

Did King Agrippa Believe In Jesus?

This study is about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our passage is Acts 26:1-29. Before we get into the study, I would like to give you a little background to our passage. If you were to look at Acts 21:27-40, you would find that Paul was arrested in Jerusalem. He was arrested in the temple, possibly just outside the temple, because some Jews mistakenly thought that Paul had brought a Gentile into the temple. It was expressly forbidden by Jewish law at that time to allow a Gentile to be inside the temple. Apparently they thought that is what Paul had done, and, therefore, he was deserving of death. Paul was arrested.

PAUL DEFENDS HIMSELF AGAINST THE CHARGE. We learn in Acts 22:25 that Paul then proceeded to defend himself, and speaks to a crowd. At one point the crowd said,

“Away with this fellow!” So the Roman commander took Paul and prepared him for flogging. He put Paul on the rack, stretched him, and when they were ready to flog him, Paul said, “I am a Roman citizen.”

It was against the law to flog a Roman citizen without a trial. There was no trial. As a result, they did not flog Paul but put him in prison.

PAUL DIVIDES THE SANHEDRIN COUNCIL. In Acts 23, Paul appeared before the Sanhedrin Council. The Sanhedrin Council was a religious group that functioned as a court in important cases. There were two main groups that comprised the Sanhedrin Council: one group was called the Pharisees, and the other group was the Sadducees. The Sadducees were

the major religious group in that council. There were more Sadducees than Pharisees for a total of seventy-two council members.

The Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection. They did not believe in angels. They did not believe in the Holy Spirit. They accepted only the Pentateuch—that is, the first five books of the Bible. They rejected the rest of the Old Testament. The Pharisees were the conservatives who believed the Scriptures. They knew the Scriptures, and had them memorized. Paul took advantage of this difference of theological perspective, and declared that he was on trial over the hope of the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection, but the Sadducees did not. Consequently, a furor started and conflict erupted in the Sanhedrin Council

because of what Paul had said. We find that the Roman commander pulled Paul out of the council because he was afraid that Paul was going to be hurt.

PAUL IS SHIPPED TO CAESAREA. We find in verse 12 of the chapter

that all of a sudden the Roman commander decided to ship Paul to Caesarea because the Sanhedrin Council had conspired to assassinate Paul. Paul was shipped to Caesarea and in Acts 24 Paul appeared before Felix. He was kept there in prison for two years! Can you imagine being in prison for two years? He was accused and then sat in prison for two years. In Acts 25 Festus arrived in Caesarea. Festus was now in control and King Agrippa II visited him in Caesarea. King Agrippa brought along Bernice, his wife, and told King



Paul Before King Agrippa II

Agrippa II that Paul was in prison. Do you know what King Agrippa II wanted? He wanted to hear Paul.

PAUL STANDS BEFORE FESTUS. Now we will look closely at what happened to Paul starting in Acts 25:23. Paul was going to be brought before Festus and then King Agrippa. Our study starts in Acts 25:23. Here is what the text says:

So, on the next day when Agrippa came together with Bernice ...
Acts 25:23 (NASB)

That is his wife.

... amid great pomp ...

By the way, the word that is translated as “great pomp” is a Greek word from which we get our word “fantasy.” The pomp and circumstance that were given to Agrippa and Bernice was like fantasy land. The people really honored these two. It was excessive.

... and entered the auditorium accompanied by the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. Acts 25:23 (NASB)

So here was everyone: Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice were there. Commanders were there and the prominent men of the city. The stage was set, and Paul came in.

In verse 24 Festus spoke first.

Festus said, “King Agrippa, and all you gentlemen here present with us, you see this man about whom all the people of the Jews appealed to me, both at Jerusalem and here, loudly declaring that he ought not to live any longer. But I found that he had committed nothing worthy of death; and since he himself appealed to the Emperor, I decided to send him. Yet I have nothing definite about him to write to my lord.” Acts 25:24-26a (NASB)

Basically Festus says, “I have no good reason to send Paul to Rome.”

Therefore I have brought him before you all and especially before

you, King Agrippa, so that after the investigation has taken place, I may have something to write. Acts 25:26b (NASB)

Festus was looking for something he could write about Paul in order to send him to Rome. What reason would he give for sending Paul to Rome? In verse 27 Festus explained that it would be difficult to send Paul without a reason.

For it seems absurd to me in sending a prisoner, not to indicate also the charges against him. Acts 25:27 (NASB)

Festus is struggling with a real problem. He did not have a good reason to send Paul to Rome. Festus was looking for help from King Agrippa.

PAUL STANDS BEFORE KING AGRIPPA II. In Acts 26:1 Agrippa spoke,

Agrippa said to Paul, “You are permitted to speak for yourself.” Then Paul stretched out his hand and proceeded to make his defense ... Acts 26:1 (NASB)

King Agrippa gave Paul permission to speak. So Paul spoke in verse 2, and here is what he said:

In regard to all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, I consider myself fortunate ... Acts 6:2 (NASB)

The word “fortunate” is worthy of special attention. The Greek work for “fortunate” is *makarias*. From it we get the word “happy” or “blessed.” So Paul is really saying, “King, I am glad to be in front of you,”

... King Agrippa, that I am about to make my defense before you today ... Acts 26:2b (NASB)

So Paul was saying, “I am glad to be able to be here. I am glad to be able to tell you what has happened to me.”

I imagine there are many Christians who would love to stand before a politician. Maybe you would enjoy being able to stand before the president of the United States, and to share Jesus Christ. Imagine having his full attention. King

Agrippa was listening to Paul. Remember, King Agrippa II wanted to hear from Paul. He was a captive audience. So Paul stood before King Agrippa II and said, "I am glad to be able to speak with you."

Now we must not miss the important fact that Paul would not have had this opportunity if he had never been in prison. Some of us would have said, "It is not fair that I am in prison!" We would have been praying, demanding and insisting that God get us out of this unfair situation. But we must realize that Paul would never have had the opportunity to speak before King Agrippa if he had not been wrongfully arrested, shipped to Caesarea and spent two years in prison. It is important to see that God had a purpose for allowing Paul to be in prison.

Verse 3 continues . . .

. . . especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews . . . Acts 26:3a (NASB)

So Paul said, "I am really glad to be in front of you because you are an expert in all the customs and questions among the Jews."

. . . therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently. Acts 26:3b(NASB)

BACKGROUND OF KING AGRIPPA II. King Agrippa II was an interesting person in history. He was the son of Herod Agrippa I. When we are told "Agrippa," he is really King Herod Agrippa II. He lived roughly A.D. 27 to 100. His father murdered the Apostle James in Acts 12:1-2. Agrippa I had two daughters and one son. Obviously Agrippa II was the son. Bernice was one of the daughters. We just read that Bernice was his wife. Yes, that is right. Agrippa II married his sister; he committed incest. The other sister was Drusilla, the wife of Felix. We saw Felix in chapter 24.

Herod Agrippa II became king in A.D. 48. He ruled in Lebanon and his territory was expanded later to include more of the Jewish territory. We also are told from history that he was in control of the Jewish priesthood. So when Paul said that Agrippa knew about the customs and the

questions with regards to the Jews, Agrippa II really knew. This man would have known about the Old Testament. He would have known about the prophets, the customs and the priesthood. Paul is speaking to someone who was well informed.

PAUL'S PERSONAL TESTIMONY. In verse 4, Paul began to give his personal testimony. He said,

So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my own nation and at Jerusalem; since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion. Acts 26:4-5 (NASB)

Do you know what Paul is saying? He is saying, "I lived in Jerusalem. They know about my manner of life, and if they want, they can tell you. They know all about me. There are no secrets here."

Verse 6 continues with Paul's statement.

And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day. And for this hope, O King, I am being accused by Jews. Acts 26:6-7 (NASB)

This is a fabulous statement. Paul talked about the hope to which the Jews were attaining. I want you to notice particularly that he says, "the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain as they earnestly serve him night and day." The message is that they were trying to gain eternal life. Do you remember throughout Jesus' ministry how often the phrase "eternal life" occurs? Jesus used that term repeatedly. Do you remember when the rich young ruler came to Jesus? He made the point that he had kept all these commandments. Why did he do that? He was seeking eternal life. Those words came out of the mouth of the rich young ruler. The idea was not foreign. So there was and is a promise of eternal life.

In verse 8 we discover more of Paul's speech.

Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does

raise the dead? Acts 26:8 (NASB)

Now verse 8 is easily understood when we realize that the Jews were hoping to return to life and live forever. They were hoping for the resurrection. They were hoping to live again. Why would they not believe in the resurrection of the dead? Why should they not expect God to raise the dead? When Paul said “incredible,” it comes from a Greek word, *apistos*. The Greek word *pistos* just means “faith.” And in Greek, when you put an “alpha” in front of a noun, it becomes a negative. So *apistos* means “not faith.” Therefore, when Paul said “incredible,” he really said they did not believe it. They are unbelieving. They did not believe that God can raise the dead. It is not “incredible;” they did not believe that He will.

The Old Testament teaches us that God can cause a resurrection. In 1 Kings 17 we find that Elijah raised the son of the widow at Zarephath. In 2 Kings 4:18-37, Elijah raised the son of the Shunammite woman. In 2 Kings 13:21 Elisha’s bones touched a man. Elisha was dead, but when the bones touched the man, he came back to life. The Old Testament has other examples of dead people returning to life. In Jesus’ ministry, there were at least six different people who came back to life—not to mention Jesus Himself.

Therefore, when Paul said they did not believe that God raises the dead, he revealed what the Sadducees believed. The Sadducees had selectively interpreted scripture. There have always been people who claim that they know the truth, but yet they are not really open to truth. There have always been people who do not care about truth. Yet, they pretend that they do.

Verse 9 is the beginning of Paul’s personal testimony. He says,

“So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.” Acts 26:9-11 (NASB)

What Paul did not say was that he also flogged the Christians. They would be beaten to intimidate them, to keep them from worshiping Christ and sharing about Jesus Christ.

Verse 12 continues his testimony.

“While so engaged as I was journeying 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, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, ‘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 get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you . . . Acts 26:12-17 (NASB)

Paul gives a long explanation here as to what happened to him. Paul concluded by telling us about his conversion when Christ met him on the road to Damascus.

PURPOSE CHRIST’S DEATH AND RESURRECTION. Now notice verse 18. What is very interesting about this particular verse is that Jesus tells Paul the reason for His death and resurrection. Or to put it another way, about salvation. There are four blessings that come with salvation. The first blessing is given in the first part of the verse.

. . . to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God . . . Acts 26:18a (NASB)

The first blessing is to give spiritual sight so that people might see the light. Paul’s ministry was to help people have open, spiritual eyes, if I can put it that way.

The second blessing is that a believer’s sins are forgiven.

. . . that they may receive forgiveness of sins . . . Acts 26:18b

(NASB)

The third blessing is that believers gain an inheritance. Ephesians 1:3 says that believers are given spiritual blessings in the heavenly places.

... and an inheritance . . . Acts 26:18c (NASB)

The inheritance Christ spoke of is eternal life—life forever in heaven.

The fourth blessing is that every believer is sanctified.

... among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me. Acts 26:18c (NASB)

But what does sanctified mean? Sanctified refers to being made holy. All these blessings are the result of faith in Christ, for Jesus said they come “by faith in Me.”

I just love the last part of that verse, “by faith in Me.” Verse 18 is the gospel in a nutshell. Salvation comes by faith in Christ and you are declared to be forgiven, made holy, gain eternal life, and have your spiritual eyes opened. It is a great summary statement.

Can you imagine Paul having this incredible opportunity to share the gospel with King Agrippa II? I am sure that Paul was thrilled to be able to share the gospel. I wonder how much did King Agrippa understand?

HOW PAUL PRESENTED THE GOSPEL. Now what follows in verses 19-23 is the content of faith.

So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance. Acts 26:19-20 (NASB)

Notice that Paul gives us a synonym for faith. If a person truly believes, there will be repentance over his or her sin. If a person truly believes, they will perform deeds that are appropriate to repentance. That is, they will sin less and less.

So Paul quickly gives us the essence of faith.

In verses 21-23 he says,

For this reason some Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death. So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.” Acts 26:21-23 (NASB)

Notice what he says the prophets and Moses said was going to occur. Christ would suffer and rise from the dead. Paul reminded King Agrippa of what he already knew. He already knew about Christ. The king knew about the Jewish customs and the Scriptures.

Festus may not have known about Christ, but this passage reveals that King Agrippa knew Old Testament scriptures. When I say he knew the Scriptures, I do not mean that he had it memorized like a Pharisee, but he knew about the Scriptures. That is why Paul was appealing to his knowledge. Paul then appeals to the prophets and Moses because they spoke about Jesus.

Some years ago I sat with a pastor. We were talking about why we believed in Jesus Christ. I had an opportunity to talk about the early years of my life when I started searching to know whether or not Jesus was real, and whether or not I could trust the Bible. He told me the reason he believed in Jesus was because of the experiences that he had, and because of answered prayers. That was the reason why he believed in God and why he trusted the Bible. I thought to myself, “How empty is that? How shallow is that? It does not hold together.” When my wife and I used to live in Los Angeles, we would go down to the Los Angeles airport (LAX). On occasions we would find different groups trying to encourage us to be involved in their religion and worship their god. The Hari Krishnas were there in their purple robes, beating their tambourines. They are zealous for their god and could tell you what their god has done for them. Their god supposedly answered prayers for them. They had this special experience and spiritual experience. That occurs again and

again in various false religions.

As I talked with this man, I thought to myself, “The Hari Krishnas would have said the same thing he had just said. Other false religions would have said the same! Therefore, how does anyone know that Jesus or God is real? Is the answer that you had a special experience?” The answer is obviously no!

Not too many months ago I was talking to someone who was an unbeliever. He was telling me how he spoke in tongues. He had had different special experiences. But it was not until later on in life that he actually became a Christian. When I think about the fact that experiences do not prove the existence of Jesus, of God, I think about Acts 26. What did Paul do with King Agrippa II? Paul appealed to his knowledge of the Scriptures. Paul appealed to what he knew about Christ. Paul says, “King Agrippa, you know about the Jewish customs and the Jewish questions.” Then when Paul spoke of Jesus dying and coming back to life, he said, “Remember the prophets and remember Moses?” Paul appealed to his knowledge, and ultimately, to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He appealed to prophecy.

You might ask, “What is so important about prophecy?” The prophets predicted the rise and fall of nations: Israel, the Babylonian Empire, the Medo-Persian Empire, the Grecian Empire, and the Roman Empire, and many smaller nations and peoples. Paul appealed to something that he knew was real such as the prophets and their prophecies which came true. Paul appealed to the king’s knowledge. The prophets authenticated Christ, His death and resurrection. Paul appealed that which was true! The prophets gave the king a basis for believing in Christ.

KING AGRIPPA’S RESPONSE TO CHRIST. How did the king respond? The answer begins in verses 24. There are two different reactions to the good news that Paul shared about Christ. The first response came from Festus.

While Paul was saying this in his defense, Festus said in a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad.” Acts 26:24 (NASB)

Festus thought that Paul was foolish — that he had lost his

senses. He said, “Your great learning is driving you crazy.” I could not help but think about what happens today to Christians. We share the good news about Christ, but unbelievers do not know the prophets. They do not know Moses. They have not read the secular statements about Jesus Christ. All of a sudden they hear that Jesus has risen from the dead and they say, “You are nuts, Christian!” At times we have the same experiences that Paul had.

Now notice how Paul replied to Festus.

But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth. For the king knows about these matters . . .” Acts 26:25-26a (NASB)

The king that Paul refers to is King Agrippa II.

. . . and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner. Acts 26:26b (NASB)

Do you know what Paul was saying? What happened to Christ did not happen in secret. It was not hidden. The king knew all about it. Therefore, Paul reminded him of the prophecies. He was urging him to believe.

King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do. Acts 26:27 (NASB)

Now the king replied,

Agrippa replied to Paul, “In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian.” And Paul said, “I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains.” Acts 26:28-29 (NASB)

This is an important passage of scripture, because it tells us how Paul went about witnessing to Agrippa. He did not try to create emotion in the king. He did not create an experience. He simply gave the king facts about Jesus Christ. There is an old statement that says, facts come first, then comes

faith and finally the feelings. Increasingly believers are emphasizing feelings, often devoid of facts. That is not what Paul did. He put the facts first—right at the very beginning. There is a reason to believe. That is the message.

CONCLUSION. I want to conclude by illustrating the four different groups of people in this study. The first person is Festus. We know people like Festus. They are ignorant of the prophecies. Did you know that there are hundreds of prophecies before Christ entered this world that are about Jesus Christ? Festus seemed to be totally ignorant of them. We should not be surprised that he thought Paul was crazy. There are people like that today—people who are ignorant of the truth because Satan and the world’s forces are trying to keep them in ignorance.

The second group of people are like the Pharisees. They think they are saved. They know the Bible. They are dogmatic about their belief system, but they are unwilling to think that maybe they are wrong. Over the years I have shared on occasions that it is not uncommon for pastors to visit a pastors’ conference, and during the pastors’ conference discover they are not a Christian—whether they are Arminian or Reformed or of any other theological system. They have been teaching in their church but then discover

they are going to hell. One pastor commented, “How could I have not known the truth because I taught it Sunday after Sunday?” Not until he sat at a pastors’ conference did he become aware of the fact that he was not a Christian. He had never really trusted Christ to forgive his sins. He never surrendered himself to the Lord—never!

The third group of people know the Scriptures. They are humble, looking to learn, zealous and sharing the news about Jesus. I just love Paul’s great example. He illustrates what happens when we give ourselves to God.

Then the final group of people are like King Agrippa. They know the truth, but they do not yet believe in Christ as their Savior and have not given themselves to the Lord. Paul gave King Agrippa facts about Christ and then he appealed to him. The death and resurrection of Christ was at the core of Paul’s presentation. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is what makes Christianity different from every other religion. The resurrection is the proof that Jesus was God; that He was and is the Savior who can forgive our sins, give us an inheritance of eternal life and declare us to be holy. But it all starts by believing in Jesus Christ—or as Jesus Himself said, “Believe in me.” Do you believe in Christ? Are you going to heaven?