

# Explore the Bible: Answering Critics

January 31, 2018

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Feb. 18 focuses on Acts 26:19-29.*

In the previous lesson, we studied a speech by the Apostle Paul that caused quite a stir through Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. If you peruse the chapters between that lesson and today's text, you will notice how Paul was passed around as a prisoner in a way that resembles a customer being transferred from one department to another.

*Ask: Why was Paul such a problem for so many? Prepare to give an overall response that the gospel message is offensive to anyone who does not follow Christianity.*

The fact that "the gospel demands a response of repentance and faith" leaves us unsurprised that Paul, a gospel messenger, stepped on so many toes. As we should be gospel messengers, keep in mind our aim is to be faithful messengers, not confrontational voices. Yet, the gospel is confrontational, and we should be ready to answer all critics.

## The Gospel Told (Acts 26:19-23)

By this time, Paul had retold his story multiple times, and here he is pointing out a defense for his obedience to his vision. In Acts 26:12-18, he recounts the same account we know quite well, proving this supernatural call on his life.

Paul was more interested in proving his consistency. His work fell in line with what the Jewish Scriptures taught, as well as what Jesus Christ called

him to do. Ask: *Why is consistency so important to Paul? What do unbelievers think of inconsistent Christians?*

Do not forget that this setting is a courtroom trial. Paul was on the stand to prove himself against the Jews' plot. He was not an instigator of a rebellion or new religion; he simply was following the fulfillment of the Jewish faith, which they rejected.

Paul's consistency with Scripture is something we should model when we share the gospel. And this is a message of hope (See Acts 26:5-6). The truth is that the gospel brings hope to the unsaved through faith and repentance. *Do all "unsaved" people see it this way?*

## **Objection Rebuffed (Acts 26:24-26)**

This section should catch our attention because of something easy to miss: This court session is primarily directed to King Agrippa, but it is Festus who interrupted Paul's case. In fact, the phrase for "out of your mind" gives us the literal transliteration for "maniac" (J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, 484).

Paul responded to Festus respectfully, and we also should respond respectfully to those who "listen in" on our conversations. The gospel is a message that touches the ears of both direct and indirect listeners. While the message and our stories may come off as seemingly strange, it is simply that the gospel calls us to a different way of life.

Living our lives should cause onlookers to ask questions. We are, after all, an inquisitive species. This also means we should be ready to offer responses to objections and questions. *How do we usually respond to questions about our faith or lifestyle? What can we do to prepare ourselves to respond well to critics?*

## Invitation Given (Acts 26:27-29)

Paul's direct move here is clear: He wants to hear King Agrippa's response. His question to Agrippa in front of the crowd sparked an answer that a "King James Version" audience might recall through this hymn: "Almost persuaded, come, come today; almost persuaded, turn not away; Jesus invites you here, angels are ling'ring near, prayers rise from hearts so dear; o wand'rer come!" (Philip Bliss, "Almost Persuaded").

While Agrippa hints at being nearly persuaded, the emphasis is if he could be persuaded so quickly. Notice Paul's response in verse 29. This is significant. His main desire for Agrippa, for the crowd, and for you and me is that we all would experience his hope as a Christian—minus the chains the held him in court.

*Ask: What do you think of Paul's response to this room full of critics, most of whom wanted to murder him? The gospel is always an invitation, and Paul always invited people to respond to what changed him.*

## Conclusion

Like Jesus, Paul was seen as innocent at the end of his trial. Pilate recognized the innocence of Jesus, and Agrippa recognized the innocence of Paul. Yet, because of their stand for the good news, Jesus and Paul had to face imminent persecution and sacrifice.

*Should we have the same audacity to share the gospel with everyone? Scripture says yes, but it is easy for our flesh to say no for fear of persecution. The better question is: Will we have the same audacity to be faithful messengers?*

Expect this to be a humbling lesson with somber discussion. Nevertheless, encourage your group to engage the story and respond as if they were

there during Paul's trial. It is better to experience this story together than to struggle with the confrontation of the gospel individually.

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