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Steve Carter – Talk on Sunday 29th December 2024 on Acts 26:1-23

Good morning and thank you for your welcome; it is very good to be here with you. Wayne says that you have been having a teaching series on the big story of the Bible and where, as Christians, we fit into it. You have arrived in the book of Acts, and he spoke to you before Christmas on Peter and his address on the day of Pentecost. So it seemed fitting to focus today on the other major figure of the book: that is, Paul.

To do this we are jumping ahead almost to the end of Acts, to chapter 26. The reason is that the passage we have just heard is a good summary of Paul's whole career as it has been recounted to us since chapter 7, and an even wider overview of his life. We read here about Paul's experience as a Pharisee, his persecution of Christians, his commission by Jesus and his obedience to it. His defence before Agrippa makes sense of everything we can read about him in the earlier chapters.

And this passage is also helpful in the context of your teaching series, because like the other set-piece speeches in Acts, it tells God's big story as this book presents it, or at least a large part of that story. The book of Acts is first about the mission of the church to bring the salvation that Jesus has won for us to the ends of the earth, in fulfilment of God's predetermined plan to save the

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whole world. Paul's individual story as he tells it here is a miniature version of that bigger story, containing many of its most important parts.

It is good for us as Christians to understand Paul's work and teaching, not just so we can see how it helps to fulfil God's saving plan in Jesus, but also so we can know where we fit into that plan. So today we are going to work through the passage briefly, section by section, to sketch the main features of that plan and to place ourselves within it.

So we will begin with verses 1 to 3, which are a prologue to Paul's defence. To set the scene: Paul has been accused by the Jews and put on trial before Festus, the Roman governor of Judea, and the proceedings have ended with his appealing to have his case heard by the Roman emperor. Festus then consults the Jewish king Agrippa, who at the time was ruling over extensive territories in and around Galilee, and enlists his help in clarifying the charges against Paul. The next day they gather in the audience chamber; Paul is brought in, and Agrippa gives him permission to speak for himself.

Paul says first that he is blessed to be making his defence before Agrippa, especially because the king is an expert in the customs and disputes of the Jews. He is using a common approach in speeches of the time of expressing respect for his listeners to get them on his side; we might say today that he is

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battering Agrippa up! But even so, what Paul says is not untrue; Festus has consulted Agrippa precisely because he is an expert in Jewish matters and can help him understand them. And the fact that it is a Jewish expert who is on the judge's bench serves to validate Paul's defence right from the start; if what he goes on to say is not true, Agrippa will be able to catch him out.

So on we go now to verses 4-8, which deal with Paul's way of life as a Pharisee and his hope in the Jews' ancestral promise. Paul explains that he was a devout Jew from his youth and that he belonged to the strictest sect of Judaism. The Pharisees were experts in the Jewish law and aspired to a very high standard of religious practice, to which they tried also to hold other Jews; they strongly disapproved of those who held more lightly to the Jewish law as they understood it.

Paul then asserts that he is on trial because of the promise made by God to Israel, the promise that his whole nation earnestly and constantly hopes to attain. Paul believed as a Pharisee that that promise, that hope, would be finally fulfilled in the resurrection of the dead, and he believes as a Christian that that fulfilment has now begun in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is absurd, he says, that he should be accused by the Jews for proclaiming that God's promise to Israel has now come true.

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These verses tell us that the gospel of Christ that we believe and share is the fulfilment of Old Testament promise and hope. God's big story centres on the resurrection of Jesus, but it does not start with that, as though God had torn up what was previously written and started again on a fresh piece of paper. No, the gospel proclaims the events to which the Old Testament story was pointing, and in which everything anticipated in the law and the prophets is now coming to pass. God's saving plan and our place in it are defined by Old Testament expectation, so time spent in studying those texts is not wasted. Remember what you have read and learned there in the past year; it will help you better to understand the gospel and what it requires of us.

We move on now to verses 9 to 11, which are about Paul's record as a persecutor of the church. As a good Pharisee, Paul thought it was necessary to oppose the Christian movement, so he got authority from the chief priests to lock up in prison many of the believers in Jerusalem; he voted for them to be put to death; and he went through all the synagogues many times to punish them and intimidate them into denying Jesus. He was so angry with them that he even pursued them beyond the borders of Israel.

The persecution of the church by the Jews for its supposed breaking of the law is a recurring theme in Acts, and it explains why Paul himself is later

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persecuted and put on trial. But the point of mentioning Paul's own persecuting activity here is probably to show us that Paul was not well disposed to the gospel from the beginning; on the contrary, he was violently hostile to it. So it cannot have been his human background that launched him on his long mission of proclaiming Jesus; such a 180-degree change of direction can have happened only as a result of divine activity.

These verses tell us that our faith and task as Christians are not of human origin. God's big story is not something that we made up; it is written for us by the hand of God himself. And it is not about our reaching after God; it is something that God both begins and unfolds, and to which he calls us to respond. It is God's message we believe, and it is God's mission in which we are engaged.

Then in verses 12 to 18 Paul outlines the divine intervention that turned him from his course as a persecutor of the church and made him a herald of the gospel. He was on his way to Damascus on one of his persecution trips when he was stopped by a bright light from heaven and addressed by the risen and exalted Jesus. The Lord appointed him as a servant and witness to him and promised him his protection for the task. The fact that this passage echoes the

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call of several of the Old Testament prophets underlines that Christ gave Paul a divine commission.

The book of Acts is all about the fulfilment of the next stage in God's plan of salvation, which is sometimes called the age of the church. It tells us that during this time Jesus is continuing and extending his saving mission, the mission that he started during his earthly life. He is doing so through his people, and in particular through those whom he calls to preach the gospel in his name. On the road to Damascus Paul is commissioned for that specific ministry, and he becomes the supreme example of it.

Most of us are not called to this leading role within the divine mission, but Acts does suppose that the whole church will be engaged in it. We do this in our common life as a Christian community, as we embrace God's saving plan for ourselves and serve it in whatever ways he may require of us in our own contexts. In that way we play our part in God's big story, by living out and showing to others the salvation that Jesus has given to us.

And he has given it to us, even though most or all of us are not (like Paul) from a Jewish background. One central aspect of Paul's commission is often stressed in Acts and is mentioned here too, when Jesus says that he is sending him to 'the people' – that is, the Jewish people – and to Gentiles, people who

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are not Jews. We have seen that the gospel is the fulfilment of the promises and hopes of Israel, but those promises, those hopes, include the bringing of Gentiles into the people of God alongside the Jews. So Paul is called to preach the gospel to both groups, and he performs that task even in this scene, as he stands before a Jewish king and a Roman governor. If we are not Jews but have responded positively to the gospel, then we too have a place in God's big story; we too receive the salvation that Jesus provides.

And these verses also tell us briefly what that salvation involves. Jesus says that he is sending Paul to the people and the Gentiles to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from Satan to God, and so that they might receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Jesus. This is a neat summary of salvation according to Acts: release from bondage to evil spiritual forces to live under God's authority instead, forgiveness of our sins, and eternal life as members of God's holy people, who are now defined not by being Jewish but by faith in Christ. If we take our place in God's big story by believing in Jesus, then these promises of salvation are fulfilled for us.

Then in the final part of our passage, verses 19 to 23, Paul describes his obedient response to the heavenly vision that he had received. In Damascus

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first, and then in Jerusalem and the whole Judean region, and then to Gentiles everywhere, he called on his hearers to respond to the good news. Because of this the Jews seized him in the temple and tried to murder him; as we have seen, they associated his message and mission with disloyalty to the Jewish law.

So Paul's obedience to his divine commission is used by God to take forward his saving plan. But these verses also give us extra insight into both the content of Paul's gospel message and the response to it that God requires. Taking the response first, we have seen already that faith is basic to it, but faith demands and presupposes a prior repentance: a turning away from sin to serve God instead. And if it is real faith, active faith, saving faith, then it will inevitably also express itself in deeds that befit repentance. It is by that threefold cord of repentance, faith and deeds that we fulfil our place in God's big story.

We have also noted that Paul's gospel includes the different elements of the salvation that Jesus brings: freedom, forgiveness, life. But even more basic than these are his message about Jesus himself: that as the Messiah he was subject to suffering, that he is the first to rise from the dead, and that as such he is going to proclaim light to Jews and Gentiles alike. Paul's gospel is grounded first on the death and resurrection of Jesus; these are the great

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events, the centre points, of God's big story. It is through them that we have been brought out of darkness into light, from slavery to Satan to freedom under God.

It is time to sum up. What have we learned about God's big story from Paul's defence before Agrippa, or at least about God's big story according to Acts? We can group it into three parts.

Firstly, God's big story has been written and carried out by God himself, and it concerns his plan to bring the salvation brought by Jesus to the ends of the earth. It includes both the promises and hopes of the Old Testament and the gospel events in which these have been fulfilled.

Secondly, the present stage of God's big story – the stage that Acts is at and we are at – involves Jesus continuing his saving mission through his people, in particular those like Paul who are called to proclaim his message, but including all of us, the whole church in our common life. The salvation provided by Jesus is given not only to Jews but also to us Gentiles, who now take our place alongside them within the people of God.

And thirdly, the message by which the salvation provided by Jesus is dispensed is centred on the saving events of his death and resurrection.

Salvation includes freedom from slavery to evil, forgiveness of sins and eternal

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life among God's holy people. We receive it by repenting of our sins, putting our faith in Jesus, and doing works worthy of repentance.

From all this it should be clear where we fit into this big story, or how we take our place within it. As Gentiles, we can now share in God's salvation, and Paul's gospel calls us to respond to what God has done in Jesus' dying and rising, with repentance and faith and deeds, so that we can receive God's freedom and forgiveness and life. In this way we both embrace and serve God's saving plan, receiving his salvation for ourselves and demonstrating it to others.

So as we prepare to close our book on 2024, this passage brings us back to the very foundations of our Christian faith and encourages us to renew them as we face another year. And it should also provide you with a framework and starting point for further studies in God's big story in the rest of the New Testament in 2025. May those studies be fruitful for you, and may you all enjoy a very blessed and happy New Year.