

Bible Studies for Life Commentary

Making Your Case

Lesson Passages:

Acts 21:40–22:10; 1 Peter 3:15-17

Background Passages:

Acts 21:26–22:21; 1 Peter 3:13-17

Lesson Outline:

Be Prepared (1 Pet. 3:15-17)

Know To Whom You Are Talking (Acts 21:40–22:3)

Share What You Know (Acts 22:4-10)

What This Lesson Is About:

This lesson helps adults understand the value of knowing what they believe and being able to explain it with confidence in any circumstance.

Why This Lesson Is Important:

Adults are bombarded with a wide variety of philosophies, beliefs, and trends. While many adult believers know they are opposed to many wrong beliefs, they can't clearly articulate what they believe or why. This lesson introduces the study of apologetics because it is important for adults to know both what they believe and why they believe.

How This Lesson Can Impact Your Life:

By learning the value of apologetics, you will discover the importance of defending your faith and beliefs in Christ. You will discover that defending your faith does not mean defensiveness but sharing with love and gentleness.

Spiritual Preparation Through Personal Bible Study

I have an apologist in my house right this very minute. A couple of months ago, my wife, Leslie, and I found termites chewing away happily on two of the front rooms of our house. After subsequently reviving my dear wife, we engaged the pest control forces and have now begun the process of repairing the damage. One of the chief workers is a man named Lester. In addition to being a carpenter/painter/electrician/anything that needs to be done type of worker, he is also a Christian who reads well and shares his faith readily and naturally. He is interested in theology, but his main strength is a simple testimony of how God has shaped, changed, and redeemed his life.

An apologist is one who defends the faith. Typically we think of a person with many degrees, engaging in debate with unbelievers in the halls of higher learning. Our first task in working through this Unit entitled "The Case for Hope" is to dispel that image. An apologist is *anyone* who follows Christ. Every one of us is enabled and responsible to make the case for the Christian faith. Apologetics, the defense of the Christian faith, involves several straightforward tasks. First, it means that a Christian should be able to

articulate a positive case for the Christian faith as a belief system that should be embraced. Second, it should provide a defense against attacks on our faith from competing belief systems. Third, an apologist should be able to respond to non-Christians' reasons for their belief systems. Finally, an apologist should be able to make a positive appeal to non-Christians to become Christians by committing their lives to Jesus Christ.¹

The passages for this study build a foundation for understanding and engaging in apologetics. Peter's words in his first letter provide some guidelines. Paul's testimony in Acts provides an example. And a man like Lester who combines love for Christ, knowledgeable faith, and friendly demeanor provides a great illustration of how every Christian can and should be an apologist.

Be Prepared (1 Pet. 3:15-17)

¹⁵ but set apart the Messiah as Lord in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. ¹⁶ However, do this with gentleness and respect, keeping your conscience clear, so that when you are accused, those who denounce your Christian life will be put to shame. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

The two verses preceding our focal passage (1 Pet. 3:13-14) provide an important context for making your case in difficult circumstances. Peter wrote to people who were persecuted for their faith. One of his main points is that we all "suffer for righteousness" and cannot be surprised by it. That fact does not undermine the legitimacy of Christianity. In fact, "you are blessed" when persecution comes.

All believers are to take advantage of every opportunity to witness to others about Jesus Christ. If we are waiting for the perfect situation, or waiting to become the perfect disciple, then we have decided ahead of time that we will remain silent. Suffering, pain, or persecution ought not mute our witness. Ironically, through God's grace and power, difficult circumstances can magnify our witness.

The starting point for making our case is to **set apart the Messiah as Lord in your hearts**. *Set apart* reflects the root word for holiness, meaning to keep something apart or above all other things in significance. The heart represents the motive for all thoughts, words, and actions. The result is a life that reflects accurately a devotion to God, a Christian point of view, and activities that are pure and honorable. This private devotion to God results in a very public life that will inevitably be evident to others. In other words, your walk must match your talk, because people will be watching.

Consistency of life and words means that we will **always be ready to give a defense** (see this lesson's word study on "Defense"). The word translated *be ready* is actually an adjective that simply describes a state of preparedness. The idea appears to be that sound Christian belief coupled with a genuine Christian lifestyle prepares every Christian for the natural opportunities to make the case for faith. No doubt, this includes a lifestyle type of evangelism, and that is good, but lifestyle evangelism must include a verbal

witness and a warm encouragement to non-believers to receive the gospel. The assumption is that we should know what we believe and be able to articulate it. Believers need to understand the essentials of the gospel and be able to explain them to others.

We should also notice that Peter anticipated that people would ask **you for a reason for the hope that is in you**. In that pagan world, the Christian lifestyle stood out starkly. Christians were different, and should be today. The real question, however, concerns not why we *live* differently, but why we have **hope**. People are truly looking for hope. In the first century, traditional Roman religion failed to meet people's deepest needs. Gods and goddesses were usually depicted as uninterested in the affairs of normal people. Into this spiritual vacuum came Christianity with its call to a higher life, its promise of a loving God, and the offer of grace. People would have wanted to know about this new religion.

People still want to know today. Our world faces the same types of spiritual and moral challenges of the first century. We live in an unbelieving world that sometimes makes us want to throw up our hands in despair. This situation actually calls for us to redouble our efforts. People will ask. Their needs have not changed. The truth of the gospel can and must be defended in an unbelieving world.

The defense of the gospel must be accompanied by **gentleness and respect**. The first word is often translated as "meek" and has the meaning of restraint, or not loudly claiming one's rights and privileges. The word translated *respect* is actually the Greek word for fear, but indicates in this context reverence toward God and in a secondary sense, sensitivity to others. Together these words remind us that we can never argue someone into the kingdom. An argumentative or belligerent approach risks making a hundred rebels for every convert. An angry or defensive Christian is not very attractive! Our goal in apologetics is to lovingly respond to someone who asks about or questions our hope in God.

Peter's exhortation to keep **your conscience clear** is a further call to live under the lordship of Christ. Bad behavior undermines a Christian's witness, but the message here is even more dire. Christians in that day would be **accused** of impiety or even treason. A pure life would be their best defense and **put to shame** their accusers. We might not yet face formal persecution in our country, but Christians must never give a foothold for the accusation of hypocrisy by immoral lifestyles.

Know To Whom You Are Talking (Acts 21:40–22:3)

⁴⁰ **After he had given permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned with his hand to the people. When there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language:**

^{22:1} **"Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense before you."² When they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even quieter.³ He continued, "I am a Jewish man, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and educated according to the strict view of our patriarchal law. Being zealous for God, just as all of you are today,**

The events described in this passage occurred after Paul's arrest in the temple complex. A mob was beating him, and if not for the intervention of the Roman guards he likely would have been killed. As the guards were hustling Paul up the steps to the Roman fortress of Antonia built against the northwest wall of the temple area, Paul asked for, and was granted, an opportunity to speak to the crowd.

Paul was a highly educated man, and made his plea to the commander of the troops in Greek (21:37). When **he addressed** the crowd, however, he spoke **in the Hebrew language**. This point of contact with the Jewish mob was extremely important. The riot against Paul began because of accusations that he was undermining Jewish law and tradition and that he had brought Greeks into the temple, thus profaning it (v. 28). They viewed Paul as a troublemaking outsider. To hear him speak **in the Hebrew language** would have at least given them a moment's pause. This one they considered a Greek outsider was suddenly addressing them fluently in their own native tongue. Perhaps he was not such an outsider after all.

He addressed them as **brothers and fathers**, terms that reflected his kinship with them and his great respect for the elders among them. Even though they had beaten him and would have killed him, he sought to establish common ground. He was one of them. Having initially established a relationship to them he appealed to them to hear his **defense**, the same word used in 1 Peter 3:15. Paul was about to make an explanation or defense of his beliefs.

The effect of his speaking in their language was immediate. Their initial quiet most likely came from the threat of Roman soldiers, but after the surprising use of Hebrew **they became even quieter**.

Paul cited several important points of contact with the crowd. Each one was highly significant. He was a **Jewish man**. Some people in the crowd likely knew this, but other did not. Even the commander of the Roman contingent initially thought he was an Egyptian rabble-rouser (21:38). Paul was not an outsider. He was one of them.

The city of his birth, **Tarsus**, lay in the Roman province of **Cilicia** [sih LISH ih uh], in southern, modern-day Turkey, and likely had a considerable Jewish population. More significantly, Paul had been **brought up in this city**, that is, Jerusalem. We do not know his age at the time, but apparently as a youngster Paul moved to Jerusalem and was raised there.

A natural part of his upbringing included being **educated according to the strict view of our patriarchal law**. The reference to *the law* specifically included the first five books of the Bible, or the Torah, the most precious of Hebrew Scriptures. His mention of **Gamaliel** [guh MAY lih uhl] was highly significant. Gamaliel was an eminent and deeply respected Jewish scholar, a leading member of the Sanhedrin, and a trainer of many disciples. Paul's educational pedigree was beyond question.

All taken together, Paul had demonstrated that he was **zealous for God** just as they were. He was no opportunistic interloper. He was one of them. The purpose for reviewing his background was to establish points of contact with the crowd. His ultimate purpose was to demonstrate that if he could make the transition to faith in Christ, then they could as

well.

Making a case for Christ should never be bound to only the right time and audience. We should be prepared to share our faith any time the Spirit moves us. However, this episode in Paul's life certainly reveals an important strategy. Our words are most likely to be heard by ears that are similar to ours. Many people may hold some notion that Christian faith is either beyond them or belongs to people who are strange and different. Do not underestimate the prejudices people retain about Christianity. To see a person like themselves, sharing their background, perhaps even their heritage, is particularly effective.

We should be especially sensitive to identify points of commonality between ourselves and those with whom we seek to share our faith. Look for opportunities to establish and deepen relationships with the people who are around you right now. The Great Commission means not only going to distant lands, but making your case "as you go" about daily business. May God awaken us to opportunities to share the hope in us!

Share What You Know (Acts 22:4-10)

⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women in jail, ⁵ as both the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify about me. Having received letters from them to the brothers, I was traveling to Damascus to bring those who were prisoners there to be punished in Jerusalem.

⁶ "As I was traveling and near Damascus, about noon an intense light from heaven suddenly flashed around me. ⁷ I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'

⁸ "I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?'

"He said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting!' ⁹ Now those who were with me saw the light, but they did not hear the voice of the One who was speaking to me.

¹⁰ "Then I said, 'What should I do, Lord?'

"And the Lord told me, 'Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told about everything that is assigned for you to do.'

Paul's personal contact with the mob was even deeper because at one time he **persecuted this Way to the death**. Earlier in his life he shared with them a personal loathing of Christianity so intense that he was **putting both men and women in jail**. The Sanhedrin, or **the whole council of elders**, had approved and could confirm his contentions. He had been a persecutor of the church, and in fact at the point of his conversion **was traveling to Damascus** to continue his efforts to eradicate this perceived threat to the Jewish religion. The effect of this part of his personal testimony must have been startling. Under slightly different circumstances, Paul could have been among the very mob he was addressing, and seeking to attack a follower of the **Way**.

What follows is Paul's recounting how he met Jesus and the change resulting from that meeting. The points of the narrative speak for themselves and need little or no explanation. The story is self-evident. What is vitally important for our study is the

pattern it represents and how Paul demonstrated that pattern in this passage. He illustrated the principles we studied in 1 Peter 3:15-17.

Making your case for faith involves four distinct points: what your life was like before you became a Christian, how you came to learn about Christ, how and when you trusted Him, and what your life has been like since you became a Christian.

Paul had already broadly established his life previous to Christian faith. The crowd could have identified with him fully. We have addressed this in the previous section.

What was your life like before you became a Christian? I have always thought this was one of the weakest parts of my personal testimony. I was nine years old when I became a Christian, and frankly cannot recall a time in my life when I did not know about God, who Jesus was, the real meaning of Christmas and Easter. My parents took me to church the second Sunday of my life. I was not a carousing and trouble-making eight-year-old! However, mild as such a testimony might be, it does establish the fact that there was a time when I was not a Christian. It sets up the next part of making my case. There was a time when I had to make a decision about what I knew concerning Jesus.

Paul's specific confrontation with Christ occurred as he was **traveling ... near Damascus**. Jesus spoke to him directly, and challenged his life. A great deal of speculation surrounds how much Paul had considered the claims of Christianity prior to his conversion. No doubt, he was familiar with the faith of these Christians he persecuted. Had their devotion to Jesus caused him to reflect? Probably. Most people do not go from "dead set against" to devoted follower instantaneously.

How did you come to learn about Christ? My personal example involves being in church and Sunday School, and being led by a pastor, teachers, and children's choir directors. They all had a hand in helping me learn the story and the facts. Most importantly, I had Christian parents who guided and modeled the Christian faith for me.

Paul's specific response to Christ was to ask, "**What should I do, Lord?**" The use of *Lord* indicates that Paul submitted to Christ, and was in the process then of setting "apart the Messiah as Lord" in his heart as Peter later would write (1 Pet. 3:15). This scene describes the beginning point of the transformation of Paul's life.

What was that point in your life? It does not need to have been dramatic, but it does need to have happened. I remember as a nine-year-old boy realizing I needed to "do something" with this knowledge I had gained. I prayed and asked Jesus into my heart, and followed that decision with baptism. It was the defining point in my life.

The final point of testimony is not well-illustrated in our passage for study, but is borne out in the narrative of Acts concerning Paul's journeys to share his faith and in the 13 letters of the New Testament he wrote.

The strongest point of your testimony should be the difference Christ has made in your life. My life has meaning, purpose, and direction because of Christ. He has taught me to look for God's presence, guidance, and blessing. He has given me a way to understand trials, to survive them, and to grow through them. I did not meet the Lord in a vision, but

His presence has been the strength and focus of my life.

Any believer can share what Christ has done in his or her life. This defense is not complicated, but is very compelling. A changed life is a powerful defense. People can take issue with arguments for God's existence (which is actually almost never brought up); they may wonder about the relevancy of the cross and the claims of the resurrection. But they cannot argue with your changed life.

Though the verse lies outside of our focal passage, we should note that even the great apostle did not gain a favorable response from the crowd. They wanted to "wipe" him "off the earth" (Acts 22:22). Though certainly disappointing, this result can be reassuring. We will not be successful every time we share our faith, but we are not responsible for the results. Our duty lies in faithfully making the case. The response is between the other persons and the Holy Spirit.

My friend Lester faithfully tells his story. Not everyone responds positively. In fact, he would probably be discouraged if he looked only at the statistics. Neglecting Christ is the easy way to go in life, and that way is heavily populated. But a faithful Christian, like Lester, takes joy in telling others about his Lord, and especially living before people the changed life that Christ has authored.

In subsequent lessons in this Unit we will learn about the importance of making a case for God's existence, for God's love, and for God's involvement. But making your case for Christ is the first step in apologetics. So become an apologist! Share your faith and beliefs in Christ with love and gentleness.

Biblical Truths of This Lesson in Focus

- Making your case is strengthened by living continually under the lordship of Christ.
- You are not called to argue anyone into the kingdom, but to make your case with gentleness and respect.
- Making your case is strengthened by identifying points of contact with your hearer(s).
- The strongest part of making your case is almost always sharing how Christ has changed your life.

Word Study: *Defense* (1 Pet. 3:15; "answer," KJV)

The Greek word for defense is *apologia*, from which we derive the English words *apology* and *apologetics*. To make an apology means not only to express remorse but also to present an explanation, the key meaning of apologetics. Christian apologetics means to present a coherent defense for our beliefs and commitment. While we certainly need a group of highly trained and skilled apologists to confront challenges to Christianity, the greater need is for typical Christians to explain their beliefs to people they know. All Christians should be apologists.

1. Kenneth D. Boa, "What is Apologetics?" *The Apologetics Study Bible*, gen. ed. Ted Cabal (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2007), xxv.