



The Book of Acts - Chapter Twenty Six

X [Acts 24:1-26:32 - The Witness in Cæsarea \(continues/concludes\)](#)

X.c [Acts 25:13-26:32 - Paul before Agrippa \(continues/concludes\)](#)

X.c.ii [Acts 25:23-26:32 - Paul witnesses to King Agrippa II \(continues/concludes\)](#)

Summary of Chapter Twenty Six

At the end of the previous chapter, Festus had convened an informal investigative hearing of Paul's case in the presence of King Agrippa, his sister Bernice, court officials and many prominent men from the city of Cæsarea. Paul was then called to give his defence.

Paul seems primarily to have given his address to King Agrippa, as he was a Jew and was well acquainted with the issues Paul wanted to proclaim. However, it is also clear that it was a message that he wanted all those present to hear. He started by outlining his pious lifestyle as a Pharisaic Jew, living totally in service to and in awe of the God of Israel. He particularly emphasised his determination not only to persecute but to destroy all those who were Christians.

He was on his way to Damascus to conduct such a mission, with the written authority of the high priest, when he was struck by a brilliant light from heaven, brighter than the noonday sun. He and his travelling companions fell to the ground. Then the Lord Jesus spoke to him in Aramaic, accusing him of persecuting Jesus the Messiah, and instructing him that he would now be a light for the Christ to the Jews but especially to the Gentiles. It was his fulfilment of the main part of his calling that had so antagonised the Jews, which was the primary cause for his being arrested in Jerusalem, and now appearing before them in court. Paul concluded his argument by stating that the Gospel was not in opposition to, but actually the fulfilment of the law and promises, that the Jewish people had longed for since time itself began.

At this point, Festus cut Paul's monologue short and claimed his great learning had driven him insane, a claim that he calmly refuted, stating that the king would understand that what he was saying was true. It appears that Agrippa was perhaps close to believing Paul and may have come to faith, if he had heard any more.

The hearing was then ended. As Festus, Agrippa and Bernice left the hearing, they discussed what they had heard and concluded that Paul was clearly innocent. He would have been set free had he not appealed to Cæsar at a previous hearing, which had taken the matter out of Festus' jurisdiction.

¹ Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself.”

So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defence: ² “King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defence against all the accusations of the Jews, ³ and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.

Acts 26:1-3

King Agrippa. Festus was the court president, but it was to Agrippa that Paul appealed as he had more knowledge and understanding of the issues. Luke takes note of how Paul conducts himself and his body language, especially his hand gestures. He was a man at ease with his situation, at peace with God and content to make his proclamation despite being bound over to Cæsar: <<But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect>> (1 Peter 3:15).

I consider myself fortunate. This is almost certainly a genuine statement and not intended in the way that Tertullus had tried to flatter Felix at an earlier hearing, see Acts 24:2-3.

Listen to me patiently is the Greek phrase makrothymos, which translates as ‘with long suffering’. Paul was not only called to be a Pharisee, he lived as a Pharisee, now he is not just a Christian but he is called to live like a Christian, with Jesus the focus of every fibre of his being; a model for us all to emulate.

⁴ “The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. ⁵ They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee. ⁶ And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today.

Acts 26:4-6

I lived as a Pharisee. He remained zealous for those aspects of God’s law that remain but such things as the Levitical priesthood and sacrifices were swallowed up in the magnificent sacrifice of Christ, followed by his glorious resurrection and rightful ascension to God’s right hand, to assume all authority to judge the world. The ceremonial law died with Christ but God’s promises live on: <<What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise>> (Galatians 3:17), and: <<Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them>> (Hebrews 11:16), that is, the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2).

On trial today. Agrippa, was Paul’s judge and so he could state: <<I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say>> (1 Corinthians 10:15). Being taught by Gamaliel of the school of Hillel, Paul was much more religious than those of the school of Shammai. Paul lived in good conscience before God, the only judge that matters.

⁷ This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me.

Acts 26:7

Paul spoke of the twelve tribes although ten remained in exile and dispersed. Some individuals from those tribes had either avoided deportation or had managed to return to Israel in later generations, e.g. Anna was from the tribe of Asher (Luke 2:36). Jesus also speaks of the twelve tribes: <<Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel">> (Matthew 19:28), as does James: <<James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings>> (James 1:1). The statement by Jesus seems to indicate that people, whose heritage is of those tribes will come to know and serve him, for surely those who were alive before the revelation of Christ will not be judged by the twelve apostles.

The Jews, like Anna in Luke 2:37, served God day and night waiting for the promises to be fulfilled. In Christ, nothing has changed with regard to the future promises but the method of attaining them is more specific. Paul believed in the promises above the ceremonial law. Whereas, the circumcision group believed in the ceremonial law above the promises! As a Christian, Paul suffered for the very hope of Israel.

⁸ Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?

Acts 26:8

It seems that Luke did not record the part of Paul's discourse that probably came before this. For it would seem logical for Paul to have explained the promises made regarding resurrection and eternal life before stating: Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? Such an explanation would not be needed for the King, of course, but for Festus and other Gentiles in his court.

On resurrection, Paul states: <<I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead>> (Philippians 3:10-11), and: <<This is what the Lord Almighty says: "It may seem marvellous to the remnant of this people at that time, but will it seem marvellous to me?" declares the Lord Almighty>> (Zechariah 8:6). That is, it may be beyond the power of nature but it is not beyond the power of God, nothing is. We are not asked to believe the incredible, for God is Almighty: <<Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God" >> (Mark 10:27).

If God can create everything including man, out of nothing with just a spoken word, restoring life is but a small thing to him, yet it is fundamental to hope and belief, and it is encapsulated in the promises that God has given to his people from the time of creation onwards, and is particularly given to his chosen people Israel in the OT scriptures. We too now share in this promise if we accept Jesus as our Lord and do his will.

⁹ "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

Acts 26:9-11

In persecuting the saints, Paul truly believed he was working for God, whereas he was wilfully persisting in the worst of crimes, yet Paul thought he was bring glory to God: <<Hear the word of the Lord, you who tremble at his word: "Your brothers who hate you, and exclude you because of my name, have said, 'Let the Lord be glorified, that we may see your joy!' Yet they will be put to shame>> (Isaiah 66:5). Inhuman action is not only justified but sanctified and magnified, but a Christian is required to accept such persecution, just as Jesus had said: <<They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God>> (John 16:2).

He even compelled them to blaspheme Christ, i.e. blaspheming the very God he worshipped; this perhaps was far worse than imprisoning or killing them, as for many this could only have been achieved through torture or at least the psychological fear of persecution, just as Peter had experienced: <<He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, "I don't know this man you're talking about" >> (Mark 14:71).

¹² "On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³ About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions.

Acts 26:12-13

The light from heaven is the brightness of God's glory or Shechinah: <<About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me>> (Acts 22:6), which is similar to Ezekiel 1:26-28 <<Above the expanse over their heads was what looked like a throne of sapphire, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking>>, and Revelation 1:16 <<In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance>>.

God had spoken to Abraham in a thick and dreadful darkness (Genesis 15:12), and Solomon claims God would dwell in a dark cloud (2 Chronicles 6:1), but: <<The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned>> (Isaiah 9:2). For Paul, it was a light brighter than the noonday sun: <<For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ>> (2 Corinthians 4:6).

¹⁴ We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

Acts 26:14

We all fell to the ground. Here, he makes reference to all those with him falling to the ground on seeing the light. This is the third account of Paul's conversion in Acts, see chapters 9:3-6 and 22:6-11.

Saul, Saul. Jesus called him twice by name, the call was personal and distinct.

By persecuting men and women of God, i.e. why do you persecute me? Paul had been opposing God rather than bringing honour and glory to his name as he thought he was doing.

Paul did not become an apostle through being taught by Jesus, witnessing his death, as did John, or by spending time with him after his resurrection, or witnessing his ascension, as did all the apostles, but by divine revelation; it was revealed to him through his sight and hearing on the Damascus Road, and probably in his later visions of Jesus too. It was clearly not of his imagination either, as those travelling with him saw the light and heard the sound but could not understand what was said, as it was not for them.

To kick against the goads is a proverbial statement the Romans probably knew, meaning that one cannot ultimately resist God's will. Goads were sharp sticks used to prod oxen, and if the oxen kicked in resistance, the drivers would keep them in line by using the goads more severely.

¹⁵ “Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’

“‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. ¹⁶ ‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. ¹⁷ I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them ¹⁸ to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

Acts 26:15-18

I will rescue you might not have registered with Paul at the time but Acts and other scriptures explain just how often Jesus rescued Paul from the situations he encountered while serving Christ and proclaiming his Gospel.

Now get up. He was instructed to get up out of the dust: <<Shake off your dust; rise up>> (Isaiah 52:2a), and go into the city of Damascus to receive those instructions. We are not to lie in the dust but stand up for Christ.

Paul was sent by one who was himself sent by the Father: <<Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you”>> (John 20:21), to be a light unto the Gentiles, which he did to great effect; although he never abandoned the hope of the promises to his own people, which is why he was on trial now. According to Acts 9:15 and 22:15-17, Paul's instructions came later in Damascus. It is likely Paul puts the statements together in this retelling for brevity.

Paul did not become a Christian by choice, reason or persuasive argument. He was as opposed to Christianity as it is possible for a man to be, then the Risen Lord appeared to him, the Holy Spirit was imparted upon him and supernaturally he received the gifts to teach, heal, and even raise the dead, i.e. Eutychus (Acts 20:10). It is clear that he must have also received divine revelation of Christ to have such a clear understanding of the Gospel message that he was then able, not just to pass on verbally at his numerous meetings over the years to come, but to give to us through his remarkably detailed letters initially sent to churches and individuals, but which now form such a significant part of the NT in the bible.

Paul would later give thanks for his calling despite, and perhaps because of, his suffering: <<I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service>> (1 Timothy 1:12). He taught that which he had received:

<<I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ>> (Galatians 1:12), but he did not receive it in one go, but had several visions, probably many more than those recorded in Acts or his epistles. It may be that some of these came during the years between his conversion and Barnabas bringing him out of obscurity in Tarsus to work in Antioch (Acts 11:25), although he had taught in Damascus, Jerusalem and around the coastal areas of Cæsarea before going to Tarsus, possibly in Arabia and Cilicia/Syria as well, of which there is no record.

By repenting and turning to God, we are not only forgiven, we are rewarded with rights beyond imagination and human reach. The evidence of testimonies like Paul's dispels the need for further miracles, for we can have faith in their witness, faith in the promises, and faith in God's grace, love and mercy.

¹⁹ “So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven.

²⁰ First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judæa, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

Acts 26:19-20

Paul's obedience to his commission began in Damascus (Acts 9:19-25), continued in Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-29), and ultimately focused on the Gentiles (from Acts 11:26 onwards). A witness by Paul throughout all Judæa is not recorded elsewhere in Acts, but must have occurred during the time of or immediately after his first visit to Jerusalem (Acts 9:28 and 9:31). There is no evidence that he visited the area during the three years he spent in Arabia (Galatians 1:17).

Prove their repentance by their deeds. This again makes it clear that salvation is by grace and not by works but that, once we have come to know Christ as our Lord, we will want to demonstrate what we have in the way we live and in the deeds we do. This compliments rather than contradicts the views of James: <<In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead>> (James 2:17), and: <<As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead>> (James 2:26).

²¹ That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. ²² But I have had God's help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen – ²³ that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”

Acts 26:21-23

The inclusiveness of Paul's witness was both social, i.e. small and great, and racial, i.e. his own people and the Gentiles. The suffering of Jesus was the fulfilment of OT prophets: <<Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?>> And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself>> (Luke 24:26-27), and: <<Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things>> (Luke 24:45-48). See also Acts 2:24-36, 3:17-26, and 13:32-39.

The Cross was a stumbling block to the Jews yet Jesus, as the Messiah, had to suffer, be killed and then rise in order to fulfil scripture, which he did. Yet Paul was accused of going

against the law by preaching the very essence of it from Moses to Malachi. Jesus became the firstborn of the dead: <<And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy>> (Colossians 1:18), <<But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep>> (1 Corinthians 15:20), <<and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood>> (Revelation 1:5), to give us hope of a resurrection into the next life.

²⁴ At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defence. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane."

²⁵ "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable.

Acts 26:24-25

You are out of your mind. At the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection, Festus proclaimed that Paul's great learning, and probably his recent life style, had driven him to having mental health issues, but Paul assured them this is far from the case.

I am not insane. A young prophet sent by Elisha to anoint Jehu as king was called mad (2 Kings 9:11), and Hosea says the prophet of Israel will be shown to be a fool when judgement comes (Hosea 9:7). John the Baptist and Jesus were both accused of having a demon or being crazy too. It is likely that, as Paul recollected his encounter with the Risen Christ, and all that the resurrection holds for the world, that he became more excited and animated, perhaps leading Festus to conclude his great learning had tipped him over the edge of sanity. He had answered such charges before: <<If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you>> (2 Corinthians 5:13). Paul is not affronted by Festus' assertions but answers him most rationally.

²⁶ The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner.

Acts 26:26

The king is familiar with these things. Paul knew that Agrippa had an extensive knowledge of Jewish beliefs and he appealed to the king to admit he knows Paul is right. To Festus, as an unbelieving Gentile, the Gospel must have come as surprise and he would have found it hard to understand that a god, The God, would not just visit his people, but would suffer and die on their behalf. Nothing like this was known in the Roman pantheon of gods or even came close to the reality of the true God, which is beyond the comprehension of man.

None of this has escaped his notice. Paul's appeal to Agrippa is that he would have heard this spoken of many times for it was not a secret: <<You know what has happened throughout Judæa, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached>> (Acts 10:37).

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

Acts 26:27

Do you believe the prophets? I know you do. Agrippa had a reputation as a pious Jew, which is why Paul could make this appeal.

²⁸ Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

²⁹ Paul replied, “Short time or long – I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”

Acts 26:28-29

In a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian? Realising that Paul was pressing for a Christian commitment, Agrippa put him off, quipping that it was too short a time for making such a decision. Paul picked up on Agrippa's remark: short or long, he wanted everyone to trust Christ. The translation of this verse is not easy, because:

1. ‘In a short time’, Greek en oligō, might also mean ‘with a small effort’;
2. Some take Agrippa’s words to be a statement rather than a question;
3. ‘To be’, Greek poieō, could also mean ‘to act like’;
4. There is some variation in the Greek manuscripts. However, most commentators favour a sense similar to that given here.

Far from thinking him mad, King Agrippa clearly believed he had heard a strong argument and seemed to be on the verge of accepting the message, although his answer may have been given in irony. But he offered no objections to Paul’s arguments. Just as Paul had stated in Romans 10:1 <<Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved>>, he would have all those in the room saved as well as all Israel. He would want them to be like him except for his physical bonds as a prisoner of Rome, although there is nothing wrong in being in bondage to Christ. Yet even his chains he did not begrudge if it advanced the Gospel of Christ: <<Therefore this is what the Lord says: “If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me; if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman. Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them>> (Jeremiah 15:19). Paul would remain a Christian and would not revert to being a Jew by association. Job says: <<May my enemies be like the wicked, my adversaries like the unjust!>> (Job 27:7); Paul says ‘let my friends be as I am, a Christian’.

Paul’s main concern would no doubt have been that someone, who is almost a Christian, is not a Christian at all, and remains a lost soul forever.

³⁰ The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. ³¹ They left the room, and while talking with one another, they said, “This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment.”

Acts 26:30-31

They left the room. Normally, a prisoner would be given the right to conclude his defence but the impact Paul was having was too much for Agrippa, at least, to hear any more. Anyway, they concluded he was innocent, just as Jesus was, and would have released him had he not appealed to Cæsar. Under Roman law, once a citizen appealed to Cæsar then the lower court could neither condemn nor release him. This, of course, suited Festus in many ways as he would not want to release Paul and risk antagonising the Jewish leaders so early on in his tenure.

³² Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

The question remains unanswered as to whether Paul should have appealed to Cæsar or not. Did he now regret doing so? His recent defence, even if he had given it in Jerusalem, would almost certainly have caused Festus to release him, and he could then have travelled to Rome as a free man; not as a prisoner. The second question is: should he have appealed to God and not Cæsar? The answer is always yes, but perhaps this was the way God wanted it to be anyway, as it would present Paul with opportunities he might not otherwise have received. It is often difficult to know what direction we should take, as Solomon reflects: <<For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone?>> (Ecclesiastes 6:12).