

Acts

Acts 25:13 to 26:32 - Dealing wisely with opposition

Paul is now back on track to fulfilling his calling, encouraged, strengthened and much the wiser too, having learnt to be more sensitive to the Spirit's guidance and not to leap ahead with his own wishes (Acts 21:4, 10-14).

It was a messy roundabout trip to get Paul back on track, that had severely restricted the freedom he'd had **before he resisted the Spirit's warnings**, but he was on his way to Rome. It wasn't quite the way he'd dreamt of, however, because he'd been stewing away in prison unable to do any teaching about Jesus for at least two years in Caesarea - except to Felix the Roman Governor, who wasn't that interested anyway, and was only listening to Paul to get Paul to offer him a bribe (Acts 24:21-27). Not happy years for Paul at all.

But it so happened in **Acts 25:13** that the last king of Judea, Herod Agrippa and his (incestuous sister) wife Bernice, "arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus (the new Roman Governor replacing Felix)" and spent "many days there," during which time "Festus discussed Paul's case with the king" (verse 14). And it sounds like Festus was exactly the right man, because he explains things well to Agrippa, not only from Paul's point of view but from the prosecuting Jewish chief priests' and elders' point of view too - and, amazingly for a man in such high office, even admit his own inadequacy in settling the problem as well.

We see that in **verses 18-20**, when Festus tells Agrippa, "When Paul's accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive. **I was at a loss how to investigate such matters**; so I asked Paul if he'd be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges."

This clearly intrigued Agrippa, and enough for him to say to Festus, "I would like to hear this man myself," **verse 22**. So here we have two men in high office discussing what to do with Paul being charged for claiming a "dead man named Jesus was alive." How ironic that they're doing Paul's job for him, highlighting Jesus being resurrected from the dead. And Agrippa, not actually a Jew himself, but a believer in the Jewish faith, would get to hear from Paul what Paul had dreamt of doing, getting one last chance to reach his own people with the truth about Jesus (Acts 21:13).

It was also a chance for Agrippa to be treated like a king and with “great pomp,” as he entered the room with all “the high ranking officers and the leading men of the city” (Acts 25:23). So Paul has quite the audience waiting for him. But first, Festus has to explain why this meeting was being held in the first place. He’d found Paul “had done nothing deserving of death” (verse 25), so how could he send Paul to Caesar without anything “definite to write” as far as specific “charges against him”? It wouldn’t do his own credibility any good either, so Festus is hoping Agrippa and Co can help him come up with something he could write about Paul that would hold water in Rome (verses 26-27).

So Agrippa gives permission to Paul to speak, **Acts 26:1**. And Paul’s defence goes like this: “I’m a Jew, and all the Jews in attendance here know that. I even lived as a Pharisee, the strictest sect of our religion (verse 5). And I share exactly the same hope as all Jews, the promise of the Messiah to restore our nation back to life (verse 6), so why (Paul asks) should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?” (verse 8). In other words, what’s the point of us Jews “earnestly serving God night and day” (verse 7), if there isn’t a resurrection waiting for us? A resurrection is what we all look forward to; it’s a boat we’re all sailing together in.

So **Paul seeks common ground first of all**, not come out all guns blazing to defend himself. He mentions more common ground between him and his accusers too, in that he too “opposed the name of Jesus” (verse 9), and under similar orders from the chief priests he too wanted to “put many of the saints (or Jesus followers) in prison,” and vote for their death (verse 10).

So Paul isn’t spoiling for a fight, or trying to put anyone down, or prove he’s the righteous one standing on the higher moral ground. He admits that he too was “obsessed” with believing it was the right thing to do to put Christians to death (verse 11). And for me that’s been a very useful clue when people criticize Christianity and what they consider its “weird beliefs,” because I can honestly say, “You know, I’ve had trouble with Christian beliefs and interpretations too, especially when they differ so widely between Christian denominations and even Christian scholars.”

And it’s true. I hope I’m not trying to be clever like some lawyer to get people to lower their guard and make themselves vulnerable. I really do have difficulty with any Christian causing confusion, creating division, and gaslighting fellow Christians by putting them down, **having done all those things myself** and realizing from Paul’s example **how wrong it is**. And Paul wasn’t about to make the same mistake he made in Acts 23:3-5 either.

That's when he'd called the high priest a "whitewashed wall," and even in his ignorance that the man was the high priest, Paul castigated himself for not following Scripture. Well, here we have **more Scripture** we're being faced with in **Acts 26**, in **how to deal wisely with opposition**.

It doesn't mean we have to be doormats and say nothing in our defence. I remember when someone really took me to task about my past beliefs, and accused me of all sorts of wrong and destructive things I'd said and done, as though they were intentional on my part. They weren't. They were all circumstantial, based on what I really thought was right at the time, which is where Paul goes next in his defence too.

He explains **how** he came to realize what he was doing was wrong. It was Jesus pointing out to him what Paul had never considered, that maybe what the Christians were saying about Jesus being resurrected from the dead was true. And to prove it Jesus had talked to Paul personally, which had shocked Paul into asking, "Who are you, Lord?" in verse 15, or as I interpret it, "Is that really you, the resurrected Lord, who truly is alive after all?" No wonder Paul could speak confidently about Jesus being resurrected, therefore, when he'd experienced it personally, but also admitting that he hadn't believed it either, until he had convincing evidence it was true. And that's another clue in how we deal with opposition - that we **speak from personal experience**.

And because Paul now knew from personal experience that Jesus was alive (verse 16), how could he **not** do what the resurrected Jesus wanted him to do (verses 17-19)? And what better defence is there than being able to say, "I'm speaking from experience that Jesus is alive"? What better "eye-opener" too - in "turning people from darkness to light, and from Satan to God" (verse 18)?

And that's why, Paul explains, he was now travelling all over telling Jews and Gentiles to "turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds," **verse 20** - or prove they now believed in Jesus being alive by trusting their lives to him. But instead his fellow Jews wanted him dead, despite "the prophets and Moses" also predicting Jesus would rise from the dead, and that he'd prove it to both Jews and Gentiles too (verse 23), one obvious proof being "the help" Paul had been receiving from God "to this very day," **verse 22**. Again, more evidence of Jesus being alive from personal experience.

So we need Jesus providing US with that personal experience of him being alive too, then, right? Which is exactly what he promised the Holy Spirit would do for us in Acts 1:8 - give us that personal proof first, so we could then speak from experience that Jesus is alive to **others**.

How the Holy Spirit does that is his business, but when it happens and we have the evidence to back it up, we could be in for some interesting surprises too, because “At this point,” **verse 24**, Festus jumps up and yells out, “You’re out of your mind, Paul; your great learning is driving you insane.”

It was jolly rude interrupting Paul like that, and from Festus of all people too, who’d been very reasonable in dealing with Paul so far. And shouting publicly in front of royalty that Paul was nuts could really have triggered Paul to yell a few insults back. But Paul not only keeps his cool, **he answers with respect too**, another jolly helpful clue for us in dealing with opposition.

“I am not insane, **most excellent Festus**,” Paul replies in **verse 25**, because “What I am saying is true and reasonable.” And he knew he could establish common ground with the king on that point too, because the king, being a believer in the Jewish faith, was “familiar” with what the scriptures said (26), and he was fully aware of Jesus too, because who Jesus was and what he was teaching “was not done in a corner.” It was all out in the open, and done in such a way that it wouldn’t have “escaped the king’s notice,” just like people today know about Christianity and what Christians believe (Christmas and Easter made sure of that). It’s another clue, then, that in dealing with people **we’re talking about things they are already aware of**.

So with all this common ground, personal proof, respect maintained, and knowing that what he was saying was familiar to Agrippa, Paul now looks directly at the king in **verse 27** and asks him, “Do you believe the prophets? I know you do.” It’s bold, but it’s like asking people today, “Do you believe in the Golden Rule? Of course you do.” Who in his or her right mind wouldn’t? Think what kind of world we’d have if we all believed in it. Take it, then, that people “know” that.

So Paul, who so desperately wanted people to “become like him,” **verse 29**, in what he knows about the living Jesus Christ and experiencing him personally, has played all his cards. But Agrippa is not moved. Instead, in sneering sarcasm, he replies (in our terms), “Is that it? Well, you’re going to have to do a lot more than that to make ME a Christian.” And off he huffs in verse 30, but admits Paul hadn’t done “anything that deserves death or imprisonment.”

So Paul has won his case, and “he could have been set free if he hadn’t appealed to Caesar” (verse 32), but he’d remain a prisoner instead. In not obeying the Holy Spirit’s instructions to not go to Jerusalem, then, Paul had lost his last chance and his longing to reach his fellow Jews. But he’d done really well in dealing with opposition, and in so doing the Holy Spirit had some wonderful things up his sleeve yet for Paul....