

## Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> March Paul Defends Himself Against Agrippa- Acts 26

Acts is truly one of the most exciting and action-filled books of the Bible. Don't you think so?

The very name Acts suggests there is going to be some action.

The 28 chapters are filled with energy and adventure...hopefully you can call to mind a lot of the ground we have covered over the last year. Think for instance of some of the thrilling escapes.

Paul in Damascus has would be assassins watching at the city gates so his friends hide him in a basket and lower him down the wall to escape. (chapter 9) Peter's jail break in chapter 12- when Peter discovers it's easier to get out of jail than into the church prayer meeting!

We cover hundreds of miles of adventure -more journeys than anywhere else in the Bible, but very few of them trouble-free. There are stonings, being left for dead, placed in stocks. Floggings...in fact lots of floggings. Storms and shipwrecks in the last chapters and also courtroom drama and political intrigue-which is where we find ourselves in today's passage.

The Holy Spirit says go here and then no don't go there. He lets Philip know the whereabouts of a man in a chariot, and tells him to go and speak to him. (chpt.8) In fact, nothing is done in Acts without the prompting and guiding of the Holy Spirit. It has led some to suggest that the Book should be called The Acts of the Holy Spirit!

But wait a minute you say! These are ancient pages and this is an internet age! That's true but these ancient pages overflow with insights and principles that still transform lives today just as they did all those years ago. Interestingly, Ray C. Stedman called his book on Acts, '**God's unfinished Book**' but that's to remind us that the Holy Spirit is still at work and God is in the midst of writing volume 21, the acts of God in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Let's look this morning at chpt 26

We are zooming in today on the last of 3 courtroom dramas involving Paul the apostle. We saw last week in chpt 24 trial before **Felix**, procurator of Judea and even though he knew Paul was innocent kept him in chains for 2 years hoping for a bribe. **Festus** who has inherited Felix's mess AD 59 but still hasn't the backbone to acquit Paul. This leaves Paul no choice but to appeal to Caesar and now Festus calls in **King Agrippa** to give him some help in what to write to the Emperor Nero in Rome about this man Paul.

Yes he is playing politics but quite frankly he is baffled by him.If this was a pantomime -you would boo everytime Herod Agrippa II's name was mentioned.Oh No We Wouldn't I hear you say! Who was this King Agrippa?

The Herods were Edomites -descendants of Esau and there had been bad blood for centuries. Even though Jacob and Esau reconciled, their kids took it badly. The first of the line was Herod the Great, (beware of anyone who feels the need to call themselves The Great. He killed the babies in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. (and several of his own sons) His youngest son, Herod Antipas was the king who had John the Baptist

beheaded in prison. Herod the Great's grandson, Herod Agrippa I put the apostle James to death by the sword

The son of Agrippa I was Herod Agrippa II who was appointed by the Romans as tetrarch (subordinate ruler) of Galilee. He's our man! He's also the last in the Herodian dynasty. He had authority to appoint the high priest in Jerusalem and administer the temple but he was loyal to Rome, not the Jews. Interesting that each generation had an encounter with God but failed to respond in faith.

Now that we have that background let's get to the hearing! You can hear the clerk of the court saying **All rise!** Look at the scene at the hearing. V23 of previous chapter 25  
<sup>23</sup> The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high-ranking military officers and the prominent men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. <sup>24</sup> Festus said: "King Agrippa, and all who are present with us **you see this man!**" This little man in chains, a tent maker by trade stands in complete contrast to all the dignitaries and royalty gathered there. There are several similarities to Jesus' appearance before yet another of the Herods - Herod Antipas. Good to remind ourselves frequently how things turn out. Billy Graham used to say, **I've read the last page of the Bible. It's all going to turn out all right.'**

We're only mentioning Felix and Festus and King Agrippa because that man Paul was in the room. But for this little man they would be forgotten. Good to know this in light of what is happening to the persecuted church today. **V2-3 Paul's Courtesy** I'm glad it's you King Agrippa, as you are an expert on all things Jewish.

Paul is taking his own advice, **Honour to whom honour is due** Romans 13v7 When we are given an opportunity to speak for ourself we need to remember we are followers of Jesus. We are not there to pick a fight. Speaking of not picking a fight, Paul shows in v. 4-7 that he was not trying to accuse his fellow Jews of anything - in fact he was one of them. **I live as a Pharisee-the strictest sect of our religion.** Their hope of the ancient promises being fulfilled was his hope. This is a carefully crafted start by Paul but now he adds an edge. **'Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?** What a? v.8 Again he is appealing to the Jews in the audience and of course King Agrippa. Remember when Lazarus died and Jesus told Martha, **'Your brother will rise again** John 11v23 Martha replied **'I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.'**

How did she know this? From several passages of the Hebrew Bible our OT. Isaiah 26v19 **'But your dead will live, their bodies will rise.**

**You who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy.'**

There are many other references in Psalms and Job and Daniel.

That is why Paul says we are not at odds here. I believe what God promised our fathers in the Scriptures. V9-11 He relates how he was a one-man wrecking ball to tear down this new Way. He pulled them out of the synagogue to keep the faith of his fathers pure. It was an obsession he admits to everyone- leading to prison and death for followers of Jesus.

**Paul's Testimony v. 12-23** In this section Paul offers the most compelling form of Christian witness. His personal testimony. This section is the reason you hear about the 'Damascus Road experience' or talk of 'seeing the light.' It is also the third time Luke tells us this story. Chpt 9 and then chpt 22 so clearly we are to pay particular attention to this.

It's the day he met Jesus...Saul it is only yourself you are hurting...using the picture from agriculture about an animal kicking out at a pointed stick-a goad.

v.15 But when he asks 'Who are you Lord? He gets the shock of his life.

**I am Jesus** is the rely -wait isn't this the crucified man? The one the Romans made doubly sure was dead because there had been talk that he might do just this!

The spear in his side and guards at the tomb That's why Paul talks so much about resurrection because he met the risen Christ and why Michael Green calls his book on Easter, **The day death died**. Yes and look how Jesus identifies with his persecuted believers. **You are persecuting me**. Then Paul in reciting the words of Jesus gives us the Lord's diagnosis of the human condition: v18-19

Human beings live in darkness. They are enslaved by Satan and are lost in their sins. Has anything changed in 2000 years? Oh yes we are much more sophisticated. We have probes on the planet Mars yet people living on the streets. We have brilliant scientists capable of producing life saving vaccines but then we leave God out of the process and thank Science. No, the issues we hear on the news night after night show we are still in darkness, unable to see the truth and groping our way through life. But Paul again singles out King Agrippa in v.19. It's as if he's the only one in the room, but everyone else is listening intently. **I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision**. No one could disagree with that. Paul poured as much energy and zeal into his new life as he had done previously. **I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds**.

Look at the order here. Repent, turn to God and prove your repentance by your deeds...as talk is cheap. There's that word repent again. We have heard it so often throughout Acts. About turn. You are going the wrong way! A lot of people have been tempted to reverse this order. They say Steady on. You just need to show you are decent and respectable by your good deeds and in that way your good behaviour will earn you the right to enter heaven. But by doing things in this reverse order look what has been left out, v23 a suffering Saviour, that need for repentance-for turning away from your sin.

The lamb of God who had to die has become a house pet that we are in charge of and we have changed God's message of salvation to one of our own invention. The order has to be repent, turn to God and prove your repentance by your deeds. Paul now shows that he is only saying what Moses and the prophets have been saying all along about the Messiah but here is the crux of the matter. He identifies him as Jesus in the same way John the Baptist said, **Look there he is**. Jesus is the fulfilment of all the prophecies and what's more God raised him from the dead.

This is the message that has caused such a sharp reaction for many Jews in all the places we have visited in Acts. Remember 'He came to that which was his own, but his own received him not' and sadly that is true to this day.v.23 There it is: Paul says Jesus is the Christ- the one who would suffer and now is risen from the dead. Suddenly a voice booms out across the room. It is Festus stopping Paul at the critical part of his message.

**The Reaction v.24-29** N.T. Wright tells us the Greek says **he shouted at the top of his voice**. An embarrassing thing to do in front of all these distinguished guests. Festus can't believe in something he can't see with his own eyes. Paul you're crazy-raising the dead? Everyone knows that when you are dead you are dead! You are insane.

Paul makes a final appeal to the Jewish sympathies of King Agrippa.v26-27 'Oh no I am not mad. The king knows about these things. **It was not done in a corner!** Don't you love that phrase? Reminds us that the truth about Jesus had not taken place out of sight and out of scrutiny. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were all public and because it happened in Passover week, thousands of Jews and visitors from all over the Roman Empire were there in Jerusalem and knew these things. Remember the walk to Emmaus in Luke 24. The 2 disciples were amazed that the stranger who had joined them didn't seem to know the latest news. **'You must be the only person in Jerusalem who hasn't heard about all the things that have happened there the last few days.** Cleopas told him in v.18 No it could not have escaped King Agrippa's attention.Paul asks him, **You do believe the prophets, don't you? Of course you do!** The king's answer is dripping with sarcasm. Notice he astutely answers that personal question with another question. Here is a slick politician.v.28 Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?Look at Paul's reply. What a heart this man has. Setting aside the fact had he has been in prison for the last 2 years even though innocent his only concern is for his listeners. He turns it neatly around and even uses humour. 'Actually yes I'd like everyone here to be just like me and then looking at his shackles- except for these chains of course. v.29 And there the hearing ends and once again Luke reminds us Paul has not committed any crime as Agrippa says to Festus as they head out the door...**pity he appealed to Caesar. He could have been set free if he hadn't done that.** So now the scene is set. Paul will be taken to Rome to appear before Emperor Nero. The most exciting journey in the whole of the Bible awaits us in chapters 27&28.

**Taking the 3 trials as a whole** it's interesting to notice the reactions of the 3 political leaders. The irony is not so much that Paul was on trial but that they were. God made sure that they heard this good news about Jesus. How did they respond to the gospel?

**Felix** 24v25 That's enough. When it is more convenient I'll call for you again. He trembled with fear but it didn't change him. As we saw he wanted a bribe. Money was his God. (He was recalled to Rome in disgrace by Nero in AD58)

**Festus** 26v24 You are insane. Too much study has made you crazy. This gave him an excuse not to look more deeply into the things of God. He was a modern man. Give it to me in 150 characters otherwise I don't want to know. (3years later he was dead)

**Agrippa** v28 Do you think in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian? - Just an excuse for not seriously responding to the gospel. Were it solely a matter of time Agrippa could easily have arranged for further conversation with Paul.

I'd like to ask respectfully, What about you? What's your excuse for not becoming a Christian?

The Bible tells us that one day along with these 3 rulers we will stand before a holy God- you can read it for yourself in Rev. 20 -great white throne. Each individual standing before the God who made them and too late to trust in Christ.

What will you say? What claims will you make? Your good works? They won't match up- you see you've left out the lamb of God who had to die. You need a Saviour.

Today is a good day for sorting this out. If God is speaking to you, don't put it off.

Accept God's free gift and join the rest of us sinners who have been forgiven.

Paul said, **I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.**

May God help us to do just that. Amen.