

Acts Series Part 65

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[0 : 0 0] in Paul's defense there in verse 8. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? But before we do that, we do need to briefly introduce the main character here, the main character other than Paul himself, who we are familiar with.

And the other main character is King Agrippa. He really takes center stage, and Festus is left to one side in this part of the account. King Agrippa, or to give him a fuller name, Herod Agrippa II, came from an infamous Jewish royal family, and many of his relatives are familiar figures in the biblical account. He was the great-grandson of Herod the Great, that is the Herod, who is gruesomely remembered for the massacre of the infants at the time of Jesus' birth. He was the son of Herod Agrippa I. Now, Herod Agrippa I was the one who killed James and imprisoned Peter and knew of Peter's miraculous escape from prison, the account that's recorded for us in Acts chapter 12. That was this man's father. Now, when his father died in very gruesome circumstances that are also recorded for us in the book of Acts, that was in A.D. 44, and Herod Agrippa II at that time was only 17 years old. And I think essentially for that reason, the Roman authorities decided to place Judea under the direct rule of a Roman governor, rather than under the rule of this very young man, who presumably they felt wasn't in a position to exercise that role. However, he was given, I suppose as a kind of consolation, a small kingdom in what today we know as Lebanon. And he ruled there for a period of time until he was able, I imagine through some, the use of influences of one kind or another, he was able to secure a slightly larger kingdom that included Galilee, but was still smaller than what his father had enjoyed. He also secured the right and authority to appoint the high priests, which was a way of wielding influence, of course, within certainly the religious establishment there in Jerusalem.

On this occasion that we've read of, he is paying the Roman governor Festus a courtesy visit. Festus has only recently replaced Felix in the governorship, and so it seems politic for Herod to come and to visit him, King Agrippa, as he's described here. And so he does, and he's accompanied by Bernice.

Now, if we didn't have the background, we might just assume that this was his wife, but in actual fact, this was his younger sister, though the nature of the relationship did provoke considerable suspicion as to just exactly what was its character. So, King Agrippa, the one before whom Paul is presenting his defense, as it's described, is a powerful man, maybe not a hugely powerful man. He is, after all, a puppet king of a relatively small kingdom, but nonetheless, in the scheme of things, he is still a powerful man. He is a Jew. As a Jew, as Paul makes very clear in the words that he uses in addressing him, he was familiar with Jewish customs and indeed the Jewish faith. He would have been, we presume, it seems entirely reasonable, he would have been familiar with his own family's previous involvement with the followers of the Jesus sect. And especially given the growth of the Christians in Jerusalem, particularly, he must have been aware, at least in a measure, of who they were and those things that they believed. Indeed, Paul seems to state that quite explicitly when he speaks of these things not having happened in a corner, but that were visible and known by all. And he certainly would have been aware of their central claim, that of the resurrection of this man, Jesus. Now, the scene before us is not a formal trial. Rather, Festus reckons that Agrippa's greater familiarity with Jewish ways might help cast some light on the charges that the Jews had brought. In addition, Agrippa, in a curious echo of the wishes of his great uncle, Herod Antipas, this is the Herod who we meet in the trial of Jesus, that was a great uncle of this man. And though we're not going to look up the passage for reasons of time, but it's curious that Herod Antipas is described as one who wanted to meet this Jesus.

And now we find his great nephew also wanting to meet, in this case, the apostle Paul, intrigued, curious to make his acquaintance. Now, as we proceed to consider the questions that occur in this defense, largely presented by Paul, the one, the final one, by Agrippa to Paul, it's important to be clear that Paul's primary concern in what he says, in what's described as a defense, though it isn't actually a formal trial, and there's really no prospect that the words that Paul uses and the arguments that he wields will change his situation. He's already appealed to Caesar. The die has been cast. So, though it's described as a trial, or rather as a defense, as far as Paul's concerned, this is simply a heaven-sent opportunity to share the good news of the gospel with Agrippa, and indeed with all who are gathered there, something that Paul, as we'll notice in a moment, makes very explicit, something that he valued, this opportunity.

[6 : 21] So, with this in mind, that Paul, in what he says, is primarily concerned with making known the good news of the gospel, we can perhaps identify one or two pointers that could help us in our own task of sharing the gospel with others. So, to the first question that we find in the passage there in verse 8, why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? Now, by posing this question, Paul does, I would suggest, three important things as he presents the good news to his audience. The first thing that he does in posing this question is that he identifies the key issue, the resurrection. Although he doesn't explicitly, and no doubt deliberately, he doesn't explicitly mention the resurrection of Jesus. Clearly, this is the agenda. If he can establish that the resurrection in principle is something that can happen, then it is a much smaller step to proceed to speak of the resurrection particularly of Jesus. And the resurrection in general terms, and of course very particularly of Jesus, is the key issue. It's the key issue in maybe two regards.

In the first regard, it's the resurrection that confirms the identity of Jesus as the promised Messiah, and consequently, it is Paul's assertion that Jesus is alive that is the reason for the hostility of the Jewish religious authorities and for his chains. So, it's the key issue because that's why he is what he is.

He is in chains precisely because he is claiming that Jesus is the Messiah and that his Messiahship has been confirmed and vindicated by the resurrection. But it's also the key issue, perhaps in a more important regard, and it's the key issue because the gospel itself stands or falls on the truth or otherwise of the resurrection. And of course, that was true then, and it is true today. As Paul himself asserted on another occasion when he wrote to the believers in Corinth, if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. But of course, the other side of the coin, if Christ has been raised, then the implications are huge and would oblige any reasonable hearer, any reasonable hearer there in Caesarea a couple of thousand years ago, and any reasonable hearer here in Aberdeen today, if it is true that Jesus has raised from the dead, then any reasonable person would have to take that very seriously and consider what the implications of that are. So, the resurrection is the key issue, and Paul poses this question as a means of making very clear that this is the key issue. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? For us today, it may well be that as we seek to make known the good news concerning Jesus and the gospel, depending on who it is we're speaking to, we may approach the subject from a variety of different angles, we may seek to identify those concerns that the one we are speaking with has and try and come at our message in that way, that would seem sensible and wise and winsome, but whatever we do, any presentation of the gospel that does not have the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a central plank will, I'm sure you would agree, be fatally flawed.

So, by this question, Paul, first of all, identifies the key issue, but secondly, by this question, he recognizes the key objection. Just as the resurrection is the key issue, so the key objection to the gospel is the denial of the resurrection of Jesus is the denial of the resurrection of Jesus.

Notice the manner in which Festus presents the facts of the case to Agrippa in chapter 25, there in verse 19. You know, what we're privy to here, and it's an intriguing question, how Luke would have known the conversation that took place between Festus and Agrippa, but let's leave that curiosity to one side. But it's interesting the manner in which Festus presents the case to Agrippa. There in verse 19, he says, instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus, whom Paul claimed was alive.

[11 : 28] Notice what could be described as an absolute presupposition on the part of Festus. And what is it? Well, it is this, dead men stay dead. Jesus died. That is not in dispute. All are agreed that Jesus died. And so, for Festus, the only reasonable conclusion is that he is a dead man.

Even before he would be privy to or listen to any evidence to the contrary, for Festus, there could be no evidence to the contrary. Dead men stay dead. And so, nothing that could be said would shake him from that conviction. This Jesus was a dead man. He's a dead man. Yes, there are some crazy people out there who say he's alive, but clearly they're wrong because dead men stay dead.

They don't rise again. It would seem, though we can't be sure of this, and of course, Agrippa was a Jew, but it would seem certainly in what we're told there in chapter 25 that Agrippa would concur with Festus' presupposition concerning dead men and not coming back to life. Now, that was 2,000 years ago, but this remains a very real barrier in seeking to make known the gospel of Jesus Christ. If we are of the opinion, as we are, that the belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is central, indeed, the whole edifice crumbles. If Jesus has not been raised from the dead, then it is so crucial and fundamental that somebody comes to share that conviction. If, like Festus, there is, in the mind of those with whom we speak, a presupposition that that simply doesn't happen, that is impossible, dead men stay dead, then there will be great difficulty in communicating in any meaningful or effective way the gospel. And many today would be unwilling to consider the evidence because they've already decided dead people don't come back to life. It just doesn't happen. Paul recognizes this key objection in the posing of this question, why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? But the third thing that Paul does, and it's very much connected to the second, is that he challenges this key objection. Indeed, the question of the three things that we are suggesting that Paul is doing by this question, really, this is the one that is the central one in Paul's intent. Paul, by posing the question, is challenging this objection. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? He says, I know that's what you're thinking. You know, I know Festus thinks that this is just a piece of nonsense because dead people stay dead, but why do you think that? Why have you already decided that it's impossible that Jesus could have been raised from the dead? Or that dead men could be raised by God? Why do you think that? Why have you already decided? Why have you already closed the door to the possibility? Why is that? He challenges this key objection.

He's inviting those who listen to him to consider, to ponder, is what I claim as unreasonable as you imagine. Is it literally incredible? You say it's incredible. It's something that cannot be believed.

But why not? Why do you think that? Notice that Paul, further on in the chapter, when he is responding to the accusation of being insane, his defense is a very considered and pondered one, and he says, I'm not insane. What I say is reasonable. What I say is reasonable. Your accusation of insanity is not founded. What I say, what I claim, what I proclaim is reasonable.

[15 : 45] Paul challenges then this key objection. And that is something that I think is helpful for us to bear in mind and to consider as we would seek to make known the good news concerning Jesus Christ in our own day and generation. That with Paul, we would be careful to, inasmuch as we are able, to try and identify what might be some underlying, principal objections to the gospel that need to be challenged and overcome. You see, if the person we're speaking to has already decided, be it on the matter of the resurrection of the dead, which is a central matter, or perhaps on some other matter, if there is in their worldview, in their way of seeing the world, already a predetermined position that this cannot be or this must be, and these things are in contradiction with our message, then that's something that it's good to know as we would enter into a conversation and dialogue with such.

Paul does this. In this first question, he identifies the key issue, he recognizes the key objection, but he also challenges the key objection. Now, there's a second question, but we are going to take a break there, and we're going to join in the sung praise of God, and we are going to sing in Psalm 16. On page 17, Psalm 16, verses 8 to 11, this is a psalm that speaks of, prophetically, messianically, of the resurrection of Jesus. Psalm 16, verses 8 to 11, we'll sing to the tune, Golden Hill, and we'll stand to sing these verses.

Before we call, standing, I said the Lord alone, because he is at my right hand, I'm in the sign and heité act, and I need to find his name.

So he varied me of than he brought into the singlet of Jesus. Ohor, my heart is bad, so I still try that way and Booked a song of it in this era, I wanted to believe in he■n, that I was so glad he brought into themittiently, and he said the Lord alone, he grew up into the sea, and he paid into it, and be God eternal will rest secure in hope our weaverling.

For you will not allow my soul in death to stay, nor will you leave your Holy One to see the tombs decay.

[19 : 33] You have made hope to me the path of life divine This time I know that your right hand Joy from your face will shine Okay, now we're going to consider the next question.

It's a question certainly that Paul poses. And it's in the context of him relating to Agrippa the account of his conversion. And that account is one we've encountered already in the book of Acts, and here it is repeated largely as it had been on previous occasions.

And we know that Saul was on his way to Damascus. There is this bright light from heaven, and he is addressed from heaven, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

And then there follows a question that Saul poses. Then I asked, Who are you, Lord? Lord. I want us to think a little about this question that he poses, that he records for us, that he relates to Agrippa as he tells him of how he became a Christian.

And the posing of this question, and very especially the answer that he received, is central to his becoming a Christian. And as we think about the question, we want to think first of the question, one particular characteristic of it, and then also briefly just to notice the answer that he is given.

[21 : 31] The first thing we can say is that Saul poses, and I'll try and speak of him as Saul as we speak about this account, but I may get mixed up and call him Paul occasionally as well.

You'll know what's going on. But Saul here poses what we might call a confused question. You just think about it a little. In the very question that he poses, he identifies the one who speaks as the Lord.

Then in verse 15 of chapter 26, Then I asked, Who are you, Lord? This would be a little unfair, but it almost would be like if I approached Shep and said, Who are you, Shep?

Well, that's silly. You obviously know who I am, because you're identifying me in the very question that you pose. That doesn't make any sense. That would be a very confused way of approaching anybody.

So, why the question? Why does Saul pose this question in this, at least intriguing way? Who are you, Lord? Well, there's two possibilities.

[22 : 38] The first one dispels the confusion. Indeed, if we go for the first possibility, then there is really no confusion. The first possibility is that he is using the word Lord, the Greek word kurios, in the sense of Sir.

And if that is the way that Saul is using the word, then there really is no confusion, because that makes sense. Who are you, Sir? There's this voice. I don't know whose voice it is.

And so I ask, you know, who are you, Sir? As I say, if that is what Saul is doing, then there is no confusion. However, it seems to me more likely that given who it is, given the knowledge that he has of the Scriptures, given that it is a voice from heaven that is addressing him, it seems much more likely that he is using this name, this title or name, kurios, as the name of God.

We know that in the Septuagint, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the name of God, Yahweh, is translated by the Greek, name, kurios.

And of course, this was something that was very familiar to Saul. And so we have this voice from heaven that addresses him. And as he responds to this voice, it does seem reasonable to understand that Saul considered this to be a message from God.

[24 : 08] And if this is so, what the question reveals is a man in a state of great confusion. Now, that's perfectly understandable in the circumstances.

He's heading to Damascus with a task to perform, and suddenly there is this bright light from heaven he's brought to his knees. This is an experience that he has never experienced or even imagined he would experience before.

And so it is to be expected that he would be in a very perturbed and confused state. And so he poses this intriguing question, who are you, Lord?

He seems to appreciate that it is the Lord who speaks. It is God who is speaking to him. But who is the Lord? I believe in God, I believe that God is speaking, but who is this God who speaks to me?

That would seem to be what we have behind the question that he poses. And though this is a very unique experience, unique to this individual called Saul of Tarsus, and very much to be understood in his own very personal circumstances, I do wonder if there isn't a sense in which we could find ourselves in the company of those who have maybe a similar notion.

[25 : 38] Yes, I believe in God. I do believe in God, but who is God? Who is this God? Who is he? How can I know him? What's his name? Well, that's the question.

But we also have an answer to the question, and the Lord answers Saul's question with crystal clear clarity. I am Jesus.

I am Jesus. And even in Saul's perturbed and confused state, these words would have been like a thunderbolt for Saul.

Never did he imagine that the words, I am, with all the theological significance that they carry, could be followed by the name Jesus.

I am Jesus. It's as if the Lord is responding to Saul and the question he poses by saying, Well, Saul, you believe in God.

[26 : 40] That's good. You believe in Yahweh. That's good. You believe in the Lord in Kurios. That's good. You believe in the God of Israel. But you ask, who is the Lord?

Well, I am Jesus. Jesus is Lord. In the answer that Jesus gives, he's really declaring this fundamental Christian creed. Jesus is Lord.

This is the first gospel truth that Saul is confronted with, or certainly the first gospel truth that Saul believes, and it's at the very heart of the gospel. It was and remains the essential Christian testimony.

Jesus is Lord. And of course, as we would seek to make known the good news of the gospel, this is our task, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to bring people to understand who God is.

That they would know how God can be known. That they would be brought to understand and embrace the truth that Jesus is Lord. That in their own uncertainty and confusion, they might cry out, who are you, God?

[27 : 49] Who are you? And that they would hear, by whatever way God chooses to make this truth known. I am Jesus. I am the one. I am the creator of the universe.

I am the one who can save you. I am the one you're looking for. I am God. I am the Lord. Notice also that, the answer that he has given is an answer that carries with it a very definite purpose in the life of Saul.

He is granted this understanding of who the one who he is being spoken by is, that he would respond in service to God.

Notice the very next words in the answer that Jesus gives. He is, from the majesty, if you wish, from this glorious revelation that is to be found in the words, I am Jesus.

Followed immediately by the earthy practicality of what we read in verse 16. Now get up and stand on your feet. Get up and stand on your feet. Why?

- [28 : 56] Because I am making myself known to you that you would now go and serve me. And what follows that is made clear, but we won't spend more time considering that.

So there is this confused, if you wish, a question on the part of Saul, understandable in the circumstances, but this glorious and crystal clear response from the Lord.

I am Jesus. Well, before we move on to consider the final two questions, let's sing again. We are going to sing in Psalm 34 on page 246 in our psalm books.

Page 246, Psalm 34, verses 1 to 9 to the tune Jackson. God will I bless all times, His praise my mouth shall still express.

Let's stand to sing. God will I bless all times, His praise my mouth shall still express.

- [30 : 11] God will I bless all times, His praise my mouth shall express. My soul shall boast in gold flaming, shall near with joyfulness.

Exalt the Lord with me let us exalt His name together.

I sought the Lord, He heard, and did, He from all fears deliver.

They looked to Him, and light and work, not shame and wear their faces.

This poor man cried, uttered and sinned from all his distresses.

- [31 : 24] The angel of the Lord encamps and drowned in compasses, all those about had to bring fear and then deliver them.

O, tis that see that God is good, to trust in him is blessed.

Here are his saints, none that came here shall be with one's own rest.

The final two questions in the account that we have before us are ones that very much go together.

There in verse 27, the context of this particular question, really a rhetorical question on the part of Paul to Agrippa, is Paul having been accused by Festus of having become insane, of having lost his mind.

- [32 : 53] And Paul is conscious that in Festus and in Agrippa he has two very different people in terms of what they believe. And so he very deliberately, in a sense, sidelines Festus and says, Well, what about you, Agrippa?

Festus maybe thinks I've gone insane as I speak about these things, but what about you? And he challenges King Agrippa with this question, King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets?

And then that question that he poses is then responded to by Agrippa with a question of his own. Whether it is or is not a question is a matter of debate. Certainly in the NIV it is presented as a question.

Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian? If we think of the first question that Paul poses to Agrippa, do you believe the prophets?

Paul here identifies common ground with Agrippa. Agrippa was not a pious Jew, but he was, it would seem, in some sense of the word, a believing.

- [34 : 00] Do you? And Paul himself certainly is of that conviction. Not only does he ask the question, he actually answers as well. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets?

I know you do. I know you believe the prophets. And this constitutes, if you wish, common ground for Paul with Agrippa.

He wouldn't have enjoyed that common ground with Festus, but he did with Agrippa. And so, Paul first of all does that, but then he also, in identifying this common ground by posing the question, he also is obliging Agrippa to reach the necessary, if very uncomfortable, conclusions of his belief in the prophets.

Now, what Paul could have done, and maybe did do, and what we have here is a summary, we don't know. He could have, of course, brought to Agrippa's attention any number of prophetic pronouncements concerning the Messiah and the manner in which they had been fulfilled in Jesus.

But what he says to Agrippa is, if you believe the prophets, as I know you do, and as you would claim to, then you surely must believe what the prophets declare concerning Messiah.

[35 : 14] And you must also take that to its reasonable conclusion in being able to identify that what the prophets say concerning Messiah has been fulfilled in the person of Jesus, the one that I claim has been risen from the dead in confirmation of his Messiahship.

So that's the first question. So that's the first question. But the second question that we want to look at, and with that draw things to a close, is a question that Agrippa then poses to Paul.

Paul, do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian? I wonder what lies behind the question. And you know, we have the words before us, though even with the words, and even with those who do have a familiarity with the original languages, at the end of the day what you have are words.

And it's clear that some have different views as to whether it's a statement on the part of Agrippa or a question. As I say, in our Bibles it's posed as a question. But even having the words and knowing the meaning of the words, especially a statement like this, leaves us somewhat intrigued because what we don't have is an appreciation of the tone of voice that he used when he said these words.

We don't, we can't appreciate the body language that was going on. And for this particular statement or question, I think that would be quite helpful. Because the question really can be understood in different ways.

[36 : 46] Does it reveal genuine interest on the part of Agrippa? Is it the case that he genuinely was in significant measure being persuaded concerning the truth of the Gospel?

Is what Agrippa saying that, yes, you've taken me some way along the road, but surely you can't imagine that so quickly I would become a Christian?

Is he using this question in an ironic tone as if to say, well, don't for a moment imagine that I could possibly buy into all that you're saying, Paul?

Does the question reveal a discomfort on the part of Agrippa that is then confirmed by him rising from his throne or whatever it is he's sitting on and leaving the room because he doesn't want to be discomforted anymore by Paul's address and message?

He's maybe unwilling to commit. He's maybe beginning to work out that, well, if I am to agree and if I am to accept what Paul is saying, well, that will have a series of consequences in my own life, maybe even in the relationships that I have and the manner in which I govern and a whole host of things that I don't even want to think about.

[38 : 09] And so, by means of this question, he bats away the challenge that is being posed by Paul's question, do you believe the prophets?

But perhaps of greater practical value for us is to just notice briefly what is revealed by Paul's answer to the question that Agrippa poses to him.

We have the reply there in verse 29. Paul replied, short time or long, I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me may become what I am except for these chains.

In Paul's answer, we are given an insight into his heart for the lost. We move beyond maybe questions of method and how Paul was so adept at asking just the right questions, of identifying the key objections, of challenging the key objections, of establishing common ground, all of these things that are important and we can learn from Paul.

And we go beyond that method, if you wish, to the motivation, the motivation, short time or long, I pray God that not only you, Agrippa, but all who are listening to me may become what I am, a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, except for these chains.

[39 : 36] The answer reveals Paul's desire for the lost, for Agrippa, for Agrippa, for Agrippa, and in Paul there is this deep desire that they would be as he is, a follower of Jesus Christ, Paul's desire.

I wonder if that's true of us. You know, we can spend or we could spend a great deal of time examining and exploring how we could best make known the good news. But if we lack this desire, if we lack this burden and this love for the lost, then all that knowledge will perhaps be put to very little use. Paul is wise in his delivery. He's very adept at addressing people where they are and identifying where they're coming from. But behind it all, of course, there is this deep desire that they would come to know Jesus. And I wonder if that is true of us. But not only does the answer reveal Paul's desire, but it also finally reveals Paul's dependence. He is very conscious that though his great desire is that all who are before him would become Christians. We don't know if any of them became Christians. That was Paul's desire. But he recognizes that he stands in dependence on God.

Short time or long, I pray God. I pray God. I perhaps will not persuade you, Agrippa, but I pray to God that you would be persuaded. I pray to God that if it's not today, well, it may be tomorrow. Maybe when I'm long gone in Rome or in the grave, that somebody would be used of God to bring you to embrace Jesus Christ. I pray to God. I can't do it, but God can. I stand in dependence on God. God is the one who is able to convert Agrippa and indeed all the others who are present there. And so Paul prays. And of course there, it doesn't need to be labored, is a clear lesson for us, a reminder for us that as we would seek to make known the good news concerning Jesus, we must pray to God that He would be the one who by His Spirit persuades those whom He gives us the opportunity to speak to. Well, let us pray. Heavenly Father,

Heavenly Father,