

*Acts 26:1–31 (CEB)*

Agrippa said to Paul, “You may speak for yourself.” So Paul gestured with his hand and began his defense. <sup>2</sup>“King Agrippa, I consider myself especially fortunate that I stand before you today as I offer my defense concerning all the accusations the Jews have brought against me.

<sup>3</sup>This is because you understand well all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I ask you to listen to me patiently. <sup>4</sup>Every Jew knows the way of life I have followed since my youth because, from the beginning, I was among my people and in Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup>They have known me for a long time. If they wanted to, they could testify that I followed the way of life set out by the most exacting group of our religion. I am a Pharisee. <sup>6</sup>Today I am standing trial because of the hope in the promise God gave our ancestors. <sup>7</sup>This is the promise our twelve tribes hope to receive as they earnestly worship night and day. The Jews are accusing me, King Agrippa, because of this hope! <sup>8</sup>Why is it inconceivable to you that God raises the dead?

<sup>9</sup>“I really thought that I ought to oppose the name of Jesus the Nazarene in every way possible. <sup>10</sup>And that’s exactly what I did in Jerusalem. I locked up many of God’s holy people in prison under the authority of the chief priests. When they were condemned to death, I voted against them. <sup>11</sup>In one synagogue after another—indeed, in all the synagogues—I would often torture them, compelling them to slander God. My rage bordered on the hysterical as I pursued them, even to foreign cities.

<sup>12</sup>“On one such journey, I was going to Damascus with the full authority of the chief priests. <sup>13</sup>While on the road at midday, King Agrippa, I saw a light from heaven shining around me and my traveling companions. That light was brighter than the sun. <sup>14</sup>We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice that said to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me? It’s hard for you to kick against a spear.’ <sup>15</sup>Then I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The Lord replied, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are harassing.’ <sup>16</sup>Get up! Stand on your feet! I have appeared to you for this purpose: to appoint you as my servant and witness of what you have seen and what I will show you. <sup>17</sup>I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you <sup>18</sup>to open their eyes. Then they can turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, and receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are made holy by faith in me.’

<sup>19</sup>“So, King Agrippa, I wasn’t disobedient to that heavenly vision. <sup>20</sup>Instead, I proclaimed first to those in Damascus and Jerusalem, then to the whole region of Judea and to the Gentiles. My message was that they should change their hearts and lives and turn to God, and that they should demonstrate this change in their behavior. <sup>21</sup>Because of this, some Jews seized me in the temple and tried to murder me. <sup>22</sup>God has helped me up to this very day. Therefore, I stand here and bear witness to the lowly and the great. I’m saying nothing more than what the Prophets and Moses declared would happen: <sup>23</sup>that the Christ would suffer and that, as the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to my people and to the Gentiles.”

<sup>24</sup>At this point in Paul’s defense, Festus declared with a loud voice, “You’ve lost your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you mad!”

<sup>25</sup>But Paul replied, “I’m not mad, most honorable Festus! I’m speaking what is sound and true. <sup>26</sup>King Agrippa knows about these things, and I have been speaking openly to him. I’m certain that none of these things have escaped his attention. This didn’t happen secretly or in some out-of-the-way place. <sup>27</sup>King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”

<sup>28</sup>Agrippa said to Paul, “Are you trying to convince me that, in such a short time, you’ve made me a Christian?”

<sup>29</sup>Paul responded, “Whether it is a short or a long time, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today will become like me, except for these chains.”

<sup>30</sup>The king stood up, as did the governor, Bernice, and those sitting with them. <sup>31</sup>As they left, they were saying to each other, “This man is doing nothing that deserves death or imprisonment.”

*How can we know if we have been saved? Can we ever really know?*

It is a long Scripture reading for today, but I thought it important to include the entire dialogue between the apostle Paul and Herod Agrippa II, for this study will focus on these two men as we confront the uncertainty and ambiguities inherent in our experience of salvation.

## *Paul's story*

In verses 2-18 above, Paul tells his own story, beginning with his life as a Pharisee and persecutor of the Jesus movement through his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. You might take a moment and read Paul's tale. At first blush, it seems that Paul, then known as Saul, went from persecutor to believer in a moment, an instant, when confronted by Jesus. But is that really how we experience our salvation? Is it even really how God works?

In his excellent commentary, *The Message of Acts*, the prominent evangelical scholar John Stott argues that Saul's conversion into the apostle called Paul was neither sudden nor compulsory. Stott rightly emphasizes that God prepared this zealous Pharisee for his encounter with Jesus. Could Saul really have glimpsed nothing of the truth of Christ? Could he have been unshaken by the testimony and martyrdom of Stephen? Rare is the person whose faith in Christ comes completely out of nowhere. God prepares us for the revelation of the Good News. Stott sums it up this way:

The cause of Saul's conversion was grace, the sovereign grace of God. But sovereign grace is gradual grace and gentle grace. Gradually, and without violence, Jesus pricked Saul's mind and conscience with his goads. Then he revealed himself to him by the light and the voice, not in order to overwhelm him, but in such a way as to enable him to make a free response. Divine grace does not trample on human personality. Rather the reverse, for it enables human beings to be truly human. It is sin which imprisons; it is grace which liberates. The grace of God so frees us from the bondage of our pride, prejudice and self-centeredness, as to enable us to repent and believe. One can but magnify the grace of God that he should have had mercy on such a rabid bigot as Saul of Tarsus, and indeed on such proud, rebellious and wayward creatures as ourselves.

C. S. Lewis, who sensed God's pursuit of him, also expressed his sense of freedom in responding to God:

I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out. Or, if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing, like corsets, or even a suit of armour, as if I were a lobster. I felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could unbuckle the armour or keep it on. Neither choice was presented as a duty; no threat or promise was attached to either, though I knew that to open the door or to take off the corset meant the incalculable. The choice appeared to be momentous but it was also strangely unemotional. I was moved by no desires or fears. In a sense I was not moved by anything. I chose to open, to unbuckle, to loosen the rein. I say 'I chose,' yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite. On the other hand, I was aware of no motives. You could argue that I was not a free agent, but I am more inclined to think this came nearer to being a perfectly free act than most I have ever done. Necessity may not be the opposite of freedom, and perhaps a man is most free when, instead of producing motives, he could only say, 'I am what I do.'<sup>1</sup>

Will Willimon, formerly a bishop on the UMC, wrote this on the conversions in the book of Acts. I've bolded a few of the most important points. (I included a larger excerpt in last week's study, but I think it is worth another look in the context of Paul and Agrippa.)

David Steinmetz notes that the Protestant Reformers were so convinced that sin is so deep-rooted in human thinking and willing, that the gospel is so demanding and different, that only a lifetime of conversion can change us into the new creations God has in mind for us. The modern evangelical notion that conversion is an instantaneous, momentary phenomenon is not rooted in the thought of the Reformers nor, we might add, in the thought of Luke. Even Paul's dramatic encounter upon the Damascus road (reported three times in Acts—with significant differences in each account), required interpretation, reflection, and the confirmation of the community. Presumably, we never become too old, too adept at living the Christian life to be exempt from the need for more conversion, additional turning. The Christian life is

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<sup>1</sup> from Lewis' book on his own conversion, *Surprised by Joy*

akin to the way in which Luke organizes the life of Paul—a series of journeys, pilgrimages, and excursions out into some unexplored territory where all that is known is the faithfulness of God. Conversion is a process more than a moment.

Conversions in Luke-Acts are *stories about beginnings*—the beginning of a new chapter in the life of the church, the initiation of a new mission, as well as the beginning of a new life for the individual person. Conversion is the beginning of the Christian journey, not its final destination. Moreover, conversions in Acts are *stories about vocation*—someone is being called for some godly work. Conversion is not for the smug individual possession of the convert, but rather for the ongoing thrust of the gospel. Finally, conversions in Acts are *stories about the gifts of God*—God is the chief actor in all Lukan accounts of conversion. Even the smallest details are attributed to the working of God. Conversion is not the result of skillful leadership by the community or even of persuasive preaching or biblical interpretation. In many accounts, such as those of Philip’s work with the Ethiopian, the mysterious hand of God directs everything. In other stories, such as the story of Peter and Cornelius, the church must be dragged kicking and screaming into the movements of God. Manipulation, strategic planning, calculating efforts by the community aimed at church growth are utterly absent. Even our much beloved modern notions of “free will” and personal choice and decision appear to play little role in conversion in Acts. Conversion is a surprising, unexpected act of divine grace. “*By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope ...*” (1 Peter 1:3*b*; author’s italics.)

All this should help us to acknowledge that we can never know where someone else stands with God, for we have enough trouble knowing where we stand. If pressed, I would tell you that God grabbed me hard about eighteen years ago and nothing has been the same since. Could I tell you the day? No. But I could tell you the season. Yet, I taught adult Sunday school and even preached a couple of sermons at the Methodist church in Stow, Ohio when I was around thirty. Was I “saved” then? Beats me. I suspect a journey something like mine could describe many of us. One thing I am sure of – God has brought me on a journey from Christian-ish to an ever more passionate servant of Jesus Christ.

And so we turn to Agrippa, a poster child for ambiguity.

#### *Agrippa’s story*

Agrippa doesn’t tell us any of his own story, so here is a summary from the *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*.

When his father, Agrippa I, died suddenly in A.D. 44, Agrippa II was only seventeen and was being educated in Rome. The emperor Claudius, though well disposed toward him, did not immediately grant him the rights of succession because of his youth. By 50, however, he had been given the small territory of his deceased uncle, Herod of Chalcis, and in 53, he was permitted to exchange this for rule over the former tetrarchy of Philip and certain territories in the Lebanon. Nero added parts of Galilee and Perea to this realm, and Agrippa renamed his capital, Caesarea Philippi, Neronia in the emperor’s honor.

Agrippa’s sister, Bernice, had been the wife of Herod of Chalcis, and she came to live with her brother after her husband’s death. Their relationship became notorious as an incestuous affair, which apparently lasted throughout their lives in spite of her brief marriage to Polemon of Cilicia and her scandalous affair with Titus. The relationship between Agrippa and Bernice adds a poignant note to the account, in Acts 25:13-26:32, of Paul’s appearance before them as a prisoner.

Agrippa retained important rights having to do with the Temple in Jerusalem and was directly involved in its completion and the subsequent paving of the streets of Jerusalem with white marble. He attempted, insofar as possible, to support and promote Judaism. His true loyalty to Rome never wavered, however, even when put to the ultimate test provided by the Jewish revolt of A.D. 66 and its subsequent suppression by the Romans. Agrippa, after futile efforts to forestall revolt, joined the Roman side and not only regained his kingdom with Roman help but was closely associated with Titus, the conqueror of Jerusalem. Agrippa moved to Rome, and there

he died after A.D. 93.

Even that brief summary of Agrippa's life reveals that his fellow Jews would have regarded him with disgust and fear. He had chosen a life marked by scandal and treachery, making his bed with both his sister and Rome.

Now, Paul stands before him ready to account for his actions. Earlier, he had been rescued by Roman soldiers from an assassination plot but was standing trial for charges brought against him by the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. As a Roman citizen (that's a surprise, isn't it), Paul had demanded a trial before Caesar and was now working his way up the "judicial" hierarchy. The Roman governor, Festus, and Agrippa, the local puppet king, are hearing Paul's defense.

When Paul finishes telling his story, he calls his listeners to repentance and proclaims the Good News, "I'm saying nothing more than what the Prophets and Moses declared would happen: that the Christ would suffer and that, as the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to my people and to the Gentiles" (v. 22-23).

Festus the Roman finds the whole thing ridiculous; he thinks Paul has spent too much with his head in the books. But Paul looks directly at Agrippa and challenges him: "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do."

Agrippa's response to Paul's challenge can be read a couple of ways. The question is how to translate *en oligō* in the original Greek. The translators of the King James translated it as "almost," as in "almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian,"<sup>2</sup> implying that Agrippa found himself nearly convinced of the truth of the Good News. Alternatively, most modern translations render *en oligō* as speaking of time, as in "Are you trying to convince me that, in such a short time, you've made me a Christian?" (v. 29). Regardless of what exactly Agrippa means in his reply, Paul prays that this ungodly king will come to put his faith in the truth that Paul has proclaimed to him.

Does Agrippa go on to embrace this Good News? Based on what comes after, it seems doubtful, but can we really know? No, we cannot. Process, uncertainty, and ambiguity is much more likely to express how we are saved than a blinding flash or a single overpowering moment. Sadly, most such moments are mostly likely to reflect the sweep of powerful emotions than the deep-seated trust in Jesus that is the mark of his people.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What is your own experience of salvation? Perhaps you've just always loved Jesus. Perhaps you've come closer to and further from God over the course of your life. Perhaps, like me, you can identify a season in your life when God seemed to grab you as he hadn't before. Perhaps you had an overpowering experience that changed everything for you. Why do so many Christians have the idea that "being saved" must happen in a certain way? Is it our discomfort with uncertainty and ambiguity?
2. In his commentary on Acts in the *New Interpreters Bible*, Robert Wall asks us to consider the following. What do you think? Is Wall right?

Would Paul's apologia before a sophisticated audience of rich and influential leaders sound a responsive note today? Perhaps not: Most might repeat Festus's harsh verdict. Today's society is cultivated by a scientific sophistry, convinced that all claims to universal truth must be assessed by empirical investigation. The principal disposition toward anything religious, especially if revivalist in tone, is one of deep suspicion of its intellectual integrity. Central to Paul's testimony, whether to religious Jews or sophisticated pagans, is that his conversion and calling is not his doing but the living Lord's: As Willimon has noted, "Most of the traffic on the bridge between us and God is moving toward us." The subtext of Paul's testimony is that a reasonable yet radical leap of faith is required to grab hold of the theocentricity of the Christian gospel. At the end of the day, Festus and then Agrippa (26:28) remain unconvinced, not because they lacked solid evidence but because they lacked faith in a faithful God who forgives and transforms human life, both now and forevermore.

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<sup>2</sup> There is even an old evangelistic hymn titled, "Almost Persuaded."

# Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Acts 9:1-31</b> Saul, persecutor of the Jesus followers, is confronted by Jesus as he makes his way to Damascus to round up more believers.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Acts 22:1-29</b> Paul's defense before his Jewish accusers</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Acts 22:30-23:35</b> Paul is rescued by the Romans and begins a series of trials and events that will take him to Rome</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Acts 24</b> Paul is tried before Felix, the Roman governor at the time. Paul is held for two years until Felix is replaced by Festus.</p>
<p><b>Friday, Acts 25</b> Paul will now have to stand before Festus, who calls on Agrippa for guidance on this Jewish matter.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b></p>

