

Paul's Defense Before Festus and Agrippa (Acts 25-26)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Acts

I. Background and Introduction

- a. Paul was imprisoned as a result of a riot that erupted in Jerusalem while he was in the temple area.
- b. The Romans sent him to Caesarea, where he was tried before the Roman governor, Felix. Felix rendered no decision yet kept Paul under guard but with a degree of freedom to have visitors.
- c. Paul remained under guard in Caesarea for two years under Felix, until Felix was succeeded by the new governor.
 - i. "But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound." (**Acts 24:27**, NKJV)

II. Paul is Tried Before Festus

- a. Read **Acts 25:1-12**.
- b. Storyline:
 - i. The high priest and leaders of the Jews in Jerusalem scheme to have Paul transferred from Caesarea to Jerusalem, planning to ambush and kill him in transit.
 - ii. Festus declines the request to have a trial in Jerusalem, and instead has a new trial in Caesarea.
 - iii. Accusers come from Jerusalem. A trial is held before Festus. Paul again maintains his innocence, and his accusers are not able to prove their allegations.
 - iv. Festus, trying to curry favor with the Jewish accusers, asks Paul if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem to be tried there before Festus.
 - 1. Paul instead, as a Roman citizen, appeals his case to Caesar in Rome.
 - 2. Paul clearly does not want to go to Jerusalem; he may have known or suspected something bad would happen (as the Jews had plotted to ambush him on his way from Jerusalem to Caesarea initially).

- c. In the text we have read today, we find a case study that demonstrates principles regarding how Christians should deal with government in challenging circumstances.
 - i. Christians in the US have faced challenges in relating to the governing authorities many times during American history. We have seen that during the American Revolution, the Civil War, and various other wars or times where Christian convictions have run counter to the agenda of the governing authorities.
 - 1. We may see this again in the future, during our own lifetimes. Therefore, it is important for us to be prepared, and to understand the principles we should follow.
 - 2. In the New Testament we have teaching on this from Jesus and the apostles, as well as their examples.
 - ii. Jesus was aware that his followers would be in trouble with the governments of the world, in the future. He warned them about that danger, and told them what to do.
 - 1. “You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.” (**Matthew 10:18–20**, NKJV)
 - iii. Peter and Paul also gave advice regarding interactions with the governing authorities.
 - 1. Peter wrote: “Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men—as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.” (**1 Peter 2:13–17**, NKJV)
 - 2. From Paul, in **Romans 12-13**:
 - a. “Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I

will repay,' says the Lord. Therefore 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (**Romans 12:17-21**, NKJV)

- b. "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore, you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor." (**Romans 13:1-7**, NKJV)
- iv. However, in **Acts** we see a living example of how the apostle interacted with the governing authorities in several challenging situations. Basic principles we have seen demonstrated include:
 1. Paul did not use force or violent means to protect himself, even when unjustly accused.
 2. He humbly backed down when he spoke against the high priest (unaware at the time that he was the high priest), showing respect for the position even if it was occupied by a corrupt and wicked man at the time. (**Acts 23:1-5**)
 3. When faced with opposition from the government leaders, the apostles were not surprised. They saw it as a fulfillment of the prophecy of **Psalms 2**, which speaks of the rulers of this world gathering together against the Lord and His Christ. Instead of being intimidated, they prayed for boldness.
 4. When told to do something that violated a command of Jesus (in this case, being told by the Jewish leaders to stop speaking about Jesus), the apostles refused to comply with what the

authorities commanded. Instead, they responded: "We ought to obey God rather than men." (**Acts 5:26-29**)

5. When thrown in prison, Paul and Silas are singing hymns to God, heard by the other prisoners. They made the most of the opportunity; and end up converting the Philippian jailer and his household. (**Acts 16:22-34**)
6. Paul knew his legal rights, as Roman citizen. Three times in **Acts**, we find him insisting that his legal rights be upheld by the authorities.
 - a. In Philippi, in **Acts 16**: "But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out." And the officers told these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans. Then they came and pleaded with them and brought them out, and asked them to depart from the city." (**Acts 16:37-39**, NKJV)
 - b. In Jerusalem, in **Acts 22**: "...the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him. And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, 'Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?' When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, 'Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman.' Then the commander came and said to him, 'Tell me, are you a Roman?' He said, 'Yes.' The commander answered, 'With a large sum I obtained this citizenship.' And Paul said, 'But I was born a citizen.' Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him." (**Acts 22:24-29**, NKJV)
 - c. Now, in **Acts 25**, Paul exercises his rights as a Roman citizen to *appeal his case to Caesar* (rather than being tried in Jerusalem by the Roman governor).

v. Why this is important for us to be aware of.

1. Christians in the West (Roman empire) faced major persecution from the government, on and off for about 300 years. However, even after that there were major waves of persecution of various Christian groups. Also, Christians in other parts of the world (China, India, Middle East, Africa, Muslim and Communist countries) have seen major persecution in the last 100 years.
2. Things can change fairly rapidly, either for better or for the worse.
 - a. Consider the rapid fall of communism in the former USSR in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Right after that, longstanding persecution of the Christian faith melted away very quickly in Eastern Europe.
 - b. On the other hand, in my childhood they had Bibles in public school classrooms in the US, with prayer and a Bible reading often included at the start of the school day for all. Consider how much things changed in the US within just one generation!
3. Here in the US, the way things have been going, we should not be surprised if we see Christians facing increasing persecution from the government in the near future.
 - a. Recall the recent 'public health emergency' related to Covid, which included forcing churches to close their doors and limit services.
 - i. Never before in US history, even in much more serious disease outbreaks of cholera, flu, etc., did we see this level of interference in churches by the government.
 - b. Recent challenges to parental rights over education and influence of children and anti-Christian indoctrination in government schools. This might be combined with attacks on Christian private schools and homeschooling (as we have seen in Europe).
 - c. The social credit system in China and concerns about the use of high tech to do similar things in the US.
 - d. Historic respect for freedom of speech, religion, privacy, etc. are being subverted to other agendas. To speak against certain activities that are called sinful in Scripture is now considered 'hate speech' (and

currently subject to suppression and punishment by the government in some countries).

4. Christians here in the US, in Europe and elsewhere need to be prepared for what may follow. However, we must not give in to the temptation to be rebellious and disrespectful toward those in authority. Instead, we are to follow the examples of Jesus, Peter and Paul:
 - a. Jesus told the apostles to be, “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (**Matthew 10:16**, NKJV).
 - i. The context of that statement was that Jesus was sending the apostles out to preach the gospel, where they would encounter hostile reactions from those in authority. He explained in advance to the apostles that they would be “brought before governors and kings” (**Matthew 10:18**).
 - b. Don’t speak evil of those in authority. Peter admonishes us to “honor the king” (**1 Peter 2:17**).
 - c. Expect persecution, based on what we read in the Scriptures. However, even in those situations, we will be able to see the sovereign hand of God at work.
 - i. Jesus said: “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ *If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also.*” (**John 15:20**, NKJV)
 - d. We should be bold and make the most of every opportunity, when we are persecuted; even if we find ourselves in a prison-like situation.
 - e. Be prepared to relocate if it becomes necessary.
 - i. “When they persecute you in this city, flee to another...” (**Matthew 10:23**, NKJV)
 - ii. Jesus referred to Satan as “the ruler of this world” in **John 12, 14** and **16**. Let us not forget whose world we are in. As the old gospel song reminds us, “This world is not my home; I’m just a-passing through.”
 - iii. There are many Christian refugees today.

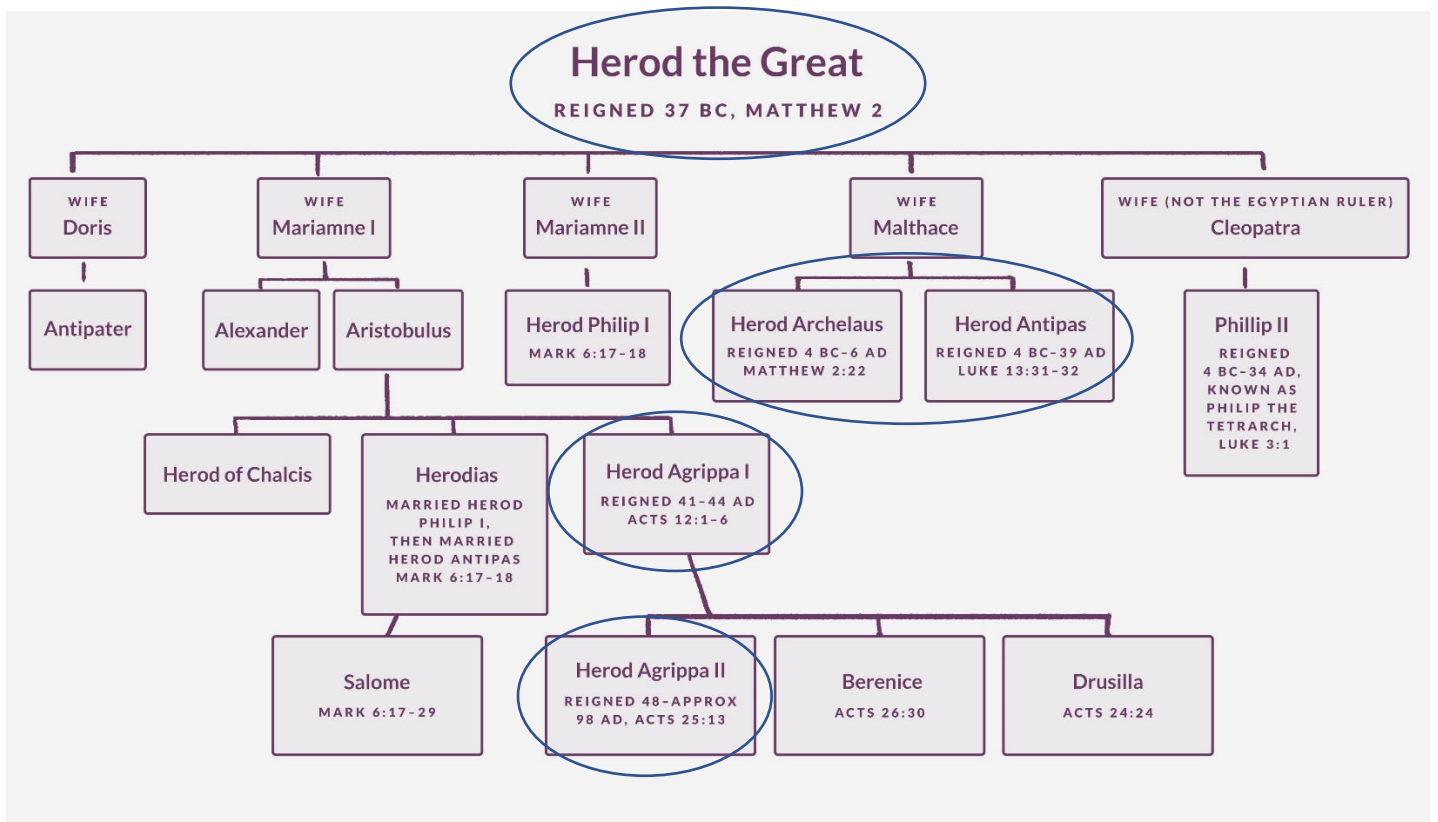
- iv. The disciples were scattered in the persecution that followed the death of Stephen, but it served to spread the gospel.
- f. Know our rights as citizens of whatever country we are a part of. During 'emergency situations' (war, pandemics), there may be attempts to erode these rights.
 - i. Paul did not just do whatever any government official asked or told him to do. He knew what his legal rights were as a Roman citizen and exercised those rights. So, it seems to me that we should be able to do the same!
 - ii. In the US, that means knowing what rights we have under the laws, especially the Constitution, including in the Bill of Rights (the first 10 amendments to the Constitution), such as in:
 - 1. The First Amendment (freedom of speech, religion, etc.)
 - 2. The Fourth Amendment
 - a. If a policeman knocks at the door of a house church gathering, I will pleasantly ask if he has a warrant issued by a judge if he requests to enter!
 - 3. The Fifth Amendment (right to remain silent, not required to incriminate ourselves, due process, etc.)

III. Introducing 'King Agrippa'

- a. Read **Acts 25:13-22**.
 - i. King Agrippa arrives in Caesarea with his sister Bernice and wants to hear Paul's story.
- b. The lineage of King Agrippa, a/k/a Herod Agrippa II.
 - i. He was member of a corrupt political dynasty family.
 - ii. His great-grandfather was Herod the Great, who had rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, and tried to kill the infant Jesus in **Matthew 2**

(but instead had all the other baby boys murdered out of jealousy regarding his throne).

1. Herod the Great was Idumean (descended from Esau). Since he was not a Jew, Eusebius pointed to his ascending to the throne as a sign that the birth of the Christ was imminent (based on the prophecy of **Genesis 49**).
 - a. “The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from his loins, until Shiloh comes; and to him shall be the expectation of the nations.” (**Genesis 49:10**, LXX, OSB)



* Herod family tree: Bradley, Jayson. “Who Was Herod? Wait... There Were How Many Herods?!” Overview Bible, 21 September 2020, www.overviewbible.com/who-was-herod.

- iii. Agrippa’s great-uncle was Herod Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great. Archelaus was so wicked that Joseph was afraid to settle in Judea, and went to Galilee instead. (**Matthew 2:22-23**)

- iv. Another of Agrippa's great-uncles was Herod Antipas (half-Idumean, half-Samaritan). He seduced Herodias, the wife of his half-brother Philip, then abandoned his first wife to marry Herodias (who also was his niece, being the daughter of his half-brother).
 - 1. He is prominently mentioned in the gospels, as being crafty like a fox (**Luke 13:31**), being responsible for beheading John the Baptist, and who, along with Pilate, was involved in questioning Jesus prior to the crucifixion.
- v. The father of King Agrippa (a/k/a Herod Agrippa II) was Herod Agrippa I. We encountered Herod Agrippa I in **Acts 12**, where it says he was responsible for killing the apostle James (the brother of John) and attempting to kill Peter. As it says there, he was struck dead by an angel for not giving glory to God; and was "eaten by worms" (**Acts 12:23**).
 - 1. Therefore, King Agrippa (Herod Agrippa II) would have known a great deal about Jesus and the apostles!
 - 2. He would have been 17 years old at the time of his father's death in 44 AD.
- vi. King Agrippa had two sisters who are mentioned in **Acts**.
 - 1. According to Josephus, in *Antiquities of the Jews*, Drusilla (**Acts 24:24**) was the wife of Felix, the former governor. Therefore, Felix was his brother-in-law.
 - 2. Bernice also was a sister of Agrippa (and daughter of Herod Agrippa I).
- c. About Bernice (sometimes spelled Berenice), the sister of King Agrippa.
 - i. However, according to Josephus (who was from Galilee, and was present at the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70) this was not your typical brother-sister relationship! We also learn more about Felix, the prior governor, and his wife Drusilla.
 - ii. From Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, book XX, chapter 7:
 - 1. "While Felix was procurator of Judea, he saw this Drusilla; and fell in love with her: for she did indeed exceed all other women in beauty: and he sent to her a person whose name was Simon, one of his friends, a Jew he was, and by birth a Cypriot: and one who pretended to be a magician, and endeavored to persuade her to forsake her present husband, and marry him: and promised that if she would not refuse him, he would make her

a happy woman. Accordingly, she acted ill; and because she was desirous to avoid her sister Bernice's envy; for she was very ill treated by her on account of her beauty; was prevailed upon to transgress the laws of her forefathers, and to marry Felix: and when he had had a son by her, he named him Agrippa. But after what manner that young man, with his wife, perished at the conflagration of the mountain Vesuvius, in the days of Titus Cesar, shall be related hereafter.

2. "But as for Bernice, she lived a widow a long while after the death of Herod [King of Chalcis]: who was both her husband, and her uncle..."
3. From Juvenal, a Latin poet, in *Satires*, vol. 6, lines 156-160 (written c. 120 AD):
 - a. "Then in the wintertime, when the merchant Jason is shut out from view, and his armed sailors are blocked out by the white booths, she will carry off huge crystal vases, vases bigger still of agate, and finally a diamond of great renown, made precious by the finger of Berenice. It was given as a present long ago by the barbarian Agrippa to his incestuous sister, in that country where kings celebrate festal sabbaths with bare feet, and where a long-established clemency suffers pigs to attain old age..."
 - i. Juvenal certainly has a rather colorful and humorous way of describing the Jews (who of course do not eat pork, the flesh of pigs).
4. Therefore, according to Josephus (who lived very close to that time) and Juvenal, we learn:
 - a. Felix married Drusilla, the beautiful (already married) daughter of Herod Agrippa I.
 - i. Note: when Paul spoke to Felix about "righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come" (**Acts 24:25**), perhaps we can now better appreciate *why* Felix was afraid!
 1. It also helps me to appreciate the great *courage and boldness* of Paul, who was challenging a man who had the power of life or death over him.

- ii. Also, Bernice was more than just a typical “sister” to Herod Agrippa II. She was also his wife! They were involved in an incestuous relationship, a recurring sin in the Herodian dynasty.

d. Read **Acts 25:23-27**.

- i. Festus recounts the story of the charges against Paul.

IV. Paul Makes His Defense and Recounts His Conversion

a. Read **Acts 26:1-23**.

- i. This is the third place in **Acts** where Paul’s conversion story is told (also in **Acts 9** and **Acts 22**).
- ii. We learn a few more things about Paul here.
 - 1. He was involved in casting his vote in the punishment of Christians. (Perhaps Paul had been a member of the Sanhedrin previously.)
 - 2. He provides more detail regarding what Jesus said to him on the road to Damascus.
- iii. The darkness/light theme is strong here.
 - 1. Bright light – brighter than the sun.
 - 2. Blinded, yet told he would “open the eyes” of Jews and Gentiles, to turn them “from darkness to light” (**Acts 26:18**). He then speaks of the Christ proclaiming light to the Jews and Gentiles. (**Acts 26:23**)
 - 3. This reminds me of some important passages of Scripture
 - a. **John 1**, regarding light coming into the world.
 - i. “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.” (**John 1:4-5**, NKJV)
 - ii. “That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.” (**John 1:9**, NKJV)
 - b. **John 3:19-21**, regarding those who are willing (or not) to come into that light.

- i. “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” (**John 3:19-21**, NKJV)
- c. **Matthew 4:12-16**, quoting the prophecy of **Isaiah 9:1-2** regarding the light appearing in Galilee.
 - i. “Now when Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, He departed to Galilee. And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: ‘The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned.’” (**Matthew 4:12-16**, NKJV)
- d. The ninth plague of **Exodus**, and the departure scene leaving Egypt.
 - i. See **Exodus 10** and **Exodus 13-14**; also discussed in **Wisdom of Solomon 18**.
 - ii. God’s people were in light, while the Egyptians were in darkness.
 - iii. As they leave Egypt, God’s people were led by a pillar of light.
- e. Paul uses similar imagery when addressing the Christians in **Colossians 1**.
 - i. Read **Colossians 1:9-14**.
 - ii. We have been rescued out of one kingdom (the kingdom of darkness) and brought into another one (the kingdom of God’s Son, “in the light” and of kingdom of love).

- iii. This is the same two-kingdoms perspective and message that Jesus had presented to Paul in **Acts 26**.
 - 4. We should see evangelism the same way.
 - a. In **1 Corinthians 10**, Paul presents the exodus journey as a map of the Christian life. The Red Sea crossing foreshadows baptism, and the time of testing in the Wilderness foreshadows the Christian life. Therefore, it makes sense the bondage in Egypt under Pharaoh's kingdom represented our time as slaves to sin, in Satan's kingdom. Evangelism is helping to pull people out of one kingdom (the kingdom of darkness and bondage to sin) and into another one (the kingdom of light and love).
 - b. It is critical that we see liberation from Satan and from his kingdom as key part of the gospel message.
 - i. "He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil." (**1 John 3:8**, NKJV)
 - ii. Almost no churches today talk about Satan as much as Jesus and the apostles did.
 - 1. **Question:** Why not?
 - 2. Let us emphasize the same things that Jesus and the apostles did when they preached the gospel, *including the part about Satan!*
 - iv. Paul preached a strong message of repentance.
 - 1. "...but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should *repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance*." (**Acts 26:20**, NKJV)
 - a. Note that the people Paul was preaching to were steeped in sin, including sexual depravity.
 - 2. "Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, *witnessing both to small and great*, saying no other things than

those which the prophets and Moses said would come—” (**Acts 26:22**, NKJV)

- a. Here Paul is preaching to the top two government officials in that part of the world: the Roman governor and the king over the Jews. Paul here was preaching to those who were among the “great” in the eyes of the world. He preached to all types of people.
 - b. **Challenge:** Are we willing to preach to those who are “great” in the eyes of the world?
 - i. To those who may be wealthy, popular, talented, good-looking, successful, who appear to ‘have it all together’, etc.?
 - ii. To those who we may find impressive or intimidating?
 - iii. Let us follow Paul’s example, and preach to everyone, including those who are considered to be “great”.
 - c. Paul also did not neglect preaching to those who were “small” in the eyes of the world; those considered to be nobodies. Let us do the same, without showing favoritism.
 - d. Paul is preaching repentance and the fulfillment of the prophecies contained in Moses and the Prophets (the Jewish Scriptures).
 - i. This is the same approach we have seen Paul take throughout his missionary journeys in Asia and Europe.
- b. Read **Acts 26:24-32**.
- i. Paul is accused of being “mad” (the same word in Greek from which our word “maniac” comes from).
 - ii. Paul’s response to the charge is that he is not crazy, but rather is speaking words of truth and reason. He asserts that what he believes is in fact logical and reasonable, especially since it is based on the fulfillment of prophecies.

1. Note that Paul's confidence in the gospel is based on truth and reason, rather than on a subjective feeling he has that he is trying to convey somehow to others.
2. He even challenges Agrippa:
 - a. "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe." (**Acts 26:27**, NKJV)
 - iii. King Agrippa, his wife and sister Bernice, and governor Festus depart, after their discussions with Paul. Agrippa concludes that Paul had done nothing deserving of imprisonment, and even says, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."
 - iv. In the final lesson in this series, we will follow Paul on his journey from Caesarea to Rome, setting the stage for his trial appeal before Caesar.