

ACTS—WEEK 23

PAUL MOVES UP THE LADDER



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Acts 25:13–26:32 — Paul Moves up the Ladder
*The Cover Picture is “Paul” by Masaccio (1401–1428),
on display at Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa.*

Paul’s trial now moves from Felix to Festus—and then to king Agrippa. The charges make no sense, but Paul has already appealed to Caesar.

That’s a problem. They can’t just send him to Caesar without a coherent explanation for what he’s appealing. So, what does Paul do in this situation?

Preach the gospel, of course.

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Thank you.

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1 Acts 25:13–22 (ESV)

Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus. And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, "There is a man left prisoner by Felix, 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. 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. 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. When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. 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. Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. 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." Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," said he, "you will hear him."

Not only is the case against Paul weak, but his accusers have botched the presentation. Festus is surprised by the insignificance of their charges. He says to Agrippa, *"When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. 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."*

With Felix, they at least made a case that a governor would care about. It was a lie, but it had a point.

For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. — Acts 24:5

But lies require planning and coordination. After a two-year delay, Paul's accusers don't have their act together that well, so they end up telling the truth about what's really bugging them. That's a real head scratcher for Festus, and so his explanation to Agrippa is rather long.

This has the curious benefit of piquing Agrippa's interest.

One of the most glorious things about God's universe is the way that truth often works out for the best.

But lying is so much a part of our culture that we don't even notice it. Just look at our politicians, or the commercials we watch, or even the news media. We laugh at people who trust what they hear or read.

But it's even worse than that. We ask people, "How ya' doin'?" but don't expect a real answer. What would you do if someone told you they're struggling?

Would you have the time and the love to stop and ask them, "What with?"

2 Acts 25:23–27 (ESV)

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. Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. 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. 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. 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 we have examined him, I may have something to write. For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him.”

Festus has a problem. He was in the middle of trying Paul for a crime that isn't even a crime when Paul appealed to Caesar. Now he has to figure out how to explain this to Rome without sounding like an idiot. He can't send him for trial without a charge, but the accusations against Paul have nothing to do with Roman law. He needs a way to spin this.

Actually, his explanation to Agrippa in yesterday's passage sounded pretty good. *“There is a man left prisoner by Felix [who, don't forget, was ultimately fired for incompetence] 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. ... When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. ... 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.”*

But Festus knows that Caesar doesn't want to be bothered with silly stuff like this, which is expected to be handled at the local level. Just telling the truth isn't an option.

Maybe Agrippa can come up with something.

This is starting to look like spiritual warfare. Festus is under pressure to lie.

Christians need to have a special radar for things like this. Any time you find yourself in a situation where the easy way out is to do something you know is wrong, a red flag should pop up. There's probably more to the situation than meets the eye.

The number one reaction you should have is resentment. When evil attacks, you need to get in a fighting mood. You are much less likely to be tricked by the evil one if you recognize the situation for what it is. Getting angry about it will help you stay focused. Don't let your guard down.

The second key is to remember that they're smarter than you are. The worst thing you can do when fighting evil is to try to be clever. You win if you do the right thing regardless of the consequences. This is the lesson taught in “The Silver Chair” by CS Lewis.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Silver_Chair

3 Acts 26:1–8 (ESV)

So Agrippa said to Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself.” Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense:

“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, especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.

“My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. They 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. And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 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! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?”

Paul has already appealed to Caesar; this hearing does nothing for him. So, what does he do?

Preach, of course. Paul is going to make a thoughtful point, and he’s pleased that Agrippa, being *familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews*, will be able to follow his reasoning. Still, Paul warns him by saying, “*Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.*”

The key word in Paul’s explanation is “hope.” “*And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, 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!*”

It’s about hope. Judaism has always been about hope. Paul doesn’t come right out and say it, but his point is that the Jews were so wrapped up in the details of the law that they forgot what it’s all about. The dream came true and they didn’t even notice. Now they seem to resist the good news.

“Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?”

We all have a tendency to lose sight of our goals—if we even have them. We’re busy doing whatever we think needs doing and we don’t usually think about why we decided it needed doing in the first place.

That emotional inertia keeps us from making real progress. Everyone should occasionally take a step back and take stock of where they are. The start of a new year is as good a time as any.

But unfortunately, the standard practice is to make a New Year’s resolution without the assessment that should go with it.

If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.

Find something that needs to change—and resolve to change it.

4 Acts 26:9–18 (ESV)

“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 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. 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.

“In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. 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. 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.’ And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 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, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to 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.’”

Here, Paul uses a clever modern briefing technique—get the audience’s head moving up and down (nodding in agreement) before raising difficult issues. This produces a sort of “vertical momentum” that helps to put the audience on your side. Paul begins by testifying to things Agrippa probably knows about—and if he doesn’t, he can easily check. This lays a credible foundation for the next part.

Then Paul tells the amazing tale of what happened on the road to Damascus. It’s fantastic, but Paul has set it up well. Besides, it doesn’t make sense as a lie; it’s useless as a defense. It almost qualifies as “too much information.” Paul is just recounting something that he thinks is really interesting.

But it *is* really interesting, if it’s true. That’s the thing about miracles; they’re either the greatest things ever, or they’re evidence that you’re losing it. Here, that leads to a wondrous irony. You might think that the question of Paul’s sanity puts pressure on Paul. Not at all. Paul goes with option A—miracles were the greatest things ever. He’s as relaxed as a puppy sleeping on his master’s lap.

The pressure is on Agrippa and Festus. Either Paul is nuts (and he sure doesn’t act nuts) or he’s telling the truth. They either have to change their minds about Paul, or they have to change their minds about Christ.

What a hoot. This hearing is supposed to put Paul on the spot. After all, he’s the one on trial. Instead, he’s got Agrippa and Festus squirming in their seats. His lack of fear about his situation has turned the tables.

Fear is the enemy of evangelism. Many Christians freeze up when they get a chance to share Christ. Why?

Because we lack experience. We need to learn to be more comfortable, more natural when talking about what we know. Just get that vertical momentum going and you’re good.

5 Acts 26:19–32 (ESV)

“Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 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. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. To 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: that 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.”

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.” But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. 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. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” 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.”

Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, “This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.” And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

In the previous passage, Paul told them how Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. Today, he continues, *“Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 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.”*

So, Paul is either nuts or he witnessed a real miracle. Festus instantly blows Paul off as a nut—but he’s just a strap-hanger in this briefing. Paul is speaking to Agrippa. *And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?”* Agrippa’s question is a bit cryptic (and hard to translate) but he’s basically saying, “Do you really think I’m going to convert based on one short speech?”

Modern Christians often use the “one short speech” method of evangelism. We focus too much on harvesting people who are ripe for conversion while ignoring the task of getting them to that point. Before you can harvest, someone has to till the soil. Someone has to plant seeds. Someone has to water them.

Our narrow focus causes us to misunderstand the gift of evangelism. If we’re not great harvesters, then we must not have that gift, right?

Actually, you might be incredibly gifted at tilling, planting or watering—moving people closer to conversion. All of this is the gift of evangelism.

There’s no separate “gift of watering.”

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What are the worst ways that our culture is dishonest?
2. What was a trying time you've ever been pressured to do something wrong?
3. What are your goals for the coming year?
4. What's your biggest fear in trying to lead people to Christ?
5. Are you good at the "pre-evangelism" tasks?