

Acts 25:23-26:32

De-Fense!

Learning Objectives:

- Think about what you would say to “defend” the Gospel.
- Realize that no matter the resistance you encounter, your identity is in Christ alone.

Pray for your time together as a group.

? Have you ever needed to defend yourself against an accusation (e.g. disagreement about a decision you made)? How did you build your defense?

Possible Answers: Facts, sharing the results of my actions, truth, bringing in other witnesses.

Optional Transition: In the passage we’ll read tonight, we’ll see that Paul is given yet another opportunity to share his story--to defend himself--in front of a significant authority figure. In our last study, Paul appealed to Caesar to hear his case. Before sending him onward, Festus brings Paul before Agrippa.

Setting the Stage

Read Out Loud: Acts 25:23-26 (NIV)

²³ The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high-ranking military officers and the prominent men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. ²⁴ Festus said: “King Agrippa, and all who are present with us, you see this man! The whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. ²⁵ I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome. ²⁶ But I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. ²⁷ For I think it is unreasonable to send a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him.

? The “pomp” with which Agrippa and Bernice present themselves stands in stark contrast to Paul, a prisoner in chains. What do you think their attitudes might have been towards each other and this situation?

Possible Answers: Agrippa and Bernice: Thinking this was something beneath them, irritated to waste their time, curious about what Paul would say, nervous about how their opinion might be received by the Jewish leaders.

Paul: Excited to share the Gospel message with high-ranking officials, nervous about the impact of their opinions, weary of going from one leader to the next.

? Festus wants to justify sending Paul to Rome for trial. Why might he have done this?

Possible Answers: To protect himself from Rome saying he was foolish to send Paul. To better understand why Paul had appealed to Caesar.

? Optional: When have you tried to “cover your bases” about a sticky situation? What happened?

Stepping Up

Read Out Loud: Acts 26:1-23 (NIV)

¹ Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself.” So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: ² “King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, ³ and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.

⁴ “The Jewish people all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. ⁵ They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee. ⁶ And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today. ⁷ This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me. ⁸ Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?

⁹ “I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.

¹² “On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³ About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. ¹⁴ We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’

¹⁵ “Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’

“ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. ¹⁶ ‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me.

It is hard for you to kick against the goads.

“This proverb appears often in classical writings. Daniel Fuller explains that it was ‘often used by the Greeks to express the futility of striving against fate or against the gods and its meaning to Paul on the Damascus road was that it was now futile for him to try any longer to work against Christ as it would be for an ox to kick against the plowman’s goad.’”

-The NIV Application Commentary: Acts, Ajith Fernando, Pg. 595

¹⁷ I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them ¹⁸ to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

¹⁹ "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven.²⁰ First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. ²¹ That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. ²² But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—²³that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles."

? What features do you see in Paul's defense to Agrippa?

Possible Answers: Appeals to Agrippa's knowledge/background, shares his own experiences/story.

? What appeals to you the most about this defense? Why?

Possible Answers: It sounds heart-felt. It's harder to argue against someone's experiences. It makes Paul relatable.

? How do we see Paul remain consistent and/or modify his defense of the Gospel based on this particular audience?

Possible Answers: See Acts 15, 17, 22. Often shares his story as part of his defense. Draws from other Scripture. Appeals to their knowledge and sense of reason.

? If you were to share your own defense of the Gospel, what would you include? Why would you include those features?

Possible Answers: Things I've learned from an apologetics class. Aspects of my story or that of other people I know. Scripture.

Leaders' Note: The Holy Spirit is essential in any defense of the Gospel--giving us words and wisdom. You can reference your discussion of this from our last study, but we won't be recapping it here unless you find it beneficial for your group:

? Optional Question: What role does the Holy Spirit play in our defense of the Gospel? How do we balance relying on Him yet also equipping ourselves (1 Peter 3:15)?

The Response

Read Out Loud: Acts 26:24-32 (NIV)

²⁴ At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane."

²⁵ "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. ²⁶ The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do."

²⁸ Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"

²⁹ Paul replied, "Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."

³⁰ The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. ³¹ After they left the room, they began saying to one another, "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment."

³² Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

? Paul appeals to Agrippa's knowledge of Jewish tradition and scripture. How does Agrippa respond?

Possible Answers: He mocks Paul. With incredulity. He also is being put in an awkward situation, as converting would damage his position with the Jews.

? What types of responses have you encountered when sharing the Gospel? How did this impact you?

? Paul is unshaken by Agrippa's mockery. How does his response reflect his sense of identity?

For Discussion and Accountability

? Do you know your position and identity in Christ? How do you apply that truth when you face discouragement?

? In what ways (and/or to what people) is God calling you to share the Gospel?