



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts 26:1-32

Acts

"Paul's Madness"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Chapter 26 is, as you can see, a lengthy chapter. It's 32 verses, and I'm not going to read the whole chapter, in part because of its length but also because Luke records again the conversion of the apostle Paul. Paul recounts before Agrippa and Festus and a whole company of people his conversion on the Damascus road, and we have been given this by Luke in chapter 9 and in chapter 22 and now in chapter 26.

It's interesting that Luke, who had a limited amount of space in which to write – these scrolls on which they wrote were limited, they didn't go on and on. He had a certain amount of space and he had information to impart that was restricted to that amount of space and yet three times he gives us this conversion experience of Paul and gives it in some detail. The details differ a little bit. They don't contradict each other but they give just a little bit different information in them as Paul recounts what happened, which raises the question why that is.

Why does he repeat this two times in addition to the original event that occurred? Maybe – and I'm speculating somewhat, but it may be – well, obviously, he wanted us to know it and wanted us to see it. It was important in Luke's mind that we examine this, but perhaps the reason is because Paul, who is great a preacher of the grace of God, is – the explanation is given why he was such a preacher

of grace because if there is ever an evidence of the grace of God, it is in the conversion of Saul of Tarsus.

You look at that conversion and you see this is unique. It is a unique conversion and yet it is not unique at all. It's unique in that Jesus Christ literally appeared to the apostle. He saw Him, a great light. In fact, he describes it here as brighter than the noonday sun. He heard a voice and those around him heard something and saw something. It wasn't discernable to them, they didn't know what was being said, but Paul heard and saw the Lord Jesus Christ.

We don't have that experience. People don't have a vision of Jesus Christ. They don't hear His voice speaking to them out of heaven. It is unique in that sense and yet at the same time it is not unique at all in that all of us have a direct encounter with Jesus Christ. He literally comes to us through the Holy Spirit. He speaks to us, He reveals Himself to us, not in audible words and not in visions of light, but He literally comes to us and in the same way that He came to Paul. Didn't approach him on the Damascus road and plead with him to come. He said, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads," meaning you can't resist my Will, you're going to become mine, and it is really the same with us.

We are brought to Jesus Christ by His sovereign power and grace, and maybe that is why Luke repeats this event. It explains something very significant about Paul and about his theology, but it communicates a truth to us. God saves by His sovereign grace. He doesn't come and knock on the door of your heart. That is what He does in terms of fellowship with His church and His people, but He comes upon us and by His Will, He brings us to Himself.

Well, we have that in the first half of this chapter, and I'm not going to read that because we're familiar with it. I'm going to go over it in our lesson, but let's begin with verse 19 where Paul is speaking to King Agrippa; Festus, the governor; Bernice, Agrippa's sister and queen; and a whole company of dignitaries.

Verse 19: "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. 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 the 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." 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." 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, 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. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do." 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 time or long time, not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am, except for these chains." The king stood up and the governor and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them, and when they had gone aside, they began talking to one another, saying, "This man is not doing anything worthy of death or imprisonment." And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

May the Lord bless this reading of His Word. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for the time we have together to open the Scriptures, to read them, and then to discuss in our minds the meaning of this text. We pray that as we do that, as we consider it, that you would bless us, that you would teach us, that you would open our hearts to receive the truth of it. That is a spiritual work,

Father, and we are grateful that not only do we have the Word of God, your inerrant truth, the Bible, but we have a teacher, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, to explain these things, to enlighten our minds, to guide us in the truth and not only to understand the meaning of the text but how it applies to us.

So bless us, Lord, to that end. May we understand these things clearly. May we understand them in a better way. May we advance in our knowledge and may we see how this applies to us and may we live in light of the things that we learn. So teach us beyond the lesson that's given this morning. Go beyond the instruction. Minister to us individually, privately. So we look to you to bless, Father, and we thank you for the blessings you've given. We think of the material needs that we have also, Father, and we look to you to bless. We pray that you would provide for all our needs. You are the one who does that.

We have so much and we thank you for that. It's so easy, Father, in light of the abundance and the faithfulness that you show to take these things for granted, but nothing is to be taken for granted. We look at the prayer requests that are in our bulletin. We see numerous names of individuals who are suffering in various ways, physical difficulties, and it reminds us that we're made of dust and ashes. We are weak and at any day we can lose our health, something tragic can happen, something in terms of an accident, and all of that can be taken from us. What we have, we have as a gift.

Bless the ministries that occur in this assembly. We thank you for the Sunday school teachers. We pray that you'd bless them in the hour to come. We pray that you would bless the work that they've done and give them blessing throughout the week as they make preparations for the classes that they teach, and may those who listen to them this morning, may they benefit and may their hearts be opened to receive your truth. We pray for those ministries that occur throughout the week, the ladies' ministries. We pray that you'd bless them.

We thank you for the interest that's shown in the Word of God throughout the week and the effort that is put into it. Bless Sharon and Sue and others who teach. Give them the energy and the discipline to continue to prepare their lessons and bless the teaching that they do. Pray for Rick and the ministry he has in prisons and others that might join him. What a good work he does; we pray that you'd bless that. The list goes on, Father. Ministries that are done. We pray that you'd bless the Word of God as it goes forth, here and elsewhere.

Bless our meeting this evening. May it be helpful to each of us. May we begin to prepare our hearts, and may it be edifying. We commit that to you. We pray your blessings upon us now as we sing our final hymn. May our time together be profitable for each of us. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] In the history of the church, there have been moments of special courage as when Luther appeared at the court of Charles V at Worms to defend the faith. It was a scene that Luther's biographer said lends itself to dramatic portrayal. Luther, a simple monk, was surrounded by the earthly powers of church and state, accused of heresy, and told to recant the writings of the books that he had written, which were stacked before him. He refused to do that. "Here I stand," he said. "I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."

A great moment of courage, but I don't think there has been a more riveting encounter than the one recorded in Acts 26 when Paul stood alone at the court in Caesarea. It was a moment of great pageantry. King Agrippa and his sister, Bernice, entered wearing their purple robes and gold crowns accompanied, I'm sure, by sounds of trumpets. Festus, the governor, came dressed in the scarlet robe that Roman governors wore on occasions of state. The Roman tribunes attended in their military uniforms escorted by guards with armor and swords. The rich and influential people of the city, they came dressed in fine clothes.

Then into the midst of this pomp, Paul entered. He didn't have a gold crown, didn't have a gorgeous robe, no trumpets announced his arrival, just the rattle of his chains. He was not impressive in appearance. According to an old tradition, Paul was small and balding. He had a hook nose and bowed legs. But this little Jew stood before this proud and powerful audience with courage, and he gave a well-reasoned statement of the faith, supported with evidence, only to be called crazy. He was interrupted, he was dismissed as a fool. "Paul, you are out of your mind," Festus said.

So our passage gives us more than a picture of Paul's courage. It also gives us a glimpse at the world's hostility to the faith, its attitude toward the gospel, its attitude toward those who have faith in Jesus Christ. It gives us an example of Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 1:18 that the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. Don't be surprised if the world calls you mad. If it dismisses the gospel as foolishness. Paul wasn't surprised by the outburst of Festus, and he wasn't embarrassed by the ridicule. He knew that what the world called foolishness is the greatest of wisdom. He knew that what it called madness was life itself, eternal life.

So regardless of the world's hostility, regardless of its mockery, Paul could say in effect, "Here I stand," and he stood firm. Can you do that? Or does the gospel embarrass you? Do the opinions of the world matter so much to us that we will back down before its opposition and before its mockery? Not Paul, and in Acts 26, Luke recounts his unflinching courage in what I have said is one of the most riveting encounters in all of the Bible.

Festus, the governor, has already prepped Agrippa on Paul's belief in a dead man named Jesus whom Paul asserted to be alive. Agrippa was known to have a knowledge of Jewish theology. He certainly had heard about Jesus and the resurrection and he was curious about Paul, what he had to say. So when Paul entered the auditorium filled with all of these dignitaries, the rich and the powerful, the king told him he could speak. Paul did by first stating

his gratitude for the opportunity to make his defense before a man who knew quite a bit, a man who had a knowledge, a good knowledge, of Jewish beliefs and the particular issues that concerned his case.

Then he began with a review of his life in Judaism, explaining that he had been a faithful Jew. He was raised in Jerusalem as a Pharisee, the strictest of the sects of his day. We know from other texts, other passages, that Paul had been a student of the great Rabbi Gamaliel and he had gained a reputation for his scholarship and his devotion to the law. He tells Agrippa that there were still plenty of people who could testify to that if they were willing to do so. After all those years, he was still remembered as a stellar young rabbi. They could remember back when he was making a name for himself as a great student, as a man zealous for the law.

So how was it that Paul, this accomplished and devoted Jew, came to be on trial? He explains in verses 6 through 8 it was because, he said, of the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. That hope is the hope of the resurrection from the dead. There could be no fulfillment of the promises that God had given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the promises that He had given to Israel of a kingdom to come on this earth, unless there is a resurrection from the dead. How else would Abraham inherit the land that God had promised to give him unless he was to be resurrected to inherit that land? So the resurrection is the great hope that Israel had.

The irony of this trial was that the charges brought against Paul were brought against him by the Jews themselves, the very ones who believed in the resurrection. So he asks in verse 8, "Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead?" The question that he asks there echoed one that God asked Abraham in Genesis 18:14, "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" That can be translated "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" That had to do with Sarah, who was barren, conceiving and giving birth to Isaac, the child of promise. It was humanly impossible. Both Abraham and

Sarah were past the years of producing children, but God can do anything.

Is anything too hard? Is anything too wonderful for him? God can and He did do it, and God can raise the dead. He did it. "Why is that so hard to believe?" Paul asks. His question was directed to Agrippa, the Jewish king, but it must have resonated with the Romans also. It is a question for all men. Why do you limit the unlimited God? The question is: How big is your God? Or how small is your idea of God? The God of the Bible is limitless. He is omnipotent, He is omniscient, He is all-powerful, He is all-knowing. There is nothing that He cannot do.

Now, He cannot contradict Himself, that's true. He cannot lie, He cannot sin, He cannot do anything that would adversely affect Himself or contradict His Word, but there is nothing too difficult, there is nothing too wonderful for God to do. He can raise the dead, and He did raise the dead when He raised His Son from the dead, and that was the real issue here.

Paul preached the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which proved the truth of the resurrection of the dead. Certainly the dead can be raised in the future. God raised a man in the past. He raised the Lord Jesus Christ, but that also proved the truth about Christ. It vindicated Him as the Son of God and the Savior of the world. The resurrection demonstrated that Jesus is the Christ. He is the Messiah, He is the deliverer of Israel, and that is what the people objected to. Paul understood that. Paul knew from his own experience that attitude. When Paul was a Pharisee, he was a strong believer in the resurrection. He looked forward to a resurrection in the future, but he did not believe in that resurrection.

That God would have raised the crucified Jesus was, he thought, incredible. It was unbelievable, and he treated everyone who did believe it as a blasphemer. He persecuted them. He tells Agrippa about this in verses 9 through 11, not only because that was part of his story, because it was part of his testimony, but also because it was evidence of the truth

of his message. The change in his life in this, the life of this zealous Jew, from that of a rabbi to an apostle, from that of a persecutor of the church to a leader of the church, is evidence that something very significant happened in his life. And as Paul explains, what happened was a divine intervention. It was an appearance to him of the resurrected Christ.

He hated the name of Jesus and he did many hostile things to it, he said. He arrested Christians and if he couldn't make them blaspheme, he said – that is, if he couldn't make them deny Christ there at the synagogue – then he would vote for their death, and many died. He had a lot of blood on his hands, which should have raised the question in the minds of those people who were listening – Agrippa, Bernice, Festus, all of these Romans who were there – why would these people die for Jesus if Jesus were just another dead man? A crucified criminal? Why were they so devoted to Him?

Expand that question to ask how could this movement of Christianity emerge from a small group of simple men and women in a backwater region of the empire to spread throughout the empire, to spread throughout the ages, command the loyalty of men and women down through generation after generation, affect in a very real way the very course of history, if Jesus Christ were simply another dead man? How could that happen unless it were true that He is alive from the dead? Well, the devotion of these early Christians didn't raise that question in the mind of the apostle.

In fact, Paul as Saul of Tarsus, as this rabbi, was only made more determined by their devotion to blot out the name of Christ, and he expanded his persecution of the church beyond Jerusalem, beyond the region of Judea to foreign cities, he said. That was when he met the Lord. He was on his way to Damascus on a mission for the high priests and said, verse 13, "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 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.'

Kicking against the goads was a well-known expression taken from agricultural life known well among the Greeks as well. In their vocabulary, in their language, it referred – it was an expression that referred to opposition to God, and the Lord was saying to Paul that it was fruitless to resist His sovereign Will, which would turn him in a new direction, which would turn him in the opposite direction with a new life and a new mission. It's hard to resist that.

It's impossible to resist that, he says, and Paul, realizing that this is the voice of God speaking to him out of heaven, he responded and said, "Who are you, Lord?" and when the Lord answered, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting," he knew at that moment that Jesus is alive from the dead, Jesus is resurrected, Jesus is vindicated as God's Son, Jesus is very God of very God, and at that moment, Paul believed. Became a new creature, became a new man, and then he told Agrippa about the mission, the ministry that he was given.

He was made a minister and a witness, he said, and he was sent to the Gentiles for a purpose – verse 18 – "to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God." He was to go into all the world and he was to preach the gospel. But the way his mission is stated expresses both the greatness of man's need and the greatness of God's salvation. Mankind is fallen. Mankind is wrecked and ruined. Mankind is enslaved in Satan's domain. Paul says that here, he says that elsewhere in Colossians chapter 1. He speaks of man in that condition.

John speaks of the world being in that condition at the very end of 1 John. Come to the end of chapter 5 and he says, "The whole world lies in the evil one." That's what Paul is speaking of here. This evil one, Satan, the devil, is the great spirit, a personality, a person, a spiritual being, that energizes the world in its persistent rebellion against God, and people are a part of that and they don't even know it. They don't know it because their eyes are closed. They are spiritually blind – in

fact, so blind that they don't even know that they're lost and they don't know that they're under the influence of the powers of darkness. They think that folly is wisdom and wisdom is folly, 1 Corinthians 1:18.

That's the condition of man. He is so blind he cannot see how blind he is, and so Paul's mission was to go to the blind and tell them how blind they are, to give them the truth and in that way to open their eyes so that they would turn from darkness to light, from Satan to God, and Paul did that by speaking the truth. He did that by reasoning with men. We have seen him doing that throughout the book of Acts as he has gone into the synagogues of the Jews and into the marketplaces of the Gentiles. He would give well-reasoned explanations of biblical truth, as he was doing before this group of people, Agrippa, Bernice, Festus, the Roman commanders and all of the rich and powerful people that were there. He made things clear.

He spoke in a very clear way, but it wasn't Paul who opened eyes. That is God's work, the work of the Holy Spirit who shines light into the darkness of the heart, who brings the truth to bear upon a person's sinful condition, their mind, and their will. It is He, the Spirit of God, who opens hearts to respond. That is the greatness of grace. But Paul is said to do it. It is given as his mission because it occurs through the preaching of the gospel, and Paul would go out and preach the gospel. That's when regeneration occurs. That's when this life occurs. It occurs in connection with the preaching of the gospel.

It is spoken, it is preached or a person reasons with another person as they talk about the Scriptures, and in that way spiritual seed, as it were, is planted in the heart and God causes it to produce life. That's how Peter explains this work of regeneration and the preaching of the gospel in 1 Peter 1:23. God regenerates the sinner. The Holy Spirit causes him or her to understand what he or she has heard, which was foolishness before, but suddenly it makes sense, they understand it, they believe it all in a moment.

That was Paul's mission, to give the gospel that God would bless so people would turn to Him and receive forgiveness of sins and an

inheritance among the saints. Or as Jesus said to Paul in verse 18, "an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in me," in other words, "set apart from the world through faith in me." That's what we become when we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, set-apart ones, we're different that moment. Well, is there any greater message, any greater mission than that? I don't think so. This is the greatest mission and the greatest message that anyone can have.

One of the most famous messengers in history was Pheidippides. You maybe don't know that name, but he ran the first marathon. He was the man who ran from the plain of Marathon to Athens with good news. "Rejoice, we conquer!" he said, then fell dead. News of victory is a great message, and that was a great message, but the reality is ten years later, the Greeks and the Persians were at war again. The victory didn't last. The glory that the Greeks achieved didn't last and it's the same today with good messages, great messages that are given, messages like "The tests were negative. I'm giving you a clean bill of health." What a great message that is or "You've just won a million dollars." It's a great message to hear.

But nothing those messages promise lasts. Those things in and of themselves are ephemeral, they're not eternal, they're not permanent, and even if they are long-lasting, we're not. We don't last. We're like the flower of the field. We wither in a moment. We're gone. But the promise that God forgives our sins fully and forever and that He gives an inheritance, an eternal inheritance, one that Peter says will not fade away, that is a great message. That's the greatest message that there is, and it's the message of eternal life, eternal blessing, which Paul was given and Paul received it gladly. Told Agrippa, "I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision." He was faithful.

Wherever he went, he proclaimed the truth of the gospel. He proclaimed the truth that there is salvation in Jesus Christ and there is salvation in no one else. In verse 20, he tells Agrippa the wide scope of his ministry from Damascus and Syria to Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea. He preached this gospel then he went to the lands of

the Gentiles preaching that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance. That is the gospel for the Jew as well as the Greek. It is the only gospel that there is. It is the call to turn from darkness to light, to turn from error to truth, to turn to God. When a person believes in Jesus Christ, he or she goes in a completely new direction.

That's the idea of this word "turn" that Paul uses twice in our text. We go in a completely new direction, both in our thought and behavior. We become new creatures in Christ. It's all of grace. We don't make ourselves new creatures in Christ. We can't do that. We don't save ourselves by our works. Unbelieving people cannot do deeds that please God. Read Romans 1:1-8. The man, the person, in the flesh cannot please God. Doesn't please God. Paul makes that point, but in verse 8 he makes it very clear. He cannot please God – cannot – doesn't have the ability to please God. We cannot save ourselves by our works. The unbelieving man or woman cannot do that. Can't do anything that pleases God.

God saves and God alone saves. People receive that salvation as a free gift by faith alone. But having said that, works play a part. Works follow as the proper response of genuine faith. They are the evidence of new life. Paul goes on to state that he urged people as he preached the gospel to do deeds appropriate to repentance. So the Christian life is a call to that kind of life, a life of obedience, a life of righteousness. The gospel does not promote what some people like to call cheap grace; that is, a life of verbal commitment only, a life of commitment on Sunday morning occasionally and that's it. No, it calls for a life of obedience.

Grace produces faith that results in works. It's all of God. That is what Paul preached. That's what Paul taught. You read the book of Ephesians, you see that very clearly, and in chapter 2 verses 8 through 10, he states that very clearly where he states that salvation is all a gift of grace through faith, apart from works, but then he adds in verse 10 that we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. We're His

workmanship. We're what He has produced and He has ordained works for us that we should walk in them. So good works are necessary but even they are God's gift.

Still, we are responsible to do them, and the child of God will. He will do those works and he will do them by the grace of God. We have been made for good works. You've been made to be new creatures, to be like Jesus Christ.

This was the message Paul had preached from the beginning and he preached it to the end. From the day that he received that message, the day of his conversion, the day he received it from Jesus Christ until his last day in Rome, this is the message he preached. He never changed that message, he didn't alter it in any way. Over the years he didn't make little additions to it or little adjustments to it, changes to it. This was the message given to him. It was the message that had been given to the prophets. It had been given to Moses. It is the gospel that has always been. There's no different gospel. There's only one gospel from Genesis 3:15 to the end of the Bible, that's the gospel.

Paul was not an innovator. He taught what Moses and the prophets taught. In fact, he would have said beware of innovators, beware of creative theologians, beware of those people who come along with something new, something inventive, something that hasn't been heard before. You can be assured it's been heard many times before in different guises. It's just a heresy of a different kind. What he would say is test everything by the Word of God.

Charles Hodge was a man like that. Hodge was a great Presbyterian theologian of the 19th century. He taught at Princeton Seminary for many years, and by his teaching and writings shaped the thinking of men on both sides of the Atlantic. Was a profound man, very significant theologian, but he said, "I have never advanced a new idea and have never aimed to improve on the doctrine of our fathers." Paul was that kind of man. He wasn't a creative theologian. Didn't come up with all kinds of new ideas.

Now, it can't be said that Paul never advanced a new idea. He revealed mysteries. He gave revelation. He was an apostle. But Paul never advanced a new idea that was contrary to the Old Testament. Everything he believed and taught was consistent with the Word of God, and that is the point that he made here in his defense. He has been seized – he was seized in the temple, he was almost put to death, narrowly rescued by the Romans, and all of that – put on trial – all of that because he was teaching what Moses and the prophets taught. He was loyal to Israel's ancient faith. He was consistent with the revelation that God had given.

He taught that Christ suffered and died and was resurrected because it was true. The prophets said that it would occur, and he had witnessed it on the Damascus road. So he reaffirms this. His preaching of the resurrected Jesus Christ is nothing new. Read the Bible, read the Old Testament, read Psalm 16 and other passages, and it's clear.

Now, Festus sitting there had heard all of this before and finally lost patience with talk about the resurrection of a dead man. He was a Roman. He was a materialist. He understood tangible things. He understood conquest, building, ruling, worldly power. Talk of resurrections and life to come was preposterous to him. It was utterly irrelevant to what was important in life, and so unable to endure it any longer, he interrupted Paul and he said, "Paul, you are out of your mind. Your great learning is driving you mad." Maybe he was familiar with his contemporary Seneca's statement that there is no genius free from some tincture of madness. He was convinced that Paul had a touch of madness.

Words like that, "Paul, you're mad," can wither a man or they can infuriate him but Paul was unruffled. He calmly rejected the insult and said that his words were true and reasonable. Nothing that he spoke about had been done in a corner; that is, it's not something secret. These aren't esoteric ideas that he's speaking of. These aren't theories that he's propounding. He was talking about history. The cross, the empty tomb were seen by hundreds of people. Paul spoke of public events. King

Agrippa knew that. "The king knows about these matters," he said. Then turning to him, he said, "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do."

Now Agrippa was on the spot. It's one of these occasions where we have the judge put on trial. Suddenly he was the focus of the court and so as Paul says, "Do you believe the prophets?" all the eyes of the court turned to look at Agrippa. Yes, he did, he believed the prophets, he believed the Old Testament was sacred, he believed that it was true, but this question meant more than that. This question meant "If you believe the prophets, would you then believe in the one whom they prophesied? Would you believe in Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected?"

Agrippa wasn't ready to do that and answered Paul, "In a short time, you will persuade me to become a Christian." King James gives the poignant translation "Almost thou persuadest me to be to be a Christian," which suggests that Agrippa really had been stirred by Paul's words and was under conviction but more likely his statement was made in jest in an attempt to put Paul off and avoid the question. He refused to believe. He made something of a joke of the whole matter. Why? Was there something foolish about Paul's explanation of the faith? No, not at all. Paul gave a reasonable, biblical defense to a man who believed the Bible. His statements were supported with evidence, but still Agrippa did not believe.

Maybe at one level the reason can be found in those sitting around Agrippa. He was sitting between his sister and the governor when Paul invited him to believe something that Festus called crazy and would cost him his queen. Agrippa's relationship with Bernice was unnatural, it was incestuous, but he was unwilling to give it up. Sin is like that. Sin is deceiving. Sin is blinding, it is enslaving, and it is the reason that many people do not turn to Christ. They love their sin. They don't want to stop with their sin. Paul preached faith in Christ that leads to deeds appropriate to repentance; Agrippa did not want to do those deeds. He loved the passing pleasures of sin.

But in addition to Bernice, there was Festus sitting on the other side, the rough, commonsense Roman governor, a man of the world, a man of power, a man of influence. His opinion mattered a lot to Agrippa, and Festus had already spoken his mind. Paul was mad, his ideas were insane, it was all foolishness, and Agrippa didn't want to be thought a fool by a man like this, by Festus. The idea of being sneered at or laughed at by a prominent man was more than he could bear. He wanted the acceptance of the world. He wanted the love of the world. Didn't want to be rejected and dismissed as a madman.

So Agrippa sat before Paul, pulled by his lust on the one hand and pulled by his pride on the other, and he could not break free to take the offer of salvation. This is often the struggle that people have with the gospel. They are like Agrippa who was unable to confess himself a sinner and turn from it and unwilling to humble himself and endure ridicule. The author of Hebrews said that we are to go outside the camp and bear Christ's reproach. Agrippa couldn't do that, and so he deflected an embarrassing question with this clever indirect response, "In a short time, you will persuade me to become a Christian."

Maybe there was some laughter as he said that, but Paul would not be put off, and in one last attempt to appeal to the king, he said in verse 29, "I would wish to God that whether in a short time or a long time, not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am, except for these chains," and you can just hear the chains rattling as he held them up to the king. What Paul was saying was, "Agrippa, I only want your welfare. I want you to have what I have. Not these chains but the freedom that I have within these chains." He wanted that for everyone in the audience, to know Christ, to have the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting, that inheritance of which Christ spoke.

But at that point, the king stood up, the trial ended, and Paul was led back to his cell. Agrippa discussed Paul's case with Festus and Bernice. They all agreed that Paul was innocent, but there was

nothing that they could do because Paul had made his appeal to Caesar. And that verdict here is important to Luke's argument because it is another witness to Paul's innocence, but what they didn't say is equally significant. They didn't even mention Paul's message of forgiveness, his witness to Christ. In the end, all that he said to them had no effect. They heard it. They were disturbed by it. Then they dismissed it without discussion because the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.

And each of these perishing people did perish. Festus, that hardworking governor, died in office two years later. Bernice finally left Agrippa and became the mistress of both Vespasian and Titus, the emperors of Rome, but eventually she was sent away and returned to Palestine where she died. And Agrippa continued as king. Nero enlarged his domain. He had a long life. He lived to the end of the 1st century but died childless, the last of the Herods, the last Jewish king. In the end, each one of these people lost everything. They left this world without the inheritance that is promised to the believer in Jesus Christ, but they had opportunity.

They were like ships on the sea at night that for a moment emerge from the shadows as they cross the moon's path, then are lost again in the darkness. Recalls the Lord's question: What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Which is madness? Which is madness? Living for the moment, even if that moment is 70 or 80 years, or living for eternity? Because eternity is fast approaching all of us.

So if you're here this morning without Christ, that is a question that you must ask yourself. What good will it be if a man gains the whole world yet forfeits his soul? You've heard the message of eternal life. You've heard the gospel. There is no greater message, no greater promise. Nothing that you can consider can compare with the importance of that message. And you must choose. You must choose whether you will believe it or whether you will disbelieve it. You must choose to love the world or go outside the camp and bear the

reproach of Christ. If you do so, if you trust Christ, the world will call you mad. It called Paul mad – it called Christ mad.

But the world is passing away. It's he who does the Will of God who abides forever. So believe in Jesus Christ. Receive the forgiveness of sins and an eternal inheritance, one that cannot, will not fade away. May God help you to do that and help each of us to live a life that honors Him in faithful service. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for your goodness and your grace. We are reminded of it again in this conversion of Paul. We're reminded of how you save. You don't come and plead and beg and leave it to us. We do make a choice, we do make a decision, but it is sovereignly governed by your grace. You come upon us as you did the apostle Paul and you turn us around. You save us by grace. You do for us what we cannot and what we will not do for ourselves. Salvation is of the Lord, we're reminded of that again, and we thank you for it.

It reminds us of the greatness of grace, the greatness of our need and the greatness of our salvation. We praise you and thank you for it, and we pray that you'd move each of us to live lives of faithful service, bearing the reproach of Christ gladly, and we do that by your grace. Pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.