

## Acts 26

Agrippa's expressed wish to "hear the man myself" gave an occasion for Festus to entertain on a large scale. Paul's preaching to Felix was an apparent private manner but when he gave his defense of himself to Agrippa the "chief captains and principal men of the city" had been invited to listen (25:23). When God told Ananais to go to Paul (despite Ananais's apprehension about Paul's intentions) God allayed Ananais's fear, "Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). The occasion before Paul was a partial fulfillment of those words.

As host, Festus made introductory remarks which revealed some things he knew about Paul. He revealed that prior to asking him to bring Paul back to Jerusalem to stand trial there, Jews had asked Festus to execute Paul (25:24). When Festus then heard what Paul's accusers had to say, with Paul's answer, it was apparent Paul "committed nothing worthy of death" (25:24). Festus wanted Agrippa to hear Paul so that he might help him craft a letter which could state specific reasons why Jews charged Paul as they did.

Agrippa took charge after Festus' introduction and said to Paul, "Thou art permitted to speak for thyself" (26:1). It was then Paul began to make his defense. In making his defense before Agrippa, Paul had no hopes for release from imprisonment. Agrippa's reaction, favorable or otherwise, could not alter the events which Paul himself set in motion when he said, "I appeal unto Caesar" (25:11). As events later reveal, Agrippa concluded, "This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar" (26:32). If Paul's appeal to Caesar spared him from almost certain death should he have agreed to be tried in Jerusalem, it imposed on him continued imprisonment for the foreseeable future. Paul's defense was simply an explanation of his reasons for his course of life, and thus subtly, an appeal to all his listeners to become as he. There are three major arguments in Paul's address to Agrippa.

First, Paul reveals his life as a persecutor of Christians. He expressed his joy that he could give an explanation of his life before Agrippa because he knew Agrippa was an "expert in all customs and questions" that were among the Jews (26:3). Unlike Festus (who was thoroughly confused by all the charges unbelieving Jews made against Paul), Agrippa would understand. Agrippa claimed to be Jewish and agreed with the doctrine of the Pharisees. Paul declares his life was an "open book" for all the

Jews knew his manner of life from his youth up (26:4). Prejudice and hatred of Paul might silence their lips, but if Paul's accusers were willing to tell what they knew, they could verify what he was about to say was true. That knowledge would include his training under Gamaliel (one of the foremost and respected teachers among the Jews) as well as the fact Paul, or Saul of Tarsus, was one of Israel's brightest and promising young men for he "advanced in the Jews religion beyond many of his own countrymen (Gal. 1:14)".

Paul declared he lived according to the strictest sect of the Jews, a Pharisee. When he stood before the council in Jerusalem he divided that council composed of Pharisees and Saducees by saying, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees: touching the resurrection of the dead, I am called in question..." (23:6). Some modern critics charge Paul with lying when he said those things, but many are quick to condemn the guilty. Paul's accusers knew he was a Christian, a prominent follower of Jesus Christ. They knew he was only claiming to yet believe the principal tenets of the Pharisees: belief in angels and men's spirits, the resurrection from the dead. Paul had become a Christian but he had not renounced belief in either of those teachings of the Pharisees: he went even further in his belief of the resurrection when he declared the death and resurrection of Jesus! Did Agrippa secretly smile when Paul said, "Why is it judged incredible with you if God doth raise the dead"? Festus had broadcast his utter ignorance of this belief when he earlier told Agrippa that Jews had "certain questions against him of their own religion and of one Jesus, who was dead and whom Paul "affirmed to be alive" (25:19). Did Festus flinch when Paul asked why any should "think it incredible that God should raise the dead?" We do not know. Perhaps Agrippa felt a kinship for Paul on this, their shared convictions.

Having stated his former life as a student and zealous Jew, Paul proceeded to reveal his antagonism against Christians. "I verily thought with myself I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (26:9). Those "many things" included shutting up saints in prison (with the approval of chief priests); giving his vote against them who were put to death (Stephen, 8:1); punishing them in the synagogues; seeking to make them blaspheme; exceedingly mad against them; and so zealous in his opposition to them that he pressed his persecution of them even unto foreign cities (26:10f). Had Paul remembered this when Jews from Thessalonica followed him to Berea to stir up persecutions against him there, just as he had hunted Christians in the early period of his life (17:13)? Surely Paul's patience with his persecutors was in large measure the reaction of reflection that their zeal

was only a reflection of his. And, this phase of Paul's life always was with him. If it did not haunt him, it bore upon his mind a dark corner of his past. He was "less than the least of all the saints". "He was the chief of sinners" because he had persecuted the Son of God (Eph. 3:8; 1 Tim. 1:12-16). With these facts before them, who of Paul's listeners could not have helped but have thought "How on earth, Paul, did you come to be what you now are, considering what once you were?" Paul's answer to such an unspoken question constituted his second major argument in this address.

The Damascus Road was the turning point in Paul's life. He started his journey with full intent to bind Christians he found there and carry them to Jerusalem (9:14; 22:5). However, when Paul entered this city he was a very troubled man. He neither ate nor drank nor slept (9:9). He was constant in prayer (9:11). He arrested not a single Christian. Never again would he fight against followers of Christ! His life had been turned "upside down" that that Damascene Road ... for he had seen the Lord!

Of course Paul did not recognize Jesus when he saw Him. When the light shone about him and the Voice cried, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" He asked, "Who art thou Lord?" (26:14f). The fact that he called this Being "Lord" does not mean he recognized Jesus from earlier years. Some think so and cite Paul's second letter to the Corinthians as proof he had earlier known Jesus. There he wrote, "Wherefore we henceforth know no man after the flesh, even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet we know him so no more" (2 Cor. 5:16). Such is a misapplication of the text. Paul did not say he personally knew Jesus, he said that Christ was a Jew, having kinship with every descendant of Abraham, thus with him. The contrast is that now he "knew no man after the flesh" although he had once known "Christ after the flesh". Did he not know Mark, Luke, Timothy? Certainly he did! Still, he did not know them because of fleshly ties in Abraham and Judaism; he knew them because both they and he were spiritual sons of Abraham (Gal. 3:7; 29; 6:15f)

When Jesus said "I am Jesus of Nazareth whom thou persecutest", floods of shame, remorse and fear must have swept over Paul (22:8)! Humbly he asks, just as others who faced by their own accusing conscience asked, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 2:37; 22:10). It is at this point in Paul's speech that he reveals something not apparent in either of the two earlier records of his conversion (9, 22). God made known to Paul His plan for him "But arise and stand upon thy feet: for to this end have I appeared unto thee, to appoint thee a minister and

witness both of the things thou hast seen me and of the things wherein I will appear unto thee..." (26:16). In both Luke's account of Paul's conversion and Paul's own account earlier to the council in Acts 22, the account tells that one would tell him in Damascus of all things he would do (9:6; 22:10). Here, before Agrippa, he reveals that the Lord had told him already his ministry would be to preach to Kings, Gentiles and Jews (26:16f). The fact that despite his zealous persecution of Christians, his slaying of them; God had made HIM a chosen vessel "to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and children of Israel" (9:15) and made Paul keenly conscious of God's greatness and grace! Little wonder that he viewed his apostleship as a grace and blessing despite the intense and constant sufferings which accompanied it (Eph. 3:2;7, 8; Acts 9:16). How blessed he was! In view of the honors he once held as Judaism's bright star now contrasted with his debased state, what could have prompted Paul to have changed save the Divine intervention he simply and boldly declared had occurred?

Then Paul made his final argument. He was not disobedient to the heavenly vision he saw but "declared both to them of Damascus first, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the country of Judaea, and also to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God" (26:20). This was WHY the Jews assayed to kill him! They regarded him as an apostate; one who had renounced his former belief. Then, he explodes a bombshell. It was not he who acted contrary to God's word, but they; just as he had acted contrary to God's will as he, like they, persecuted disciples of Christ. Thus Paul's argument: his actions were the consequence of following the prophets and Moses, saying what they said, "How that the Christ must suffer, and how that he first by the resurrection of the dead should proclaim light both to the people and to the Gentiles" (26:23). Moses and the prophets HAD predicted the Christ was to come. The difference between Paul and his persecutors was that he accepted the testimony God gave concerning Jesus as proof that He was the Messiah and his persecutors did not.

Paul was interrupted on his address by Festus who had failed to understand what Paul was saying. He said "Paul, thou art mad; thy much learning hath made thee mad" (26:25). Paul offered no proof to counter Festus' words other than his denial of it (26:25). It was evident Festus was beyond his reach. Was Agrippa? Agrippa knew of the things Paul rehearsed before him. They had not been done in a corner (26:26). Did Paul see something in Agrippa's eye or a bodily response that caused him to say, "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest" (26:27). "And Agrippa said unto Paul, with but little persuasion

thou wouldest fain make me a Christian" (26:28). Was Agrippa's response to Paul's question a scornful, sarcastic one, as some insist? "Paul, do you think that by this little bit of persuasion you are going to make a Christian of me?" Or was he genuinely, "Almost persuaded" (KJV)? We do not know. It appears Paul took him seriously for he said, "I would to God that whether with little or much, not thou only, but also all that hear me this day, might become such as I am, except these bonds" (26:29).

Agrippa arose and the rest of the audience then arose with him. The hour is over. Paul's words have been interrupted and silenced. Yet, as his listeners privately commented on what they have heard, and soberly reflected, "This man doeth nothing worthy of death or bonds" (26:31). And Agrippa, great-grandson of Herod the Great who slew the infants of Bethlehem; nephew of Herod who beheaded John the Baptist; son of the Herod who slew James the brother of John and intended to kill Peter; Agrippa, the fourth and last generation of the Herod family to be King said, "This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar" (26:32)!

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