for us. It may entail preparation, personal sacrifice, and maybe even suffering or other painful consequences. It's one biblical way to demonstrate our faith, and it's how we show God our obedience, our gratitude, and indeed, our love. God bless you.