

I. Introduction

Good morning! For those who are willing to look, there is an amazing amount of evidence for the truth of the Christian faith. This evidence includes historical and archeological evidence, the powerful evidence of fulfilled prophecy, and much more. *"Evidence that Demands a Verdict,"* by Josh McDowell, *"The Case for Christ,"* by Lee Strobel, and *"Mere Christianity,"* by C.S. Lewis are three excellent books to start with. These and more are either for sale from the book cart or available from the lending library. *"Mere Christianity,"* is also available in Japanese.



But we know that many people around us will not open a Bible, read a book, or look at other resources that show the evidence for the gospel. For many people, contact with Christians in daily life may be the only opportunity they have to learn about Jesus. For these people, we ourselves are the evidence for Christianity. With our lives and with our words, we need to speak about Jesus and explain what we believe are needed.



1 Peter 3:15, urges us, **“But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”** This quote is from the Apostle Peter. And, in today’s Scripture reading, we will see how Paul provides an excellent example of being ready to give an answer.

Let’s remember the context from last week. Paul was at the temple in Jerusalem when some Jews falsely accused him of bringing gentiles into the temple. These Jews grabbed Paul and dragged him out of the temple and were beating him, trying to kill him. But the Roman commander came with troops and took Paul away from the crowd and placed him in chains. The commander thought Paul might be an Egyptian man who had caused trouble before, but in **Acts 21:39**, **“Paul answered, ‘I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people.’”**

Let’s read what happens next, Acts 21:40-22:22.

II. Scripture Reading (Acts 21:40-22:22, NIV, 1984)

21:40 Having received the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic :

22:1 "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense." 2 When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet. Then Paul said: 3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. 4 I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, 5 as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

6 "About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. 7 I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' 8 'Who are you, Lord?' I asked. "'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 9 My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. 10 'What shall I do, Lord?' I asked. 'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.' 11 My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

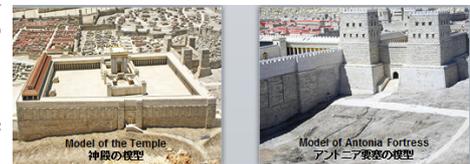
12 "A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. 13 He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your

sight!" And at that very moment I was able to see him. 14 "Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. 15 You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'

17 "When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance 18 and saw the Lord speaking. 'Quick!' he said to me. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' 19 "'Lord,' I replied, 'these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. 20 And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' 21 "Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" 22 The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"

III. Teaching

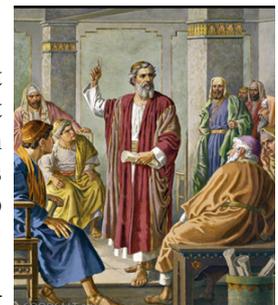
The reaction of the crowd was probably not what Paul was hoping for, but when we testify to the love of Jesus we must be prepared for a variety of responses. Let's imagine the scene and then take a closer look at Paul's testimony. I shared these photos of a model last week also, but just to refresh our memory, here is what the temple and courtyards looked like, except they would have been crowded with people. And here are the steps leading into the Antonia Fortress just outside of the temple courtyard.



Paul stood at the top of the steps and faced the crowd. He motioned for them to be quiet, and then spoke to them in Aramaic, the common language among the Jews of that time. Paul starts his testimony saying (**Acts 22:1**), **“Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense.”** Paul shows deep respect for those who had attacked him. He calls them, **“Brothers and fathers,”** asserting that they are of the same people and humbling himself.

Paul continues by introducing himself. **Acts 22:3**, **“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today.”** Paul could have criticized the crowd for their illegal and unjust action in attacking him. But instead, he complimented them on their zeal for God and asserted that he also had the same zeal and more training than most, because he was a student of Gamaliel.

Gamaliel was a well-known Jewish leader. Some even say he was the greatest rabbi of that time. The use of his name must have encouraged the crowd to think that Paul was worth listening to. Gamaliel was also a member of the Sanhedrin and a man of great influence. You may remember that Gamaliel defended Peter and the apostles before the Sanhedrin when they wanted to put the apostles to death for continuing to preach Jesus.



In **Acts 5:38-39**, Gamaliel advised the council, **“Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”** Gamaliel was clearly a voice for reason and calm and this may be an additional reason why Paul mentions his old Jewish teacher by name. According to tradition, Gamaliel eventually became a believer in Jesus also, but Paul says nothing about that.

In **Acts 22:4**, Paul continues, saying, **“I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison.”** The immediate occasion of the attack on Paul was the false accusation that he had brought a Gentile into the temple. But Paul's reputation as a Christian was known to all and many were hostile toward the faith. In reminding them that he himself had also once been hostile to the Christian faith, Paul is saying that he is very much like his accusers. In effect, Paul is saying, *“I used to be just like you!”* After this effort to establish common ground, Paul went on to tell about his miraculous and life-changing encounter with Jesus.

Acts 22:6-8, “About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked. ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied.” In persecuting Christians, Saul, who became Paul the Apostle after this, was persecuting Jesus Himself. This reveals to us an important truth, because of His great love for us, when we suffer, Jesus suffers also. He feels our pain and weeps along with us in our trouble and sorrow.

Isaiah 53:6 tells us, “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Saul was on the wrong path, instead of trusting in Jesus, he was persecuting Him by hunting down all who believed in Jesus. But through the plan and wisdom of God, Jesus accepted the punishment for Saul’s sins and for all of ours as well.

Isaiah 53:5, “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” When we read this verse, we often focus on the suffering of Jesus. But we could equally well focus on the blessings gained through Jesus’ suffering on the cross: peace and healing. Paul knew the healing power of Jesus and the peace of God which passes all understanding. And Paul longed for his fellow Jews to experience this as well.

Paul had been blinded by the brilliant light from heaven, but the Lord had also promised to give him a mission in life. The news of that mission would come through a man named Ananias. In **Acts 9:11**, the Lord came to Ananias. “The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.” Paul tells what happened when Ananias came to him.

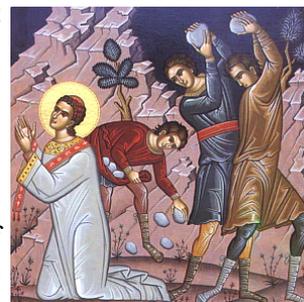


Acts 22:13-15, “He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him. Then he said: ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.’” Paul received healing and a new mission in life, the mission to testify that Jesus is alive and He is Lord. Paul was baptized and he received the Holy Spirit and immediately began the work of proclaiming the Name of Jesus to all who would listen.



The Lord spoke directly to Paul on several occasions. In fact, in **Galatians 1:12**, Paul declares concerning his message, “I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.” This does not mean that Paul never learned anything from others Christians, but it does indicate that the core of Paul’s message of salvation by grace received through faith was directly from the Lord. We might be tempted to envy Paul’s direct line to God, but if we consider the level of responsibility that went along with those revelations, we might hesitate to ask for the same.

In his testimony before the angry crowd, Paul next spoke events from of an earlier time when he had visited Jerusalem. **Acts 22:17-18** “When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking. ‘Quick!’ he said to me. ‘Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’” On that earlier occasion, the Lord had told Paul to flee Jerusalem, but now the Lord has brought Paul back to face his brother Jews and to tell them things that they did not want to hear.



Paul worked hard to establish common ground with his accusers. He called them brothers and fathers. He complimented their zeal and spoke of his own zeal for the Law and his training under Gamaliel. He reminded them also, by telling the story from the vision, that he had been involved in the persecution of the Christians from the beginning. He was even there, giving his approval, when Stephen, the first martyr, was stoned.

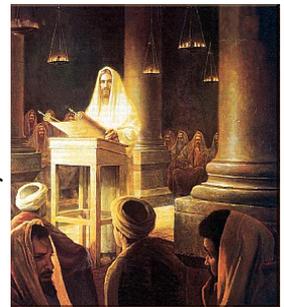
Through all of this, the crowd listened quietly. They did not object to Paul’s testimony about Jesus appearing to him or speaking to him in visions. Perhaps they might even have been willing to consider the

possibility that Jesus might be the long-prophesied Jewish Messiah. But there was a word they would not tolerate. **Acts 22:21-22** “**Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’ The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, ‘Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!’**”

The Jews would not tolerate the word, “Gentiles.” They would not accept the possibility that Jesus might be the Savior for Jews and Gentiles alike. They could not imagine that God would send Paul to preach salvation among the Gentiles. Paul did everything he could to establish a connection with the crowd and to show that he understood them. But Paul would not compromise the message of God’s love for all people. The message that God loves all people everywhere, people from every tongue, tribe, race, and nation, is central to the gospel message. Before the Jews, Paul could not consider his testimony complete without speaking of God’s love for the Gentiles.

Do you remember the time when Jesus preached in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth? **Luke 4:17-19**, “**The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’**”

After Jesus read this passage, he continued in **Luke 4:21**, saying, “**Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.**” When Jesus announced that Isaiah’s prophecy was fulfilled then and there, He was claiming to be the Messiah; only the Messiah could fulfill that prophecy. Do you remember how the people in the synagogue responded? A lot of people get this wrong, probably because a lot of preachers get it wrong. But we have to read carefully. What does the next verse say?



Luke 4:22, “**All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. ‘Isn’t this Joseph’s son?’ they asked.**” They were amazed by Jesus’ words, but they all spoke well of him and called His words, “**gracious.**” They were willing to consider Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah.

But a few minutes later, the people were outraged and they tried to throw Jesus off a cliff. Why? Take a look at the verse immediately before the crowd got angry. **Luke 4:27**, “**And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed--only Naaman the Syrian.**” What made the people furious was that Jesus reminded them about God’s love for Naaman, a Gentile. The people Jesus spoke to in the synagogue in Nazareth and the crowd that Paul spoke to from the steps of Antonia Fortress were very much alike. They were willing to consider the possibility of Jesus being the Messiah for the Jews. But they were enraged to be told that God loved the Gentiles also.

If you read the Old Testament, it is easy to understand why many of the Jews hated the Gentiles. After all, the Egyptians had enslaved them, the Assyrians and the Babylonians had hauled them away into captivity, and Gentile nations all around had attacked them time and time again. And, in the time of Jesus and Paul, Israel was occupied by soldiers of the Roman Empire. The Jews really had no friends. When you have been treated badly for so long, it is easy to hate.

But what did Jesus teach? **Matthew 5:44-45**, “**But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.**” God loves and blesses all people, even those who hate Him. When we come to Jesus, we need to forgive our enemies and learn to love them, because God loves them.

IV. Conclusion

Before he became Paul the Apostle, Saul hated Christians and was busy persecuting them. But Jesus appeared to Him and taught him a better way. Paul learned the lesson of God’s love for all people well and he included it in his testimony. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul urged Timothy to pray for all people and then he said in **1 Timothy 2:3-6**, “**This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men--the testimony given in its**

proper time.” There is only one Savior, Jesus Christ. But the salvation that God offers through the cross of Jesus is for all who believe in Him. The cross is, in fact, the perfect testimony of God’s love. It is God’s heart that all would come and be saved.

Saul had to repent of his hate and accept the fact of God’s love for all people in order to become Paul. But once he understood, he did not hesitate and he never turned back from the way of love after he knew Jesus. The crowd that Paul preached to on that day in Jerusalem rejected his message of love for the Gentiles, at least at that time. But some of them surely repented later and believed in Jesus. I am sure that Paul’s testimony was not wasted.

What about us? For those of us who have trusted in Jesus, do we speak of His love and grace often and effectively? For those who have not yet made the decision to believe, what is holding us back? Does it move our hearts to know that God loves all people? Does it bring us to repentance to know that God loves us, each and every one? Consider what Ananias told Saul on the day of his healing. Perhaps the today is the day of your salvation. **Acts 22:16, “And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.”**

Let’s pray!

V. Prayer