

# On Trial for Hope

Acts 25:13–26:32

June 9, 2002

“Now I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our fathers. . . . And for this hope I am accused. . . . Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” Why, indeed? Why is it thought incredible by anyone that God raises the dead? If God created the world out of nothing, if God created life out of nothing, surely God can and does recreate life out of death. Surely God can and does raise the dead to a new and different life. Surely God can and does save what he has made and does not let it be lost. Surely God does this. Why is it thought incredible by anyone that God raises the dead?

After all, this is what God had promised the fathers: “The LORD of hosts . . . will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever” (Isaiah 25:6-8). God had promised that he would conquer death. God had promised that he would destroy death. God had promised that he would not allow death to have the final word about who we are. This means not only that death would end someday so that there would be no more death from that point on but also that those who were already dead would be raised. Thus the prophets tell of the general resurrection yet to come: “Those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever” (Daniel 12:2-3). More specifically, God had promised to raise his own people from death: “Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. . . . And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live” (Ezekiel 37:12, 14). This is what God had promised the fathers. Why is it thought incredible by anyone that God raises the dead?

And yet, this is why Paul was on trial. “Now I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our fathers. . . . And for this hope I am accused. . . . Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” He was on trial because he believed in the promise of God. He was on trial because he dared to place his hope on the power, the goodness, and the love of God. He was on trial, not because he was a criminal, but because he believed in the resurrection, the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promise of our own, and he could not understand why no one else believed. As Governor Festus said, “When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed; but they had certain points of dispute with him about their own superstition and about one Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.” And as it is twice recorded that these Roman officials said, “I found that he had done nothing deserving death,” and “This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.” So, believing in the resurrection was not a crime, but, apparently, it was an offense.

Perhaps it is still the most difficult part of the Christian faith. For people not convinced by the promises of scripture, for people overwhelmed by the visible realities of life and death, faith in the resurrection is very hard. If you start with the reality of death, it is hard ever to get beyond that point. If you start even with the reality of life, you have to admit that all life leads to death. So, it is hard to get anywhere with that, either. But if you start with the reality of the power of God, then you have reached back to the right starting place. If you start with the reality of the

power of God, then you have something that can challenge the power of death. Death is entirely negative, destructive, and privative. It cannot create anything. It can only take away. The very fact that we are here at all indicates that there is a greater power than death in the universe. There is a power in the universe which is not merely destructive but which is actually creative. That power we understand as God. And because God, who made us, is stronger than the power of death, we have good reason to believe that he will also save us for himself even on the other side of death, raising us to life again for himself. This is what God has promised. This is what began to come true in Jesus Christ. This is what Paul believed. This is why he was on trial. This is what we are still called to believe today.

We live in a world which deals in the power of death. We live in a time of war and of threats of war. But even if we lived in a time of peace, we would still live in a situation where death challenged and threatened every one of us. Death calls into question all human life and achievement. And yet, what the gospel tells us, what the content of the Christian faith tells us, is that death does not have the final say, death is not the ultimate power, that God has plans for us which death cannot destroy, and that God will raise us from the dead and grant us eternal life. This is still good news for us today, no less than it was for Paul. This still changes everything in our lives now, just as it did then. This is still good reason for us to share the gospel with the world, even as he did then. And it still upsets and baffles many people in the church and outside the church even as it did then. It is a common saying that nothing is sure except taxes and death. Now the resurrection begins to eat away at that surety. The resurrection begins to undermine our perceptions of reality. The resurrection changes the way we look at the world and the way we look at life.

The stated purpose of Christ's resurrection appearance to Paul still stands: "I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from the people and from the Gentiles—to whom I send you to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." This is why the gospel has come to us, and this is why it cannot stop with us. We who have received the good news are to continue to share it with the world. This is the power of God to turn people from darkness to light. This is the power of God to turn people from Satan to himself. This is the power of God to forgive people of their sin. This is the power of God to call people his very own, to bring them to himself, and to make them holy by faith in God and in God's Christ. Is there anyone who does not need to know this? Is there anyone so good as not to need this help? How can we best carry this message to family, friends, neighbors, and strangers here in the Fan, in the city, in the counties, and around the world? How can Grace Covenant best be not only a recipient of the gospel of Jesus Christ but also a messenger of the gospel of Jesus Christ? How can we best be not only beneficiaries of the grace of God but also agents of the grace of God? What are the deeds worthy of our repentance? How can we help proclaim God's light?

These are the reasons Paul was on trial. Humanly speaking, his witness was the main reason the Christian faith advanced in the ancient world. For this, we are grateful. What will be our legacy? "I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our fathers. . . . And for this hope I am accused. . . . Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?"

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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