

Paul Before King Agrippa

Bible Background • Acts 25:23–26:32

Printed Text • Acts 26:19–32 | Devotional Reading • Acts 23:1–11

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: KNOW why Paul stood up for what he believed; FEEL confident in sharing our faith; and examine ways to DEFEND our faith, even in the face of rejection.

In Focus

Angie was an elementary school teacher at the local school. The parents of her students loved Angie, and her principal always complimented her on how well she controlled her classroom. Many of the teachers looked up to her and often asked her advice. Angie liked her coworkers but wasn't close to any of them. During lunch breaks, she often sat in the corner of the room rather than at the table with the other teachers. Angie, a Christian and a regular church attendee, was increasingly uncomfortable with the discussions that took place in the teachers' break room.

Off-color jokes were frequently told by some of her coworkers and lately, "the church" had been the favorite butt of the jokes. Christian beliefs and practices resulted in side-splitting laughter. Angie felt that she should say something, but she was afraid that the people, who thought so highly of her, might become resentful. How would the people who thought she was an amazing teacher react after finding out she was one of the people they made jokes about?

Taking a stand for what you believe is never easy. Christians are not exempt. In today's lesson, we will see that God understands that His people are the objects of persecution and that He can fortify us to take a stand in Jesus' name.

Keep In Mind

"But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness."
(Acts 26:25, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Repent (Acts 26:20) metanoeo (Gk.)—To be sorry for sin and "turn to God."

B. Shew Light (v. 23) kataggello (Gk.)—To make something clear to a wide audience or over a wide area.

Say It Correctly

Agrippa. uh-GRIP-uh

Bernice. bur-NEES

Damascus. duh-MAS-kuhs

Festus. FES-tus

Jerusalem. jeh-ROO-suh-luhm

Judea. Joo-DEE-uh

KJV

Acts 26:19 Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision:

20 But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.

21 For these causes the Jews caught me in the temple, and went about to kill me.

22 Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come:

23 That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles.

24 And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad.

25 But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness.

26 For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner.

27 King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.

28 Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

29 And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds.

30 And when he had thus spoken, the king rose up, and the governor, and Bernice, and they that sat with them:

31 And when they were gone aside, they talked between themselves, saying, This man doeth nothing worthy of death or of bonds.

32 Then said Agrippa unto Festus, This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar.

NLT

Acts 26:19 "And so, King Agrippa, I obeyed that vision from heaven.

20 I preached first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that all must repent of their sins and turn to God—and prove they have changed by the good things they do.

21 Some Jews arrested me in the Temple for preaching this, and they tried to kill me.

22 But God has protected me right up to this present time so I can testify to everyone, from the least to the greatest. I teach nothing except what the prophets and Moses said would happen—

23 that the Messiah would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead, and in this way announce God's light to Jews and Gentiles alike."

24 Suddenly, Festus shouted, "Paul, you are insane. Too much study has made you crazy!"

25 But Paul replied, "I am not insane, Most Excellent Festus. What I am saying is the sober truth.

26 And King Agrippa knows about these things. I speak boldly, for I am sure these events are all familiar to him, for they were not done in a corner!

27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do—"

28 Agrippa interrupted him. "Do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian so quickly?"

29 Paul replied, "Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am, except for these chains."

30 Then the king, the governor, Bernice, and all the others stood and left.

31 As they went out, they talked it over and agreed, "This man hasn't done anything to deserve death or imprisonment."

32 And Agrippa said to Festus, "He could have been set free if he hadn't appealed to Caesar."

The People, Places, and Times

King Agrippa II. He was the son of King Agrippa I, the ruler who was responsible for beheading the apostle James and who had Peter arrested. He was the grandson of the ruler who'd had John the Baptist beheaded. He was also the great-grandson of Herod the Great, who, in his attempt to kill the baby Jesus, had killed all the male Jewish children two years old and younger in Bethlehem.

Agrippa II's power was limited to authority over Jewish affairs, Scriptures, and conflicts. Rome appointed him as the curator of the Temple, meaning he had authority over the Temple treasury and to appoint high priests. Agrippa II did not have any children, and when he met the apostle Paul, he was living in an incestuous relationship with his younger sister Bernice. Agrippa's capitol was Caesarea Philippi, which he renamed Neronias in honor of Caesar Nero. Agrippa II called himself "Great King, pious Friend of Caesar and Friend of Rome." The last of the Herods, he died in A.D. 100 at age 73.

Background

When Jesus called Saul of Tarsus to be an apostle, he sent Ananias to Paul, to pray for him and to welcome him into the Christian family. The Lord prophesied, "[Saul] is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel" (from Acts 9:15). Following his conversion from persecutor to Christian, the apostle Paul was a faithful and fervent disciple. He traveled broadly, spreading the Good News and winning souls to Christ. His zeal was not without trouble. Paul frequently found himself in personal danger. Opposition to Paul often came from the Jews, who believed he was a heretic. In Acts 24, an imprisoned Paul stands before the Jewish governor, Felix, facing false accusations that he incited Christians to riot against Jews, was the ringleader of a sect of zealots intent on overthrowing the Romans, and insulted the Temple, its priests and custodians. Although Paul successfully defended himself against these charges, the Jewish authorities pressured Felix to leave him in prison where he remained for two years.

Felix is succeeded by another governor, Porcius Festus. The Jewish authorities quickly met with Festus and urged him to transport Paul to Jerusalem. Unknown to the governor, they secretly planned to have Paul assassinated during the transport. This plan was thwarted, and under God's direction, Paul wisely appeals to Festus to be tried in Rome as a Roman citizen. Festus had no choice, and Paul was brought to Rome to appear before Caesar, thus fulfilling the Scripture.

At-A-Glance

1. Paul Declares His Apostleship (Acts 26:19–23)
2. Paul Declares the Truth (vv. 27–29)
3. Paul Declared Innocent (vv. 30–32)

In Depth

1. Paul Declares His Apostleship (Acts 26:19–23)

Paul begins by stating his credentials as a faithful Jew, who before his conversion had lived as a Pharisee. In spite of the fact that Agrippa was living in an incestuous relationship—he is married to his full sister, Queen Bernice— Paul is aware that King Agrippa is Jewish and is considered an expert on Jewish laws and customs. Paul makes it clear that he, like all Jews, is aware that the Jews were a “special” population, and he asserts that he is living in full expectation of God’s promises to the Jewish people. Paul does not sugarcoat the truth. He tells the whole truth, including the fact that he had formerly hated and ardently persecuted Christians. Paul explains to King Agrippa that it is only after his conversion, when he begins to be a witness to the Gentiles for Christ, that he becomes a target of the Jewish authorities. The political charges against Paul were bogus. He had never offended the sanctity of the Temple. His charges stemmed solely from his attempts to preach the Gospel, based on the Word of God. Paul freely and boldly admits preaching that Jesus had suffered; that Jesus had died and had been the first to rise from the dead, and that Jesus would one day proclaim light to the Jews and the Gentiles. Paul’s assertion of Jesus’ death, resurrection, and preaching to a world without particular respect to Jew or Gentile is why Jews had “tried to kill (him)” (v. 21, NLT).

2. Paul Declares the Truth (vv. 27–29)

This declaration proves to be too much to the governor, Festus, who shouts that Paul’s Gospel will make people believe he is crazy. Modern- day Christians would do well to remember that when properly presented, some people will think the same thing of them. Paul taught the Corinthians, “the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing” (from 1 Corinthians 1:18, NIV). We must not allow such allegations to stop us from preaching to a dying world that there is a Savior in Jesus, the Christ. Our Gospel is characterized by truth and based on historical events: the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Paul tells Festus that the things he has preached were based on truths and were probably known to King Agrippa. Paul now presses the challenge and asks King Agrippa whether he believes the prophets. In Acts 26:28 (NKJV), Agrippa’s response is curious. He says in part, “You almost persuade me.” One way to understand Agrippa’s response is to mean that in a short time, Paul could persuade him to believe. We want to remember that there were obvious barriers to Agrippa’s acceptance of the Gospel. One, seated next to him was his wife, who was also his sister. One of the hallmarks of Christianity is the willingness to turn away from sin and darkness in our lives. Here, Agrippa is openly living in an incestuous relationship. He may have been unwilling to give her up and other immoral areas in his life to embrace Christianity. Another possibility is that King Agrippa feared that others, like Festus, would believe that he too was crazy if he embraced Christianity.

3. Paul Declared Innocent (vv. 30–32)

Paul has stated his case and now King Agrippa, his wife, and Festus go off to discuss what they have heard. It is obvious to all that Paul has done nothing wrong and is not guilty of any of the charges. As far as they are concerned, Paul is innocent. However, it appears that there is a legal problem with setting him free. Paul’s initial appeal, as a Roman citizen, was to have his case heard by the “Roman” emperor. Agrippa’s response seems to imply that once an appeal was made, it could not be retracted. Rather than read this as a mistake, Christians should recognize Paul’s continued imprisonment as a fulfillment of God’s plan. Paul will get to witness to the emperor in the same way he had just witnessed to King Agrippa and the governor. He will also fulfill a long-standing desire of Paul’s to visit the Christian community already present in Rome (Acts 19:21).

Search the Scriptures

1. What were Paul's main three points of preaching (Acts 25:23)?
2. When Festus accuses Paul of being insane, what two qualities does Paul insist his testimony possesses (v. 25)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Why is the resurrection of Christ from the dead so essential to the Gospel?

Liberating Lesson

This lesson clarifies that God has a plan for each of us. In it we are able to see that God knows best and that He will protect us from all things. The only things that can happen to us are what God wills. When God asks us to take a stand, we must believe He has already prepared the way. The same God that rescued Paul from the Jewish authorities promises protection to us all.

Application for Activation

Have you been guilty of remaining quiet when you hear others say negative and insulting things about Christians? Pray and ask God to give you some "holy boldness" this week and provide opportunities for you to declare your Christianity, appropriately, articulately, and with love.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Acts 26:19–32

19 Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision: 20 But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, throughout all the coasts of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.

Agrippa II, "King Agrippa" here, and his sister Bernice came from Jerusalem to Caesarea to welcome Festus as the new Roman overseer of most of Palestine (Acts 25:13). Festus had little knowledge of Judaism, had been in Caesarea only a short time, and spent less than 10 days in Jerusalem. Agrippa oversaw Galilee west of the Sea of Galilee and a thin area south of it. This region was called Perea and was located east of the Jordan River. In addition, Rome had assigned supervision of the Temple

to him. As the great grandson of Herod the Great, he knew Jewish beliefs well and was interested in Jewish affairs.

For that reason, he asked Agrippa to hear the charges against Paul and Paul's defense against them, even though Festus was his superior. Festus was at a loss about what charges against Paul to send for his appeal before Caesar (Acts 25:26a). Paul's appearance before Festus and Agrippa was not a trial but an examination. He uses it as an opportunity to present the experience that convinced him that Jesus was God's fulfillment of Jewish hopes (Acts 26:1–18).

In verse 19, Paul's "vision" (Gk. *optasia*, op-tas-EE-ah) was auditory rather than visual: "I heard a voice." (Acts 22:7) A supernatural light blazed and blinded him (Acts 22:11, 13). Jesus' voice was Paul's "vision from heaven" as both the New Living Translation and the New International Version translate it.

Verse 20 describes Paul's response to God's revelation through Christ. His actions outline how to share our faith. First, Paul goes to those closest "in Damascus" and then to those who knew him best "in Jerusalem" (26:20, NLT). As he traveled, he shared with those with whom he had a common background along "the coasts of Judea" (v. 20, KJV). (Rather than "coasts," Gk. *chora*, KHO-rah, another translation is "regions.") "The God who was nothing" to Paul became "the God who was everything."

Paul then gives one of the Bible's most important definitions of true repentance and conversion. First, genuine repentance begins with remorse for our sin and turning away from it (Gk. *metanoeo*, me-ta-no-EH-o). Second, characteristic of heartfelt repentance is a "turn to God" (Gk. *epistrepho*, ep-ee-STREF-o) through faith in Christ. Third, the confirmation of honest repentance that gives one's testimony credibility is "works meet for repentance." This phrase becomes clarified when one understands that "meet" (Gk. *axios*, ax-EE-os) is an outdated word that means "worthy or deserving." The best proof that true repentance has occurred is that our deeds match our words (Jas. 2:26).

21 For these causes the Jews caught me in the temple, and went about to kill me.

Note that Paul uses "causes"—a plural form. His arrests began when Jews from the province of Asia grabbed Paul in the Temple. Jews persecuted Paul and had him arrested repeatedly in that region (Acts 14:3–5, 19; 17:13; 20:3). The captain of Roman troops arrested Paul as a troublemaker amid claims that he defamed the Jewish people, Jewish teaching, and the Temple. They also accused him of defiling the Temple by bringing non-Jews into it (Acts 21:27).

22 Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come:

23 That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles.

Paul begins his defense by acknowledging God's help. That claim might seem ridiculous considering he had been in jail for two years and was about to be sent to Rome for trial (24:27; 25:26–27). But Paul felt that he'd experienced divine deliverance many times as he encountered hardship and persecution. Once he was beaten so severely that he was left for dead but survived (Acts 14:19). Repeated arrests followed, but with release each time, once with an apology (Acts 16:23–24, 35–39). A Roman captain stopped an attack on Paul, arrested him and transferred him to captivity in Caesarea. The arrest foiled a plot to seize and kill him (Acts 23:10–16). Paul saw God's hand of help in all those events.

More evidence of God's divine help was in Paul's skill in spreading Christ's message. He operated with the confident belief that God supported his success in sharing his faith. When he says, "obtained help" (Acts 26:22), Paul is clear that he is not working from his own power but under the leadership of God Himself. When we share our faith in Christ's message we can be assured of God's reinforcement of our efforts. Paul was.

This passage tells of an opportunity for Paul to share God's revelation in Christ to those at the pinnacle of influence in that part of the world. Their positions in Roman government made both Felix and Festus into channels for publicizing God's ultimate will and purposes through Christ. Paul understood that. He refused to let this great opportunity slip away and waste it. That was because Christ had commissioned him to proclaim God's Good News to all people (Acts 22:14-15).

"I continue unto this day," fails to encapsulate Paul's zeal for the task God had given him (26:22). "Continue" (Gk. histemi, HIS-tay-mee) means to stand firm, but here the form of the word is intense, adding the idea of standing fixed, unwavering, and immovable from his convictions. Paul's example teaches that even when it might be human to lose hope, we can still be witnesses because we can count on God's help.

Although the Asian Jews accused Paul of abandoning the Mosaic Law and the Jewish people (Acts 21:21, 27-28), Paul held to the orthodox expectation of the Messiah as prophesied by Moses and later prophets (Deuteronomy 18:15-18; Isaiah 53:4-9; Zechariah 12:10). As recorded in Acts 26:23, Jesus' coming to "shew light" (Gk. kataggello, ka-tang-GEL-lo) meant to make something clear to a wide audience or over a wide area. Paul did both of these things. To Paul, Christ's life, death, and resurrection were essential for making God's love understandable to humanity.

24 And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad.

25 But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness.

These two verses show why Paul was such an effective witness to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Festus's outburst was not unusual. "A loud voice" means Festus bellowed at the ardor and certainty of Paul's faith (v. 24). Festus described Paul in the KJV as "beside thyself" (Gk. mainomai, MAH-ee-nom-ah-ee) or "crazy" in the NLT, and "out of your mind" in the NIV. Christian witnesses today shouldn't be surprised when they occasionally encounter charges of, "You're crazy," "That's ridiculous," or other similar responses to our attempts to share the Gospel. Paul's reaction wasn't to cower before rejection, resort to religious double-talk, or waver from what he had said. He followed Peter's counsel for sharing one's faith: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everybody who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (from 1 Peter 3:15, NIV). Paul's response in Acts 26:25 did not take an argumentative tone. Rather, his reply, "most noble Festus" showed respect for the governor's agitation as well as the authority of his powerful position. Yet, it also showed Paul's confident certainty in the trustworthy and reasonable nature of what he said. Likewise, Christians sharing their faith today should keep their confidence in God's truth without resorting to bitterness, argument, or anger.

26 For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner.

27 King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.

Although Paul was replying to Festus's loud reaction, he skillfully turns his reply to include Agrippa. He was the great-grandson of Herod the Great who attempted to kill Jesus at birth (Matthew 2:16), and the grandson of Herod Antipas who had John the Baptist beheaded (14:10). From childhood, Agrippa had been immersed in the events of Jesus' life and his interaction with the Temple and its leaders. In addition, Agrippa had an ongoing interest in Jewish affairs and religion. Although he ruled over two small areas in Palestine, the Romans had appointed him as their overseer of the Temple. So Paul accurately depicted Agrippa's knowledge of what he spoke.

His statement in Acts 26:26, "this thing was not done in a corner" was a widely known Greek saying. Also, Jesus had been crucified outside Jerusalem during Passover. Thousands of Jews from across the world were there. With this understatement, Paul emphasized Agrippa's knowledge of what was widely known.

When asked whether he believed the prophets, Paul assumed Agrippa's interest in spiritual realities. This was an effective approach to sharing his faith. Paul understood that then, as now, all people want to believe that their lives have purpose and meaning beyond their present circumstances. This should bolster Christians' confidence as we share God's Good News in Christ today.

28 Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

29 And Paul said, I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds.

Earlier, Festus deflected Paul's witness by questioning Paul's sanity. Here, Agrippa utilized another common ploy to sidetrack Paul's witness for Christ. He accused Paul of trying to rush him into a decision without giving needed time to think or with too little information for making a good decision. In verse 28, "almost" (Gk. oligos, ol-EE-gos) means "a little" or "slightly." Most modern translations, such as NLT, NIV, or NRSV, interpret Agrippa's words as a question. He was asking Paul, "Do you think that in a short time, or with only a few words, you can convince me to become a Christian?"

Paul again gave us a good example of effectively sharing one's faith. He responds by affirming his assurance that he saw his commitment to Christ as a good decision and as a sure Angieh to purpose and meaning regardless of the uncertainties of his life.

30 And when he had thus spoken, the king rose up, and the governor, and Bernice, and they sat with them:

31 And when they were gone aside, they talked between themselves, saying, This doeth nothing worthy of death or of bonds.

32 Then said Agrippa unto Festus, This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar.

Here we see another means of avoiding the claims of Christ—departure. Agrippa, his sister, Festus, and the crowd of onlookers got up and left. Yet, all had heard a clear statement of faith in Christ and an appeal for commitment to Him.

In what most people would consider a bad situation, Paul found the opportunity to share the message of God's revelation through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Within two years, Festus would be dead, but he'd heard the call to follow Jesus. The Roman captain commanded one-tenth of a Roman legion—600 men. Agrippa returned to rule over two provinces. Undoubtedly, the onlookers

that day were also people of privilege, wealth, and above average influence. Paul had fulfilled his commitment and Christ's will for his life (Acts 9:15; 23:11). Festus and Agrippa saw Paul's appeal to Caesar as a strategic mistake. But it was God's way, through Paul, of spreading His message in Christ to the summit of Roman power.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Appeasing Those Zealous for the Law
(Acts 21:17–26)

TUESDAY

A Stirred-Up Mob
(Acts 21:27–36)

WEDNESDAY

Taken into Custody
(Acts 22:17–24)

THURSDAY

You Must Bear Witness in Rome
(Acts 22:30–23:11)

FRIDAY

Paul's Background as a Pharisee
(Acts 26:1–8)

SATURDAY

Paul's Encounter with Christ
(Acts 26:9–18)

SUNDAY

Paul's Testimony before Roman Authorities
(Acts 26:19–32)