

HOW TO PARTICIPAT IN RAISING THE DEAD

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

By Ron Ritchie

In May, I flew home from a short vacation on flight 24 in seat 14J. In my heart, I did not want to think about what was going on in the world yet, but at the same time, I asked the Lord to place someone next to me who might be open to the gospel of Jesus Christ. A young women sat down in seat 14H. After we exchanged names, she began to read her novel. When I realized that she was not going to talk, I asked the Lord to open the conversation.

As dinner was served, Shirley put her book down and began to share about her work as a young executive for a major company in our valley. In the course of our conversation, she shared that she was into the New Age theology and that she had already lived three previous lives as an Egyptian scribe, a princess in the Middle Ages and a women who had committed suicide sometime around 1900. She also revealed that she was a psychic and a mediator. Her constant companion was a spirit named "Louise" who gave her wisdom about living, decisions, and relationships. Presently, Shirley was attending a class to discover her aura. Listening to her, I realized I was sitting next to a woman whom God had declared to be one of "the living dead" (Ephesians 2:1-3). It also became apparent that Jesus wanted me to participate with him in raising her from the dead.

This is what we are going to think about as we look once again into the book of Acts. How can you and I be available to the Risen Christ to participate in his ministry of bringing people to life? Before we look at Acts 25 and 26, let me set up the context.

In 57 A. D., Paul was taken from Jerusalem to Caesarea because of an alleged violation against the temple. The Jewish leaders said he had desecrated the holy place by taking a Greek beyond the "Wall of Partition" during Pentecost. Having been removed from Jerusalem because Jews were plotting to kill him, Paul was brought before Governor Felix with whom he had the opportunity to share Jesus Christ. Over the next two years, he continued to witness to Felix and his wife Drusilla and trusted the Risen Lord for his next adventure in the age of the Spirit. Eventually, in 59 A.D., Felix was replaced by Governor Festus. This is where we find Paul in Acts 25. We will summarize this chapter so that we can spend more time on chapter 26.

In these two chapters, there is the beautiful picture of how we can participate in the raising of the dead, following four steps. In the age of the Spirit, God in his grace and mercy has made us who were once dead because of sins alive in Christ Jesus. Now he wants us to return to the cemeteries of our community to participate in his work. First, we need to trust our risen Lord to gather the spiritually dead.

I. Trust the Lord to gather the dead, 25:1-27

Even though Paul was still in prison, God was preparing an audience for him. God brought the people to Paul, not Paul to them. Paul did not have to go anywhere! Let me summarize Acts 25.

First, in verses 1 through 5, we find Festus on the scene. We do not know much about him except that he was appointed by Nero in 59 A.D. Festus ran up to Jerusalem from Caesarea to meet with the chief priests concerning the charges against Paul. They wanted to have him killed, but the governor refused saying that since Paul was a Roman citizen they had to come to Caesarea.

Ten days later, God brought more people before Paul. This is seen in verses 6 through 12 when Festus returns from Jerusalem with the chief priests to hear Paul's testimony.

Paul was then brought before the Jewish leaders and Festus where he gave his defense: "I do not deserve death because I did not do anything wrong." He then appealed to Caesar. That was the button to push! He had that right as a Roman citizen, and Festus had no choice but to send him on. Thus, the first living dead brought to Paul was Festus. God loved Festus and wanted to keep him in Caesarea where he could relate with Paul who had life to offer him.

In verses 13 through 23, God brought two more people that he loved--King Agrippa II and his wife Bernice. King Agrippa II was the son of King Agrippa I who in Acts 12 resided in Caesarea fifteen years earlier. At that time, the people began to worship him. When they cried out, "This is the voice of a god," and he did not deny it, an angel of the Lord struck him, and he died of worms. Thus, Caesarea must have evoked many memories with the son's return.

Bernice's story is complicated. She was the sister of Felix's third wife Drusilla and the blood sister of Agrippa. Therefore, she and Agrippa were practicing incest, a capital offense in Israel.

Festus explained to Agrippa how the Jews were in an uproar about the situation with Paul. He thought it was embarrassing that as governor he should send the man to Rome without any formal charges. Thus, he asked Agrippa to meet Paul and help him create a charge. Agrippa decided this would be a good time for a party since Paul could be the entertainment.

In other words, while Paul was sitting in prison, God assembled the entire town to hear his message. Festus and his family would be there along with King Agrippa and his wife. All of the commanders and prominent people of the city were invited. All were gathered on behalf of Paul, so that he could tell them about Jesus Christ.

Back on Flight 24, Shirley and I talked about how as a child she was able to move objects with her mind. She even felt that she could presently travel across the length of the plane by simple wishing it. I realized that the Risen Lord had brought this dead person to me because He loved her and wanted her to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Chills ran up and down my spine!

We need to see people in these terms. We have a wonderful commission. First, we are to trust the Lord to gather the dead. Then we will be ready for the second step. Look at verses 1 through 15 of chapter 26.

II. Tell them of your own living death, 26:1-15

And Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and proceeded to make his defense:

"In regard to all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, I consider myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I am about to make my defense before you today; especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently. So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem; since they have known about me for a long time previously, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion. And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day. And for this hope, O King, I am being accused by Jews.

Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead? So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities. While thus engaged as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, at midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven,

brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' And I said, 'Who are Thou, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.'"

Paul gave his defense with great courtesy. He did not want to be accused of being rude to the authorities. Also note that he never brought up the sins of his audience. Instead, he wanted to love them with his accepting attitude. He wanted them to know that he understood that they were being held captive by the evil one. In a real sense, they were the victims of Satan; they were not Paul's enemy.

Then he gave the real reason for his being on trial. He said, "I am on trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers, the promise to which our twelve tribes still hope, O King." What was that hope? They hoped that one day God would come to deliver his people from the Romans just as he had delivered them from their slavery in Egypt. Paul continued, "The problem is that you missed him when he came. He has delivered us and he has risen from the dead. I am on trial for the very thing that we spent 2,000 years hoping for."

Then he admitted, "I had a war going against Jesus just as you did. I thought he was dead and that his followers had overreacted." He went on to share about being commissioned by the chief priests to begin hostility against his followers. He imprisoned them, voted for their death, forced them to blaspheme, and chased them to foreign cities.

Then he met Jesus, the Risen Christ, and the war was over. Paul made his peace with the Risen Lord. He could identify the goads that Jesus was talking about. He remembered the statement to Stephen. He remembered how he had beaten prisoners who would sing and bless him in return. He remembered all the times he had kicked out against this Jesus.

On the road to Damascus, Paul acknowledged Jesus as the Risen Christ, and he understood the spiritual and political change that would take place. He also understood, as he stood before this court some 27 years later, that his message could still have a theological impact on the Jews and Gentiles in the audience. He was once like they now are--enemies of Jesus of Nazareth and his followers. He would still have been one of them were it not for the fact that God does raise the dead, and in this case he raised Jesus the Messiah. He shared with them his life as one of the living dead and expressed no condemnation of their own death. He understood their condition for he had experienced it himself.

On flight 24, as we continued to move towards San Francisco, Shirley shared how she had been raised a Catholic but had never understood her religion. As a result, she turned to the New Age theology. This gave me the opportunity to share of my own "living death."

I understood where she was coming from because I had a similar religious background. And I also ended up in the same position--a man without hope and without any sense of life. In a real sense, I became my own god and made my own rules in order to survive in a world gone mad. I also shared with her that the same fruits of emptiness, hopelessness and despair were harvested in my self-made religion.

After we have allowed the Lord to gather the dead, we are to tell them of our own living death. Third, we are to share how we arose from the dead. Paul continues his testimony in verses 16 through 23.

III. Tell them how you arose from the dead, 26:16-23

"And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But arise, and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; delivering you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.' Consequently, King Agrippa, I did not prove

disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance. For this reason some Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death. And so, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He should be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."

Paul told the gathering about his conversion. First, Jesus appointed him to be a minister. He was to be a witness of the things that he had seen and of the things the Lord would teach him later. Second, he was given a message of hope for the Jews and the Gentiles: "As Isaiah said, Jesus came and opened the eyes of the blind."

Paul was to continue Jesus' ministry. By opening the eyes of the unbelievers, two things would happen: they would turn from darkness to light and they would turn from the dominion of Satan to God. If they turned, two more things would happen. First, they would receive the forgiveness of their sins which had separated them from God. Second, they would be given an inheritance, Jesus Christ himself. He is the source of all of life, and believers can partake of his character and use it in their lives.

As a student of the Old Testament, Paul understood that he, like so many other Jews and Gentiles alike, had been blinded to the wonderful light of the knowledge of God in Jesus. The problem is that all of humanity born in Adam are dead, blind, and deaf. All are being held captive within the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom of Satan.

Paul wanted his audience to know the good news. But in order to appreciate the good news, they needed to understand the bad: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." All deserve to receive the wrath of God (physical, emotional and spiritual death). No man can experience life as it was intended to be lived, for dead men cannot function. But Paul went on to share the good news: "If you place your faith in the resurrected Jesus, he will forgive you of your sins. Then he will give you himself and the Holy Spirit who will empower you to cope with life."

Once he gave them the good news, he said, "You have a choice. Repent of your former views of Jesus. He was not the criminal or blasphemer that everyone says he was. Turn to God whose name is Jesus--as proven by the resurrection. The result of repentance is that the Risen Christ will come into your life and will motivate you toward good works and a life filled with goodness."

What Paul heard on the road to Damascus agreed with all the prophets of the Old Testament including Moses. What he heard was that the Messiah whom we know as Jesus was to suffer and that by resurrecting he should be the first to proclaim light both to the Jews and to the Gentiles. He concluded his testimony by saying, "Dear King Agrippa and Governor Festus, I am following in his footsteps. I am only agreeing with what has been written for 2,000 years."

Flight 24 offered a movie, but Shirley did not want to see it. She wanted to keep talking. I sensed in the Holy Spirit it was time to share how my life had changed from death to life, how I came to know Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. I wanted to tell her about how he forgave my sins and gave me his life. Thanks to an older gentleman across the aisle who loaned me the Bible he was reading, I was able to answer all her questions about Jesus from the Scriptures.

I brought up the fact that if she really wanted to know who God was she must look at Hebrews 11: 6: "Without faith it is impossible to please God, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." She loved the verse and wrote it down in her notebook. She was beginning to see that if she just asked God who Jesus was he would tell her. When the movie ended, we stood up, walked around for a while, and returned to seats 14J and 14H.

How can we participate in raising the dead? After we trust the Lord to gather the dead, we need to tell them of

our own living death. Then we need to tell them how we arose from the dead. Finally, we need to offer the dead life in Jesus Christ. Look at verses 24 through 32.

IV. Offer the dead life in Christ, 26:24-32

And while Paul was saying this in his defense, Festus said in a loud voice, "Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad." But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth. For the king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe in the Prophets? I know that you do." And Agrippa replied to Paul, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian." And Paul said, "I would to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains."

And the king arose and the governor and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them, and when they had drawn aside, they began talking to one another, saying, "This man is not doing anything worthy of death or imprisonment." And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

Governor Festus was bewildered. He did not know what to do with Paul. Although he thought the man was crazy, he saw that Paul was filled with passion and logic. King Agrippa was in an even more difficult situation because he knew that everything Paul had said was true. In fact, he admitted, "If I stay here much longer, I will become a Christian. But I am a Jewish king! I must think of my reputation." Paul responded with an invitation to everyone in the audience to come to know Jesus Christ. He said to the king: "King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know you do. You should know who Jesus Christ is!"

After almost five hours, flight 24 was coming to an end. Shirley and I laughed together about how time flies when your having fun. I asked her what she thought my "aura" was. She said I was well-grounded in the Scriptures and that my belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God affected my entire life. She also said that our time together made her seriously consider whether Jesus was and is the only Son of God. She now understood that if he was then she was free, based on Hebrews 11:6, to ask God to reveal that truth to her in some way. Flight 24 landed on that note. As I stood up to get our bags, I thanked the older gentleman for the three-hour use of his Bible. He laughed and said it was one of his greatest flights. He had listened to our conversation and was praying for me the whole time. Shirley gave me her address, a kiss and stepped back into her cemetery. I prayed for her and sent her a Bible with Hebrews 11:6 underlined and the tape "Who is Jesus."

Did Shirley become a believer in Jesus as her Lord and Savior? I do not know; I am not in charge of saving people. But I am responsible to witness of my faith when the Risen Lord gathers the dead, like when he gathered her on Flight 24 and placed her in seat 14H .

How do we participate with the Risen Christ in raising the dead? We are to trust the Lord to gather the dead. We are to tell them of our own living death. We are to tell them of how we arose from the dead. We are to offer the dead life in Jesus Christ.

Why are we to do this? Because the dead are blind, void of light, filled with sin, held captive by Satan, and separated from God and the life of Christ. Do not be fooled by all your friends, neighbors, and co-workers: Just because they are breathing does not mean they are living. Without placing their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, they are dead. God is willing to raise them from the dead through you and me by his power as we share the gospel of Jesus Christ and invite them to receive the free gift of God: eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the person and power of the Holy Spirit to cope with life on this earth and life in eternity. Why would you want to live any other way?

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