



43 | ACTS 25:13-26:32

ALMOST PERSUADED

To be almost persuaded is to be entirely lost. If you are lost, don't put off turning to Christ for another day. Turn now and receive eternal life.

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May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works, ³² who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke! ³³ I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. ³⁴ May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD.

—Psalm 104:31-34

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WELCOME: We are glad you are here! Be sure to grab a Welcome Packet if you are visiting with us.

Introduction

In this passage, Paul the apostle is accused of being out of his mind for believing and teaching the gospel. It seems like such a far-fetched thing that the God of the universe would take on human flesh, live and die on behalf of broken sinners, and then rise again, bidding them to come into his kingdom and serve him. This is love and mercy, but it seemed too good to be true to King Agrippa II whom, Paul appeared before. Paul was so sincere, forthright, and believable that the great King was almost persuaded in such a short time to be a Christian.

Almost is the difference between heaven and hell. To know Christ is all or nothing. You can't serve two masters. You've got to choose Christ, and choose him now. I think of the story of D.L. Moody, who, by his own admission, made a mistake on October 8, 1871. It was a mistake he determined never to repeat. He had been preaching in the city of Chicago. That particular night drew his largest audience yet. His message was "What will you do with Jesus?" By the end of the service, he was tired. He concluded his message, and once again presented the true gospel with a concluding statement: "Now I give you a week to think that over ... and when we come together again, you will have an opportunity to respond."

A soloist began to sing. But before the final note, **the music was drowned out by clanging bells and wailing sirens screaming through the streets. The great Chicago fire was blazing.** In the ashen aftermath, hundreds were dead and over a hundred thousand were homeless. There was no meeting a week later. Without a doubt, some who heard Moody's message had died in the fire. He reflected remorsefully that he would have given his right arm before he would ever give an audience another week to think over the message of the gospel.

When I read that story, I thought about the Scripture that is in front of us. There are some here in this service that are at the very door of salvation. God has been drawing you, but you have not been surrendering. You've been putting it off. **To be almost persuaded is to be entirely lost.** There's coming a day when the harvest will be past. Death comes for all of us. No longer will you hear the gospel call because it will be too late. You will find yourself in the lake of fire, in a place where there are no exits. If Christ is calling you today young person or older person, turn to him today. Let your heart soften and feel the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Give in to the Lord's loving hand and plan for you.

Key thought: To be almost persuaded is to be entirely lost. If you are lost, don't put off turning to Christ for another day. Turn now and receive eternal life.

A **good knowledge of the gospel is not enough for eternal life.** There must be a total and **complete surrender to Christ.** To be almost persuaded is still completely unregenerate, headed for hell, and still under the wrath and condemnation of God's holy justice. Total surrender, by grace through faith in Christ is the only way to gain the mercy of God.

1. THOSE NEEDING GOSPEL PERSUASION (25:13-27)

Festus didn't know it, but he had in his prison in Caesarea the **greatest evangelist perhaps that had ever lived**. Paul was all about giving sinners hope for eternal life in Christ. How Festus needed Christ. But he was far more focused on his legal case, and he didn't have expertise in the laws of the Jews. And as far as Roman law was concerned, he had already proclaimed that Paul had done nothing worthy of death or imprisonment. Festus needed expert help in the Jewish law if he was going to write an appeal to Nero, who was the emperor at the time. From a civil perspective, there would be none greater to help him than Herod Agrippa II, the king over Palestine.

Governor Festus was hoping King Agrippa could help him write to emperor Nero something about what the charges really were. It would look extremely odd for a prisoner to arrive under heavy guard in Rome but with **no statement of the accusation against him**.¹ In Festus' view, Paul was completely innocent. So in comes the great King Agrippa.

THE KING, AGRIPPA

Acts 25:13 | Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus.

Here is the great King Agrippa II, who had almost the same land mass as his great grandfather to rule over in Israel, the infamous King Herod the Great. Agrippa has a long life and stays on the scene in Israel until the end of the century, dying in 100 A.D. **Agrippa II was king of the land of Palestine, appointed by the Romans**. In the earthly realm, he is great, but **in the heavenly realm, he is condemned** by his own sins before a just and holy God. He needs to be persuaded of the gospel.

Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great. Agrippa's father, Herod Agrippa I, had arrested Peter and beheaded James, the brother of John, son of Zebedee. Agrippa II was a pretty civilized king compared to his father and grandfather. Except one thing: he was living in an **incestuous relationship with his sister, Bernice**, which hardly commends him as a model of virtue. Bernice was the sort of figure whose photograph, had she lived in our times, would seldom have been out of the glossy magazines. Bernice was her generation's Marilyn Monroe.

Bernice and Agrippa had another sister as well, Drusilla, who was the wife of the former governor, Felix.² So scandalous was Bernice's act of marrying her own full-blooded brother, that when she later became the Emperor Titus' mistress, he had to send her away because of the moral outcry of pagan Rome.³ Though Luke mentions none of this, the fact that he just says 'and Bernice' in verse 13 may tell its own story; most of his first hearers or readers would raise at least one eyebrow at the thought of this fashionable and powerful woman coming into contact with Paul.⁴ King Agrippa and Queen Bernice were a sick, sin-

¹ Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 2*, 202.

² MacArthur, *Acts*, vol. 2, 327.

³ Earnest Cary, trans., *Dio's Roman History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 56:18.

⁴ Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 2*, 202.

infested couple. So this was quite the family affair. Oh, how they needed to hear the gospel, and from an apostle no less!

Because of his relation to his grandfather (Herod the Great), **Herod Agrippa II was considered an expert in the Jewish religion**. The Romans granted him the custody of the ceremonial vestments worn by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. He also held the authority to appoint the high priest. In this respect he could be considered “king of the Jews.”⁵ Despite his paganism and immoral life, he was well educated in the Jewish religion and culture, likely more as a curiosity than anything else. There was at least this in his favor: he would be able to understand Paul’s situation, which is how he got involved in his trial.⁶

How King Agrippa II needed to hear the good news! When he hears it, he is “almost persuaded” to become a Christian (26:28). And how often does anyone on earth get to hear the gospel message from an actual apostle of Jesus Christ? The scene is set now for Agrippa’s evangelization. Enter Paul.

THE PRISONER, PAUL

Festus brought Paul’s case to Agrippa II toward the end of his state visit to welcome Festus the new proconsul. Agrippa expressed a wish to hear Paul in Caesarea. Paul prepared his speech with great care, for he looked on it less as a defense than an opportunity of preaching the gospel before an exalted influential audience.⁷ Paul could remember his own commission from the Lord Jesus. “You are ‘a chosen instrument of mine **to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings**,” Paul could hear the Lord say (*cf* Acts 9:15).

Acts 25:14-22 | And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, "There is a man left prisoner by Felix,¹⁵ and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him.¹⁶ I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him.¹⁷ So when they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought.¹⁸ When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed.¹⁹ Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.²⁰ Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them.²¹ But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar."²² Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," said he, "you will hear him."

⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, 492–493. See also Bruce, *Acts*: NIC, 481f.

⁶ Boice, *Acts: An Expository Commentary*, 401–402.

⁷ Pollock, *The Apostle*, 260.

Festus tells Agrippa all about Paul, who here is called a “prisoner.” Felix and Agrippa have all the earthly power. **In the earthly realm, Paul is a poor prisoner.** He was a leftover of Governor Felix. Paul had rotted in the Caesarean jail now for two years. Festus lays out the history of the case, careful to show both that he has done everything by the book.⁸ The Jews had brought their case against Paul, but his only charge was “about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive” (25:19). Paul wanted to get to Rome, so he appealed to the emperor. Agrippa was curious to hear Paul, so a time was arranged for the next day. You see, **Paul the poor prisoner is the mighty apostle with the good news that can give eternal life to all the kings of the earth if they will just repent.**

Paul had been a glorious recipient of the good news. He’s going to give his testimony of salvation to Agrippa the next day, but he had been a high-ranking Pharisee, possibly a **former member of the Sanhedrin**, and most importantly, before his conversion, he was the chief persecutor of Christians. He put them to death if he could, and the rest he jailed. By hating the Christians, he thought he was doing God service. As he will tell us later (26:1-23), Paul was converted to Christ through a vision from the Lord. Jesus revealed himself to Paul as the Son of God, creator of the world. And he commissioned Paul to reach the Gentiles, which is why Paul was in this jail. Paul was imprisoned so much that he was glad to take on that identity. Paul wore his Roman chains as a symbol of what God can do through the weakest of people. Paul used to lock people up, but **now he was the prisoner.** He speaks of it throughout in his letters.

Ephesians 6:20 | I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.
Ephesians 3:1 | Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles.
Philippians 1:12 | What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

On a human level, one would expect that Paul’s imprisonment would slow or perhaps even stop the progress of the gospel.⁹ After all, Paul cannot plant churches while in Roman custody. Yet **God does his best work with the weakest of people.** But we must remember what Paul states elsewhere.

1 Corinthians 1:25 | The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

What about you? What are the chains in your life? Do you see them **as mere limitations**, or can you see with the eyes of faith how God has given you those limitations for the advancement of the gospel? It may be a **health problem**. You may be a bit bitter at how the pain or paralysis has limited you. Perhaps it’s **a difficult marriage** or a **crushing job situation**. Maybe it is a wayward child, or it could be an unmet expectation or severe disappointment in life. These circumstances can feel like chains. I challenge you to look deeper and see the hand of God in your limitations. Through our limitations, God humbles us. We need to embrace our weakness that the power of Christ would rest upon us. Your limitations are often the very things God uses to advance the gospel. Paul was a weak, limited man, but that’s exactly who God uses.

⁸ Hamilton, *John–Acts*, 558.

⁹ Jerry L. Sumney, *Philippians: A Greek Student’s Intermediate Reader* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), 19.

THE PROCONSUL, FESTUS

Festus is the governor of Judea, like Pontius Pilate many years before. He welcomes King Agrippa and his Queen Bernice to Judea. In the eyes of the world, Festus looks regal with his sister/queen Bernice. **He is esteemed in the world but condemned before God for his sins.** Roles are quite reversed in the heavenly realm. Yet and still, Festus calls **a fancy meeting to introduce Paul and King Agrippa.**

The Fancy Meeting

Acts 25:23a | So on the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city.

Governor Festus is a man under the authority of King Agrippa II. Agrippa has brought Bernice, his wife and full-blooded sister. **Agrippa arrives with full military honors and “great pomp.”** Incredible details are given by Luke, who some believe may have been granted permission to be there with Paul. King Agrippa and Queen Bernice would have been escorted to their thrones, with blare of trumpets, waving of peacock feather fans, and rigid salutes of the generals. Agrippa and Bernice would be arrayed in purple, Festus in red. Agrippa apparently has the same flair for pomp and circumstance that his father had (and died over). Dignitaries and military personnel assemble—the most powerful and influential people in that region of the empire—and Paul is ushered in (25:23).¹⁰ Luke notes that they entered into the “audience hall” or the courtroom of Festus’ palace there at Caesarea where Agrippa would act as judge and hear Paul’s case.

The Frail Apostle

Acts 25:23b | At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in.

Paul was brought in before Agrippa and Festus and the whole ensemble. Here stood the apostle, small, almost **stooping with his “bald head and crooked legs.”**¹¹ Yet he was alert and energetic in manner, gray-bearded now. Perhaps he was a little less thin and wiry after years in moderate comfort, safe from stoning, or beatings or long treks from city to city, yet with a frailty and a scarred face in sharp contrast to the hearty young soldier who led him, politely enough, by a chain.¹² Imagine, Paul was likely better taken care of in the prison of a palace than with all the persecutions he had been through.

The Facts About Paul’s Case

Acts 25:23-27 | And Festus said, “King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. ²⁵ But I found that he had done nothing deserving death. And as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him. ²⁶ But I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after

¹⁰ Hamilton, *John-Acts*, 558.

¹¹ Barrier. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 73.

¹² Pollock, *The Apostle*, 260.

we have examined him, I may have something to write.²⁷ For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him.”

Festus summarizes the case before King Agrippa, **giving only the bare details**, but **leaving the full report to be given by Paul the apostle**. He says that Paul is innocent of the charges, but further than that, he needs Agrippa’s help so that when he gives a letter to Nero the emperor, he will have **“something to write.”**

But what do we actually know about Governor Porcius Festus? According to the historical annals at the time, Festus was appointed in **“Nero’s fifth year in A.D. 59.”** We know this to be a fact since **each time a new governor was appointed** there would be **“change in the provincial coinage** of Judaea” with the new governor’s symbol on it (a palm branch), and the year he began.¹³ **There are many of these coins available today.** In fact, you can purchase an original Festus coin for as little as **\$60 online.** Josephus wrote that Festus ruled wisely and justly, in contrast to his predecessor Felix.¹⁴

Festus availed himself of the aid of Agrippa II, an able and popular ruler among both Jews and Greeks, and a person with a close acquaintance with both Judaism and Christianity. Festus wanted to honor the old Herodian family in calling upon the great Herod Agrippa II.¹⁵

The Fatal Suspicion

Festus’ great claim to fame is regarding Paul to be insane. At the conclusion of Paul’s giving of the gospel, **Festus would shout at Paul.**

Acts 26:24 | **Paul, you are out of your mind;** Your great learning is driving you to madness!

Festus outright rejects the gospel, which we will speak of more in a moment. But with all their riches and power, **what advantage did these kings and governors have over Paul or any child of God?** What good do earthly power and riches do for the eternal state?

Mark 8:36 | What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?

Oh, how these kings on earth desperately needed the good news. Their positions on earth would not give them eternal life. We can gain the highest places with the greatest wealth on earth, but we will lose our soul if we don’t know Christ.

2. THE POWER OF GOSPEL PERSUASION (26:1-23)

Now it was time for Paul to present his case to the Roman appointed “King of the Jews,” Agrippa II. Paul himself, a most unlikely candidate, had been persuaded by the gospel.

¹³ F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 345f.

¹⁴ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XX, viii, 9; XX, ix, 1.

¹⁵ E. M. Blaiklock, *The Century of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1962), ch. 6.

PAUL'S CASE

Paul is not merely going to make a case for his own innocence. That has already been expressed on several occasions. **Paul's case is for the gospel. It saved him**, and he wants it to save Festus and Agrippa. Indeed, he does all he can to **persuade them to trust in the Lord** for salvation. The gospel that had saved Paul can save anyone—it's the power of God for salvation!

Romans 1:16 | For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

The Magistrate of Paul's Case

Presiding over Paul's case is **Agrippa II, an expert in Jewish law** as far as a civil magistrate.

Acts 26:1-3a | So Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense: ²"I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, ³especially because **you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews.**"

Paul is glad to speak before Agrippa, since the Herodian king is "**familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews**" (Acts 26:3). This chapter contains the most extensive testimony from Paul in Acts. As in his defense at Jerusalem, Paul mentions his personal background and **presents himself**—and, by extension, the Christian **faith**—as **the proper expression of the Jewish religion**.¹⁶ Paul stretched out his hand to make his defense. He asks for Agrippa's patience.

Paul was grateful that he could present his case before someone eminently familiar with Judaism, the grandson of the infamous Herod the Great, who had constructed the Jerusalem temple and launched it to a place of incredible prominence in the ancient world. Agrippa II was familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures, so **for the first time in over two years, Paul can finally give a full presentation of the real reason he is imprisoned**. Agrippa has enough background to understand that Paul is innocent of insurrection at Jerusalem and desecration of the temple. What he is guilty of? Preaching the good news that the Messiah has come to fulfill all that is written in the Old Testament Scriptures.

The Motive of Paul's Case

Acts 26:1b-3 | Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.

Paul asks the king for patience as he begins his defense. This is just what Paul had longed for during his bleak two years in prison—a knowledgeable judge and a non-antagonistic audience before whom he could make his case. Speaking with remarkable optimism and fervor, **Paul's speech was not so much a personal defense as a positive presentation of the gospel and an evangelistic appeal**.¹⁷

¹⁶ Hamilton, *John-Acts*, 560.

¹⁷ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, 326.

PAUL'S CHARACTER

Paul now uses himself as an example for faithful Judaism. He claims that Christianity is nothing new—it's actually the faith of the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Agrippa would have appreciated this since he was well versed in the religion of the Jews. Paul uses his own life to say that he is merely living faithfully according to the Jewish Scriptures.

The Apostle's Faithfulness

Paul's conversion story is so shocking because he would have been **the most faithful Pharisee in all of Israel**. No one could doubt the apostle's faithfulness. At a young age, he left his home in Tarsus and moved to the holy city of Jerusalem to learn under a great rabbi.

Acts 26:4-5 | "My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. ⁵They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee."

When Paul moved to Jerusalem, he trained under the **rabbi Gamaliel** (cf 22:3). Very few boys would be allowed to move to Jerusalem to be trained by the grandson of the great Hillel, but Saul of Tarsus was one of a handful. **He would have begun around age 15**. It was more than just classroom learning, but the small group of students would imitate whatever the rabbi did. Paul exceeded his fellow students and became the most faithful Jew of his day, from the strictest group: the Pharisees. He describes himself in Philippians 3:5-6, "**Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel**, of the tribe of Benjamin, **a Hebrew of Hebrews**; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to **righteousness under the law, blameless.**"

He's imprisoned presently because he's trying to continue to be faithful. **The true Messiah called him**. He speaks of the depth of his character and knowledge of the Jewish religion, presenting his own life as a follower of Christ as the fulfillment of the **faith of Abraham**.

The Ancient Faith

Paul has not invented something new but is living out the ancient faith of Abraham. Paul speaks directly to the real charge against him. He's living out the true faith of a child of Abraham. Paul is guilty of being committed to the ancient faith. The hope of Israel is not in this life, but the promise of the resurrection. This is why he's being held in prison.

Acts 26:6-7 | "And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, ⁷ to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king!"

Paul describes his faith in Christ as "**my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers**" (26:6). Paul claimed, it was for his adherence to the hope of fulfillment of God's promises to the ancestors of the Jews that he now stood on trial. ¹⁸ It was that promise that was made by God throughout the Old Testament: Messiah would come to take away

¹⁸ Marshall, *Acts*, 412.

sin and establish his kingdom of righteousness. And it was that very promise to which the twelve tribes of Israel hoped to attain as they earnestly served God night and day.¹⁹

Paul was about to present a case that Jesus had come according to the Old Testament prophecies and promises. **Faithful Judaism always looked forward to the Messiah.** Now he had come! Jesus had fulfilled the law. Paul hadn't invented anything new. The ultimate true expression of Judaism now that the Messiah had come had to be exclusively through God's ultimate Son and King whom he'd promised since the opening chapters of Genesis (*cf* Gen 3:15).

Paul mentions his personal background and presents himself—and, by extension, the Christian faith—as the proper expression of the Jewish religion.²⁰ Paul had been born a true Jew, reared a true Jew, trained in the strictest Pharisaic viewpoint of Judaism, and **still remained a true Jew.** It was **precisely his faith in the resurrection of Jesus** that most pointed to his fidelity to Judaism because in the resurrection Israel's hope in God's promises had been fulfilled.²¹ How vital it is that we not only believe the faith of Abraham but live it out!

The Amazing Fact

Paul presents to Agrippa the one fact for which he's incarcerated: that God raises the dead. He **raised Jesus from the dead.** This is the **central claim of the Christian faith.**

Acts 26:8 | “Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?”

Since Agrippa has a deep respect for the Jewish religion, Paul knows it shouldn't be a stretch for Agrippa to believe that **God raises the dead.** In fact, Paul extends it to “any of you.” If God really is the Almighty, then why would it be incredible for him to do anything?

Paul makes it clear that it is for the hope of the gospel, specifically that God raises the dead, that he is incarcerated. This is short for the gospel, which Paul likely explained. **Christ died for the ungodly.** The death of Jesus of Nazareth was well-known throughout Judea. Paul lets the king know that God can indeed raise the dead! Jesus didn't stay dead but **rose from the grave on the third day!**

PAUL'S COMMITMENT

Yet, Paul realizes what an incredible claim this sounds like on the surface to these Roman rulers who were so focused on the power and glory and materialism. **Really? God raises the dead?** How in the world did you come up with this Paul? They must have already thought he was out of his mind, but remember Paul had asked for patience, and it seems Agrippa and Festus were surely doing their best to hear Paul out. Paul lets them know that **he was a notorious persecutor of the church.**

Saul of Tarsus was an enemy of Christ and a fierce persecutor of the church. It would take something “out of this world” to **convince the great Saul of Tarsus that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah.**

¹⁹ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol. 2, 333.

²⁰ Hamilton, *John-Acts*, 560.

²¹ Polhill, *Acts*, 500.

Acts 26:9-11 | “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.”

We have Stephen’s martyrdom recorded in sacred Scripture. Paul was there approving and holding the garments of those who stoned him.

Acts 7:58 | They cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Saul of Tarsus had no mercy on the Christians. He locked them up and put them to death, but now he was one, standing there before Agrippa, on trial for his faith.

PAUL’S CONVERSION

“How in the world,” Agrippa must have thought, “could one who opposed Christians now be one?” Paul was about to answer the question Agrippa must have been thinking. It all happened one day when he was on his way to Damascus in Syria, just outside of Dan in Israel, the northern most point. I’ve stood on the hill overlooking that Damascus Road in Israel. Paul was on a mission to persecute and discourage Christians, but the Lord was about to change Paul’s mission. He was about to be converted from Christ hater to Christ follower. Here for the third time in Acts, Paul gives his testimony of conversion (*cf* 9:1–30; 22:5–21).

Acts 26:12-15 | “In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³ At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. ¹⁴ And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ ¹⁵ And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.’”

This is what it takes to convert the great Saul of Tarsus: seeing the resurrected Christ! Paul now gets extremely personal. He shares his vision of the risen Christ. How could a man so committed to persecuting Christians suddenly and dramatically change his mind? Paul let’s Agrippa know. “I met a man who was raised from the dead, and he’s the Jewish Messiah.”

Paul tells the king that when he was persecuting Christ’s followers, that the Lord Jesus Christ took it personally. When Paul persecuted Christians, he was actually persecuting Jesus the Messiah.

Jesus said to him, “It’s hard for you to kick against the goads.” A goad is a **sharp stick, about six to eight feet long**, with a sharp end on it to **keep the cattle** going in a **straight line when you are plowing** on a farm. It’s a prod of sorts. The more the cattle kicked against the prod or goad, it would stick in them more. The farmer would prick the animal to steer it in the right direction. In essence, the more an ox

rebelled, the more it suffered. **Paul had to learn the hard way that resistance to Jesus was a losing battle** — hopeless. God is sovereign. He can convert and subdue even the most stubborn ox, like a Saul of Tarsus. Jesus was going to goad and direct and sovereignly steer Paul in the right direction. It was futile for him to kick against the prod that God was using. What else could Paul do but give in and surrender to the goad of God? The goad was an instrument of submission and training.

Conversion is like that goad. We have to face the pain of our own sin and our own choices. Paul thought he was righteous, but he was painfully wrong. His self-righteousness was stripped away so much that he called himself the “chief of sinners” because he “persecuted the church of God.” Who would want to persecute God’s own forever family? Paul thought he was so right, but he was so wrong.

What about you? What is your testimony of salvation? When did you come to know Christ? Has there been a time when you’ve turned from your sin to Christ? It doesn’t have to be as dramatic as Paul’s testimony. The greatest conversion stories are those of little children putting their faith in Christ. But no matter what your age, conversion is a new way of living, turning from sin and turning to Jesus Christ.

One more thing—if you have a testimony, share it! Everywhere Paul was, he shared what God had done for him. That was always a powerful way to introduce the gospel. Are you sharing your testimony everywhere you go? Do you serve the living God? Is he alive and active in your life?

PAUL’S COMMISSION

Paul was immediately commissioned to preach the gospel. And he’s going to suffer a lot, but it will be worth it. God is going to turn whole groups of people from darkness to light and from Satan to God. Paul had just undergone conversion, and now he was being commissioned to convert others.

Acts 26:16-18 | ‘But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, ¹⁷delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you ¹⁸to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

Paul was to bring true deliverance to both Jews and Gentiles, but he had a specific and special commission to the Gentiles. We are not saved to sit and soak but commissioned to serve. Jesus said to **“go into all the world and preaching the gospel to every creature”** (Mk 16:15, NKJV).

If we obey his commission God promises to do for us what he did for Paul. God will “open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (26:18). People are in slavery to Satan. Paul tells the Corinthians that unbelievers are blinded by the devil. **Only God can open their eyes!**

2 Corinthians 4:4 | The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

God will open their eyes as you give the gospel. That's why we need to be giving the gospel everywhere we go. When blind eyes can see, they will put receive complete forgiveness of their sins. Judgment day is canceled for the believer. Sinners become saints. They are "sanctified by faith" in Jesus. Those once robed in the rags of sin are now robed in Jesus' righteousness. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

PAUL'S CALLING

Paul tells King Agrippa, "I obeyed my calling." Imagine the surprise of the Jews in Damascus, that **instead of bringing Christians to them for arrest** and execution or imprisonment, he **tells them to turn to Jesus in faith!**

Acts 26:19-20 | "Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,²⁰ but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.

Paul's call was not just to the Jews. The good news was never just for one group of people. God's love and mercy is for the entire world. So **Paul was obedient** and told everyone, both Jews and Gentiles that they needed to open their eyes to the truth. Repentance means "a change of mind." It's like being given new eyes and the ability to hear. You see God in all his beauty and his grace becomes irresistible. Whenever a person truly repents, they produce a life "in keeping with **repentance.**" **They live as if they see life differently, in submission to Christ,** because they see everything through his eyes.

PAUL'S CHARGES

Paul says, "The real charges are against me because of the gospel. I've been faithful to the faith of my ancestors and to the Scriptures I've read and loved all my life."

Acts 26:21-23 | For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. ²²To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: ²³that the **Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead,** he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles."

What is Paul guilty of? **Preaching the Old Testament Scriptures** in a faithful manner. "Moses and the prophets" point to one thing: the Redeemer that would come into the world and **suffer, just like Isaiah said,** and that **he would be "the first to rise from the dead" just as Hosea said.** He's the light of the world, "the way, the truth, and the life" not just for Paul's people, the Jews, but for the whole world. Paul was guilty of being a faithful son of Abraham and preaching the faith of Abraham and Moses in the coming King who is both Savior and Lord of all, who will judge the living and the dead.

What about you? Would you be found guilty of being a Christian? Are you faithful to the faith of Abraham? Are you faithful to the message of Moses, entrusting your life to the

God who is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in unrelenting love and faithfulness” (Exo 34:6)?

3. THE TRAGEDY OF BEING “ALMOST” PERSUADED (26:24-32)

What was the response to the good news that Paul preached? Not good.

GOSPEL FOOLISHNESS

Festus interrupts Paul and lets him know that for such a learned man, he sounds like he is out of his mind.

Acts 26:24 | And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.”

Despite conventional references to Roman gods, the typical Roman worshiped imperial fortune—the prominence and success of the Empire.²² **Festus**, being first and last a politician, worshiped power and was **a practical materialist**.²³ Saying Paul was out of his mind was not an insult from the great Governor Festus. Festus was genuinely amazed—not that Paul would think there is something greater than power and glory and material wealth, the Jews held to that—but that Paul actually lived by it. Most of the Jewish leaders, at least the Pharisees, had similar theology to Paul’s but they didn’t live by it. They sought the power and influence and wealth of this world. Paul forsook this world for the pleasures of Christ.

Festus must have been amazed at Paul’s response to the vision he received from Jesus. He left everything and was willing to suffer for the Lord. This stretched Festus’ rationality to the limit. It made no sense to him for Paul to choose a path that not only brought the apostle less pleasure but more suffering!²⁴

Paul could have lived a very pampered life with all his connections and respect within Judaism. Now he looked “out of his mind.” Paul was accused of insanity, just like his Lord. Jesus enemies and his own family thought our Lord had lost his mind (cf Mk 3:20; Jn 10:20).

Paul’s mind was so fixed on heaven, that Festus thought Paul had lost his mind. Truly the things of the Spirit are foolishness to the natural, lost person.

1 Corinthians 2:14, NIV | The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.

The **good news of Jesus is foolishness to those who are lost**. They are “dead in their trespasses and sins” (Eph 1:1-3). They are “blinded by the god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4). They see the gospel as ridiculous, and nonsense. They cannot and will not endure it. They need the Spirit of God to open their eyes. They need the Father to draw them.

²² Charles Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), 113.

²³ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, 327.

²⁴ Ibid.

GOSPEL BOLDNESS

Paul hadn't lost his mind. He knew the king understood the Scriptures. Paul was bold because that's what mercy and love does to the heart of a Christian. Our love for sinners makes us bold.

Acts 26:25-27 | But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words.²⁶ For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner.²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe."

Paul gives an invitation to King Agrippa to believe the gospel. The gospel is the "power of God to everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16) and that includes the great king! Remember Agrippa's father had beheaded the apostle James and would have done the same to Peter had an angel not rescued him. Look how far the gospel has reached. Now the great Agrippa II is giving a fair hearing to the gospel.

Neither Paul or any Christian is out of our minds! Our minds are set on things above where true reality lies (Col 3:1). We who are heavenly minded know that God's ways are so much higher and beyond comprehension of mere human ways, that they seem insane (Isa 55:8-9). What Paul was speaking may sound outrageous, since **the natural mind cannot comprehend or appreciate the things of God.**

Romans 8:7 | The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.

Agrippa was around when Jesus was raised from the dead. "None of these things" escaped the notice of the king. They weren't "done in a corner." People by the score had been healed by Jesus. Thousands had feasted on loaves and fish miraculously multiplied from a little boy's lunch. Demons recognized the Lord and fled before his command. The very dead had been raised. Moreover, our Lord had lived a life of perfect holiness combined with all-embracing compassion and love.

Agrippa would have known about Jesus' illegal trial and crucifixion, his burial in the tomb of one of the wealthiest and most influential Jews in the country, and his subsequent resurrection. All these things had rocked the country. The futile attempts of the Jewish authorities to cover up their crimes by making the resulting Christianity illegal (including Paul's persecution of the church) were also public knowledge.

Nobody could factually deny the resurrection of Christ. Christ had appeared again and again—on one occasion to more than five hundred credible witnesses. Nothing but deliberate refusal to face the facts could account for unbelief. "This thing was not done in a corner." The facts were public knowledge, and all attempts to repress them had failed.²⁵ All these things had been done according to the prophets. Carried away by the marvelous truth of the gospel, Paul ceased to be the advocate in his own defense and became God's advocate to the conscience of the king. Paul asks a bold question, "**King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.**"

²⁵ J. Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, Ac 26:25c–26.

GOSPEL PERSUASION

Agrippa is a bit surprised by Paul's boldness and seeming expectation that King Agrippa would turn to Christ right then and repent.

Acts 26:28 | And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you [almost] persuade me to be a Christian?"

These were the most tragic words Agrippa uttered in his life. The Apostle of Christ was standing before him, preaching Christ to him, and Agrippa said that he was almost persuaded, but not quite.²⁶ All his life Agrippa had learned to ride both horses, as it were: **to be a good Roman and to give honor the Jews**, but now **Paul is asking him to choose sides**. Agrippa is essentially saying, "Do you think you can convince me to give up my power and my honor to follow Christ, in such a short time? I'll pass for now. Maybe another day."

Acts 26:29 | And Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains."

And Paul, picking up Agrippa's clever if embarrassed response, turns it neatly round and sends it back with a joke. "Actually, yes, I'd like everyone here to be just like me"—and then, glancing down in mock surprise at the clunky shackles round his ankles—"except for these chains, of course."²⁷ **He was trying to persuade the great king to follow Christ!**

GOSPEL EXONERATION

As Agrippa, Bernice, and Festus dismissed themselves, they conversed with one another about Paul's innocence.

Acts 26:30-31 | Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. ³¹ And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment."

Paul was acquitted on all charges. What every Gentile authority in the book of Acts recognizes is that whatever the charges, Paul is innocent of anything deserving of death or imprisonment. Kings, rulers, and authorities at various levels see this all as a dispute between a few Jews, but in reality, it is a dispute over loyalty to the true King, Jesus of Nazareth.²⁸ Paul was completely innocent but had appealed to have a court date in Rome.

GOSPEL DIRECTION

Agrippa makes a point that would have affected most people, but not Paul.

Acts 26:32 | And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

²⁶ Sproul, *Acts*, 408.

²⁷ Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 2*, 218.

²⁸ Hamilton, *John-Acts*, 558.

Paul could have been set free, but he wasn't at all concerned about his personal freedom. Paul's heart was to go to Rome and preach the gospel there. Paul's goal in life was not personal comfort but gospel expansion.

The Roman soldiers would escort him to Rome. This meant he was safe from potential Jewish assassins, and he didn't even have to organize his own passage. He was going to Rome at last.²⁹ Festus and Agrippa indeed thought Paul had lost his mind. But truly those with the mind of Christ will often look like they have gone mad to this world.

Conclusion

You know as Christians we don't fit at all in this world. I'm getting ready for my high school's 30-year class reunion in the fall. I've been trying to get in shape for a while. But at a class reunion everyone wants to shape up to fit in.

My daughter, and other ladies who got married recently—they made sure they could fit into that wedding dress.

This year, I was so excited for Easter because I had the perfect suit that one of the brothers at our church gave me, but when I went to get in it, I forgot to get the waist fitted, so I did not fit in at all. It was way too small.

I'll tell you what, **I don't fit into this world anymore**, but where I do fit in is God's forever family. That's the place where we fit. **In the world's eyes, we are the crazy ones.** We truly are **crazy for Jesus**. We will never again fit into this world. We don't belong here. But we fit in among God's people. Praise his name that though we look "out of our minds" when it comes to this world, we are right at home among those with hearts and minds made new by the Holy Spirit.

I'll tell you what though – for anyone here who is on the fence, you understand that all this comfort will be ripped away from you at the judgement of God. All people will live forever somewhere. All the comfort and ease we have on earth will not matter if you are thrown into the lake of fire. Don't be "almost persuaded." Follow Christ today!

²⁹ Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 2*, 219.