

**King Agrippa: A Rich Young Ruler**  
**Acts 26:19–32**  
**July 17, 2022**

The Rich Young Ruler seemingly had it all. His 3–word title tells us everything we need to know. He’s rich. In their culture, as well as ours, money appears to solve all kinds of problems. You want to live in that neighborhood, eat at that restaurant, hang with those people, go to that place? It helps if you’ve never had an issue at the bank. Second, besides being rich, he’s young. Generally youth is wasted on the young, right? But this guy still has plenty of energy to use his abundance of resources. As well as plenty of time to enjoy them. Third, he’s a ruler. He rolls in to every room brimming with money and power. *Seemingly*, he’s got it all.

When Jesus met the Rich Young Ruler in Luke 18, King Agrippa hadn’t been born yet. In other words, King Agrippa is too young to be *the* Rich Young Ruler. But the similarities between the two are many. He is *a* rich young ruler.<sup>1</sup> He’s entered this palace surrounded by pomp. There are religious similarities too. Like the ruler in Luke 18, Agrippa knew the commandments. In fact, in one sense he was the “King of the Jews.” He was a rich, young, Jewish ruler. But the similarities don’t end there. Like the ruler in Luke 18, we’ll see in our text today that Agrippa would not bend the knee to the true King. He’d bow elsewhere. Why? That’s one question for our consideration today. Maybe Agrippa’s reasons were similar to the Rich Young Ruler’s.

This text is the pinnacle of the trial narrative Luke’s been walking us through for chapters, going all the way back to Acts 21 when Paul had been seized in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> We’ve talked through it for a couple months; it’d been *years* of Paul’s life. After being falsely accused, accosted, and beaten, he’d been forced to defend himself before Felix, Festus, and—in last week’s text—before a rich young ruler named Agrippa. Paul’s still speaking when our text picks up today.

**1. The Mission and Peril** (vv. 19–21)

Verse 19: **So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision.** If you were here last week, or you read the preceding verses, you might say, “How could he be?” Say you were riding horseback with some friends on your way to a city and a light from heaven knocked every single one of you down, and then the *supposedly* dead Man you’ve ardently opposed spoke to you out of that light—if all *that* happened—would you just go on about your business as if nothing occurred? Of course not. Paul had been running, running *after* those belonging to the Way, and running *from* His Maker, but he’d been chased down by grace. He never got over it.

So, what did he do? How was he *not* **disobedient to the heavenly vision**? As you listen to this verse, ask yourself, “What *other* verse in Acts does this rhyme with?” Verse 20: **But kept declaring both to those at Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then through all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.** If the category is, “famous Verses in Acts,” and you said, “What is Acts 1:8?” you’re on to something.<sup>3</sup>

The parallels are significant. In Acts 1, the disciples experience a heavenly vision (1:9–10). Jesus speaks to and commissions them. He does so in these geographical terms, **you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth** (Acts 1:8). And in our text, in the thirty years since Paul’s heavenly vision/commissioning

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<sup>1</sup> Eckhard Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 995, says Agrippa and Bernice are in their early thirties. Paul is around 60.

<sup>2</sup> Schnabel, 1018.

<sup>3</sup> Scott Kellum, *Acts*, EGGNT, 291; Craig Keener, *Acts*, NCBC, 586.

(26:16–18), he went to Jerusalem, Judea, and even to the Gentiles. If there were a table of contents to the book of Acts, Acts 1:8 is it. Through both the disciples and the Apostle Paul, the gospel advanced. The Word crossed boundaries. The Spirit obliterated divisions.

Paul went to region after region, declaring to the Jews—and **even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God**. At Lystra in Acts 14, Paul and Barnabas told the pagan idolatrous peasants, we **preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God** (14:15). To the high-browed philosophers in Athens, Paul preached, **God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent** (17:30). And in Ephesus, Paul described his ministry among the Ephesians in these terms, **I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ** (20:20–21).

Paul preached a gospel where repentance and faith were two sides of the same coin. He walked thousands of miles telling Jews and Greeks that King Jesus’s coming demanded they turn from self, turn from idolatry, and turn toward Christ. Further, that kind of repentant faith wasn’t a flash in the pan. It perseveres.<sup>4</sup> It has effects. Verse 20: **performing deeds appropriate to repentance**. The order is vital. Righteous actions *follow* repentance and faith.<sup>5</sup>

Paul took *that message* to the world. Jews must repent. Gentiles must repent. And, according to Paul’s message, if those Gentiles repented, they too could be received by God. City after city heard that message. And city after city responded. How? Did Athens say, “Ok, Paul. Sure thing, buddy. We’ll immediately abandon everything we trust in. As philosophers, we’ve been thinking our religious system is fairly dumb”? No, many of them sneered at Paul (17:32). Did Lystra say, “Yeah, Paul, idolatry is ridiculous. I had lunch with the guy that crafted the image I bow down to. Thanks for coming by, Paul”? No, Acts 14:19: **they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead**.

People don’t like to be told what to do. But the essence of the gospel is a new way of life. So, *because* of the message, Paul faced opposition. Christ warned him, of course. On the road to Damascus, in last week’s text, Jesus said He would rescue Paul **from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you** (26:17). Paul would *need* rescuing because the message he brought would either uproot idols or stir up a deep-seated anger.

Paul tells Agrippa that *this* is what he’s done for 30 years. He kept declaring the message—to Jerusalem, Judea, and *even* to the Gentiles—that they should **repent and turn to God**. And then he says this in verse 21: **For this reason some Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death**. It wasn’t that he supposedly defiled the temple. They made that up. The issue, as we keep saying, is the gospel of a resurrected King. Paul didn’t oppose Moses’s words; they opposed Paul’s. And they opposed it to the degree that they were trying to kill Paul.

If the message is opposed, the mission is perilous. Why is the message opposed and the mission perilous? Because of the world’s posture. Read the church history in the book of Acts. Or read later church history, a history of missions or a missionary biography. The world’s opposition to gospel is not a *gesture* made in a moment. It’s a posture formed by eras of repeated gestures.

Maybe some of you grew up in a place or an era where the gospel thrived. I went to a high school where true revival came. Followers of Christ weren’t made fun of. The President of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes—a guy that went on to be a Pastor—was also voted Prom King. Regardless of our experience, we should be reminded that no one ever said the message would be

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<sup>4</sup> As Paul had already written in Romans 8, in justifying faith little by little we’re **conformed to the image of His Son** (Rom. 8:29).

<sup>5</sup> Kellum, 291.

welcomed in droves. In fact, Jesus said the way was narrow (Mt. 7:14). And no one ever said sharing the message—the mission we’ve been given—would be met with a red carpet and adoring throngs. In fact, Jesus said the opposite. About Paul’s mission, He said, **I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake** (9:16).

Yet, He sends His people. He sends them into a hostile world. But, as we consider that, we shouldn’t lose sight of the One authoring each page and moment. Because if you write the table of contents in Acts 1, and then it happens as you said, the details are not devoid of purpose.

## 2. The Messiah and Purpose (vv. 22–23)

Verse 22: **So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to great and small.** We noted last week that Paul speaking to Agrippa was the fulfillment of Christ’s revelation in Acts 9, that, **he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings** (9:15). But that he’s standing *at all* is *also* fulfillment of Christ’s revelation. Jesus said on the road to Damascus He would rescue Paul from the ones He sent him to. At Lystra, they supposed Paul was dead. But, Acts 14:20: **he got up and entered the city.** At Philippi Paul and Silas were thrown into prison. Acts 16:26: **and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken.** At Thessalonica, though the masses hunted him down, the church got Paul out of town (Acts 17:10). At the theatre in Ephesus a mob of thousands encircled Paul’s fellow-workers, thirsty for blood, but the Lord used a pagan town clerk to deliver Paul (Acts 19:35–40). At Jerusalem assassins plotted to take Paul’s life. Yet, the Lord allowed Paul’s nephew to hear the plan and foil it (23:12–16). And that’s *after* another pagan named Claudius had delivered Paul from certain death (22:33–40).

So verse 22’s **having obtained help from God** carries some weight. He’d been rescued repeatedly. Paul knew it. And he acknowledged that the providence of God directed every moment. He stands before Agrippa this day, *because* God helped him.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, he’s not merely testifying to purposes fulfilled in his recent past, he’s been testifying to God’s unfolding purposes for years. Verse 22: **So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great.** “Small and great” means he’s testified to “all”: peasants in Lystra, philosophers in Athens, kings in Caesarea, and every person in between.<sup>7</sup> To *everyone*, Paul asserts that he has stated **nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place.**

Why would Paul point this out before King Agrippa, the supposed King of the Jews? He’s already clarified that the reason the Jews attempted to murder him was the message he proclaimed about resurrection and repentance. It *wasn’t* that Paul was anti-Jew, anti-temple, or anti-Moses. Yet, maybe thinking Agrippa bought the propaganda, Paul makes plain: he’s **stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place.**

Of course Paul wasn’t the first person the religious leaders accused of being anti-Moses. The Man Paul followed had been accused as well. And He said, **it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void** (Luke 16:16–17). God doesn’t speak out of both sides of His mouth. He’d revealed Himself in the Law and the Prophets. No dot became void. Then, Jesus fulfilled every jot. Remember Moses and Elijah—representing the Law and the Prophets—standing with the Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration, hearing the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob say, **This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!** (Lk. 9:35). If we’re listening to Him, He said in Luke 18:31: **See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything**

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<sup>6</sup> Kellum, 291.

<sup>7</sup> Schnabel, 1013; Keener, 587.

written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. And as He approached Gethsemane, He quoted the prophet Isaiah: **For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in Me: “And He was numbered with the transgressors (Is. 53:12; Luke 22:37).** Paul appealed to the Old Testament—**stating nothing other but what the Prophets and Moses said**—because the Prophets and Moses pointed to the Christ—the Messiah. And they foretold what would happen to Him. Which is what Paul asserts here. Verse 22: **Stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ was to suffer.**

The passage Jesus said was about Him—that He would be numbered with the transgressors—also made plain that He would bear the sin of many, those for whom He would also intercede (Is. 53:12). That prophet sounds Pauline, does he not? He bore the sin of many: **He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all (Rom. 8:32).** And the One that bore the transgressor’s sin also intercedes for that transgressor: **Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us (Rom. 8:34).** The prophets don’t sound Pauline, actually. Paul just knew the prophets. And then He saw the One they wrote about.

Paul wrote of these glories, v. 23, **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.”** Paul isn’t finished with the Servant in Isaiah, of whom it had been said in Isaiah 49:6: **I will also make You a light to the nations so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.** Which is what Simeon declared when he held baby Jesus in Luke 2: **My eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel (Lk. 2:31–32).**

Paul proclaimed what the Scriptures foretold. What the Scriptures foretold came to pass, in the Person of Christ, in His suffering, in His resurrection, and in light going to the Gentiles. Nothing in Luke’s Gospel, nothing in the book of Acts—not even Paul’s present chains—was outside the purposes of the Messiah. He penned every page. He, as author of history, continues unfolding the narrative of redemption. Therefore, Paul’s mission was *both* given by *and* directed by Jesus Christ. So, if our mission is also the one *He* gave us, does the posture of the world, or the peril we might face, thwart any of His purposes?

Seeing Christ in the Old Testament is central to interpreting the Bible correctly. You can’t understand Joel, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel without seeing Him. But seeing God’s purposes in promising Christ, and then seeing Him fulfill every single one of those promises, is central to interpreting our own life correctly. Not a single purpose goes unfulfilled, even when it seems otherwise.

What is this power that governs all of creation? Who is this God that cannot lie? What is this mercy that draws near when difficulties come? Who is this Man that rescues me from sin and self? The picture of this God in the Scriptures, rightly seen, is too good to be true. Yet, most people just don’t see it rightly.

### 3. The Malaise and Persuasion (vv. 24–32)

In Greg Gilbert’s book, *Who is Jesus?*, he talked about the time a man—dressed in casual clothes—stationed himself at a Washington D. C. subway station, opened his violin case for donations, and began to play. For forty–five minutes he played as over a thousand men and women from our nation’s capital walked by. No crowd ever formed. Most people simply did what they did every day, reading their papers, staring at their phones, while in a hurry. Though he was wearing a black long-sleeved T-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball hat—looking *like the last guy* that played at the subway station—the violinist was actually Joshua Bell, a Grammy–Award winning violinist. He made his Carnegie Hall debut at 17. The violin he played that day was made in 1713; it’s worth an

estimated 3.5 million dollars. Maybe you've seen the video. Almost no one even pauses. Very few even stop to notice the one filling the room with beauty.<sup>8</sup> It wasn't Bell's aim, but in my mind few things have captured the malaise of our world toward Jesus of Nazareth quite like that video.

Here in Caesarea, before the pageantry, Paul meets that malaise. In verse 23, as Paul's outlining the beauty of the gospel, of resurrection hope, and the light of the world, verse 24: **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."** The high drama of verses 24–32 is best communicated if we see it as dialogue in a scene.<sup>9</sup> The main characters, again, are Governor Festus, King Agrippa, and Paul. The first one to speak is Festus to Paul: **Paul, you are out of your mind!** In Festus's mind, that Paul's accusers actually oppose Jesus, that Paul stands under divine protection, that a heavenly voice speaks to Paul, and that the One that spoke was a resurrected King—all *that*—flew in the face of common sense. It defied logic. Paul must be mad.<sup>10</sup>

Verse 25: **But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth.** Maybe you've experienced this. You say something that the Scriptures teach. People think you're a bigot. Co-workers whisper that you're old-fashioned, stodgy, or—worse—oppressive. You speak truth. They think you're out of your mind.

Paul defends the truth of what he's saying by noting facts. What he's describing about Jesus is true—it's historical, we might say—and it's public knowledge. To make his point, he drops Agrippa's name to Festus. Verse 26: **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.** The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was far from a secret, especially to someone like Agrippa. He knew people that met Jesus. He knew plenty of people that hated Jesus. Agrippa was not unfamiliar with what Paul spoke of. Festus might've thought Paul insane. Agrippa did not.

Because what Jesus did had **not been done in a corner.** And Paul makes clear, v. 26: **none of these things escape his (Agrippa's) notice.** Historian Luke has taken pains to locate Jesus in historical terms. It might be worth re-reading passages like Luke 3, noting the rulers Luke mentions—Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Lysanias, Herod the Tetrarch, etc. All the rulers Luke names can be fact checked with ancient history. So can King Agrippa and his sister Bernice. As can Paul. And, most importantly, so can Jesus of Nazareth. Sometimes when I experience doubt, this is where I go. I've formulated a simple, brief catechism along these lines: Q: According to history, was Jesus a real person that walked on the earth? A: Yes. Q: Do we have historical evidence that He died on a cross? A: Yes. Q: After the resurrection, did anyone find His body? A: No. So, can I have historical confidence that what the Bible says actually happened? A: Yes.<sup>11</sup>

Often, when I think about that, the Spirit fills me with joy. You know what that is? **The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God** (Rom. 8:16). What Jesus did wasn't done in a corner. Kings—kings from the history books—knew what Jesus had accomplished, including King Agrippa. And now, in boldness, this prisoner turns to that king. Hear Paul's courage. Verse 27: **King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do.** I don't think Agrippa had heard of a Catch-22, but Paul showed him one. As the Jewish king, he *can't* say he doesn't believe the prophets. But if he says "yes," he's publicly agreed with Paul.<sup>12</sup> And he's put the

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<sup>8</sup> Greg Gilbert, *Who is Jesus?*, 25–26.

<sup>9</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST.

<sup>10</sup> Schnabel, 1015.

<sup>11</sup> For a helpful consideration of historical confidence, see Greg Gilbert's *Why Trust the Bible?*, 22–24.

<sup>12</sup> Schnabel, 1016.

ball on the tee for Paul to say, “Ok, you believe the prophets. Let’s read Isaiah 53 together and you tell me who it’s about.”<sup>13</sup>

Since he can’t say “yes” or “no,” he must say something else. Like he ruled in *our* day, he deftly evades the pointed question. Verse 28: **Agrippa replied to Paul, “In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian.”**<sup>14</sup> Agrippa’s pride drives him.<sup>15</sup> He knows the cost of following Christ. So, even though he knows and, quote, “believes” the prophets, he’s unwilling to believe the One they point to.

If Agrippa is asking whether Paul seeks to convert him, Paul gladly answers. Verse 29: **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.** In short, “Yes, Agrippa, I am attempting to persuade you to become a Christian. And not just you, but everyone that can hear me.”

To be clear: young men and women, those that went to the Youth Conference in Louisville a couple weeks ago and those of you that attended VBS this past week, yes, we are absolutely praying for, and attempting to persuade you to become a follower of Christ. We’re unapologetic. Children, your parents bring you to church because they want you to become such as they are, believers in Christ. They desire you know what it is to be loved by the Father.

Paul’s been brought into a palace. Surrounding him are a governor, a king, a queen, military commanders, and the prominent men in the city. He wasn’t dressed like them. He didn’t eat like them. He didn’t look like them. Agrippa was young, rich, and powerful. Paul was older, worn-down, and imprisoned. Nonetheless, he says, **I wish to God, that . . . all who hear me this day, might become such as I am.** He did not mean his chains. To **become such as I am** was to be loved by God, to be in union with Christ, and to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. He might be in prison now. But he wouldn’t always be. And the ones asking him questions might rule now. But they wouldn’t always.

Paul has pleaded with Agrippa. Bernice and Festus too. Do we think Paul was unclear? Was he unpersuasive? I don’t think so. How would they respond? Verse 30: **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.”** They’ve just heard the most glorious news ever to proceed from human lips. Yet, spiritually, they shrug their shoulders. They stand up and talk about the case, thinking Paul’s on trial when they are. Paul’s persuasion was met with malaise.

Though the mission is perilous, and our persuasion is met with malaise, the purpose of the Messiah remains. Verse 32: **And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”** Agrippa, Bernice, and others have joined Claudius, Felix, and Festus in believing Paul to be innocent. Yet, since Festus had already publicly decided to refer the case, he had to follow through.<sup>16</sup> So, this group of the powerful pity Paul, “If only he hadn’t appealed!” But Paul rejoices. Jesus told him he’d make it to Rome. He was now on his way.

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<sup>13</sup> Y’all are going to have to outrun me to go talk to Paul in the New Heavens.

<sup>14</sup> Many think, including me, that this is something of a question of incredulity. In other words, “Will you persuade me, in such a short time, so easily, to be a Christian?” Keener, 590; Schnabel, 1017.

<sup>15</sup> Stott, 376.

<sup>16</sup> Keener, 592.

## **Conclusion.**

The Rich Young Ruler met Jesus in Luke 18. Jesus called him to abandon all and follow. Yet, the Rich Young Ruler held to his “stuff.” A rich young ruler named Agrippa met Paul. Paul called him to abandon all and follow Christ. Agrippa shrugged his shoulders. In one sense, both of their cases are worse than completely missing Joshua Bell in a subway station. Joshua Bell didn’t have a tux on. He didn’t post a sign saying who he was. He was somewhat incognito. Yet, the truths about Jesus were public and clear. The Rich Young Ruler looked Jesus in the face: unchanged. Agrippa heard the good news about Christ from the greatest missionary to ever walk the earth: malaise. These rich young rulers thought they already had it all. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul? (Matt. 16:26)

If we’ve heard with clarity the good news of Christ, have we believed? That Christ is King and His rule is our good? And if we’ve believed, are we continuing to believe? That Christ remains King and His rule is our good?