

Paul's Defense Before King Agrippa

Acts 26

Acts 26:1-3: *"Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself: ² "I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, ³ especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently."*

Background Notes

The location for the events in Acts 26 was the city of Caesarea, the Roman governmental and military headquarters for the land of Israel during the New Testament times. Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem, and he was taken to Caesarea as a prisoner and held there for two years. When Festus, the new governor, wanted to bring Paul up to Jerusalem for trial, Paul refused. He knew that nothing good would come of going back to Jerusalem. So Paul used his right as a Roman citizen to appeal his case to Caesar (Acts 25).

While Paul was waiting to be shipped to Rome, King Herod Agrippa and his sister Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus, the new governor. King Herod Agrippa II was the ruler (under Rome) of certain Jewish territories in Judea, Samaria, Galilee and Perea. Agrippa and Bernice were brother and sister, but they were living together in an incestuous relationship.

When Agrippa heard of Paul's case before Festus, he told Festus that he would like to hear Paul himself, so Festus arranged a hearing the very next day. Acts 25:23 says that *"when Agrippa and Bernice had come with great pomp, and had entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at Festus' command Paul was brought in."* What a scene this must have been! From the human perspective, Paul was an enslaved prisoner standing before an enthroned king - but from the divine perspective, Agrippa was an enslaved king before an enthroned prisoner!

In Acts 26, Paul again defended himself, and seized the opportunity to witness for the Lord and speak the truth of the gospel. Notice that Paul was courteous and polite in his approach (v1-3). He referred to Agrippa as *"an expert in all the customs and questions which have to do with the Jews,"* because Agrippa was part Jewish. He was the great-grandson of Herod the Great and his Jewish wife, Mariamne. The main content of Paul's speech is found in our doctrinal points.

Doctrinal Points

1. Christians should defend themselves with truth and logic.

Acts 26:4-23: *“My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. ⁵ They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee. ⁶ And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. ⁷ To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope’s sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. ⁸ Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead? ⁹ “Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.*

¹² *“While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, ¹³ at midday, O King, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. ¹⁴ And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ ¹⁵ So I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶ But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. ¹⁷ I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, ¹⁸ to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.’*

¹⁹ *“Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance. ²¹ For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. ²² Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come— ²³ that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.”*

In these verses Paul defended himself with truth and logic. He defended himself against the accusations of the Jewish leaders by first of all mentioning his strict adherence to the “faith of the fathers” in the past. As a Pharisee, he believed in the prophetic promises made to the Jewish patriarchs. Since these promises had not yet been fulfilled, Paul reasoned, they could only be fulfilled when the faithful (who had already died) were resurrected. So why should it be thought incredible that God raises the dead (v8)? Do you note the logic here? Notice, too, that Paul linked himself with many other Jews who had this same hope and faith (v7). He wasn’t some kind of “lone wolf” Jewish heretic! His beliefs were part of the Jewish “faith of the fathers.”

Then Paul moved on to relate the truth of his conversion. This account is consistent with the Acts 9 account of Paul's conversion, as well as his testimony before the Jews in the Temple area in Acts 22. When the Lord spoke to Saul on the Damascus road, what did He mean when He said, *"It is hard for you to kick against the goads"* (v14)? Goads were sharp sticks that were used to herd cattle. The "goads" here were either the pricks of Paul's conscience, or the resistance of the persecuted Christians to renounce their faith.

Paul defended himself with the truth and with logical arguments, and then left the results with the Lord. We should do the same. What more can we do? Whether we've been arrested for being a Christian, or because we're defending our actions before fellow believers, Christians should defend themselves with the truth and with logical reasoning, and then rely on the Lord to work out the situation.

2. Christians will be defamed as unstable and pushy.

Acts 26:24-32: *"Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, 'Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!'"* ²⁵ *But he said, 'I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason.* ²⁶ *For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner.* ²⁷ *King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe.'* ²⁸ *Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'You almost persuade me to become a Christian.'* ²⁹ *And Paul said, 'I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains.'* ³⁰ *When he had said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them;* ³¹ *and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, 'This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains.'* ³² *Then Agrippa said to Festus, 'This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.'"*

Defamation of character is a crime, and yet Christians are defamed all the time. In these verses we see two typical responses of unbelievers to a believer's testimony.

Response #1 - Christians are unstable.

That was Festus' response to Paul's testimony. *"Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!"* In essence he was saying: 'Paul, you've studied so much theology that you no longer know what's reality and what's myth. You're unstable to the point where you believe what is not true. You're crazy!'

Have you ever had an unbeliever call you crazy for being an outspoken Christian? I remember witnessing to my seatmate on a plane, and the man said, "Do you really believe all that stuff?" In other words, 'Because I think all that stuff is untrue and just a bunch of myths, you're crazy if you believe it!'

Notice Paul's response to Festus: *"I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason"* (v25). Festus, these are the facts. You can check out the evidence. These events were not hidden, or done in a remote corner of the land. There are eyewitnesses. The resurrection of Christ can be proved!

Response #2 - Christians are pushy.

King Agrippa's response was that Paul was presumptuous and pushy. *"Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian" (v28).* It's possible that Agrippa was making a sincere statement, and he was actually close to becoming a Christian. If so, praise the Lord – we hope he followed through. But most likely, King Agrippa was making a sarcastic remark. Maybe he meant, 'Do you think you can convert someone like *me* in such a short time?' Or he might have meant, 'Don't waste your time trying to persuade me to become a Christian!' In any case, Paul ignored the sarcasm and irony, and he responded sincerely to Agrippa: *"I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains."*

Don't be surprised if you, too, are labeled as "too pushy" or meddling in another person's business if you share your faith. Just last week when I was sharing my testimony, a person said to me, "Are you trying to convert me?" I almost said "Yes!" Christians will be defamed as unstable and pushy.

Practical Application

Let's praise the Lord for the blessings of salvation!

When you thank the Lord that He has saved you and given you eternal life, do you thank Him for all the blessings of your salvation? Notice how Paul included the truth of the gospel and the blessings of salvation in his testimony before King Agrippa (v18).

"To open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me"(v18). Paul never missed an opportunity to share the gospel – and you couldn't state the blessings of salvation in a more concise way!

When a person turns to Christ by faith, they turn from darkness to light. They are transferred from the dominion of Satan to the kingdom of God. All their sins are forgiven. They have a future eternal inheritance. And they are now sanctified - set apart for God's holy use.

Did you realize that you received **all** these blessings of salvation when you became a Christian? Let's praise the Lord for the blessings of salvation!