

PAUL BEFORE AGRIPPA (Acts 26)

As a prisoner and guilty of crimes yet to be identified, standing in the court convened in Caesarea by Festus the Roman Governor of Judea and Samaria, in the illustrious presence of King Herod Agrippa, his wife Bernice, and a multitude of Roman officials from across the region was *Paul* ... unimpressive, average, and in stark contrast to his audience. In his own words from another context, ¹ *1 Cor. 2:4* my speech ... not with enticing words of man's wisdom ... ^{4:10} ... fools for Christ's sake, ... weak ... despised. ... Yet, in the will of the Lord, God had brought all those influential people to hear the Gospel through His servant, Paul.

With a great sense of his own importance, King Agrippa, the master of ceremonies, instructed the apostle to begin, Thou art permitted to speak for thyself (26:1). Paul commenced by courteously acknowledging the king (v.2) and proceeding to explain his case. He was not flattering Agrippa, but he addressed him as appropriate to his position, ² I think myself happy *ἱμακάριος*, *blessed, privileged, cf. Mt. 5/1*, king Agrippa, because I shall answer for myself this day before thee touching all the things whereof I am accused of the Jews. ... This was the moment and opportunity Paul had longed for, - to preach the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to so many powerful and influential dignitaries. In particular, Agrippa had more than a fleeting interest in this Gospel for he had heard about it, to some degree researched it (v.3), and now had the opportunity to listen to one of its greatest exponents. ... The king would have been enthralled.

Instead of delivering a theological lecture, Paul began with his own personal experience on the road to Damascus, and how the Lord Jesus had confronted him. He reiterated his strong allegiance to the Jewish religion from his youth, and his pursuit of confronting anything contrary (⁵ after the *most straitest* sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee). He presented himself as continuing to be a faithful and loyal Jew, while adding how he had now come to a more complete understanding of the true faith of his fathers, as promised throughout the Old Testament, ⁶ And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers: ⁷ Unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come. For which hope's sake, king Agrippa, I am accused of the Jews. ... This is what I was, - convinced, persuaded, dogmatic. ... He was as much a Pharisee, - as determined to strictly observe the Law, - as any of the Pharisees presently accusing him. He had been convinced Jesus was a liar and a deceiver, and the teachings concerning Him were dangerous to the Jewish religion and therefore, had to be silenced and obliterated (v.9).

However, in the pursuit of his obsession, the Lord met and stopped him in his tracks, literally. Paul reminded his audience the doctrine of resurrection from

the dead is a Jewish belief, firmly founded in the Old Testament, so what was their problem rejecting the resurrection of one, Jesus Christ, ⁸ Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead? ... He was presenting the issue of resurrection as a sound Jewish doctrine (cf. Jn. 11:24), and of course his accusers were compelled to agree. ... Thus far, as Paul addressed his comments to King Agrippa, the Jews listening could find nothing to contradict his presentation. And as he told them how he pursued, punished, and imprisoned the Christians (v. 9-11), they would have been concentrating intently for what had been *his* former agenda matched their present aspirations.

As he related his encounter with the Lord Jesus, he described it so vividly, such was the great impression it had made on Him, ¹³ At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, *above the brightness of the sun*, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. And it transformed him for as the Lord personally spoke to him, he was arrested by His glory, submitted to His authority, *and was changed and converted*. As he spoke to this crowd in Caesarea, they could see and witness the veracity of this life-changing experience. None could deny it for it was so real! And when Paul recognised the voice of the One speaking, he immediately received it as the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ ... and Paul knew his efforts to silence His disciples were totally in vain.

On that day, in the presence of the Saviour, Saul of Tarsus and his companions fell to the ground, but Saul was instructed, ¹⁶ *rise, and stand upon thy feet for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister [ὑπηρέτης] and a witness [μάρτυς] both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee;* ¹⁷ Delivering thee from the people [*the Jews*], and from the Gentiles [*pagan idol worshippers*], *unto whom now I send thee,* ¹⁸ *To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me. ...* What a powerful message God was using Paul to preach to these Jews and Gentiles in Caesarea!

From the commencement of his ‘apology’ (v.2 ‘answer’, ‘a speech in defence’), Paul had been relating his testimony gently but persuasively ... and bringing his audience with him. Then he courteously justified his missionary and evangelistic activities, 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. ... The king was listening to every word, as Paul expertly, and under the Holy Spirit’s guidance, brought it round to why he had been called to give account before such an illustrious court, ²¹ For these causes the Jews caught me in the temple, and went about to kill me.

He neither aggressively confronted nor lambasted Agrippa with his testimony. He simply gave his account of his meeting with the Lord. He did not veer off at a tangent, with stories to impress about places he had been and people he had met ... he simply lifted up and presented Christ ... preaching Him crucified and risen again, ²² *Having therefore obtained help of [from] 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.

When he had finished, Festus could not contain himself, ²⁴ Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad. ... The ancient classical Greek philosopher Socrates is quoted to have said, “when the debate is lost, slander becomes the tool of the loser” ... and that was what Festus resorted to when he shouted in front of everyone, “You’re mad, Paul!” ... While Festus was prepared to believe all the grossly exaggerated legends and myths associated with the Roman gods, he considered Paul mad for what *he* believed!

To his credit, Paul was not diverted from presenting the Gospel, particularly to King Agrippa. He refuted Festus’ allegations, courteously (v.25), but continued to concentrate on the king, 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. ... The king was known to have explored these matters. He had studied the Old Testament and looked into the issues relating to the Law and the Prophets (v.26), so ²⁷ King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest. ... King Agrippa, it is time for you to decide ... *what is your decision?!* ... And the king immediately replied, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian (v.28). ... “In a short time, are you trying to persuade/convince me to become a Christian ... not just yet”. He sought to avoid the question. Nevertheless, looking directly at him, Paul followed up with, ²⁹ I would to God *I’m praying!*, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds. ... Paul did not miss the opportunity! Indeed, Paul was seeking for King Agrippa’s salvation!

The whole proceedings were conducted with politeness and order. Paul had proved he had no intention of starting a riot, but only to preach Christ. He graciously addressed the Jewish and Roman authorities, without any offence. His faith, regarding the Lord Jesus, was neither insurrection nor heresy.

The king and the queen and the Roman governor stood up, the occasion was ended, and they all proceeded out of the court (v.30). On their way out some of them were discussing what they had heard, and they concluded, beyond any doubt, Paul had done absolutely nothing for which he should be charged, nothing worthy of death or imprisonment (v.31) ... And King Agrippa had a stern word in Festus' ear, ³² This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar.

God makes no mistakes. He had called and equipped His servant Paul since that day on the road to Damascus. He had re-educated Paul in the truths of the doctrines of Christianity. He had led, directed, and protected him as he travelled on three major journeys proclaiming the Gospel and establishing churches. He had returned him to Jerusalem where he preached the Gospel to Jews and Gentiles, religious priests and pagan soldiers and officials. ... And *still* they could not extinguish Paul's witness! For as long as it was God's will for Paul's testimony to continue in all the places God had set before him to minister, the gates of Hell, - in all its guises, - would *not* prevail against God's almighty plan!