

## *Agrippa—Considering Christianity • Acts 25-16*

Several years ago I had a series of conversations with a devout Muslim. He was very bright and articulate. He knew the Bible surprisingly well. We discussed all kinds of religious and political issues until I realized that the conversation really wasn't going anywhere.

It was then that I said something that I think took him completely by surprise. I told him that we had talked about all the key issues and now it was time for him to make a decision. I invited him to accept Jesus Christ as his Savior and to become a Christian instead of a Muslim. It was the only time in all the conversations we had that he was silent. When he spoke he said "no". He was not persuaded that he should become a believer in Jesus Christ.

What does it take for a person to believe? For some people faith seems to come so easily. Others spend a lifetime weighing the arguments, considering the evidence, trying to decide.

Imagine a scale of one to ten. One is complete unbelief, someone who doesn't even believe there is a God. Five is the decision point to become a believer, someone with genuine personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior from sin and Lord of life. Ten is a fully committed disciple of Jesus Christ.

What is your number? Where would you say you are on that scale? Where would you like to be?

Let me tell you the story of three men who were at very different places on that scale of one to ten. It is a true story, set in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire in the year AD 59. The story is recorded in the New Testament in Acts 25 and 26.

Festus Porcius was the new Roman procurator, or governor, sent to Palestine to take over a political mess. Little did he know that eventually it would end in war, but at that point there were bands of anarchists, robbers, who were pillaging villages throughout Palestine, murdering the people and burning the villages to the ground.

Festus was a good governor whom history treats favorably. He tried to be just and fair. He did a surprisingly good job of bringing things under control, although he lasted only two years in office.

Agrippa was the Jewish king at the time of Festus. He was the last monarch in the long line of Herods who ruled parts of Palestine. They were a dynasty of despots and Agrippa really wasn't much different from the rest of them.

Because he was only 17 when his father died, the Roman Senate reduced the size of his territory. But he was a smart politician who knew how to win the favor of the Romans. For example, when Nero became the emperor of Rome Agrippa renamed his capital city of Caesarea Philippi and called it Neronius after the emperor. Nero was so delighted that he massively expanded Agrippa's kingdom.

Later in his career there was a Jewish war against the Romans that ended in the destruction of Jerusalem. Agrippa sided and fought with the Romans against his own Jewish people and led to the slaughter tens of thousands of Jews. He was more concerned with being on the side of might than on the side of right.

Agrippa's personal life was a moral mess as well. He came from a family with a history of intrigue, incest, adultery and murder. He was just the same. His sister, Bernice, was married to their uncle. When her husband/uncle died in AD 48 she came to live with her brother Agrippa. Rumors of incest were rampant, so she moved out of her brother's palace for a short time. But they were so attracted to each other that they couldn't stay apart so she returned to the palace and Bernice became functionally the queen, the wife of her own brother, Agrippa.

During the Jewish War Bernice had an affair with the Roman general Titus who later became the Emperor Titus. She even moved to Rome to live with him until there was such an outcry of oppo-

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sition that she was a political liability and was sent back to Palestine.

The third character in this story is Paul, the Christian. He's the man after whom our state capital in Minnesota is named, St. Paul. Paul was an interesting mix. He was born in a Roman city with Roman citizenship although he was thoroughly Jewish. He received an outstanding Jewish education and rose to become a member of the Sanhedrin, the body of 70 men who governed the Jewish religion in the first century.

When Paul converted to Christianity it caused outrage among many of the Jewish leaders. They had him arrested and wanted him tried and executed. This was at a time when politics were volatile and the Romans wanted more peace and less trouble.

Paul was arrested under the authority of the Roman governor Felix and was imprisoned in Caesarea, the Roman capital of Palestine. Felix knew that Paul hadn't done anything illegal but he hoped for a big bribe from Paul to let him go. He kept Paul in prison for two years waiting for the bribe. When Felix was recalled to Rome he left Paul in jail and let his successor, Festus, decide what to do with him.

Festus wanted to move the trial to Jerusalem, but Paul knew his enemies would probably ambush and kill him en route. So, Paul exercised the privilege of every Roman citizen. He said, "I appeal to Caesar!"

It was immediately out of the hands of Festus. He had no choice but to send Paul to Rome for a trial before the emperor. The only problem was writing up charges because there wasn't anything with which to charge him.

Here's what happened next. It's recorded in Acts 25:23-26:1:

The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high ranking officers and the leading men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. 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 live any longer. I found that he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he

made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome. 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. For I think it is unreasonable to send on a prisoner without specifying the charges against him.

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself."

Jesus had predicted that those who followed him would appear before kings, and that prediction came true. Paul stood before the Roman governor Festus and before the provincial Jewish king, Agrippa, and he told his FaithStory.

Almost every weekend at Wooddale Church we have a FaithStory. It is someone telling about becoming a Christian or inviting others to become Christians. This happens week after week, year after year. Each story is different. Each story is powerful. Personally, I think it is one of the most significant parts of what happens at Wooddale Church. It is not just some pastor talking about people becoming believers. It is "real people" telling their personal accounts of the transformation Jesus Christ has brought to their lives. It usually takes 3-5 minutes. Paul's FaithStory in Acts 26:2-23 takes about 3 minutes 20 seconds. Here is what he said:

"King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.

"The Jews 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. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee. And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. O king,

it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?

“I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

“On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. 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.’

“Then I asked, ‘Who are you Lord?’

“ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. ‘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 of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them 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.’

“So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. This is why the

Jews seized me in the temple court and tried to kill me. But I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”

Paul’s points are clear. First he explained the way he used to be, religious but wrong. In fact, he ended up being a murderer. Then he told what happened to change him—he encountered Jesus Christ and believed. He then told the difference becoming a Christian had made in his life—he experienced God’s help every day and in every situation. And finally he gave the basis for his Christian faith—Jesus Christ suffered for our sins, died and rose again from the dead.

Festus interrupted Paul’s FaithStory and blurted out: “You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane!”

Festus didn’t believe in God. Therefore, he didn’t believe that God could raise people from the dead. And he did not believe that Jesus Christ could totally transform a person’s life and make that person completely different. He was so set

in his pagan ways that he assumed anyone with this kind of story and faith must be insane.

But Agrippa was different. He had a religious background even though he lived a rather irreligious life. He

knew at least something about the Bible. He had seen people who had become Christians and he knew that their faith was real.

Paul carefully spoke to both of them at the same time in Acts 26:25-27:

“I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. 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. King Agrippa, do you

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believe the prophets? I know you do.”

Paul asked Agrippa if he believed. He wasn't asking if he believed in Jesus. He wasn't asking if he would become a Christian. He asked him if he really believed what he already knew about God and the Bible because if Agrippa really believed what he already knew to be true, the logical next step was to become a Christian.

There are a lot of people like Agrippa today. Ninety-eight percent of Americans believe in God. Over 90% believe in heaven and hell. Many of us have basic beliefs that clearly lead us up to faith in Jesus Christ and committing our lives to him. But that doesn't mean that we do it.

Agrippa knew where Paul was going with this. He was asking Agrippa to make a choice right there and then to become a Christian, to totally follow Jesus Christ. And Agrippa didn't have a good reason not to become a Christian. He knew his life was a mess and he probably wished he could have it transformed.

But instead of believing, he laughed away the offer: “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

Time wasn't the issue. It was a matter of decision, and his decision was no.

Agrippa lived for another 40 years. His life was mostly problems. He never fathered any children. His wife left him. He slipped into the obscurity of history, disappeared and died. The dynasty of Herods ended. There is no record that he ever became a Christian. It is as if he had his one great chance and he turned down Jesus Christ forever.

What does it take to really believe? What does it take for any one of us to become a Christian? By “Christian” I mean someone who truly believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that he died on the cross for human sin and that he rose from the dead. But it's more than just intellectual belief. Real belief is a full commitment of life. It is deciding to give your life to God, to live all-out for Jesus.

What does it take to persuade people? For some people it takes evidence. They are the ones who need to listen to a credible scientist, who need to read books and do research. They need to have proof.

For other people it takes time. I know individuals who have been thinking about becoming

a Christian for years. These people don't rush into anything. They take a long time to make decisions and they approach Christian faith that way; it takes them a long time to process it.

For some people it takes a tragedy. It's only when they face divorce, the loss of a job, the death of someone they dearly love or a diagnosis of cancer that they are ready to seriously examine Christian faith.

But for everybody it takes an opportunity. There has to be an opportunity to say “yes” or “no” to faith in Jesus Christ. That is what St. Paul gave King Agrippa—the opportunity to make that choice and to believe.

And that is what I would like to give to you: an opportunity. If you would like to become a fully committed follower of Jesus Christ, decide “yes” right now. If you are ready for God to transform your life, say “yes” now. If you have never quite been sure if you are a Christian or not, this is the time to make sure.

Here's the opportunity. If you want to say “yes” to God, say something like this:

“God, I want to be a Christian for sure. I believe in Jesus. I confess my sins. I commit my life to Jesus Christ.”

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