

Derek French:

Paul's defence before King Agrippa and Roman governor Festus becomes very personal as Paul continues to share the good news about Jesus with these influential men. Indeed, Paul speaks directly to them both, and as we'll see, their response is very significant.

We continue to look at the book of Acts and today we're in chapter 26 verses 24 – 32. Gerard and Phillippa Chrispin are with us, and Phillippa will begin by reading those verses for us and then Gerard will take us through them.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*'Now as he thus made his defence, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!" But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe.'*

*'Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." And Paul said, "I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains.'*

*'When he had said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them; and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, "This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains.'*

*'Then Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.'*

Gerard Chrispin:

It is inconceivable that if the highly educated and renowned Pharisee, Gamaliel, was presenting a reasoned case in public in the same intelligent and professional way now employed by his protégée Paul, that anyone in authority would shout, "You're going mad, Gamaliel! You are studying too much!" It would be considered outrageous if that kind of comment had been made about Marcus Tullius Cicero, the renowned Roman philosopher, politician, lawyer and orator, and bear in mind that the loud interruption that Paul is going mad is not made by King Agrippa, the Jewish expert to whom Paul's remarks are primarily directed. It is Festus, the Roman governor, who asked for input on Paul's case from King Agrippa and from the audience. In high volume he now cuts across Paul's reasoned and reasonable defence.

Like Felix his predecessor, Festus has already interrogated Paul. Until now neither governor even hinted that Paul is unbalanced and/or abnormal, so why does Festus cry out now in this way? And where does he get the crazy idea that much learning drives any sensible student mad? What has happened to his judicial fairness and professionalism? Why cut across someone in full flow as he is making his case in court? Was Festus really so astonished that a learned scholar like Paul could actually believe that the dead would live again, as one commentator has suggested?

Or is it more likely that what Festus has heard about Jesus convinces him that no one can follow Christ without repenting from sin and totally surrendering to him? He has heard that Jesus carried our sins and took the punishment for them on the cross. Does he now appreciate that the resurrection of the Son of God from the dead really does underline that Jesus is, in the later words of the book of Revelation, Lord of Lords and King of Kings?

Festus has just heard Paul speak of Christ's suffering, his death on the cross as well as his rising from the dead. Forgiveness of sin and knowing Christ as risen Lord are inseparably bound together. Believing in the resurrection of Jesus must anyhow convince a logical thinker that Jesus is Lord, thus how reasonable that a sinner must turn from his sins and receive Jesus as his Lord to obey, as well as his Saviour who forgives him!

So could it be that Festus' sinful heart now rebels strongly against such a challenge? It is interesting to note that King Agrippa, who is hearing this case, remains silent until he is questioned by Paul. Meanwhile, Paul replies to Festus.

Paul is a wise man. His wisdom does not come from his intellect or learning, it comes from God, who gives us his wisdom today, as he did to Paul then. In the words of James, probably already written by the time that Paul stands before Agrippa and Festus, 'If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given him.'

That wisdom now leads Paul to answer respectfully, frankly and convincingly. It also ensures that on this occasion he keeps his answer short. At times a fully detailed answer is required to a question raised. At other times, the very pithy and pointed nature of a reply makes the required impact.

Paul courteously, but firmly, rejects the suggestion that sanity has left him. 'I am not mad, most noble Festus.' He then makes a comment that all his hearers, King Agrippa included, know is correct. He says he speaks the words of truth and reason. That is what every gospel preacher and every Christian witnessing for Christ should always do. When we put forward God's truth accurately, reason is never lacking. We reason from Scripture.

Paul then skilfully and without offence goes over Festus' head to Agrippa, thereby gently reminding Festus that Paul is addressing Agrippa. He says, 'For the king before whom I also speak freely, knows these things.' Paul knows that even if the Roman governor's eyes are closed to the evidence for the resurrection, the knowledgeable king is well aware of the facts. After the crucifixion of Jesus took place in a crowded Jerusalem, his resurrection was not done in a corner either. That is one of the most significant understatements of the Bible.

Having referred to the evidence, well known to all in Jerusalem and to the king, Paul now points King Agrippa to Scripture. He again looks to truth as well as reason. Agrippa will know of the amazing fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy concerning the birth, life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. 'King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe!' Paul has done his homework about the king! He has put him on the spot before Festus and before this audience of Caesarea's most influential people. Will Agrippa also tell Paul that he is mad?

No, Agrippa knows that the Old Testament prophesied that Christ would come to die and that he would rise again. Agrippa knows that the evidence is overwhelming that Jesus died and rose again. He is intellectually convinced. He has heard that only by repentance and faith can he come to now Christ as Paul does. He cannot cling on to his sins; not only the obvious immoral and sexual sins but also all the others too, if he comes to Christ. He must know that the Lord who changed Saul, the cruel aggressor, into Paul the caring apostle, could change him too.

His reply before all is quite staggering. 'You almost persuade me to become a Christian.' Some think that he says this as a criticism of Paul. That seems unlikely. Agrippa wanted to hear Paul personally and originally asked Festus to arrange the hearing. As he knew before of his zeal for Jesus Christ, he cannot come now and criticise him for it. God seems to have touched his heart. Does Holy Spirit conviction of sin begin to nag in his heart? Is there a certain wistful regret in his, 'You almost persuade me to become a Christian'? Does he think, 'If only I could', all the time knowing that he is not prepared to give up his overtly immoral lifestyle?

'Almost' is not enough. 'I almost caught the plane I went for' or 'I almost passed the exam' or 'I almost got the job' are sad admissions of failure to achieve what was needed. 'Almost saved' is not being saved. 'Almost heaven' is hell. Paul's big heart for sinners and for the gospel moves him to tell the spiritually lost king and all his mainly non-Christian audience, including Festus, 'I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me today might become almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains.' This apostle probably knows more about God's sovereign work in salvation than any other man, yet he longs that both this king in front of him and this audience of well-known people all become as he is, chains apart.

And what is he? He is saved! He is forgiven! He possesses eternal life. He has a living saviour. He has peace with God and a home in heaven. He wants them all to have that too. Have you got what Paul has? Are you like Paul, apart from his chains? You can only be blessed as Paul is by asking God to forgive you through Jesus' death on the cross for you, and by owning up to your sin, turning from it and receiving Christ in your heart and life. Will you do that? Now? You will be free eternally if you do.

King Agrippa has heard enough for now. He stands to leave and so do Bernice and Festus. This hearing is over. The king came wondering about Paul and his chains. He seems to leave wondering about himself and his eternal future. Perhaps he is not the only one in that auditorium in that position.

Away from the crowd, the three of them discuss Paul's chains. There Festus, who ranted against Paul's belief in the resurrection and Agrippa who was challenged by Paul's forthrightness, and Bernice who heard it all and said nothing, all agree that Paul deserves neither death nor chains. King Agrippa vindicates Paul. He tells Festus that Paul might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.

Paul has met his goal of witnessing to all these people, mainly Gentile about his Lord and Saviour. By God's overruling grace, his appeal to Caesar caused that to take place, but Paul longs to go to Rome to

witness, as God has called him to do. His appeal to Caesar will soon achieve that as well, again only by God's amazing and wonderful grace.