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Acts 25:1 - 26:32



Acts - Steve Gregg

In "Acts 25:1 - 26:32," Steve Gregg provides an overview of the events surrounding Paul's imprisonment and trial before Roman governors Felix and Festus. The Jews against Paul continuously attempt to assassinate him, leading to him being transported with a heavy-armed guard by the Romans. Paul pleads innocent to all accusations and appeals to Caesar, ultimately standing trial in Rome as a Roman prisoner. The message of the Gospel, according to Paul and Jesus, is not about changing political structures or seizing power but changing people's hearts and thoughts, emphasizing the need for repentance, faith in Jesus as the risen Savior, and doing works befitting of repentance.

Transcript

Okay, we're now looking at Acts chapter 25. And at this point, Paul is still confined in the Herodian Praetorium in Caesarea, which is up on the coast of Israel. I've been there.

It's a beautiful coast city. This was the place that the Romans had chosen for the center of their, the headquarters of their provincial administration of the land of Israel and surrounding lands that were part of the same province. And Paul was brought there because the first man who took him to custody, who is a military officer, Claudius Lysias, found that he could not adequately protect Paul from the Jews there in Jerusalem, where he was kept initially.

So he shipped him off in the middle of the night under a heavy armed guard to Caesarea, where Paul remained under the care and authority of Felix, who was the Roman governor at the time of the region. Felix was kind of apathetic toward him, although he did hear him more than once. He asked Paul to speak to the Sanhedrin or to stand before the Sanhedrin to clarify what the charges were.

And Paul just turned the Sanhedrin into a riot by saying, I'm a Pharisee, and I'm here on trial for my belief in the resurrection of the dead. And then the Pharisees in the Sanhedrin said, this guy's not bad, and the Sanhedrin says he's not worthy to live. And they got into a huge fight, and Paul had to be spirited out of the room for his own safety again.

And so Festus realized that he had a real hot potato on his hands, wasn't quite sure how to, what to do with it. He did hear Paul's testimony, and he did hear Paul privately too, along with his wife, Drusilla. He had Paul speak to him privately about righteousness and self-control and the judgment to come.

And Felix was affected by this. He was shaken by it. And he actually called Paul to come speak to him privately on several occasions, but he never released him, even though there were no formal charges pending.

The Romans, even after Felix left and Festus came in, they were still trying to figure out what the charges were supposed to be. Now, there were original charges the Jews had raised, and that was that Paul had desecrated the temple by bringing a Gentile in. It was a totally false charge.

He hadn't done it. But more than that, the Romans couldn't care less about that kind of thing. So it got more to be a matter of, Paul is a troublemaker.

Romans did care about that. Romans did not like troublemakers. And so the original charges don't seem to be even discussed anymore at this point.

But whether Paul is a troublemaker, and the fact that he said, I'm a Pharisee, and I'm on trial for the resurrection, and trouble broke out, almost made it look like he is a troublemaker. However, it might not be him. It might be his audience that's caused him trouble.

It's hard to tell. The Romans weren't really quite sure what to make of him. And Felix, when he came to the end of his term and was replaced by Portius Festus, he just left Paul bound there and left the matter undecided.

So Festus comes in, and he's in power there for about three days before the Jews come to him and try to bring the matter of Paul's case to him. And that's what we read in chapter 25. Now, when Festus had come to the province, after three days, he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem.

Now, Caesarea is where he lived and ruled from, but he's a new ruler of the area. Jerusalem is a significant capital of the strongly religious people he's trying to govern. So he decides early in his tenure in office to go and visit and acquaint himself with the authorities of the Jews in Jerusalem.

And he goes down there, then the high priest and the chief men of the Jews informed him against Paul, and they petitioned him, asking a favor against him that he would summon him to Jerusalem while they lay in ambush along the road to kill him. Now, these people laying in ambush were probably not the same ones who originally were planning to do this because the original group had taken a note that they wouldn't eat or drink until they killed him. They had planned for the Jews to get Felix to send, I'm sorry,

to get Lysias, Claudius Lysias, the tribune.

They wanted to get him to deliver Paul over to them and they were going to ambush him and kill him. And they were not going to eat or drink until they'd done it. Well, of course, by now many months have passed.

And so those guys are either getting very thin or else they change their mind about their oath. But there's still a determination on the part of the Jews to assassinate Paul and to get him out of the Roman prison. Now, again, I would point out that they didn't expect Paul to be, you know, traveling along on the road alone.

He's a prisoner of Rome at this point. Therefore, they would have to attack a Roman bodyguard. If Paul was being transported by the Romans, these people who wanted to assassinate Paul would have to kill the Romans too.

So they were, you know, they were ready to cause trouble even with the Romans to get rid of Paul. But Festus answered that Paul should be kept at Caesarea and that he himself was going there shortly. Therefore, he said, let those who have authority among you go down with me and accuse this man to see if there's any fault in him.

So this, the Jews have to do kind of the same thing with Festus that they earlier had to do with Felix. They had to travel the 64 miles to Caesarea and try to make their case before the Roman court there. And when he had remained among them for more than 10 days, he went back down to Caesarea.

And the next day, sitting on the judgment seat, he commanded Paul to be brought. And when he had come, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood about and laid many serious complaints against Paul, which they could not prove. Remember the original accusers who presumably would be the ones who witnessed his crime were Jews from Asia who had simply been in Jerusalem for the festival of the Pentecost.

That was long past. And these Asian Jews would now have gone back to Asia. They're probably back in Ephesus now.

They're not there. And so there's no witnesses. The accusers aren't even there to restate their accusation.

They're in another country. So, I mean, this is a, this court is a circus. I mean, there's absolutely nothing about it that's conducive to justice.

And the Romans love justice, but, and they're very frustrated by the fact that they're not able to know how to proceed to bring that justice here. But the Jews brought many accusations, Paul, but it says they weren't able to prove any of them, which means that no decision could be made from it. Although, of course, in a fair court of law, if the accusers can't prove their accusations, it should by default go to acquittal.

That the Romans should have said, well, nobody has proven to me that this man has done anything wrong, so I'm letting him go. But again, we do read that both Felix and Festus wanted to keep the Jews happy. They were a very ungovernable people and he didn't want to get them riotous, as obviously happened very easily at the drop of a hat.

So he realizes the Jews are extremely emotional over this man, Paul, and for him to just let Paul walk is going to make them very upset, probably get Paul killed anyway by them, and maybe cause problems for the Romans too. So these rulers of the Romans, there's these Roman rulers of the Jews, they really aren't sure how to proceed. And it says in verse 8, while he answered for himself, that is Paul did, neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all.

So Paul gives a brief defense here. He's done with these long repetitious recitations of what happened. He just says, listen, here's the short story.

I haven't broken anyone's laws. I haven't broken the Jews' laws. I haven't violated the temple.

I haven't broken Roman laws. In other words, I'm not a lawbreaker. Why am I here a prisoner? It's essentially, that's the end of my defense.

And since no one can prove otherwise, it should have been a very adequate defense. He pleads innocent and no one can prove him otherwise. But it says Festus wanting to do the Jews a favor.

See, just like Felix, see the last verse of chapter 24 said after two years, Portia's Festus succeeded Felix and Felix wanting to do the Jews a favor left Paul bound. So Felix wanted to do favors for the Jews. Now Festus also wants to do favors for the Jews just to placate them.

But Festus wanting to do the Jews a favor answered Paul and said, are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things? Now, the tribune had known that there was a plot against Paul's life by the Jews to assassinate him, but neither Felix nor Festus apparently were aware of this. Festus was not trying to put Paul in danger. He was not aware of the danger.

He was a new ruler there. He doesn't know the background. He doesn't realize that if he lets Paul, you know, out of this prison without adequate protection, these guys are going to kill him.

Paul knows it, though. And so when Festus says, are you willing to make the trip down to Jerusalem and be tried, you know, there in front of them? And Paul says, no, frankly. Paul said, I stand at Caesar's judgment seat where I ought to be judged.

To the Jews, I have done no wrong, as you very well know. So he's getting a little

impatient with the judge. You know, I've done nothing wrong to these people.

And by the way, no one ever denied that they knew this. This is something Paul is saying, you know, the truth of this matter. Why aren't you acting on it? But you know, the Jews don't have a case against me.

So why should I go be tried by them? But now, of course, I'm Rome's prisoner and it should be Rome that decides whether I have committed any crimes against Rome or not. And so I'm going to stand by my Roman privileges here. He says, for if I am an offender or have committed anything worthy of death, I do not object to dying.

But if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar. Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council and answered, you have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you will go.

So Festus was going to get rid of Paul easy, just send him off to Caesar. And that was Paul's decision. Now, the Jews, of course, could follow him to Rome, but that'd be much more inconvenient.

And we don't read that they ever did. At the end of Acts, in Acts 28, when Paul is in Rome and he calls to him the Jewish leaders of Rome, they say, we haven't really heard anything about your case. Even though it took, you know, many, many months for Paul to get to Rome, the Jews in Jerusalem had not apparently sent any information ahead about him, had not come after him.

Maybe they just thought, now that he's in Rome, he's out of our hair. Or maybe they did come down later after the book of Acts closes, we don't know. But in any case, for the time being, he's getting far from the Jews under Roman protection, and he's going to stand before the highest court.

So just as an American under constitutional law can appeal to the Supreme Court, supposedly, if they don't like the judgments of lower courts, a Roman citizen could appeal to the highest court, that is Caesar himself. This would be Nero. And it's ironic that such a demon possessed man as Nero would nonetheless be judged by Paul to be a fairer judge than the Sanhedrin and the high priest in Jerusalem.

He knew he wouldn't get justice from the Jews. He thought there's at least a chance he would from Nero. And so I'm going to Nero.

I'm going to take my chances with him. It's interesting how Paul said it in verse 11. He says, if I'm an offender or have done anything worthy of death, I do not object to dying.

This tells us what Paul's view was on the subject of capital punishment. If I've done anything that is worthy of death, I don't object to execution. In principle, Paul did not mind that people who do things worthy of death should be executed, even himself.

Now, some people think that Christians should be against capital punishment because they say Jesus said not to resist the evil man. He said to turn the other cheek, you know, and that kind of thing. But of course, Jesus was talking to his disciples about how they should act and interact with people that they have personal conflicts with.

He's not talking about how magistrates should govern. What a ridiculous thing it would be to have magistrates who are there to judge cases every time a criminal comes before him and says, I'm just going to turn the other cheek. You know, I'm not going to prosecute.

You know, you've murdered people. You steal from people. You attack people.

You rape people. I'm just feeling generous. I'm going to turn the other cheek and let you go.

Jesus never intended for governments to handle their criminal justice systems on the basis of the private behavior that he told his disciples to maintain between them and those that were antagonistic toward them. That's not the same thing. As far as we know, Jesus never gave any instructions of any kind to any magistrate.

Jesus didn't come to change the political situation, as far as we can tell, because he never attempted it. There were times people tried to get Jesus involved in politics and he avoided it. You remember in Luke chapter 13, people came to him and told him that Pilate, the Roman governor at the time, had executed a number of Galileans, innocent Galileans, offering their sacrifices in the temple.

Apparently, Pilate sent his soldiers in, just massacred them, unarmed worshipers in the temple. And they were Galileans, as Jesus was. No doubt the person who said that to him thought, Jesus is going to get pretty riled up.

I mean, wouldn't you? If you heard that some president of the United States had just sent the, you know, National Guard in to burn down a church with the worshipers in it. Oh, that did happen in Waco, Texas. But anyway, to hear that innocent people who are not violent, who are just worshiping their God in a, you know, in a way that they want to worship God different, that a political ruler would come in and just kill them all, that should make people's blood boil who care about justice.

And yet Jesus, interestingly, he cared about justice, but his blood wasn't boiling. He just said, do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than others? Unless you repent, you'll all likewise perish. Now, of course, what Jesus was saying is that all the Jews, not just those Galileans were in danger of being killed by Romans in the temple, because that's what was going to happen within the next generation.

The Romans are going to come and burn down the temple with a bunch of Jews in it. And so if you don't repent, you're going to die similarly, you know, he says. He also mentions,

do you think those 18 people upon whom the Tower of Siloam fell, do you think they were worse sinners than others? He said, no, but unless you repent, you'll die similarly.

And many Jews did die as the Romans broke down the walls in the temple and the towers fell on them and things like that. I mean, basically saying, yeah, some Jews even now are dying as towers fall on them, as Romans kill them in the temple. And you know what? That's going to be more general than you think.

Unless you repent, that's going to happen to all of you. It's a prediction about A.D. 70, clearly. But the point here is Jesus didn't get involved.

He didn't say, let's stir up a militia to go and drive by that he's murdering people, innocent people. Now, it's not that Jesus didn't think that was an atrocity. He just thought, sadly, there's going to be even more atrocities.

He's not there to change the political situation in Israel. He's there to call a remnant out to be a kingdom of another sort. His kingdom, not of this world.

Remember, he said to Pilate, my kingdom is not of this world. If it was, my servants would have fought so that I would not be delivered to the Jews. But henceforth, my kingdom's not from here in John 18, 36.

And so Jesus said, I do believe the kingdoms of this world should fight to protect their king. And if I was such a king of such a kingdom as that, then my servants would have fought for me because that'd be the right thing to do. But my kingdom is not that kind, so they don't do that.

Notice, though, that Jesus himself indicated that a nation has a right to defend its king. If it's a nation of this world, that is. His kingdom is not that kind.

He was not coming to change the political structure of Israel or any other nation directly. Nations would be transformed by the gospel simply by the fact that people would be converted and thoughts and hearts would change and more just situations would arise as a result of the influence of the gospel. But he wasn't coming to invade the political sphere and seize the levers of power and, you know, make people be good under threat of, you know, police force.

That wasn't what Jesus came to do. And Paul knew that. But Jesus did not object to just criminal justice.

He didn't object. We have no reason to believe that Jesus objected to a criminal being punished for his crimes. Paul didn't object.

Now, a Christian should love his enemies, but a magistrate, that's not. I mean, he should love the innocent. He should love the law-abiding.

And it's not loving to the law-abiding to let criminals who victimize law-abiding people go without punishment. Paul said in Romans chapter 13 that God appointed the rulers of this world to punish evildoers. So Paul was not against criminal penalties being executed by political authorities, assuming they were just.

He said, if I've done something worthy of death and you kill me, I can't object to that. I don't think that's unjust if you kill somebody who's done something worthy of death. That's OK with me.

That's what governors are supposed to do. But I'm not guilty. I've done none of these things, so no one can deliver me over to them.

I appeal to Caesar, and I hope Caesar will be fair, you know, obviously. But if he's not, it won't be any worse than going to the Jews because they're not going to be fair. So Festus says, OK, you appeal to Caesar, you're going to Caesar.

Fine. Now, after some days, King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus. Now, Agrippa, this is Agrippa II, Herod Agrippa II.

He was the son of Herod Agrippa I, who was eaten with worms and died in Acts chapter 12. Remember him? Now, Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great, who killed the infants in Bethlehem and was reigning at the time Jesus was born, but died in Jesus' infancy. Now, Herod the Great then had started a dynasty, and there's a whole bunch of Herods.

After Herod the Great died, Herod Archelaus, Herod Antipas, Herod Philip divided up his empire. Later, another generation, Herod Agrippa I was a king in part of that region. Now, Herod Agrippa II was king.

The Romans had appointed him king over regions up to the north and east of Israel. And he was a Jew technically. Now, Herod the Great, the ancestor of the Herods was half Edomite, and the Jews hated being ruled over by someone who had any Edomite in him.

However, he had married Jewish girls, and his sons married Jewish girls, so that as the family gets further from Herod the Great, it's more and more Jewish. There's still a little tiny bit of Edomite in there, but they're mostly Jewish now. And Herod Agrippa II was technically the secular overseer and authority over the Jewish religion, over the temple.

He was an expert on Judaism. He was a king of a region outside of Israel, but he was still part of the province and very much interested in Jewish affairs. Now, Bernice, his wife, she's an interesting one.

She wasn't his wife. She was his sister. They lived together, and rumor had it that they were, she was his consort, they were involved.

There were scandals about Herod Agrippa and Bernice that they were, you know, incestuously involved. She was his slightly younger sister. She had been married to another Herod, a man named Herod of Chalcis, or Chalcis, excuse me, Chalcis, C-H-A-L-C-I-S, Herod of Chalcis was her husband, but he died.

And so, when she was widowed, she came to live with her brother, Herod Agrippa II, and live with him she did, and travel with him she did. Here, they are together. They're not husband and wife, but everyone strongly suspects that they are cohabiting in a sexual way.

Now, at a later time, much later in her life, she actually had an affair with the general Titus, who later became Emperor Titus. So, she was well connected to powerful men, connected in more ways than one, but she did have her immoral flings, and her relation with her brother seems to have been one of them. Now, they came to visit Festus.

Festus was technically a more powerful Roman official than king. Herod Agrippa was called a king. Festus was more like a co-consular.

He had more Roman authority than him. So, Agrippa would have every reason to kind of want to suck up to him a little bit, and now he's the new, Festus is the new ruler of the area, kind of, and so Herod wants to make sure he's got good relations. So, he comes to visit him, congratulate him on his accession to power, and when he had been there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, there is a certain man left a prisoner by Felix, about whom the chief priests and elders of the Jews informed me when I was in Jerusalem, asking for a judgment against him.

To them, I answered, it is not the custom of the Romans to deliver a man to destruction before the accused meets his accusers face to face, and has opportunity to answer for himself concerning the charge against him. Therefore, when they had come together, without any delay, the next day I sat on the judgment seat and commanded that the man be brought in. When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him, such as I supposed, but had some questions against him about their own religion.

The word he uses for religion here is actually more of a derogatory term, it's more like superstition. They had some questions about him, about his, their own religion or superstition, about one Jesus who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive. Now, notice Festus is trying to figure out what this is about, what did the Jews complain, and he hasn't even picked up anything from the Jews about Paul defiling the temple.

All he can see is there's kind of a religious opinion difference here about somebody named Jesus. I don't know who he is, but he died, everyone agrees about that, but Paul said he rose again, that seems to be the controversy. So, as far as Festus can tell, this is not about desecration of the temple, and the desecration of the temple doesn't seem to be an issue anymore.

It's more now about Paul's declaration of the resurrection of Christ, and particularly the controversy and the riot that was caused by his saying that in earlier courtrooms. When he said he believed in the resurrection, it caused uproars. This is the thing that concerned the Romans, but he couldn't figure out why it would.

Who cares? Some guy named Jesus died and Paul says he rose. I mean, it's kind of a silly thing to believe, but who cares? I don't understand what this is really about, and yet he's appealed to Caesar, and that means I have to send him to Caesar with some kind of explanation. Caesar's a busy man.

He might object to some lower official handing up to him a case without any kind of justifiable reason for the prisoner even being arrested. Caesar could easily argue that his time is very much being wasted, and he ought to find another official who'd take care of these things better. So, verse 20, and because I was uncertain of such questions, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there to be judged concerning these matters, but when Paul appealed to be reserved for the decision of Augustus, that is Caesar, I commanded him to be kept until I could send him to Caesar.

Then Agrippa said to Festus, I also would like to hear the man myself. Tomorrow, he said, you shall hear him. So, they set up a special interview between Paul and Agrippa and Ernesi.

Now, remember, Agrippa was an expert in Jewish affairs, and so it would appear that Festus, who was no expert at all in such things, felt he had a man, had access here to a man who could sort out the fine points of this controversy between the Jews about these different points of the religion. So, Agrippa is very eager to hear about it because he has an interest in all things Jewish, too. So, he said, okay, tomorrow you hear him.

Verse 23, so the next day when Agrippa and Ernesi had come with great pomp and had entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at Festus' command, Paul was brought in, and Festus said, King Agrippa and all the men who are here present with us, you see this man about whom the whole assembly of the Jews petitioned me, both at Jerusalem and here, crying out that he was not fit to live any longer, but when I found that he had committed nothing worthy of death and that he himself had appealed to Augustus, I decided to send him. I have nothing certain to write to my lord concerning him, therefore I have brought him out before you and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the examination has taken place, I may have something to write. For it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner and not to specify the charges against him.

I think this is intended as almost a humorous understatement. No doubt a few chuckles went around the room. Yeah, that does seem a little unreasonable to send a prisoner to Caesar and not even specify if there's any charges against him.

That does seem a little unjustifiable. In chapter 26, then Agrippa said to Paul, you are permitted to speak for yourself, so Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself. Now, I haven't been commenting on it.

I could have. Almost every time Paul speaks, Luke says he stretched out his hand or emotion with his hand. There must have been a characteristic gesture that Luke was so familiar with, you know, sort of like this number, you know.

Paul must have had a special gesture which he commonly used to get the crowd's attention and Luke is continually mentioning it, gesturing with his hand, he said, and so we find him doing it again. Paul says, I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, especially because you are an expert in all the customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore, I beg you to hear me patiently.

And now he gives his testimony and we hear the story of Paul's conversion again, now for the third time. First in Luke's words in chapter 9, secondly in Paul's words before the mob in chapter 22, and now before Agrippa by Paul here. We have three whole sections of Acts where the story is told.

Each one's only slightly different details. My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictness, the strictest sect of our religion, I lived a Pharisee.

And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. To this promise, our 12 tribes earnestly serving God night and day hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I'm accused by the Jews.

It seems obvious that he's saying that Jesus and what Jesus has inaugurated and who Jesus has brought is the fulfillment of the hope that the Jews have always hoped for night and day for generations. And this is what he puts his hope in. Why should it be thought incredible to you that God raises the dead? Now Paul gets to this right away.

He's going to tell more about his story. He's going to tell about his conversion, but this is kind of his topic sentence of his presentation. God raised the dead.

Should that be so strange? I mean, after all, even in the Old Testament, God raised the dead. Elijah raised a dead person. Elisha raised a dead person.

After he's dead, his own bones raised a dead man. And so is it that incredible that God could be claimed to have risen the dead more recently? Why should that be thought incredible that God should raise the dead? Now, actually, I'm sure this very question, being rhetorical as it is, must have set Agrippa back on his heels a little bit. Paul's later going to say, Agrippa, I know you believe in the prophets, because the man was a Jew.

And Paul's question is unanswerable. Why should it be hard? Why should it be thought impossible for God to raise the dead? Come to think of it, there's nothing about that that should be impossible. If it's God we're talking about here.

So suddenly he's got Agrippa thinking about what has now become the main theme of all of Paul's talks, the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, in particular, as applied to Jesus. Occasionally he mentions the general resurrection at the end of time, of which Jesus was the first fruits and the firstborn from the dead. Jesus' resurrection was seen simply as the guarantee that there would be a general resurrection of all.

And he had said that back in chapter 24. In verse 15 he said, I have the same hope the Jews do, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust. So Paul's main theme is the resurrection of Jesus.

But of course the resurrection of Jesus is not unconnected. In fact, it's not even separable from the general hope of resurrection of the dead, which Paul said the Jews and he all expect to take place. Now, so I mean, so everything about my testimony should be okay, because there's no reason to think it's impossible for God to raise the dead.

Verse 9, indeed I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme, and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

Now there's a little bit of rhetorical devices used here. He talks about when they were put to death. That's plural.

We don't know of any Christians that were put to death under Saul's persecution, other than, of course, Stephen. And Saul doesn't say he killed anyone. He says, like, when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them, which means I approved.

I gave my approval to them being put to death. Sometimes people say, Paul, before he was saved, was a murderer. He killed Christians.

Well, not exactly. He gave his approval when they were on trial and condemned to death. He was favorable.

But we only know of one case that he says there were, when they were put to death, it could be simply the rhetorical way of using the generalized plural. Just like when the city clerk at Ephesus, when he was calming the mob of Ephesians down in chapter 19, he said, you know, if you have a case against anyone, there are proconsuls. But in fact, there's only one proconsul at a time.

But, you know, the plural is kind of just a dramatic rhetorical way of speaking. Likewise, when Paul says, I pursued them to foreign cities, plural. We don't know of any cities other than Damascus that he pursued them to.

Now, of course, there is the possibility that there were other places before Damascus in foreign countries that Saul persecuted Christians in, and there may have been Christians who died that he voted against. It's not impossible that the plural is literal, but it's also not impossible that it is rhetorical. Okay, maybe there were other cases, but we don't know of any.

None are recorded. And when he says, I cast my vote against them, there in verse 10, many people feel that this indicates that Paul or Saul was a full member of the Sanhedrin, a voting member. Because, you know, I cast my vote.

Based on this, there are a number of things people have argued by extrapolation. Some say Paul must have been married at one time, because it was one of the requirements for being on the Sanhedrin that you'd be a married man. And since Paul was on the Sanhedrin, he must have been married.

But when he wrote Corinthians, he wasn't, so he must have been divorced, maybe his, or widowed. And there's, speculate, maybe he had a wife that left him. Maybe this is why he was so familiar with the tensions of married life that he sometimes alludes to.

But all of this is speculation based on the assumption that Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin. And that's based on the fact that he says, I cast my vote against them. Now, Saul was probably not a full member of the Sanhedrin, because he is described at the time of Stephen's death as a young man.

And the Sanhedrin was the leadership and elders of Israel. It's not probable that Saul, as a young man, was already seated on that court. Furthermore, whenever Paul gives his credentials to impress Jews, certainly nothing would be more impressive than to say, and I was a justice on the Supreme Court, which is what would be the same as saying, I was a member of the Sanhedrin.

He says, I was circumcised the eighth day. I was a Hebrew of the Hebrews of the tribe of Benjamin. I was zealous for the law.

I kept the law. I had a son of a Pharisee. He, especially like, you know, Philipians chapter three, or even in some of his speeches here, he's trying to build up the case that he was, he had impressive Jewish credentials before he was a Christian.

And if he had ever been a member of the Sanhedrin, that would have been the most impressive of all. But he never hints at it, never mentions it. Now, I would also say this, that if he was a member of the Sanhedrin, why did they use him as this, as their coat monitor when they stoned Stephen? The actual Sanhedrin went out there and

participated in the, in the games, you know, Saul, a young man was left with the coats to watch the coats, make sure no one steals these, you know, I mean, it seems clear that Saul was somehow attached, but probably not a full member.

And since he was a student of Gamaliel, who was a very impressive member of the Sanhedrin, it is likely that he was being groomed for a future seat on the Sanhedrin. But he got saved, became a Christian before he ever would realize that position. That's what I'm, I assume from the, from the total evidence available.

I don't think Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin, but why did he say he cast his vote against them? This can be taken rhetorically too, more or less. I mean, if people are, if two people are trying to decide what to do, where to go for dinner, or whether to go to a movie, or like say, my vote is with them, you know, I'll vote, you know, I'll vote for that. You know, I'm not really, we're not really having an election here, but it's just like saying, I'm on this side, I'm casting my vote here.

And I don't think that Paul necessarily is, can be forced to be saying that he was a voting member of the court when these things were decided. In fact, it doesn't look to me like there was actually a vote taken when Stephen was stoned. That would have been much too clear-headed.

Stephen's sermons just got them enraged. They all rushed on as a mob. There was no vote taken there at all.

So I think that we shouldn't take his reference to casting his vote as necessarily too literally. Okay. So verse 12, while thus occupied, that is while I was occupied persecuting Christians, I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests.

At midday, O King, along with the road, I saw a light from heaven brighter than the sun shining around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in Hebrew language, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the pricks or the goads. Now we've talked about that line before because the Textus Receptus includes that line in the telling of this story in chapter nine, but the Alexandrian texts, the older manuscripts do not include that line in chapter nine, but they do here.

So we were discussing it as a disputed sentence or clause when we're talking about chapter nine. Here it's not disputed. We know that Jesus said that because all the manuscripts agree that he said it here, but this is the first place that we find this particular line.

It's hard for you to kick against the goats in the three retellings of his conversion. This is the first time we read of it in the older manuscript. And so we see that each time you get

some different detail that isn't in the other ones.

In fact, it says in verse 14, when we all had fallen to the ground. Well, one of the other accounts, I think it's in chapter nine, says those who were with me stood speechless seeing a light, but are hearing a voice, but seeing no man. But that other account says they were standing speechless.

Here he says we fell, we all fell to the ground. Well, it's entirely possible that both are true. After all, Saul, whom we know fell to the ground, eventually got back up on his feet.

And those who fell to the ground with him may have gotten to their feet earlier and just stood there speechless. I mean, there's no reason to believe there's a contradiction here because we've got the same source of the story in every case. Now, so I said, who are you, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but rise and stand on your feet.

Now, from this point on through verse 18, where he finishes his testimony, the information after stand on your feet does not correspond with anything in the other in the other accounts. In both chapter nine and chapter 22, Jesus says stand on your feet and go into Damascus and you'll be told what to do. And that's all.

That's all that Jesus is recorded to have said in chapter nine. That's all Jesus is recorded to have said in chapter 22. Now, either this is giving more actual information for what Jesus said than those two accounts did.

That's possible or else as something some feel that Paul is for the sake of brevity, conflating some of what Jesus told him through Ananias, some of what follows was mentioned by Ananias to him. So that was also a word from the Lord to him. So he might be just saying, Jesus said these things to me and not specifying that part of it was when I was on the road and part of it was when Ananias came.

It's not too important. We know that Paul is telling the truth. Jesus really gave him this information.

The details are not entirely clear. He says, but rise and stand on your feet. Verse 16, For I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness, both of the things which you've seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you.

I will deliver you from the Jewish people as well as from the Gentiles to whom I now send you, to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in me. Now the contents of verse 18 are not found in any of the accounts from Ananias or Jesus, but that doesn't mean that that wasn't really part of it. In no case is Paul saying every detail of everything that happens.

So we have different selections of detail in the different accounts. This is apparently what Jesus said. Now the language of verse 18 closely corresponds to something in the servant song in Isaiah 42.

In Isaiah 42, verse 6 and following, the servant of Yahweh whom Paul has already seen as having the commission that Paul was following. You remember back in Pisidian Antioch when he's in the synagogue in chapter 13 of Acts. He said we're going to the Gentiles for the Lord has commanded us.

I have set you as a light to the Gentiles and so forth. Well that's a quotation from Isaiah 49 and it's one of the servant songs of Isaiah. So is this.

There's a different servant song. But Paul saw himself, although the early church saw Jesus as the servant of Yahweh, they saw that the body of Jesus is doing the work of Jesus. So Jesus is continuing to do what the servant does through people in the body, through his hands and feet, the body of Christ.

So Paul sees himself commissioned to do what the servant is commissioned to do. And in Isaiah 42, verse 6, it says, I the Lord have called you in righteousness. I will hold your hand.

I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people and a light to the Gentiles to open blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, those who sit in darkness from the prison house. And this is what Paul in chapter 26, 18 says Jesus said to him, very much the same content, different wording. But the wording here in Acts 26, 18 is very close to something Paul wrote in Colossians.

In Colossians 1, 13, Paul says that God has delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the son of his love. Now he's delivered us from the power of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of God in the kingdom of Christ. And it says that here in chapter 18, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness.

So there's some of the themes here in what Jesus said to Paul reappear in Paul's writings and also had previously appeared in the Old Testament. Now, verse 19, he brings his message to Agrippa to a close. Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.

Now, could he have been? It depends on your theology. To what degree is God alone sovereign in the salvation of sinners? If God alone is sovereign and there's no human will involved at all, then we could say Paul had no choice but to be obedient. On the other hand, why would he bother saying it if it was a given? If like it's a given, God ordained you to do it and you do it.

People are never disobedient, but people are disobedient. In fact, there was a prophet

named Jonah who had a commission as Paul did to the Gentiles, and he didn't want to go to the Gentiles and he didn't obey, not initially. God put him through a training course and he came out well trained and he did obey the second time.

But he was disobedient to his heavenly vision initially in a similar situation. God was sending Jonah to the Gentiles to evangelize them. Saul was being sent to the Gentiles to evangelize them too.

Unlike Jonah, Paul says, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but I declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea and then to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God and do works befitting of repentance. Now this is how he summarizes what he's been saying. In various places, he summarizes what his message has been, and it's all true.

In an earlier place, he said something kind of similar to that. In chapter 20, actually, I think it was, in verse 21, when he's talking to the elders of Ephesus, he says that he's been testifying to the Jews and also the Greeks repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. Now here he mentions repentance and doing works worthy of repentance.

Anyone who thinks that Paul was kind of against works has never really read Paul with their eyes open. Paul says, I teach people that they need to repent and they need to do the works that are befitting of repentance. In this, he was not very original.

John the Baptist in Luke 3.8, he told the Pharisees and the others, you do works worthy of repentance, but bring forth the fruit of repentance before you get baptized by me. So the idea that repentance shows, it's not invisible. Repentance is a matter of the mind and the heart, but it does not remain invisible because it brings about a change in behavior.

And if there's no change in behavior, there's been no repentance. And John the Baptist said, I'm not going to baptize you unless I see fruit giving me evidence that you're repentant. And Paul is no different than John the Baptist of this.

People need to repent and bring forth works worthy of repentance. For these reasons, the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day, I stand witnessing both the small and great saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come.

Now, Paul did say a lot of things in his writings that were not found exactly in Moses and the prophets. But in this case, he's limiting his range to what his message is. And he tells us what it is that Moses and the prophets said that he repeats that Christ should suffer and that he would be the first to rise from the dead and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.

So he's saying, when I say that Jesus is the Christ and that he was to suffer and that he was the first to rise from the dead and bring light to the Jews and the Gentiles, I'm only saying things that were already said by Moses and the prophets previously. He's not saying nothing else I have ever said or ever will say is goes further than what Moses and the prophets said. But my core message is no different than what the Old Testament says is what he's saying.

Interesting that he somehow found in the Old Testament that Jesus would be the first, the Messiah would be the first to rise from the dead. There's not many clear statements about the resurrection of the dead in the Old Testament. And nor anything that specifically says the Messiah would be the first to be risen from the dead.

Although there is a verse, Psalm 89 27, which says of the Messiah, he will be my firstborn. Now Paul understood firstborn to be referred to firstborn from the dead. Remember in Colossians 1 18, so that Jesus is the firstborn from the dead.

And Jesus called himself that in Revelation chapter 1. So anyway, Paul says, I'm on target with what the Old Testament says. Now, 24, as he thus made this defense, Festus broke in, interrupted him and said with a loud voice, Paul, you are beside yourself. Much learning is driving you mad.

He acknowledged Paul was a smart guy. You are a very educated man. But I think it's kind of driven you over the edge, off the rails.

Too much education can be a bad thing, frankly. I happen to know a lot of people who are very well educated and are not very smart. You've gone mad.

But Paul said, I'm not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. For the king, and he now ignores Festus and turns to Agrippa, for the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things. For I'm convinced that none of these things escapes his notice, since the thing was not done in a corner.

That's the great thing about this story of Jesus. Unlike many religions and their alleged founders, a lot of that stuff allegedly happened secretly. In some secret place, Joseph Smith received gold tablets.

In a secret place, Mohammed received the Quran from the angel Gabriel. You know, in a private session under a tree, the Buddha received enlightenment. But the things about Jesus were done publicly.

They're on public record. Historians refer to them other than the gospels. This is not a secret thing.

This is not done in a corner. Certainly, Agrippa has heard about these things. And then he addresses Agrippa.

He says, King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe. Now, he really put him on the spot here, you know. I know you believe the prophets.

I know you know I'm telling you the truth here. And Agrippa, no doubt, somewhat uncomfortable, said to Paul, you almost persuade me to become a Christian. This is, generally speaking, thought to be a sarcastic remark.

You almost persuade me to be a Christian. Interesting that Agrippa was already familiar with the word Christian. We've only encountered it one other place, and that was in Antioch, where the disciples were first called Christians.

We don't read of the Christians calling themselves that, but he was apparently aware of people who were called Christians and knew that that's what Paul was, and now you're trying to make me one of them. And Paul said, I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today might become Christians. He doesn't say Christians, but might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains, obviously.

I wish you were all like me, but of course, I'm not wishing my condition on you. Only my identity as a Christian, I wish you were that too, my beliefs. When he had said these things, the king stood up as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them, and when they'd gone aside, I think it's like Paul made them so uncomfortable.

He just said, I think this meeting is over, and everyone stands up and leaves. And then privately, and we don't know how Luke knows this. Luke might have deduced that this is what they said, or he might have actually had an insider, you know, some servant standing nearby who later told him this, but when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves saying, this man is doing nothing worthy of death or chains.

Not even a question of whether he's worthy of death. He hasn't even done anything that he should be bound for. There's no reason for him to be a prisoner.

Then Agrippa said to Festus, this man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar. Now, once you appeal to Caesar, it's in Caesar's hands and the lesser courts don't have anything more to say about it, but Agrippa was saying, you know, if he hadn't made that appeal, I would counsel you to just let him go, you know. It's a shame we can't because he's appealed to Caesar.

We got him sent to Caesar, but everyone who heard Paul's case except the Jews said he was innocent, hadn't done anything wrong. Same as Jesus. All the courts, all the Roman courts said Jesus didn't do anything wrong.

It's the Jews that condemned him. So, you know, I might sound like I'm picking on the Jews a lot here, but frankly, I think they picked on the Christians an awful lot in this, in the story. I'm not anti-Semitic and I don't have anything against modern Jews, but we have to admit that in these stories, the Jews did not exactly cover themselves with glory

in terms of their virtue.

And the Romans are always seen as, though they're pagans, more concerned about what's right and just than the Jews who had God's laws, who should have been passionate for justice, but were not. Well, that's where we end today.