

# THAT'S CRAZY TALK!

ACTS 26:1-32 MARCH 10, 2021

Picture Manhattan for a moment. I should specify: Manhattan, *Montana*. Population: 1,500. This tiny town is home to Ernie Wayne terTelgte. Ernie's looks like a Grizzly Adams impersonator. You can watch video from a 2013 court proceeding against Ernie.<sup>1</sup> He had been stopped for fishing without a license. When confronted, he told police that, under universal law, he had the right to forage for food. The situation escalated and Ernie resisted arrest. When appearing in court, he speaks in his own defense, but it doesn't go very well. First, he objects to the capitalization of the letters of his name on court documents. He's convinced to allow that would be to admit that he has been made "the property of Rome."<sup>2</sup> He also asserts that the proceedings are unconstitutional because the flag on display has gold fringe on the edges, which indicates they are attempting to force admiralty law upon him. When asked how he pled to the charges his answer is: "I never plead, animals plead, sounds like baaaa, oink oink." Things deteriorate from there. The judge removes herself to confer with her bailiffs, at which point Ernie pronounces the case dismissed and he gets up and walks out. Maybe the most remarkable part of the whole video is that you *then* see that the room had been filled with his *supporters*, who go after him outside, murmuring about how they have made history.

Today we find a man defending himself in a different court. Paul has been presented to King Agrippa, Governor Festus, military commanders and the prominent men of Caesarea. But this isn't an official trial, it was meant to be an afternoon of entertainment for these important people. What follows is nothing less than a jaw-dropping spectacle, as the Pharisee turned turned preacher turned prisoner delivers his defense and proclaims the Good News to them. Before Paul is able to finish, Festus will shout that he has gone mad. But Paul is no Ernie terTelgte. His testimony may be astonishing, but it's not unreasonable. He shares the remarkable story of how he came to faith in Christ. And, as we listen we should be astonished that God was so gracious as to save a wretch like him, that God was so powerful that He is able to completely transform the worst kind of man, and that God is so generous that He is willing to do that for anyone and everyone who will turn to Him in faith.

**Acts 26:1 - Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and began his defense:**

If you recall, everyone in the audience had come in with pomp and pageantry. All very impressed with themselves. Here, Agrippa says he's giving Paul "permission" to "speak for himself." But what will become very clear very quickly was that it was *Paul* who had authority and he was not interested in seeking anything for himself, he was speaking for *their* benefit. This scene reminds us that *we* have been given the authority of heaven. We don't need to seek the permission of man to do what our King has sent us to do. And, we're reminded that our speech, *our whole life*, is not to be lived for ourselves, but in service to our King. Agrippa said, "Speak for yourself." But what we'll see is Paul talks all about *Jesus*. Yes, he will share his personal testimony, but Paul's 'self' was completely wrapped up in the Person and work of Christ, his Savior.

Paul's message is absolutely - pointedly - directed at Agrippa. More than a dozen times Paul will say his name or say "*YOU*" to him. As he speaks he doesn't seek to exonerate himself as much as he seeks to emancipate this lost man, trapped in his sin, falling headlong toward death and judgment.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_LwR0c-CE5g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_LwR0c-CE5g)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxUunEPUGN4&t=20s>

As he lifted up his hand to speak, the jangle of his chains would be heard, for Paul was shackled to at least one soldier as he addressed them. And here's how he opens:

**Acts 26:2-3 - <sup>2</sup>“I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, <sup>3</sup>especially since you are very knowledgeable about all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.**

“I consider myself fortunate.” That’s an incredible opening line. It reminds us of Lou Gehrig saying “Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.” How could Paul be pleased by his circumstances? Well, it wasn’t the *circumstances* he was excited about, but the opportunity to deliver a cure to this dying crowd. Paul recognized that what he was suffering through was part of a greater story, a much greater effort that has been unfolding for many centuries. It wasn’t just that Paul caught a bad break. This was part of the grand work of redemption conceived in the mind of God and accomplished by His power. Along the way there was great opposition against this saving work, not only coming from the Devil but from lost men themselves. And so when Paul suffered he didn’t have to ask “why me?” He knew that it was because of sin that God’s people were resisted.

Paul asks for their patience. Not all questions can be answered quickly. Sometimes the truth cannot be rushed. Not everything we can know about God can fit on a post-it note. After a *lifetime* of study we will still learn more of Him and what He has done.

**Acts 26:4-5 - <sup>4</sup>“All the Jews know my way of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own people and in Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup>They have known me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived as a Pharisee.**

Paul wants to establish who he was before he surrendered his life to Jesus. And who he was was the best of the best that human religion could offer. There was no man of greater focus, dedication and sincerity than Saul of Tarsus. He was so committed he had become *famous* for it. Men like Festus only *wished* to grasp philosophy and knowledge the way Saul had. Men like Agrippa didn’t have the courage or will to go the high road and deny his base desires. But Saul was that rare man who laid hold of those human virtues of brilliance and morality. He was a champion specimen.

So, what happened? How did he go from rising star to public enemy number one?

**Acts 26:6-7 - <sup>6</sup>And now I stand on trial because of the hope in what God promised to our ancestors, <sup>7</sup>the promise our twelve tribes hope to reach as they earnestly serve him night and day. King Agrippa, I am being accused by the Jews because of this hope.**

The “hope” was the resurrection from the dead. Specifically, that the Messiah had come, He had been killed, and now He was alive again and therefore all who follow Him will be raised to life again.

This wasn’t a *new* promise, it had always been the hope of Israel. The problem is that the Jews had refused the idea of a suffering Savior. But, it’s right there on the page, isn’t it? What about Isaiah? What about these other references? Had God made some terrible mistake? Had He forgotten to hit ‘send’ on the message? No, it was men who made the mistake. Men who, over time, elevated tradition to the same level as the Scriptures and their understanding became distorted and ruined.

This isn't a problem unique to the Jewish people. We can look back and see times when the church moved away from the clear revelation of Scripture and instead were teaching things like indulgences, purgatory, the Crusades. Errors like these are made when God's people stop submitting to the Word of God and instead elevate tradition or custom to the authority that only Scripture should have.

Paul signals here that the resurrection should not only be considered our great hope, but that it should motivate us in our daily service to the Lord *and* that focusing on it will sustain us through the difficulties we face in this life.

### **Acts 26:8 - <sup>8</sup>Why do any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?**

The Romans found the idea of resurrection absurd. As you share the Gospel, eventually someone will scoff at the idea of life after death. But it's not an illogical claim. If there is a God who created life out of nothing, there's no reason to think He couldn't bring someone *back* to life after death.

Perhaps a person then says, "Well, I don't believe in God." That's common these days. I suppose the question I would like them to answer is: "Can you show me a symphony that wrote itself and then *played* itself? Just one. It can be as long or short as you like. 1 measure will suffice." Now *that's* an absurd idea. The London symphony orchestra currently has 106 players. It takes immense effort for them to perform a single piece of music together.

Thus far, scientists have discovered 118 elements. These elements work together round the clock in a meticulously fine-tuned orchestra to support life in our ever-expanding universe. And someone would say this cosmic symphony wrote and plays itself? "A fool says in his heart 'there is no God.'"

**Acts 26:9-11 - <sup>9</sup>In fact, I myself was convinced that it was necessary to do many things in opposition to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. <sup>10</sup>I actually did this in Jerusalem, and I locked up many of the saints in prison, since I had received authority for that from the chief priests. When they were put to death, I was in agreement against them. <sup>11</sup>In all the synagogues I often punished them and tried to make them blaspheme. Since I was terribly enraged at them, I pursued them even to foreign cities.**

Paul admits that he had tortured and killed Christians. Now remember: This was the *best* man had to offer. The finest example of spiritual enlightenment and dedication was a *killer*, who hunted down innocent people to satiate his own fury.

We need not focus on the horrors of what Paul did. Instead, we marvel at the grace of what *Christ* did. *This* man was loved by God, rescued from himself, and completely changed. Not only is that amazing grace, it's incredible to see that God is able to wash away the guilt of sin. It was over and done with. Paul was made new. It reminds us of the redemption of IG-11 in *The Mandalorian*.

Knowing who we would become, we read about Saul's rage and we *pity* him, right? We know who he will be *after* the Damascus road. So, when we see him raging at the church, we pardon him. We should also pity the opponents of the Gospel today. It's easier to hate them, but we don't want to be like Jonah, who was so consumed with hatred toward the Ninevites that he initially refused to preach to them and later was angry when they received God's mercy. We want to be like Ananias, ready to embrace even a person as wretched as Saul and welcome him into the family of God.

**Acts 26:12 - <sup>12</sup>“I was traveling to Damascus under these circumstances with authority and a commission from the chief priests.**

Saul had been sent out with what looked like a lot of power and a commission to harm. In a moment it was all gone. Because God is really the One in charge. And now, He has sent *us* out with His own commission, not to destroy but to make disciples. And we go out in the Lord’s authority.

**Acts 26:13-15a - <sup>13</sup>King Agrippa, while on the road at midday, I saw a light from heaven brighter than the sun, shining around me and those traveling with me. <sup>14</sup>We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice speaking to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ <sup>15</sup>“I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’**

A sad but important element in Paul’s story is the revelation that God will *allow* a person to kick against Him. Paul did. We’ve seen Felix did. Festus will, Agrippa will. Peter even did a bit back in the Cornelius story. Think about it: The Lord *could’ve* raptured Peter over to Caesarea and mechanically forced him to do what He had commanded, but He didn’t. God does not force Himself on us, either in salvation or to follow His leading. To the unsaved, we would say, “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.” To the saved, we would say the same and, additionally, “Don’t quench the Holy Spirit.” Don’t kick against God’s leading, His correction or His commands.

**Acts 26:15b-18 - “And the Lord replied, ‘I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. <sup>16</sup>But get up and stand on your feet. For I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. <sup>17</sup>I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them <sup>18</sup>to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a share among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’**

There’s that line in *The Two Towers* as the battle at Helm’s Deep is about to begin where Aragorn says to his soldiers, “Show them no mercy for you shall receive none.” Saul had *no* mercy for the Christians he was persecuting. And yet, the Lord Jesus met him with grace. And such grace! This man who deserved only to be consumed by the righteous judgment of God instead was given an offer of *life*. Not just life, but to have his debt wiped out. And an offer to be established and strengthened, to have mysteries revealed to him. He said, “I’ll make you My spokesman. I’ll make you My friend and co-heir.” This is the offer He makes to *all* of us despite what we deserve. We may have less blood on our hands but we have no less sin in our hearts.

Here, without being disrespectful, Paul points out that all these glittering Gentiles were, actually, lost in darkness. Blind and dying, slowly being crushed by the power of Satan. The Gospel *must* contain the hard truth that unbelievers are bound in darkness, facing the wrath of God and must be saved from their sin. That they have no future hope for forgiveness or life apart from Jesus Christ.

**Acts 26:19-23 - <sup>19</sup>“So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. <sup>20</sup>Instead, I preached to those in Damascus first, and to those in Jerusalem and in all the region of Judea, and to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works worthy of repentance. <sup>21</sup>For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and were trying to kill me. <sup>22</sup>To this very day, I have had help from God, and I stand and testify to both small and great, saying nothing other than what the prophets and Moses said would take place—<sup>23</sup>that**

**the Messiah would suffer, and that, as the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light to our people and to the Gentiles.”**

Paul never once elevates himself in this talk. He simply did what he was told. Sure, he was talking to some ‘great’ people today, but he was just as ready to speak to a few poor people down by the riverbank. Because earthly status didn’t mean anything to Paul anymore.

If you’re trapped in a burning building it doesn’t really matter who makes 7 figures and who is broke, does it? Paul could see that all this world was a burning building. His aim was not to climb a ladder of worldly success, but to rescue whoever he could before the whole thing came down.

He says Christ was the *first* to rise from the dead. We don’t have time for a full blown eschatology study tonight (we’ll get that in our studies in Revelation), but suffice it to say, Christians sometimes argue about the resurrection. There are some who say there is only *one* general resurrection. However, as we read Scripture we see there are two: The first for believers and the second for the damned. The *first* is presented as happening in *stages*. Those who criticize this idea should admit that they, *too*, believe in at least a two-stage first resurrection: Because Christ is the first to rise.

**Acts 26:24 - <sup>24</sup>As he was saying these things in his defense, Festus exclaimed in a loud voice, “You’re out of your mind, Paul! Too much study is driving you mad.”**

Apparently in the Greek when it says “loud voice” the terms used are ‘mega phone.’ So, Festus is worked up. Perhaps he felt the conviction of the Holy Spirit but instead of surrendering he decided to kick against the Lord. His tactic? Dismiss the messenger and then you can ignore the message.

It is so important that we, as ambassadors and messengers, *live out* our Christianity with integrity and consistency. We do not want to give the unbelievers around us an excuse to deny the message of the Gospel by bringing shame on the name of Jesus Christ.

Now, Paul wasn’t acting crazy. Impassioned, yes. Not crazy. Hang out online for awhile and you’ll see plenty of video evidence of Christians acting *crazy*. Don’t be like that. But neither should we be indifferent about our Christian life. We’re to be filled up with joy and zeal and passion to be about our Lord’s business. And, knowing it is a *life and death* business, we should be energetic in our efforts.

**Acts 26:25-27 - <sup>25</sup>But Paul replied, “I’m not out of my mind, most excellent Festus. On the contrary, I’m speaking words of truth and good judgment. <sup>26</sup>For the king knows about these matters, and I can speak boldly to him. For I am convinced that none of these things has escaped his notice, since this was not done in a corner. <sup>27</sup>King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you believe.”**

Our message should be built with Biblical truth and good judgment. When we move off of that into sensationalism, it not only fails to change lives, it makes us seem crazy. When a bunch of Christians get behind their pulpits and proclaim that heaven has *guaranteed* that Donald Trump will win the 2020 election and then he *doesn’t*, the unbelieving world says, “Look at those crazy people!”

Here’s what Paul did: He talked about the history of Israel, the prophecies of the Old Testament, the true, reliable testimony of Christ and then how *his own* life had been radically changed. It doesn’t mean that being born again is all a rational formula that doesn’t require faith. It does. But the truth of God is reasonable and sober and able to be communicated in plain language.

There were a lot of people in the room, but the Spirit focused Paul's attention on one guy: Agrippa. Festus clearly was reacting very negatively, but Agrippa seemed to be more receptive and so Paul brought him to a moment of decision. *Do you believe?*

That in itself is important. He did *not* say: "Will you be baptized?" Or, "Will you clean up all the missteps of your life and prove you're worthy of being saved?" No, it was, "Do you believe?"

Jesus said, "He who believes has eternal life."<sup>3</sup> We are not justified by works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> Now, *when* a person believes and God begins that transforming process, they will do the work of righteousness. But we are saved by grace through faith. Do you believe?

**Acts 26:28-29 - <sup>28</sup> Agrippa said to Paul, "Are you going to persuade me to become a Christian so easily?" <sup>29</sup> "I wish before God," replied Paul, "that whether easily or with difficulty, not only you but all who listen to me today might become as I am—except for these chains."**

We don't know exactly how Agrippa responded. Some think he was being sarcastic, some think he was right on the brink of repentance. We simply can't know. What's clear is that he would not take that step into faith. He wouldn't trade the robes of Rome for the robe of righteousness.

For his part, Paul didn't wish imprisonment or martyrdom on any of them. But he *did* wish that they would become like him in being led by Christ, motivated by the resurrection, free from the burdens of sin, full of love toward others, surrendered to the goodness of God's charge over their lives. That they would each become people with a true and vibrant relationship with the Living Christ and become part of the long work of redemption. Paul wanted that for them and God wants that for us.

**Acts 26:30-32 - <sup>30</sup> The king, the governor, Bernice, and those sitting with them got up, <sup>31</sup> and when they had left they talked with each other and said, "This man is not doing anything to deserve death or imprisonment." <sup>32</sup> Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been released if he had not appealed to Caesar."**

In 1940, Winston Churchill delivered what is known as his "Fight them on the beaches" speech. It's probably his most famous and has been long remembered. When he gave it in the House of Commons, some members (even of the opposing party) were moved to tears. But not everyone was inspired. Many, even in the Tory party, sat "in sullen silence."<sup>5</sup> And the next day polls showed many Brits were depressed by his oratory.<sup>6</sup> Of course, there was something more important than morale at stake. Churchill was talking about the very survival of millions of people on the earth.

Paul had delivered a powerful, history-making presentation of the Gospel. We have no idea if anyone in the room joined him in the family of God. But the urgency of the situation demanded the message be shared, even if no one would believe.

If you're a Christian here tonight, you have been brought into the work of God, just as Paul was. Maybe the opportunities you receive are less dramatic than this, but they're no less important or urgent. God has scattered you into time and place so that you can continue this work. He's supplied

<sup>3</sup> John 6:47

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 2:16

<sup>5</sup> <https://history.blog.gov.uk/2013/12/02/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches-three-things-you-never-knew-about-churchills-most-famous-speech/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/winston-churchills-historic-fight-them-beaches-speech-wasnt-heard-public-until-after-wwii-180967278/>

the power to stand strong in every circumstance. He's provided the special revelation of Scripture so that you can, with authority, proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ, and He has invited you to be a living proof of the resurrection, as you live out a life transformed by the Gospel, inviting whoever will listen to join you in this life of grace and fulfillment and certain hope.