

Grace Church
Roanoke, Virginia

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Lesson #57

ACTS
Paul Before Agrippa
Acts 26:1-32

Acts Chapter 26 is one of the most dynamic scenes in the whole Bible. It is in this chapter that the Apostle Paul stands before King Agrippa and gives his personal testimony to this mighty king in order to win him to Christ. This may well be the high point in Paul's ministry. It should be pointed out that Paul is not on trial before Agrippa, even though he makes a defense before him. He was before Agrippa in order that Agrippa might help Festus, the Roman governor of Judea, to discover some concrete evidence that he was guilty. Paul had appealed to Caesar when tried before Festus, and Festus had granted that appeal, but Paul was innocent. Festus could find nothing in his life with which to charge him, and this put him in a most embarrassing situation to send Paul all the way to Rome to appear before Caesar, who was then the Emperor Nero, with no charges which would hold water. This was also a time of entertainment for Agrippa because he wanted to tickle his fancy by hearing a little more about the Way made up of people who called themselves Christians and followers of Christ. He also wanted to know something more about this man, Paul the pest, as he was called by the unbelieving Jews. This was not a trial before Agrippa but merely a time of questioning Paul, for neither Festus nor Agrippa could do anything to Paul since he cried out "Apello" -- "I appeal to Caesar." Roman law demanded that Paul, a Roman citizen, be sent to Caesar because he made this appeal.

However, God in His providence arranged this whole hearing in order to have Paul fulfill his commission which stated he would speak to Jews, Gentiles and kings (Acts 9:15). Paul seized upon this opportunity to present the gospel to Agrippa.

There are some very interesting characters at this hearing of Paul. First, there was Festus. He was the Roman governor of Judea, ex-soldier, a very skilled administrator who was noted for his fairness and justice with those whom he governed. He was, however, a politician who was willing to sacrifice Paul on the altar of political expediency. Festus was a polite, smooth, cunning and, in one sense, unprincipled man, for he would bend the law if it served his own political ends. Second, there was Bernice, who was the sister of King Agrippa and was then acting as his wife. She was a very beautiful and sordid woman who had a passion for adulterous and incestuous relationships for she was then living with King Agrippa although not officially married to him. Third, there was Agrippa, better known as King Agrippa II, who was a member of the Herod family. This was a rotten family and was a long line of Christ-haters, going back to Herod the Great who put all male children two years old and younger to death in order to kill the Christ-child. Agrippa was a Jew who had been trained in Rome and he

was strongly attached to the Romans. He was so loyal to the Romans that in 70 A.D. he united his troops with the Romans and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. Agrippa was an intelligent man and a good ruler, better than others in his family. He was a powerful man because he had the authority to appoint the high priest in Israel. He knew the Mosaic Law and claimed to be a practicing Jew, but he too had only an external religion which had not made an impact on his life, for he loved riches, sex, pleasure and power more than he loved God. Yet, as a Jew, he knew much about Judaism and was concerned about the things going on in the land.

We need to get some background at this point. Paul was a Roman prisoner in Caesarea. He had been tried before Festus and found innocent. Because Festus was a new governor, Agrippa and Bernice came to pay him an official state visit of protocol. After many days, Festus mentioned to Agrippa about this prisoner Paul, and Agrippa, being somewhat acquainted with Christianity, asked that he might talk with Paul, probably out of curiosity as much as wanting to help Festus find some real charge against him. Festus immediately arranged a hearing for the next day, but he planned it so it would take place during a state banquet in honor of Agrippa and Bernice.

“And Agrippa said to Festus, ‘I also would like to hear the man myself.’ ‘Tomorrow,’ he said, ‘you shall hear him.’ And so, on the next day when Agrippa had come together with Bernice, amid great pomp, and had entered the auditorium accompanied by the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in” (Acts 24:22, 23).

From this point on, we must use our imaginations. This place where the dinner took place was a huge Roman banquet hall with high ceilings, huge columns and a marble floor. Festus was garbed in Roman scarlet; Agrippa was clothed in the purple of royalty and Bernice was decked out in her most expensive attire and jewels. Present were not only a king and queen and a Roman governor, but also the very elite of the city--politicians, military brass and the most prominent people in the city of Caesarea. This whole occasion was filled with pagan pomp and pageantry. There was luscious food, much drinking and gaiety galore. There was not only tapestry and tinsel but also abundant fanfare and even the blowing of trumpets. The trumpets blew, the main doors swung open, and in marched Festus, Agrippa and Bernice. The military men came to attention and gave the Roman salute. As these VIPs moved through the elite, intelligentsia and sophisticates, they went up to the head table where the highest governmental people sat. There may have been a makeshift throne for Agrippa. After a long period of drinking and banqueting, the doors again swung open and in came two soldiers, each one on the side of the prisoner, Paul, nudging him towards the front. Paul's hands were bound and his clothes were tattered, and he stood there before a king and a governor. Paul was unimpressive in his physical appearance and he was very solemn and quiet before the throne of mighty Agrippa. Among all these sharp, educated, cultured brass, stood a small-statured, baldheaded and physically unappealing man. Voltaire, in one of his writings, called Paul “the ugly little Jew.”

PAUL PRESENTS HIS TESTIMONY TO AGRIPPA - Acts 26:1-21

His Congeniality (26:1-3)

“And Agrippa said to Paul, ‘You are permitted to speak for yourself.’ Then Paul stretched out his hand and proceeded to make his defense: . . .” -- As soon as things had settled down in the room, Agrippa gave Paul an opportunity to speak. Agrippa wanted to hear Paul speak and he got an ear full. Here was a face to face confrontation, a shoot out at high noon. Such contrasts between these two men: one is dressed in purple, the other in rags; one is on the throne, the other in chains; one is a king, the other is the king of preachers; one is royalty in slavery to sin, the other is a prisoner in shackles, yet free in his soul.

“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.” -- Paul was cool, calm and collected as he was surrounded by all these prominent personages. He was the commanding figure in this banquet and he had commanding control of the whole situation. Paul became the center of attention and he conducted himself like a gentleman. Paul was delighted to give his testimony before Agrippa for Agrippa understood Mosaic Law and Jewish religious customs. Notice how polite, courteous and congenial Paul was as he spoke directly to the king. Paul did not argue with Agrippa. He did not use caustic language. He did not raise his voice. He did not start out by telling Agrippa he was a sinner in need of Christ and destined for hell if he did not repent and turn to Christ. Paul merely gave his testimony, giving an intelligent, logical and magnificent witness to King Agrippa.

His Character (26:4, 5)

“So, then, all the 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.” -- Paul began by showing that his whole background was Jewish and that he was even a Pharisee, zealous for the Mosaic law and Jewish religious tradition.

His Confidence (26:6-8)

“And now I am standing on 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?” -- He then pointed out to Agrippa that he believed nothing now that he did not believe when he was a dedicated Jewish Pharisee. He believed in the resurrection then and he believed it now. The promises of the Old Testament guaranteed a resurrection from the dead and, for Paul, this truth had been solidified by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, Paul was in prison because he believed in the resurrection like all good Jews believed, but

he knew the resurrection was a fact because he had personally met the resurrected Christ. The Jews did not believe that Christ was resurrected, for if He was, then He would have to be the Messiah, the God-Man, the Savior spoken of in the Old Testament. This was the rub with these Jews. Paul pointed out that a belief in the resurrection from the dead was very logical if there is a God. After all, He who created the universe and the world can certainly raise a man from the dead. The real issue is not resurrection, nor even the resurrection of Jesus, but a basic belief in God who can do the supernatural. Paul had great confidence in the God of Scripture, the promises of the Old Testament and the resurrection of the dead.

His Cruelty (26:9-11)

“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 prison, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues, even to foreign countries.” -- Paul told Agrippa about his sincerity for the Jewish religion by his willingness to treat the Christians with cruelty, persecuting them by imprisonment and death. Paul was a true Jewish believer but he made the mistake of persecuting Christians in the name of God, for he only realized later that Christianity was the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises.

His Conversion (26:12-15)

“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 told Agrippa that while he was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians, Jesus Christ appeared to him. Christ invaded Paul's life when he was not seeking Christ at all. The resurrected Christ supernaturally saved Paul, and this obviously explained to Agrippa why his behavior had changed so drastically and why he was so deeply committed to Jesus Christ.

Paul could not get away from giving his testimony concerning his conversion to Christ. His testimony was given three times in the Book of Acts alone. He loved to tell about how Christ changed him from a religious, narrow-minded, bigoted Pharisee to a committed, warm-hearted and open Christian. Christ changed Paul's whole nature. The Bible says, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots” (Jer. 13:23)? The answer is “no,” but God has the power to change these things. God can also change the nature of sinful men by conversion so as to make them new creatures in Christ with new desires for God. Only a supernatural conversion can turn a person around spiritually and that is exactly what happened to Paul.

His Commission (26:16-18)

“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, . . .” -- This commission to Paul had four parts:

1) Illumination: The gospel was to be preached so men could have their eyes opened to spiritual truth because all men are blinded spiritually by Satan lest the light of the glorious gospel should shine unto them. 2) Conversion: When the gospel is preached, men are to turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto God. Conversion is translation from the tyranny and dominion of one king to the freedom and service of another king. 3) Remission: When men are converted, they receive the forgiveness of sin, which makes them acceptable to God. 4.) Participation: Those who are converted share Christ's inheritance and all which belongs to Christ belongs to the Christian. To whom then is this inheritance available? To those who place their faith in Christ. This inheritance, this salvation, is open only to those who trust Christ and none else. Paul was narrow in his thinking and intolerant when it came to the way of salvation. We must hold to Christ as the only way of salvation or we have given up true Christianity. The Apostle Peter was intolerant for he said, “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The Apostle John said, “He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (1 John 5:12). The Lord Jesus was the most intolerant person of all, for He said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (John 14:6). Religious intolerance is very unpopular in the twentieth century, but much of the so-called religious tolerance of our day is in reality religious indifference. A true follower of Christ must say that Christ is the only way to salvation and all other religions are wrong and controlled by Satan. These are strong words but that was what the Apostle Paul was called to preach, and that is what we are called to preach today.

His Compliance (26: 19-21)

“Consequently, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision . . .” -- Paul acted upon the vision and did what he was told. Vision is not enough; there must be obedience to the vision.

It is not enough to have a vision for world evangelism but there must be commitment of life, time and money to see the task accomplished.

“ . . . 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.” -- This verse clearly teaches that the Apostle Paul taught repentance both to Jews and Gentiles. Repentance means to change one's minds to have a complete turnabout in attitude. People are to change their attitudes about God, Christ and their sinful life styles. Paul knew that repentance was a gift from God, for this is clearly stated in the Bible. “And when they

heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, ‘Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life’” (Acts 11:18). Repentance, however, is to be exercised by the person who truly trusts in Christ, and true repentance is to be proved by the doing of good works. Man is saved by trusting in Christ which includes repentance, and this is all a work of sovereign grace, but everyone who is saved by grace manifests the reality of this faith by good works. If the good works do not show up in a person who professes faith in Christ, then there is good reason to believe he was never saved because he really never repented concerning God, Christ and his life style.

“For this reason some Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death.” -- Paul was merely teaching that men had to trust the resurrected Christ for salvation and turn from their evil ways, and for this Paul was seized in the temple by the Jews.

PAUL PREACHES THE GOSPEL TO AGRIPPA - Acts 26:22-25

His Commitment to the Old Covenant (26:22)

“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; . . .” -- Paul testified to all men concerning what the Old Testament predicted about Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

His Commitment to the New Covenant (26:23)

“ . . . 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 took the Old Testament and preached from it about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Right here, Agrippa received the gospel message from Paul. Undoubtedly the whole discourse is not recorded, but Paul must have gone into great detail concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Notice Paul mentioned the gospel of Christ was for Jews and Gentiles because he wanted every person in that banquet hall to know Christ would save each one of them if they would but respond to Christ by faith.

His Clash with Festus (26:24, 25)

“And while Paul was saying this in defense, Festus said in a loud voice, ‘Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad.’ -- Festus, a rationalist, anti-supernaturalist and materialist listened to Paul speak of the death and resurrection of Christ, of salvation by grace through faith in Christ and of the repentance which manifests itself in good works, and it was too much for his Roman, humanistic mind. He rudely interrupted Paul and blurted out, “Paul, you are crazy!” Festus felt that everything Paul was saying was foolish nonsense. He decided that Paul's great education and much learning had caused him to flip out. Paul was a brilliant, educated man and his much learning had not made him cold, indifferent and dead, but he was alive spiritually and so much so that he lived like a supernaturalist which Festus could not

understand. If Festus were alive today, he would have said, "Paul, you need to see a psychiatrist." Yet, who was crazy--Paul or Festus? It was Festus who was operating on purely human understanding which is madness. He left God out of his thinking, believing in a universe of pure chance, and that man dies like a dog at the end of life with no hope beyond the grave. He mocked Christ who alone could bring him to God so as to make him enjoy the peace, love and security of God. Festus had a world-life viewpoint which excluded God, which is pure madness.

"But Paul said, 'I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth (words of truth and rationality).'" -- This was Paul's chance to get back at Festus, but he answered as a man who was in full control of his mental faculties, and he answered as a gentleman these words, "I am not mad, Festus, but I speak words from a sound mind." Paul knew a soft answer turns away wrath. He conducted himself well under the stress of this situation, indicating he was of sound mind. It was Paul who was acting cool, not Festus. Paul merely said to the king, "The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is what Christianity is all about; this is the heart of Christianity."

For us who are Christians, we must remember that the non-Christian world will always think we are a little weird, for they do not know anything about a supernatural new birth from God. In fact, if we do not come across to the world as a little strange, we probably are not living for Christ as we ought.

PAUL PLEADS WITH AGRIPPA TO ACCEPT CHRIST - Acts 26:26-29

His Calm Assurance about Agrippa (26:26)

"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." -- Agrippa had some basic knowledge about Jesus Christ and the group called the Way. Nothing about Christianity was done in secret and surely Festus knew something about Paul.

His Challenge to Agrippa (26:27, 28)

"King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do." -- Paul carried the truth of the gospel right to the heart of Agrippa. He was saying, "You know the historical facts of Jesus' life, Agrippa. And you believe the Prophets. So put it together. Jesus fulfilled what the Prophets wrote." Paul was declaring that Agrippa must believe in Christ of whom the Prophets spoke in the Old Testament. This was in essence a statement like, "Agrippa, you may be convinced of the Prophets, but are you converted?"

"And Agrippa replied to Paul, 'In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian.'" -- Agrippa's reply was stunning. There is, however, a difference of opinion among Bible scholars as to how this should be translated. Some think Agrippa gave a reply of disdain and sarcasm and said, "In brief, you are trying to persuade me to

act like a Christian,” which implies the thought, “Do you really think, Paul, in such a short time you are going to make me a Christian!” It seems to me, however, that the King James Version has captured the essential meaning very well which says, “Paul, almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian,” that is, Agrippa was saying, “I feel the force of your arguments and if I hear you any longer I do not know what the effect may be. You are almost persuading me to become a Christian.” Agrippa felt the tug of the Holy Spirit on his heart to receive Christ but he also felt the tug of the world. He clearly understood that if he really committed his life to Christ he would have to repent and change his ways. He was not willing to pay the price to follow Christ. Agrippa was an “almost Christian” but he turned away. What a tragedy!

His Call for Agrippa to Believe (26:29)

“And Paul said, ‘I would to God whether in a short time or a long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains.’” -- Paul responded to Agrippa in passion. He said in essence, “I would give anything if you would not be just an almost Christian but be a Christian as I am.” His desire was to see all men saved and set free from the bondage of sin. He did not want men to be bound in chains as he was. Yet, he would be willing to wear chains forever if it would free men from the chains of bondage to Satan, sin and self. What a passion for souls!

PAUL PROCLAIMED INNOCENT BY AGRIPPA - Acts 26:30-32

“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.’” -- Agrippa did surmise from Paul's defense that he was innocent of all charges against him, but the sad thing is that he was unaffected by Paul's passionate plea to receive Jesus Christ. Agrippa was never again so close to making a commitment to Christ as he was at that moment.

“And Agrippa said to Festus, ‘This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.’” -- It was God's will for Paul to go to Rome, and God ordained that this was to happen when Paul appealed to Caesar. Humanly speaking, Festus, influenced by Agrippa, might have set Paul free.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to mention the three main characters in this chapter -- the ardent rejecter, the altogether Christian and the almost Christian.

Festus was an ardent rejecter. He was suave, brave, cunning, talented, a good administrator with a sense of justice. He was a Roman soldier and a great leader of men. He was the kind of man which would appeal to other men. Yet he was a politely unprincipled man, a rationalist, a materialist, who lived only for the moment. He thought Christians were crazy and he was blinded in mind, hardened in heart and corrupted in his will. He did not care at all about spiritual realities. He died a lost

sinner because he rejected the supernatural and only a supernatural Christ could save him. Are you a Festus? If you are, you are in desperate need of Christ. Your soul is in eternal danger!

Paul was an altogether Christian. He may have been scrawny, baldheaded and ugly, but he knew the resurrected Christ and he had it all together spiritually. He was the center of attention and he had the power of the Holy Spirit in his life. When he spoke a Felix trembled and an Agrippa almost yielded to Christ. He was solid doctrinally and was operating on the power of God in his life. Paul had a world-life viewpoint with God at the center of it all, and he had a passion for souls which has never been equaled in the Christian Church by another person. Paul lived like a supernaturalist and trusted Christ for everything. Paul, as a citizen of heaven, lived like a man destined for eternity. Are you a Paul? If you are, you are on your way to heaven.

Agrippa was an almost Christian. He was of royalty, cultured and well educated. He was a good leader and more fair-minded than his forefathers. He was a religious Jew even though he was a secret slave to his passions. He believed in God, the Prophets and the whole Old Testament. He was religious but unsaved, for even the demons believe in God and tremble. Agrippa was acquainted with the Way and knew much about Christianity. Yet, he resisted the wooing of the Holy Spirit when the gospel was presented to him. He came so close to believing but in the last moment turned away. He would not take the final leap of faith into Christ. He was an almost Christian but an almost Christian is headed for eternal judgment.

Why did Agrippa reject Christ? We are not told definitely but there are some hints in this context. First, Agrippa was sitting on a throne and he loved power and prestige and to turn to Christ would mean to forsake these things. Second, next to his throne was a beautiful woman, Bernice, his sister, with whom he was living in an incestuous relationship. To come to Christ would mean an abandoning of his illicit sex life and the price was too high. Third, all around Agrippa was wealth and materialism and to follow Christ might mean the forsaking of all. Fourth, Agrippa heard Festus call Paul a crazy man, and surely Agrippa did not want to be linked up with a bunch of religious fanatics. Fifth, there was Paul, that ugly little Jew, right in front of him. Agrippa probably thought that to identify with Christ was to identify with people like Paul who were followers of Christ. What would Agrippa's friends say if he became a Christian? Yes, Agrippa feared what men would say if he associated with Christ. He did not want the shame and disgrace of being a Christian. Agrippa counted the cost to follow Christ and he concluded the cost was too high. Agrippa chose against Christ and for hell because he loved pleasure, riches, power, fame, sex and self more than anything or anyone. Agrippa was so close to the kingdom but he would not take the final step. He made his choice and his choice damned him for all eternity. Are you an Agrippa? If you are, you will die in your sins if you have not Christ. You may be religious; you may believe in God; you may believe in the Bible; you may have been raised in a Christian home; you may have had Christian parents or relatives. You may know the gospel of Christ but you have never made that final step of faith in Christ. Are you an almost Christian? You may be convinced intellectually but are you converted? Change your mind about

God, Christ and your life style and trust in Christ as your Savior and Lord, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.