

**PAUL THE PRISONER:
PROPHETIC WITNESSING
TO JEWS AND GENTILES**

ACTS 21:15 - 26:32

¹⁵After these days we got ready and started to go up to Jerusalem.

¹⁶Some of the disciples from Caesarea also came along and brought us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to stay.

¹⁷When we arrived in Jerusalem, the brothers welcomed us warmly.

¹⁸The next day Paul went with us to visit James; and all the elders were present. ¹⁹After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰When they heard it, they praised God.

Then they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law. ²¹They have been told about you that you teach all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, and that you tell them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs.

²²What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.

Luke has already established the mood in which we are to approach this final section of the Acts. Again and again we have been led to expect that Paul will be imprisoned. Paul knows this and he is eager to share in the experience of the One to whom he has committed his life: 'I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus' (21:13). His friends, too, are at peace: 'The Lord's will be done' (21:14).

After breaking the hundred kilometre journey at the house of Mnason, they reach Jerusalem. To understand the concern expressed by James, the leader of the Jerusalem community (see 12:17; 15:13) and the elders of the church, we need to remember that we are in the year 57AD. Nero has been emperor in Rome for three years. The Roman governors have become increasingly oppressive since they took over control again in Palestine after the failed three-year experiment with a local king (41-44AD), and the situation has become increasingly tense. It has become increasingly important for Jewish Christians to show their loyalty to Judaism by their faithful adherence to the law of Moses.

This was not a problem for Jewish Christians. They saw their following of Jesus as being the fulfilment of their fidelity as Jews. The presence among the Christians of a small number of Gentiles did not, in itself, pose a major problem, especially as they were careful to observe those parts of the law that applied to non-Jews living in the land (see 15:20-21).

The elders praise God for the success of Paul's mission among the Gentiles, but they and the community for which they are responsible have to live with their Jewish brothers and sisters in a tense situation. Moreover, like Paul himself, as we have seen, they see the importance as Jews of being completely faithful to their traditions. They want Paul to demonstrate in a public way that the rumours about his being unfaithful to the law are false.

The solution is for Paul to go through a rite of purification. He has been travelling in Gentile territory and has returned to the 'Holy Land' of Israel. He is also to join with four others who are to fulfil obligations which they have undertaken in accordance with the law laid out in the Book of Numbers:

All the days of their nazirite vow no razor shall come upon the head; until the time is completed for which they separate themselves to the Lord, they shall be holy; they shall let the locks of the head grow long ... This is the law for the nazirites when the time of their consecration has been completed: they shall be brought to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and they shall offer their gift to the Lord, one male lamb a year old without blemish as a burnt offering, one ewe lamb a year old without blemish as a sin offering, one ram without blemish as an offering of well-being, and a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of choice flour mixed with oil and unleavened wafers spread with oil, with their grain offering and their drink offerings ... Then the nazirites shall shave the consecrated head at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and shall take the hair from the consecrated head and put it on the fire under the sacrifice of well-being.

– Numbers 6:5, 13-16

Luke has prepared us for this by mentioning Paul's being under a vow at the time of his leaving Corinth (see 18:18). We already know about the letter sent to Gentile believers in the province of Syria -Cilicia after the Jerusalem assembly (see 15:23, 28-30). Luke's focus is on Paul's personal fidelity to the law of Moses as an observant Jew and a pharisee. Paul no longer looks to such fidelity for salvation; for that he entrusts himself to the love of the risen Jesus. His faithful observance of the law, however, is part of his faith in Jesus who has commissioned him to take to the Gentiles the blessings promised to Israel and intended for the world (see 1Corinthians 9:19-23).

²³So do what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow. ²⁴Join these men, go through the rite of purification with them, and pay for the shaving of their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself observe and guard the law.

²⁵But as for the Gentiles who have become believers, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.'

²⁶Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having purified himself, he entered the temple with them, making public the completion of the days of purification when the sacrifice would be made for each of them.

²⁷When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, who had seen him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd. They seized him, shouting,

²⁸'Fellow Israelites, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place;

more than that, he has actually brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.'

²⁹For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple.

³⁰Then all the city was aroused, and the people rushed together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut.

Jews from Asia were among those who were responsible for having Stephen stoned (see 6:9). Presumably, they were also among those who tried to kill Paul when he was in Jerusalem after his conversion (see 9:29). Luke has told us about the riot that broke out in Ephesus, and of the part played in it by some Jews (see 19:33-34). In Paul's farewell speech to the elders of the church in Ephesus, he spoke of how, during his time there, he had to 'endure the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews'(20:19). We can assume that they were among those spreading false rumours about Paul back in Jerusalem (see 21:21).

They see Paul in the temple and jump to false conclusions. Luke wants us to remember the accusations brought against Jesus some thirty years earlier (see Luke 23:10,14), as well as the accusations brought against Stephen (see 6:11-14). The paradox of the situation is striking. It is precisely when Paul is carefully carrying out the ritual requirements of the law of Moses in a way that is beyond the call of duty, that he is accused of being against 'our law'.

He is being accused of being against 'our people' yet it is he who, against much opposition, is carrying out faithfully the vocation of a Jew in carrying the word of God to the nations and in inviting them to enjoy the blessings promised to Abraham and his descendents.

He is being accused of being against 'this holy place', yet it is he who is bringing into the temple the offerings that have come from the contributions of the Gentiles, thereby making the temple a house of prayer for all the nations.

As we hear the Jews crying out for help, we remember the cry for help from Macedonia – a cry which Paul answered so generously (see 16:9). He has the door of the temple closed against him, yet it is he who has answered the call of God to take God's revelation to the world by 'opening a door of faith to the Gentiles'(14:27).

The Roman soldiers who kept guard over the temple mount from the Antonia fortress intervene and rescue Paul from the rioting crowd who shout out in words that echo the cry against Jesus: 'Away with this fellow!' (Luke 23:18).

The commander is surprised when Paul speaks to him in Greek. He thought that he may be the Egyptian who had led a recent revolt. We know from the Jewish historian Flavian Josephus that the Roman governor ordered a wholesale massacre of those involved in the uprising, but that their leader escaped.

Paul tells the commander that he is a Jew from Tarsus (see 9:11), and requests permission to address the people. He is granted permission, calls for silence and addresses the people in their own language.

³¹While they were trying to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. ³²Immediately he took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. When they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. ³³Then the tribune came, arrested him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains; he inquired who he was and what he had done.

³⁴Some in the crowd shouted one thing, some another; and as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks.

³⁵When Paul came to the steps, the violence of the mob was so great that he had to be carried by the soldiers. ³⁶The crowd that followed kept shouting, 'Away with him!'

³⁷Just as Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, 'May I say something to you?' The tribune replied, 'Do you know Greek?

³⁸Then you are not the Egyptian who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?'

³⁹Paul replied, 'I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city; I beg you, let me speak to the people.'

⁴⁰When he had given him permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the people for silence; and when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:

Paul was a persecutor

**¹Brothers and fathers,
listen to the defence that
I now make before you.'**

**²When they heard him
addressing them in He-
brew, they became even
more quiet. Then he said:**

**³I am a Jew, born in
Tarsus in Cilicia, but
brought up in this city
at the feet of Gamaliel,
educated strictly accord-
ing to our ancestral law,
being zealous for God,
just as all of you are
today.**

**⁴I persecuted this Way up
to the point of death by
binding both men and
women and putting them
in prison, ⁵as the high
priest and the whole
council of elders can
testify about me.**

**From them I also re-
ceived letters to the
brothers in Damascus,
and I went there in order
to bind those who were
there and to bring them
back to Jerusalem for
punishment.**

Paul, like Stephen before him (see 7:2), addresses the crowd with respect and as his brother Jews. He speaks in his own defence (Greek: *apologia*), for he wishes to explain that what he has done has been in obedience to the call given to him by the God of their people. He wants also to say to them that they, like him, could take up the call given to them as members of God's chosen people.

The setting is highly symbolic. He is standing between the Roman soldiers and the Jewish crowd on the steps leading from the temple mount to the Roman fortress. He has been chosen by God to be a bridge between the two cultures, offering peace and reconciliation through the message of life which he has been chosen to proclaim. He has spoken to the Romans in the language of the empire (Greek): 'I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia' (21:39). He opens with the same words, spoken now in Aramaic to his own people.

The violence which is stirring the crowd comes from their zeal for God. Paul reminds them that he knows what such zeal is like. We are reminded of his words to the Galatians: 'I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors' (Galatians 1:14). Though native of a city in Cilicia, he declares that he was educated in Jerusalem under one of the leading Pharisees of the day: Gamaliel, the nephew of Hillel (see 5:38).

More than that, he was so zealous for God that he persecuted the followers of Jesus (see 8:3). This is all a matter of public record. As he writes to the Philippians:

I was circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

– Philippians 3:5-6

Paul tells the crowd that in his zeal, and to stamp out what appeared to him as a form of idolatry (see Deuteronomy 13), he responded to a request from the Jews in Damascus and went there to round up the Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment.

Paul's audience knows how God has intervened in the lives of people to call them to his service. This is the story of the patriarchs, of Moses, and the prophets. This is Paul's story. Those who were journeying to Damascus with Paul knew that God was intervening, for, as with the shepherds at Jesus' birth 'the glory of the Lord shone about them' (Luke 2:9) – in this case 'to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2Corinthians 4:6). The call, however, was for Paul alone: 'they did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking with me'.

It is instructive to read in Luke's earlier account of this same scene that 'the men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one' (9:7). Surely we have here an indication that we are to seek to discover what Luke intends to say through symbolic language which is not always to be taken literally. What the accounts have in common is the personal nature of the call. In the earlier account, the stress is on the glory of God which floods the soul of Paul alone. Here all are bathed in light, but only Paul hears the call.

An added feature here is Paul's question: 'What am I to do, Lord?' (Some ancient manuscripts include this question in 9:6, and it is found there in the Latin Vulgate.) We are reminded of the question put to Peter and the other apostles on the day of Pentecost (2:37). The same question was put to John the Baptist (see Luke 3:10,12,14). It is a sign that the movement of repentance has begun.

Bathed in the light of the divine glory, Paul realises that whatever it is that has been guiding him to this point can guide him no longer. For him it can be only the new light of a new creation. He continues on his way to Damascus, a humbler man, ready to be led. The light that will guide him now is the light seen by Stephen, when, just before he was stoned (and with Paul's approval):

filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'

– Acts 7:55-56

⁶While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me.

⁷I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'

⁸I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' Then he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.'

⁹Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me.

¹⁰I asked, 'What am I to do, Lord?' The Lord said to me, 'Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do.'

¹¹Since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, those who were with me took my hand and led me to Damascus.

¹²A certain Ananias, who was a devout man according to the law and well spoken of by all the Jews living there, ¹³came to me; and standing beside me, he said ‘Brother Saul, regain your sight!’ In that very hour I regained my sight and saw him.

¹⁴Then he said, ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice;

¹⁵for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard.

¹⁶And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptised, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.’

Paul has just mentioned that he was educated by the leading Pharisee of the day, Gamaliel, ‘strictly according to our ancestral law’ (22:3). Now his call is revealed to him by Ananias, described as ‘a devout man according to the law and well spoken of by all the Jews living there [in Damascus]’. He cannot be accused of not knowing the law, or of having allowed himself to be unduly influenced by people ignorant of it.

Ananias reassures him that he has been chosen by ‘the God of our ancestors’. It was God who spoke to Paul and revealed to him his will. The accusations are being levelled against Paul by people who see themselves as being zealous for the upholding of the law. The only reason for zeal is obedience to the will of God, and it is precisely to carry out God’s will that Paul has been chosen. The psalmist prays:

I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.

– Psalm 40:8

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God.
Let your good spirit lead me on a level path.

– Psalm 143:10

Ananias describes Jesus as ‘the Righteous One’ – the same terms used by Peter (see 3:14) and by Stephen (see 7:52). Jesus is the one who was totally committed to carrying out the will of God: to being perfectly obedient to the law.

Ananias tells Paul to ‘get up’ (Greek: *anastas*). He is being offered by God the grace to rise from death to a new life. He tells him to call on the name of the Lord, for ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved’ (2:21). Indeed, ‘there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved’ (4:12). He tells Paul to ‘be baptised, and have your sins washed away’. We recall Peter’s words to the assembled Jews on the day of Pentecost:

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

– Acts 2:38

Paul has spoken of the vision which he had along the road to Damascus. He speaks now of a vision which, as in Isaiah 6:1, took place in the temple during Paul's visit twenty years earlier. This is the visit described in 9:26-30. They have just been accusing him of being 'against this place' (21:28). In sight of the temple, the doors of which they have just closed against him, Paul declares that it was while praying in the temple that he was given instructions to leave Jerusalem (see 9:29-30) to go to the Gentiles (see 9:15; 13:2). The mission to the Gentiles, far from being something against the temple, is a mission from the temple. He has been carrying out the will of God as their delegate, and on their behalf. Did not God say through Isaiah:

You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified. ...
It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

– Isaiah 49:3,6

Like Moses (see Exodus 3:12), and like Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5), Paul is sent out (Greek: *exapostellō*). Though not one of the twelve who were with Jesus from the time of his baptism (see 1:22), he is an 'apostle' (see 14:6,14), for, like the twelve, he has received a commission from the risen Lord. He speaks again of his history as a persecutor of the church (see 22:4-5), for he wants the crowd to see that if he can change, so can they. They are doing now what Paul once did. If they are zealous for the law, they will listen to God's word and want to obey God's will. They, like Paul, can respond to grace and carry out the mission entrusted to Israel to carry to the nations the knowledge of the one true God and of God's gracious offer of salvation.

Paul stands before them, bound in double chains (see 21:33), yet a free man. He is telling them that it is they who are the prisoners, as he once was himself. It is they who are on trial, not he, for the nations will judge them for their failure to carry out the commission given them by God. To be liberated from the chains that bind them, they, like him, will need to listen to the surprise of God's voice calling them to do God's will in ways that go beyond the confines of the law as they now conceive it. They, like Paul, will have to give up everything for Christ (see Philippians 3:7-11): 'Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it' (Luke 17:33).

17'After I had returned to Jerusalem and while I was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance¹⁸ and saw Jesus saying to me, "Hurry and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me."¹⁹ And I said, "Lord, they themselves know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you.²⁰ And while the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I myself was standing by, approving and keeping the coats of those who killed him."²¹ Then he said to me, "Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles."

²²Up to this point they listened to him, but then they shouted, 'Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.'

²³And while they were shouting, throwing off their cloaks, and tossing dust into the air, ²⁴the tribune directed that he was to be brought into the barracks, and ordered him to be examined by flogging, to find out the reason for this outcry against him.

²⁵But when they had tied him up with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, 'Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?'

²⁶When the centurion heard that, he went to the tribune and said to him, 'What are you about to do? This man is a Roman citizen.'

²⁷The tribune came and asked Paul, 'Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?' And he said, 'Yes.' ²⁸The tribune answered, 'It cost me a large sum of money to get my citizenship.' Paul said, 'But I was born a citizen.'

²⁹Immediately those who were about to examine him drew back from him; and the tribune also was afraid, for he realised that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.

³⁰Since he wanted to find out what Paul was being accused of by the Jews, the next day he released him and ordered the chief priests and the entire council to meet. He brought Paul down and had him stand before them.

The Jewish crowd is unrepentant. They repeat their earlier cry (see 21:36) – the same cry that was hurled against Jesus (see Luke 23:18).

Paul has given his defence before the Jews. He has claimed to have acted in accordance with the Jewish law and with God's revealed will. Now he asks to be treated by the Romans in accordance with Roman law (compare 16:37-38).

The tribune is named Claudius (see 23:36). It is likely that he received his citizenship under the emperor Claudius, and it is known that under Claudius citizenship could be bought. Since Paul was born a Roman citizen, his citizenship must have been acquired by his ancestors. We are not told how, though it is unlikely that a family of strict observance would have acquired it through military service.

Like the magistrates in Philippi (see 16:38), the military commander is afraid of the possible consequences to himself for his having treated a Roman citizen improperly. As a first step in due process he organises for Paul to be tried before the Jewish court.

Paul speaks to the members of the Jewish court as a fellow Jew. Absent from his address is the word 'fathers'(see 22:1; also 7:2; compare 4:9). Luke is presenting his words here as those of a prophet, inspired and sent by God. The court has no jurisdiction over the words of God. Paul has just declared that he is a Roman citizen (see 22:28). He now declares that he has lived 'with a clear conscience' his life as a citizen of God's chosen people (Greek: *politeuomai*, compare Philippians 1:27).

Ananias was appointed by the Romans to the position of high priest in 47AD and was replaced in 59AD. He was a cruel and avaricious man, known as a collaborator with the occupying forces. He commands an action which Luke sees as his rejection of God's word: he has the prophet struck on the mouth. Ezekiel spoke out against those who, instead of mending the wall, covered over the cracks with whitewash (Ezekiel 13:10-15). The Venerable Bede points out that Paul's words to the high priest do not express a wish (a curse). Rather, they express what will happen. They are the words of a prophet and so are to be taken as a warning. They contain the implied 'If you do not repent.' Paul accuses the high priest of acting unjustly (see Leviticus 19:15), and therefore against the very law he is supposed to uphold.

Paul is accused of disobeying God by insulting the high priest. He responds by quoting the law (Exodus 22:27), but his response is loaded with irony. By his position and dress it would have been obvious that Ananias was high priest. Paul is in effect commenting on Ananias's behaviour which was so unbecoming of his position that anyone could be excused for failing to recognise him.

¹While Paul was looking intently at the council he said, 'Brothers, up to this day I have lived my life ['as a citizen'] with a clear conscience before God.'

²Then the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near him to strike him on the mouth.

³At this Paul said to him, 'God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting there to judge me according to the law, and yet in violation of the law you order me to be struck?'[Leviticus 19:15]

⁴Those standing nearby said, 'Do you dare to insult God's high priest?'

⁵And Paul said, 'I did not realise, brothers, that he was high priest; for it is written, "You shall not speak evil of a leader of your people".'

⁶When Paul noticed that some were Sadducees and others were Pharisees, he called out in the council, ‘Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead.’

⁷When he said this, a dissension began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸(The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, or angel, or spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge all three.)

⁹Then a great clamour arose, and certain scribes of the Pharisees’ group stood up and contended, ‘We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?’

¹⁰When the dissension became violent, the tribune, fearing that they would tear Paul to pieces, ordered the soldiers to go down, take him by force, and bring him into the barracks.

¹¹That night the Lord stood near him and said, ‘Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome.’

The Sadducees saw themselves as safeguarding the ancient traditions. They rejected interpretations which went beyond the words of the Torah. The Pharisees interpreted the Torah in the light of the prophets and the writings. They drew their inspiration from the Hasidim who stood out against the attempts of the Syrian kings to introduce Greek culture into Judea. The heroism of the martyrs of the Maccabean resistance, brought some of the Jews, including the Hasidim, to believe that God would raise up the faithful of Israel even from the dead. It was in this way that they interpreted the vision of Ezekiel (37:1-14), and the words of the prophet Isaiah:

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!

– Isaiah 26:19

The Sadducees rejected the idea, as Luke has already indicated (see 4:2). Their argument with Jesus was also over the resurrection (see Luke 20:27-40).

The Pharisees agreed with the Sadducees concerning God’s transcendence, but they believed also that it was God himself who deals intimately with humans through the mediation of angels. They interpreted the words of the prophet Malachi in this way:

See, I am sending my messenger [angel] to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

– Malachi 3:1

God also deals in an intimate way with us through the gift of his own Spirit. The argument before the Sanhedrin is about who truly observes the law. Members of the Pharisee party take up the position espoused earlier by their leader Gamaliel (see 5:34-39), Paul’s teacher (see 22:3). Echoing Pilate’s judgment concerning Jesus (see Luke 23:4,14,22), they find nothing with which to accuse Paul. The soldiers are sent into the Jewish court room to rescue Paul (compare 21:32).

Jesus appears to Paul to encourage him. Paul has testified to Jesus in Jerusalem (see 21:13). He *must* now bear witness in Rome (see 19:21).

The text is self-evident. Perhaps a comment is in order on the final verse. The Jewish council and the terrorists who have taken an oath that they will murder Paul are described as being ready and 'waiting for' (Greek: *prosdechomai*) the 'consent' (Greek: *epaggelia*) of the military commander. Throughout the Acts the word *epaggelia* has been used for the promises that have been made by God to Israel, and the word *prosdechomai* has been used for waiting for these promises to be fulfilled. This is all being terribly and tragically distorted.

Paul, in prison, awaiting trial, is a symbol of Jesus, the suffering servant of the Lord. He is proclaiming the word of salvation, the word of freedom. The leaders of the Jews, who should have been the ones to welcome the word and the Holy Spirit promised by the Father, are the very ones who are rejecting Paul. It is the Gentiles who are saving him from their murderous intent.

¹²In the morning the Jews joined in a conspiracy and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. ¹³There were more than forty who joined in this conspiracy. ¹⁴They went to the chief priests and elders and said, 'We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food until we have killed Paul. ¹⁵Now then, you and the council must notify the tribune to bring him down to you, on the pretext that you want to make a more thorough examination of his case. And we are ready to do away with him before he arrives.'

¹⁶Now the son of Paul's sister heard about the ambush; so he went and gained entrance to the barracks and told Paul. ¹⁷Paul called one of the centurions and said, 'Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to report to him.' ¹⁸So he took him, brought him to the tribune, and said, 'The prisoner Paul called me and asked me to bring this young man to you; he has something to tell you.'

¹⁹The tribune took him by the hand, drew him aside privately, and asked, 'What is it that you have to report to me?' ²⁰He answered, 'The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more thoroughly into his case. ²¹But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him. They have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink until they kill him. They are ready now and are waiting for your consent.'

²²So the tribune dismissed the young man, ordering him, 'Tell no one that you have informed me of this.' ²³**Then he summoned two of the centurions and said, 'Get ready to leave by nine o'clock tonight for Caesarea with two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen.** ²⁴**Also provide mounts for Paul to ride, and take him safely to Felix the governor.'** ²⁵**He wrote a letter to this effect:**

²⁶Claudius Lysias to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. ²⁷**This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them, but when I had learned that he was a Roman citizen, I came with the guard and rescued him.** ²⁸**Since I wanted to know the charge for which they accused him, I had him brought to their council.** ²⁹**I found that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but was charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment.** ³⁰**When I was informed that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him.'**

³¹So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him during the night to Antipatris. ³²**The next day they let the horsemen go on with him, while they returned to the barracks.** ³³**When they came to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him.** ³⁴**On reading the letter, he asked what province he belonged to, and when he learned that he was from Cilicia,** ³⁵**he said, 'I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive.'** Then he ordered that he be kept under guard in Herod's headquarters.

The extraordinary size of the escort as described here by Luke is a measure of the unrest of the times, of the extent of the danger to Paul, and of the extent to which the Roman authority is willing to go to carry out its duty of care for one of its own.

The letter from the military commander to the governor is a model of clarity and good administration. He describes the initial disturbance (see 21:30-33), and his own action, which he explains as a decision which he made because Paul was a Roman citizen.

His organising for Paul to be judged by the Jewish council was exactly what he should have done. He reports that the council did not charge Paul with anything deserving death or imprisonment (see 23:9). Like Gallio in Corinth, he does not see it as his duty to interfere with internal Jewish matters (see 18:14-15), but he is sending Paul to the governor for his judgment.

The escort takes Paul by night to Antipatris, a Roman fortress some forty kilometres short of Caesarea. It was built by Herod the Great and named after his father. After Antipatris they are in largely Gentile territory and safe from ambush.

At this time, Tarsus was subject to the governor of the combined province of Syria-Cilicia. This meant that Tarsus and Judea belonged to the same administrative region. Since the accusations came from Judea, it was Felix's responsibility to judge the matter. We find out later that he is also hoping for a bribe (see 24:26).

The turmoil in Jerusalem gives way to the tranquillity of Caesarea. Though located in Palestine, it was more a Roman than a Jewish city, dominated by the presence of the Roman governor and of an army made up of Gentile soldiers. The high priest and the Jewish elders are in foreign territory here, so they rely on a Greek-speaking attorney to put their case.

At the time of Jesus' public ministry some thirty years earlier, the Roman governor was a military prefect. When the governorship was restored by Claudius in 44AD, the governor was given the position of procurator. Being of equestrian rank, he is addressed correctly by Tertullus as 'Your Excellency' (Greek: *kratistos*). Felix, who had a well-earned reputation for being ruthless, had held the position since 52AD. His current wife was Drusilla, the eighteen year old younger sister of king Agrippa II and Berenice.

After an introduction consisting of a flattering address to the governor, the attorney presents the case against Paul. He makes no mention of the real reasons for the Jewish enmity (see 21:21 and 21:28), but presents Paul as a threat to the good order which is reigning in the land thanks to the fine administration of the Roman governor.

He makes no attempt to provide any proof – there being none – and all that the Jewish authorities do is back up his accusations. The passage prepares us to focus on Paul and to listen to his defence.

¹Five days later the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and an attorney, a certain Tertullus, and they reported their case against Paul to the governor.

²When Paul had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying:

'Your Excellency, because of you we have long enjoyed peace, and reforms have been made for this people because of your foresight.

³We welcome this in every way and everywhere with utmost gratitude.

⁴But, to detain you no further, I beg you to hear us briefly with your customary graciousness.

⁵We have, in fact, found this man a pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. ⁶He even tried to profane the temple, and so we seized him.

[7]

⁸By examining him yourself you will be able to learn from him concerning everything of which we accuse him.'

⁹The Jews also joined in the charge by asserting that all this was true.

[7] Other ancient manuscripts add:

'and we would have judged him according to our law. But the chief captain Lysias came and with great violence took him out of our hands, commanding his accusers to come before you'

¹⁰When the governor motioned to him to speak, Paul replied: 'I cheerfully make my defence, knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation. ¹¹As you can find out, it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem. ¹²They did not find me disputing with anyone in the temple or stirring up a crowd either in the synagogues or throughout the city. ¹³Neither can they prove to you the charge that they now bring against me.

¹⁴But this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets.

¹⁵I have a hope in God — a hope that they themselves also accept — that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous. ¹⁶Therefore I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people.

¹⁷Now after some years I came to bring alms to my nation and to offer sacrifices.

¹⁸While I was doing this, they found me in the temple, completing the rite of purification, without any crowd or disturbance. ¹⁹But there were some Jews from Asia — they ought to be here before you to make an accusation, if they have anything against me. ²⁰Or let these men here tell what crime they had found when I stood before the council, ²¹unless it was this one sentence that I called out while standing before them, "It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today".'

Paul acknowledges the right of the governor to sit in judgment, but sets about demolishing the accusations. He has only just arrived in Jerusalem. How could he have had time to organise the kind of attack against civil order of which he is being accused? The accusation that he was stirring up trouble in the temple is simply untrue. Furthermore, they have given no evidence, and are unable to produce any support for their claims.

He explains that the problem between the Sanhedrin and himself is a religious one. What they are calling a 'sect' (see 24:5) is in fact a 'way', a way of living that is in perfect accord with the law and the prophets. His hope 'that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous' is shared by one of the main parties in the Sanhedrin (see 23:6-9).

Once again (see 23:1), Paul claims to have 'a clear conscience'. His reason for being in Jerusalem is twofold. He has come with financial assistance and to offer sacrifices. Luke mentioned the sacrifices earlier (see 21:26-27). Though he mentioned an earlier visit when Paul brought aid from Antioch (see 11:29-30), this is the first time that he has mentioned this as a reason for Paul's visit. We know of this also from Paul's letters (see 2Corinthians 8-9; Romans 15:25,31).

Paul concludes with the same proclamation with which he concluded his defence before the Sanhedrin (see 23:6): 'It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today'.

To declare Paul innocent would stir up trouble in Jerusalem. To declare him guilty without being able to provide any evidence could cause problems for Felix in Rome. He decides to postpone judgment. In the meantime Paul is to remain in custody, but with some freedom of movement, and his friends were able to look after him. Felix and Drusilla show some interest in what Paul has to say 'concerning faith in Jesus Christ'. However, the governor shows no interest in either truth or conversion. Luke reveals his motive. He has heard that Paul came to Jerusalem with money for the community, and he is looking for his cut.

Two years pass. Did Paul write some of his letters from prison during this period? It is possible, but we have no indication of this from the letters themselves, and Luke passes over the two years in complete silence.

In his Gospel, John wants us to stand on Calvary with Mary. He wants us to identify with the beloved disciple and to look in silence upon the one whom we have pierced (see John 19:37). Luke wants us to look at Paul, the faithful ambassador of Jesus, the suffering servant of the Lord. He wants us to look upon the one we have bound. Reduced to silence, and unable to move from city to city, he stands before us as a model of fidelity, wanting only God's will and witnessing to his faith. He could say later to his dear friend, Timothy:

I know the one in whom I have put my trust
– 2Timothy 1:12

And as he has already written to the Corinthians:

I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships,
persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ;
for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.
– 2Corinthians 12:10

In 59AD Felix was recalled to Rome by the emperor Nero and replaced by Porcius Festus. By this time Paul had been in detention for two years. Since he had not been pronounced guilty, Roman law required that he be set free. However, Felix, knowing that it was to his advantage to leave with as much goodwill of the Jews as possible, decides to leave Paul in prison.

²²But Felix, who was rather well informed about the Way, adjourned the hearing with the comment, 'When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case.'

²³Then he ordered the centurion to keep him in custody, but to let him have some liberty and not to prevent any of his friends from taking care of his needs.

²⁴Some days later when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him speak concerning faith in Christ Jesus.

²⁵And as he discussed justice, self-control, and the coming judgment, Felix became frightened and said, 'Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity, I will send for you.' ²⁶**At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul, and for that reason he used to send for him very often and converse with him.**

²⁷After two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and since he wanted to grant the Jews a favour, Felix left Paul in prison.

¹Three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem ²where the chief priests and the leaders of the Jews gave him a report against Paul. They appealed to him ³and requested, as a favour to them against Paul, to have him transferred to Jerusalem. They were, in fact, planning an ambush to kill him along the way.

⁴Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea, and that he himself intended to go there shortly. ⁵'So,' he said, 'let those of you who have the authority come down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them accuse him.'

⁶After he had stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea; the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. ⁷When he arrived, the Jews who had gone down from Jerusalem surrounded him, bringing many serious charges against him, which they could not prove.

⁸Paul said in his defence, 'I have in no way committed an offence against the law of the Jews, or against the temple, or against the emperor.'⁹But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favour, asked Paul, 'Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and be tried there before me on these charges?'

¹⁰Paul said, 'I am appealing to the emperor's tribunal; this is where I should be tried. I have done no wrong to the Jews, as you very well know. ¹¹Now if I am in the wrong and have committed something for which I deserve to die, I am not trying to escape death; but if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can turn me over to them. I appeal to the emperor.'¹²Then Festus, after he had conferred with his council, replied, 'You have appealed to the emperor; to the emperor you will go.'

Besides the new procurator, there is also a new high priest, Ishmael, appointed the previous year. The Jewish authorities take advantage of the new governor to ask that Paul be transferred to Jerusalem. Those who had vowed to kill Paul (see 23:14-15) are as determined as ever.

Festus does not accede to their request but promises to expedite matters and invites them to present their case against Paul at Caesarea. They do so, but, as was the case two years previously, they are unable to prove their accusations (see 24:13).

Paul pronounces his innocence in the clearest of terms: 'I have in no way committed an offence against the law of the Jews, or against the temple, or against the emperor.' It appears to Festus that the argument is basically a matter for the Jews to sort out among themselves. He suggests to Paul that he go to Jerusalem and be tried there.

Three years earlier, 'in the Spirit', it was revealed to Paul that he should go to Jerusalem and 'after I have gone there, I must also see Rome' (19:21). When he was first made a prisoner in Jerusalem, 'the Lord stood near him and said, "Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome"' (23:11). Paul discerns that the time has come, and he asserts his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to the tribunal of the emperor. After consulting with his council the governor accedes.

On the death of his father, Herod Agrippa I in 44AD (see 12:20-23), King Agrippa II inherited only a small part of the kingdom in the north (the tetrarchy of Philip, Luke 3:1). The emperor Claudius returned Judea to the control of a Roman governor. However in 56AD Nero gave him part of Galilee and Perea as well, plus a certain supervisory role over affairs in Jerusalem. He had the right to appoint the high priest.

At the time of this visit to Caesarea he was thirty-three years old and it was widely rumoured that he was living in an incestuous relationship with his younger sister, Berenice. She had already been married three times, and a few years later was to become the mistress of the Roman general, Titus, till he became emperor and rejected her.

Festus tells Agrippa about Paul. It now becomes evident that he had seen through the request of the Sanhedrin to have the trial moved to Jerusalem. He had also picked up that the main point of dispute concerned 'a certain Jesus, who had died, but whom Paul asserted to be alive'.

When Luke speaks of the first of the Roman emperors he transliterates his latin title 'Augustus' into the Greek *Augoustos* (see Luke 2:1). Later emperors took the title. Here, Luke is referring to the emperor Nero, so he uses the Greek translation of Augustus, *Sebastos*, translated here as 'Imperial Majesty'.

Thirty years earlier, the uncle of Agrippa's father had expressed interest in seeing Jesus (see Luke 23:8). Now Agrippa wants to see Paul.

¹³After several days had passed, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to welcome Festus. ¹⁴Since they were staying there several days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying,

'There is a man here who was left in prison by Felix. ¹⁵When I was in Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews informed me about him and asked for a sentence against him. ¹⁶I told them that it was not the custom of the Romans to hand over anyone before the accused had met the accusers face to face and had been given an opportunity to make a defence against the charge. ¹⁷So when they met here, I lost no time, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought.

¹⁸When the accusers stood up, they did not charge him with any of the crimes that I was expecting. ¹⁹Instead they had certain points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.

²⁰Since I was at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wished to go to Jerusalem and be tried there on these charges. ²¹But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of his Imperial Majesty, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to the emperor.'

²²Agrippa said to Festus, 'I would like to hear the man myself.' 'Tomorrow,' he said, 'you will hear him.'

²³So on the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then Festus gave the order and Paul was brought in.

²⁴And Festus said, 'King Agrippa and all here present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish community petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer.

²⁵But I found that he had done nothing deserving death; and when he appealed to his Imperial Majesty, I decided to send him.

²⁶But I have nothing definite to write to our sovereign about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write — ²⁷for it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner without indicating the charges against him.'

In this magnificent setting, in the presence of 'prominent men of the city' as well as of the Jewish king and his entourage, once again we hear the Roman governor declare Paul's innocence (compare 23:29). We are reminded of Pilate's judgment concerning Jesus:

I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death.

— Luke 23:14-15

Festus has to justify his acceptance of Paul's appeal to Rome and sees an advantage in being able to send a report that he can say has come from this assembly which includes the most prominent Jew in the province.

In verse twenty-six, Festus refers to the emperor Nero as 'our sovereign'. The Greek is *kurios*: 'Lord'. Though this expression was used commonly of the emperor in Egypt and in the east, it was only with Nero that it became both widespread and encouraged.

Paul's speech repeats much of what he said before the Jewish crowd (see 22:3-21), except that this is not so much a self-defence, as Paul, a 'prisoner in Christ' carrying out his mission of proclaiming the risen Jesus before the Jewish and the Gentile world.

Paul faces two key accusations. The first, to which Paul consistently returns, concerns his proclamation that God is offering us the grace of resurrection from the dead:

Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead.

– Acts 23:6

I have a hope in God — a hope that they themselves also accept — that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous.

– Acts 24:15

It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.

– Acts 24:21

This is the claim made by Peter on the day of Pentecost when he quoted from the Psalmist:

For David says concerning him, 'I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will live in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.'

– Acts 2:25-28; Psalm 16:8-11

Paul's defence is that this is God's way of carrying out the promises made to 'our ancestors'. It is the hope of a life of unending communion with God that sustains the temple worship. Paul is speaking as a Jew from the heart of his Jewish faith. He is speaking as a Pharisee who holds to the strictest interpretation of the law. 'Your Excellency (*kratistos*) is the appropriate address for the procurator (see 24:2). Paul addresses Agrippa, correctly, as 'O king' (*basileus*).

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

Then Paul stretched out his hand and began to defend himself:

²I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am to make my defence today against all the accusations of the Jews, ³because you are especially familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews; therefore I beg of you to listen to me patiently.

⁴All the Jews know my way of life from my youth, a life spent from the beginning among my own people and in Jerusalem. ⁵They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I have belonged to the strictest sect of our religion and lived as a Pharisee.

⁶And now I stand here on trial on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors, ⁷a promise that our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship day and night.

It is for this hope, O king [NRSV 'your Excellency'], that I am accused by Jews!

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

¹Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,

went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

³Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.

⁴I persecuted this Way up to the point of death by binding both men and women and putting them in prison, ⁵as the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify about me.

From them I also received letters to the brothers in Damascus, and I went there in order to bind those who were there and to bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment.

⁶While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me.

⁹Indeed, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰And that is what I did in Jerusalem; with authority received from the chief priests, I not only locked up many of the saints in prison, but I also cast my vote against them when they were being condemned to death. ¹¹By punishing them often in all the synagogues I tried to force them to blaspheme; and since I was so furiously enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities.

¹²With this in mind, I was travelling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests,

¹³when at midday along the road, your Excellency, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions.

⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'

⁵He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?'

The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'

⁶But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.'

⁷The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.

⁷I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'

⁸I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?'

Then he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.'

[¹⁰I asked, 'What am I to do, Lord?'

The Lord said to me, 'Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do.']

⁹Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me.

¹⁴When 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 hurts you to kick against the goads.'

I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?'

The Lord answered, ¹⁵'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.'

¹⁶But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you.

¹⁷I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles — to whom I am sending you ¹⁸to open their eyes so that they may turn 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.'

⁹Indeed, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

¹⁰And that is what I did in Jerusalem; with authority received from the chief priests, I not only locked up many of the saints in prison, but I also cast my vote against them when they were being condemned to death. ¹¹By punishing them often in all the synagogues I tried to force them to blaspheme; and since I was so furiously enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities.

¹²With this in mind, I was travelling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests

Paul is facing a second accusation: that his teaching is ‘against our people, our law, and this place [the temple]’ (21:28). In his defence he speaks, once again (see 22:4-5), of the zeal which he has shown for Judaism, even to being a persecutor of those he refers to here as ‘saints’. By speaking of the followers of Jesus in this way he is highlighting the fact that, though he was acting with the authority of the very people who are now accusing him, he was acting against the holiness of God. An example of this is the part he played in the killing of Stephen (see 7:58; 8:1; 22:20).

Throughout the Acts, Luke is constantly making the point that what Paul is doing is not against Judaism. Quite the contrary. It is his zeal for Judaism that impels him to carry out faithfully the mission given to Israel. What made the difference for Paul was when he came to see that fidelity to the God of Abraham, Moses and David demanded that he embrace Christianity, not persecute it. This happened on the road to Damascus, which Paul once again recounts (see 22:6-11).

The key to his defence is that he is teaching the way he does because he has been directed to do so by 'the Lord'. The focus in this account is clearly on mission. We know from earlier accounts the part played by Ananias in mediating God's will to Paul. Ananias is not mentioned here, because Paul does not want anything to distract from the truth that the mission which he is carrying out is in obedience to God.

A comparison can be drawn here with Paul's account of his conversion and mission in his Letter to the Galatians. We know from elsewhere how important it was for Paul that his teaching was in conformity with the teaching of the others who, like him, were sent by the Lord. In writing to the Galatians, however, he feels constrained to stress the fact that his mission comes, not from them, but from the Lord. So here, he is highlighting the fact that his teaching is in obedience to a divine command.

In his prologue, Luke referred to those who were 'eyewitnesses and servants of the word' (Luke 1:2). It was to be one of these, with a special vocation to the Gentiles, that Paul was called. Furthermore, in his vocation as a witness and a servant, he was to be a symbol for every Jew, for this is the call given to Israel by God. God chose to enlighten Paul, and to send him to open the eyes of 'your people' and 'the Gentiles':

Here is your God ... He will come and save you.
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened.

– Isaiah 35:4-5

I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I
have given you as a covenant to the people, a
light to the nations, to open the eyes that are
blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dun-
geon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

– Isaiah 42:6-7

Jesus, the risen Lord, is continuing his mission through Paul whom he has commissioned to be his witness. It is the will of God to call everyone into communion with him through faith in Jesus. He offers forgiveness from sin – an offering available to all who are willing to be converted.

¹³when at midday along the road, O king [NRSV 'your Excellency], I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions.

¹⁴When 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 hurts you to kick against the goads.' I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord answered, ¹⁵'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.

¹⁶But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you.

¹⁷I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles — to whom I am sending you ¹⁸to open their eyes so that they may turn 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.'

Paul has been faithful

¹⁹After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance.

²¹For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.

²²To this day I have had help from God, and so I stand here, testifying to both small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place:

²³that the Messiah 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 has spoken of the commission given to him from heaven. Now he points to his life to demonstrate that he has been faithful to his vocation to proclaim in Damascus (see 9:19-22), in Jerusalem (see 9:26-29), throughout the countryside in Judea (see 11:29), and also to the Gentiles (see 13:46), ‘that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance’. Paul claims that in his testimony he says ‘nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place’. We recall the words of the risen Jesus to the apostles:

‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you — that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled’. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things’.

– Luke 24:44-48

Paul is portrayed here by Luke as having carried out the mission given to the apostles by the risen Jesus. When the aged Simeon embraced the infant Messiah in the temple, he cried out with joy:

My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

– Luke 2:30-32

Paul has been faithful in proclaiming the good news to the Jews that God has fulfilled his promises to them by raising Jesus from the dead. He is the servant to whom the Lord has said:

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

– Isaiah 49:6

Standing in the audience hall before this gathering from the Jewish and Gentile worlds, Paul is a symbol of those who have been faithful to their Jewish heritage by accepting ‘the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus’(13:32-33).

On the day of Pentecost, there were those who accused the apostles of being drunk (see 2:13). Festus accuses Paul of raving. Paul claims to be speaking ‘the sober truth’ under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (compare 2:4; 2:16). Did not Jesus promise:

‘You will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.

– Luke 21:12-15

Agrippa seems quite impressed, and calls forth from Paul a prayer that sums up the longing that has been in Paul’s heart throughout the long years of his missionary life:

I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am.

Luke wants this appeal to ring out from the audience hall throughout the length and breadth of the world, to Jew and Gentile alike, as each of us in our ‘todays’ continue to hear Paul’s proclamation through Luke’s writing:

He is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts.

– Psalm 95:7-8

The scene concludes with a final statement, this time from the Jewish king, that Paul is innocent (see 23:9,29; 25:25). Luke directs our attention towards Rome.

²⁴While he was making this defence, Festus exclaimed, ‘You are out of your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!’

²⁵But Paul said, ‘I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking the sober truth.

²⁶Indeed the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely; for I am certain that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner.

²⁷King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.’

²⁸Agrippa said to Paul, ‘Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?’

²⁹Paul replied, ‘Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am — except for these chains.’

³⁰Then the king got up, and with him the governor and Bernice and those who had been seated with them; ³¹and as they were leaving, they said to one another, ‘This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.’

³²Agrippa said to Festus, ‘This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor.’