# Acts 25:13-26:32 - Williams

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Preacher: Tad Williams

[0:00] Please keep your Bibles open to Acts 25. I want to begin the sermon with a quote from a New Testament scholar named David J. Williams.

! I thought that's a solid name, you know? It must be pretty good. This is what he says in his commentary on Acts. Quote, With regard to both its form and its content, Paul's speech before Festus and Agrippa is the high point of the speeches in the book of Acts.
It is the most polished of all the speeches, adorned with rare words and marked by an elaborate, even grandiose style.
End quote. So our long passage this morning has right at the center a speech from Paul. It's a long speech. It's the second or third longest speech in the book of Acts.
It's the final formal speech in the book of Acts. There's a few scholars debate if there are speeches or dialogues to come, but this is the last of the formal speeches.
[1:24] And in many ways, it's Paul's closing argument. And it's the author of the book's closing argument for Christianity, for Jesus and his resurrection.

And so Paul gives this long speech in front of a large crowd of high profile people. But he doesn't just give a speech, he pushes for a response.
Well, look at that. He even makes it personally awkward. Pushing for a response. And the author is actually pushing us as readers of Acts to respond.
He's putting the question to us, even in a way that's uncomfortable. So I'll try to do that. I'll try to be uncomfortable this morning. Yeah. Come on, Donna, you love that.
Awkward. Let me give you an overview. Here's how I've broken this passage down into three sections. There's a setup to the speech. Chapter 26, verse 1, the first long section.
[2:42] I'm calling it the setup to the speech. Then there's the speech itself that Paul gives. 26, verses 2 to 23. And then there's the awkward ending to the speech.

It ends very awkwardly, very abruptly. And so we'll look at this passage in those three sections. The setup to the speech. The speech itself. And the awkward ending to the speech.
Let me give some historical background. Look at verse 13 of chapter 25. Now, when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus.
Okay. We have some important characters and an important place. Festus is the newly arrived Roman governor. He's come from Rome.
Or we're not exactly sure where he comes from. But he's the governor now of this region. He is in Caesarea, which is the Roman seat of political power over this entire province.
[3:51] Caesarea is a town on the Mediterranean coast. It's the closest major seaport to Jerusalem, about 60 miles away from the city of Jerusalem.

And so it functions as the gateway to the Mediterranean world. If you're in Jerusalem and you want to travel anywhere in this Mediterranean region, you go to Caesarea typically and get on a ship. And that's how, so Caesarea is the center of political and government power. And that's where Festus lives. He's visited there by Agrippa the king and Bernice.
Okay. Agrippa the king is Herod Agrippa II. He is the great-grandson of Herod the great, who killed the babies in Bethlehem.
Herod the great founded this Herodian dynasty of kings and rulers. It was Herod Agrippa I in Acts chapter 12, who executed James the apostle.
[4:59] And then, if you remember, gave a great speech in Caesarea, this same city, where the crowd said, Oh, the voice of a god! And he collapses on stage and it says, is eaten by worms.

That's the father of this Herod. Herod Agrippa II. And is also the father of Bernice, because Agrippa the king and Bernice are actually brothers and sister.

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Brother and sister. Full brother and sister. Biologic siblings. Who live together. And at this time, most people think are living together in an incestuous relationship.
There's a lot of rumors, a lot of scandals surrounding this couple. This couple actually becomes very prominent because just in seven or eight years from this time, a revolt breaks out in this region. And Agrippa and Bernice attempt to be peacemakers. To settle the rebellion that breaks out. It doesn't work. The Romans send a general, a new general to the region named Titus.
[6:12] General Titus. Bernice actually moves in with General Titus. And after Titus destroys the city of Jerusalem and the temple, he moves back to Rome.

Bernice moves back to Rome with General Titus. Titus becomes then the emperor of Rome. And so Bernice becomes the mistress of the emperor of Rome until she's kicked out of the palace because of her many affairs and indiscretions.
So this is Bernice. One commentator says of Agrippa and Bernice, they are a sin-soaked couple. But they are ruling as king and queen at this time of actually a small northern region of land.
But in kind of a bizarre setup, Agrippa has been given authority over the temple in Jerusalem. Including the authority to appoint the high priest and the authority over the treasury of the temple.
[7:23] So very influential role over the temple in Jerusalem. So Agrippa and his sister Bernice come to visit the new governor.

And they stay a few days, it says. Actually many days. And Festus lays Paul's case before the king. Gives a description of Paul's situation.
Very importantly, he says, I found that he committed no crimes. There were disputes about the Jewish religion.
That's Festus' summary of the matter. And he says disputes about a certain Jesus who was dead, but Paul thought to be alive. So Festus has gained some understanding of Paul's arguments and his situation.
And very importantly, there's a character named Jesus who's prominent in this whole thing. But Festus says, I don't know how to figure all this out.
[8:27] They're making political charges, but the actual charges are theological. They're theological disputes. And Agrippa, you're an expert on all this. You're in charge of the temple.

Maybe you can help me figure it out. Agrippa says, I'd like to hear the man myself. Agrippa says, great, tomorrow. Tomorrow you shall hear him.
And he schedules a... Not a trial. Sometimes people say this is a trial. This is Paul on trial. Paul's not on trial.
Because Festus has already declared the verdict. That Paul is not guilty of any capital offense or crime that's of concern to the Romans.
And Festus has already declared that he is going to send Paul to Rome to appear before Caesar. He tells Agrippa that. So the verdict is in.
[9:25] And Festus says, well, let's have an event. One commentator says, this is a gala of Roman judicial theater. Romans love speeches.

Let's have an oration. Let's have Paul. He's a celebrity prisoner. Give an oration. And for the leading citizens of Caesarea, it's an opportunity to see and be seen with the new governor.
And the who's who of the town. And let's gather this sort of infamous couple. This Agrippa and Bernice. And so it's a gala.
It's a theater event. Verse 23. On the next day, Agrippa and Bernice come with great pomp as they enter the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city.
So this is it. This is a big crowd. All the who's who. The prominent men. The military. Political leaders. And Festus gives an introduction. King Agrippa and all who are present with us.
[10:31] You see this man about the whole. About whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me. Shouting that he ought not to live any longer. He says, but I found that he had done nothing deserving death. And I'm skipping ahead.

And I decided to go ahead and send him to Rome. So Festus announces the verdict in front of this whole crowd. Tells everybody, I've found him to be innocent.
And I've already decided I'm going to send him to Rome. But then look what he says. He says, I have nothing definite to write to my lord, to Caesar, about him.
Therefore, I've brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after we have examined him, I may have something to write for it seems to me unreasonable. It's a key

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word.
Unreasonable. Festus is presenting himself before this crowd. He's the new governor. As a man of reason. Seemed unreasonable to send him.
[11:30] And I'm a reasonable man. I'm a dignified Roman politician. Man of reason. So we're here to be reasonable.

And certainly Festus is saying, I am reasonable. I'm not unreasonable. I would never. Not unreasonable. Not me. So we are here for reason.
To establish reasonable reasons. To send a prisoner to Rome who actually has already been declared to be innocent. Why are we doing this?
Everything about it is unreasonable. But Festus, to be reasonable, makes this speech of introduction. And so Agrippa says to Paul, you have permission to speak for yourself.
And Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense. That's the setup to the speech. That's the scene. That's the context. Some of the key players.
[12:34] So Paul stands before this great assembly to make his final major speech in the book of Acts. To give his last defense.

I think it was John Calvin who pointed out in his commentary on this that the irony, he said, that the prisoner Paul is free to speak to the largest audience, most prominent audience he has ever spoken to in the book of Acts.
So Calvin says, Paul here is more free as a prisoner than he would have been as a private citizen. How strange.
How strange. That Paul has opportunity to give a free speech.
And it's intimidating, of course, to speak in front of a crowd like that. But when the governor says he's innocent and I've already decided I'm going to send him to Rome, that makes it a much lower stake speech for Paul.
[13:45] He's not arguing for his life or for his innocence or anything. He just gets to explain his thought and his beliefs and his ideas. So Paul begins his speech.

Chapter 26, verse 2. I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I'm going to make my defense today against all the accusations. Especially because you are familiar with the customs and controversies of the Jews.
Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently. That's code for I'm going to give a long speech. Thank you for your patience.
This is going to go on for a while. It's a long speech. Let's look at the actual speech itself.
Chapter 26, verses 2 to 23. I'll divide the speech into three sections. Paul talks about his former life as a Pharisee.
[14:48] Paul then talks about his conversion on the road to Damascus. And then Paul talks about his ministry as a minister of Jesus Christ.

Much of this material we're familiar with. We've heard it before. This is a repeat. This is actually the third telling of Paul's conversion story. But he begins with my former life as a Pharisee and a persecutor.
What he's doing is he's establishing his credibility. That he was a Pharisee. That he was an insider with the Jewish ruling elite.
The theological elite. That he says in his speech, I cast my vote against these Christians. That's caused some commentary.
People have wondered, well, what is that? What context does Paul have a vote? Was he a member of the Sanhedrin? The ruling council of the Jewish people. Nowhere else in scripture does it say that he was a member of the Sanhedrin.
[15:58] So maybe he cast his vote as a member of a subcommittee of the Sanhedrin or something. But Paul's point is he is right in the center of it all.

In opposing these Christians. In opposing Jesus. And so he has credibility as a former Pharisee. We tend to give a lot of credibility to former whatever.
Have you ever noticed that? There's a woman named Ayaan Hirsi Ali. She was formerly a Muslim. And then formerly a very prominent atheist.
And a few years ago she converted to Christianity. And she actually, a few weeks ago, maybe a month and a half ago, gave a speech at Wheaton College. And a former Muslim, former atheist.

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So we tend to give credibility to high prominent former people when they offer then critiques and attacks of the former thing. That's what Paul's doing here.
[17:05] Establishing his credentials. I was formerly a Pharisee. Well then he tells about his conversion on the road to Damascus.

The bright light. The voice of God who speaks to him and says, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. Jesus risen from the dead.
Speaking. Powerful. Paul says, I heard him. I saw the light. He spoke to me. Paul is arguing that Jesus has risen.
And he's offering powerful proof and evidence of it. Let me say some of the details in Paul's story of his Damascus road here are different than in Acts chapter 9.
Maybe you noticed that. But the key difference is Paul in this account of the story edits out the character of Ananias. Do you remember that? In Acts 9, Paul has this experience, the bright light on the road to Damascus.
[18:20] He then goes into Damascus and a Jewish believer named Ananias comes and talks to him and speaks the word of God to him. As Paul tells the story here at this gala event.

He just says, God spoke to me. God said to me. He doesn't talk about Ananias. Some people have gotten bent out of shape over that. Oh, it's, you know, the Bible contradicts itself.
I put a note here on my outline. I'm like, no, it's not a contradiction. It's just storytelling. It's storytelling. It's what storytellers do.
I like telling stories. Sometimes I'll tell a long version of the story. If it's going well with the audience or the person I'm telling the story to, you know, I'll enjoy some more details with them.
And sometimes I'll tell a short version of the story. Doesn't mean it's a different story. It's just what storytellers do.
[19:22] So some of that, I think, is what's going on here. The essence of the story is clear. It's the same. It's actually remarkable, you think about this, that we have three gospel accounts, three different storytellers tell the story of Jesus, what he said, what he did.

And they are remarkably similar. There's some little differences. Some people want to major on these tiny little differences. You really should major on how remarkably similar three different stories are from three different storytellers.
So Paul tells his story again, this dramatic story, the light on the road. And then he begins to tell about his life as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
The mandate he receives to go speak to the Gentiles. Paul is speaking to a mostly Gentile audience here in this place. So he talks about the mandate to speak to the Gentiles.
And he says in verse 18, look at this. He says, To open their eyes, the Gentiles' eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me, in Christ.
[21:01] Paul says this is the message he's received from Jesus, and he is transmitting this message. This is the gospel.

And it is intended to open the eyes of the blind, so they may turn from darkness to light, and the power of Satan to God. And they may receive forgiveness of sins, and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me, It's a beautiful, mature expression of the gospel message.
We are saved by faith in Jesus Christ. By turning to God in faith, we receive forgiveness for our sins, and a place among those who are sanctified by faith.
Beautiful. That's the offer of the gospel. That's the grace of Jesus Christ. Paul proclaims that. He upholds that.
He says then in verse 19, Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. Notice a little thing here, how he makes it personal to Agrippa.
[22:25] He's standing in front of this big crowd. Festus has given the introduction. Bernice and Agrippa are there. But Paul is speaking, and he's speaking to Agrippa. He uses the name here of Agrippa.

He's making this personal. Notice that. He says, I was not disobedient, but I declared it all faithfully. Look in verse 22.
Paul says, I said nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass, that Christ must suffer, and that by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.

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He's giving the good news of Jesus Christ. He's making the argument that he's proclaiming nothing different. It's not a new religion. It's not different than what the Old Testament prophets and Moses said would come to pass, that Jesus is the Messiah.
Anticipated in the Old Testament has now come to be. This is the argument that he's making. And now it gets awkward. That's the end.
[23:35] That's a quick summary of the long speech, but it gets awkward because now in verse 24, as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, you are out of your mind.

Your great learning is driving you out of your mind. This from the man of reason, right?
This thing started with Festus. Oh, I'm reasonable. And now he breaks in and shouts. He's shouting, interrupts the public speaker giving the oration.
You're out of your mind. I'm sorry, who's out of his mind? Who's acting bizarrely?
Festus with a loud voice. Paul, you are out of your mind. Your great learning is driving you out of your mind. But Paul says, I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus. But I am speaking true and rational, rational words.
[24:49] Rational words. It is strange that the writer of Acts includes this little episode. Think about that.

Luke, the writer of the book, is clearly trying to present Paul as credible, as innocent of any criminal charges, as a significant figure, right?
This is what he's doing in the book, especially these last few weeks. He's building Paul's credibility. Well, now you have a governor shouting at Paul and accusing Paul of being mentally ill, of having lost his mind.
Why would you put that in your story? Well, because I think it happened. It's true. It's something that happened.
But also, Luke and the New Testament writers are not afraid of this accusation. They're not afraid of this charge of insanity or mental illness.
[26:01] Because they think it is rational to believe in Jesus. They think it is intellectually credible and defensible, that it is the best explanation of the facts.

Paul will speak to this topic, this issue of rationality. In 1 Corinthians chapter 15, verse 19, Paul says it this way.
He says, If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. If we say we're in Christ, we believe in the resurrected Jesus, but yet our hope is only in this life.
We're putting all our eggs into the basket of this life, into our educational degree, or our career, or our 401k, or our social standing, or our status, or who our friends are, or what our clothes are, or our house, or our car.
This life only. Paul says, We of all men are most to be pitied. We are delusional. If that's what we're doing.
[27:22] If that's how you're living. That's delusional, Paul says. And so delusion. Are we delusional?

Are you delusional? Are you living a life that's just really mental illness? Saying you believe that some character named Jesus is risen from the dead, and you're banking your life on that.
Are you banking your life on that? Paul is banking his life on that.
He has gone all in on the resurrected Jesus, and he is passionately declaring that, and this annoys Festus.
We don't know exactly what it is, but something about it just triggers Festus, and he erupts. Paul says, You're out of your mind. Paul quickly says, No, I'm not out of my mind, but then look what he does.
[28:33] He turns right back to Agrippa. Because he's been speaking to Agrippa, and he clearly, he's focused on Agrippa in this. Verse 27, Paul says, King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets?

I know that you believe. He's saying, If you believe the prophets, you have to believe in Jesus. It's true and rational to believe in Jesus if you believe in the prophets.
Do you believe in the prophets? I know you believe. And Paul is pushing King Agrippa to make a decision to commit to Jesus.
Right on stage. Right in front of the who's who. Well, Agrippa deflects this. He says, In a short time, would you persuade me to be a Christian?

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He knows exactly what Paul's doing, what Paul's trying to do. Would you persuade me? And Paul says, Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me this day would become such as I am.
[29:49] Except for these chains. I think he makes a joke here. I think this moment has become very awkward in the assembly hall. Awkwardly personal. The governor has started shouting at the speaker and now the king and the speaker.

This is very uncomfortable. And Paul boldly declares, I want all of you. But then I think he sort of diffuses the tension by saying, well, yeah, except for these chains.
He's a prisoner. He knows he's a prisoner. He knows he's a person of no repute in this crowd. And he's also not afraid of that or even ashamed of it.
He makes a joke about it, makes light of it, diffuses some tension. But it's gotten so awkward, it's so uncomfortable, that verse 30, the king rose and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them and they withdraw.
So the platform clears out, the dais empties out. They go into the back room, the backstage room. And look how it ends.
[31:00] And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, this man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment. It's again this declaration of Paul's innocence. And then Agrippa said to Festus, this man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.

So Agrippa gives a verdict on the matter. Festus has given a verdict, now Agrippa gives his verdict. This man could have been set free. He's innocent. There's nothing here that, again, this is a curious ending.
The story really builds to this kind of final word from Agrippa. If you notice, this whole passage begins with a private conversation between Festus and Agrippa, and now it ends with this private conversation between Festus and Agrippa, in which Agrippa gives his verdict and says, no, he's innocent.
We are, as readers, sort of left to wonder, well, has Paul made a mistake here? Has Paul, has he overstepped? Has he made a strategic error in all this?
I don't think that's the point of the story here. I think the point is to give this verdict from Agrippa of his innocence, but John, last week, led us in a discussion of God's sovereignty and our actions and human responsibility and how these things work together, and there's a great mystery to all that.
[32:30] God is sovereign. God has told Paul, you're going to go to Rome. So Paul knows that. And indeed, that's what's going to happen. We'll see next week.

Paul heads to Rome. Let me end our time with reflecting on three things, concluding applications and implications for us.
I want to think a little bit more about the anger of Festus. Festus erupts in anger. Sometimes people do that in response to the claims of Jesus and to our attempts to witness.
You should know that. We should all try to be as winsome and rational and calm as possible, but sometimes people will respond with anger and ridicule and even accusations of irrationality.
Remember years ago, I was doing a construction project for a client here in Wheaton, and this man is a professor at Northwestern University, actually, a kind of prominent intellectual school and center, and I was working in his house for him, and he said to me, he said, Tad, so are you one of these evangelical Christians?
[33:52] And I said, well, I don't know what you mean by evangelical. People use that word in different ways. I said, but I'm a Christian. Yeah, he said, but are you one of these born-again, Bible-believing, go-to-church-all-the-time Christians?

I said, well, yeah, that fits. You know, if that shoe fits, I'll wear it, I guess. Yes. Yeah. And he said, he's like, do you believe in miracles?
And he said it like that. Do you believe in miracles? I said, yeah, yeah, I do. I believe in miracles. I believe in God and that God has done miracles and he is capable of still doing miracles in this world and he does, in fact, still do miracles.
So, yes, really? You know, and he looked at me like I was three-headed monster from Mars or something, right? We actually had a long, wonderful conversation.
He gave me a book to read that was critical of Christianity and I read it and talked to him and I gave him a book and we had several kind of sitting on his back patio talking about books, actually. But people respond.

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[35:17] He didn't, this man didn't respond to me in anger but sometimes people respond in anger. Festus gets angry about this. So you should know that and just be prepared for that and Paul gives this beautiful speech, the most polished of all his speeches, takes his time, not under pressure.

This man responds in anger. That happens. Number two, I want to think about the indifference of Agrippa.
Agrippa responds with indifference. Kind of shrugs it off, avoids the personal implication of the thing. Oh, you want me to be a Christian in such a short time?
People do that. You'll get that response a lot. Indifference. Maybe that's the most common response.
How about you? Do you believe, are you living your life banking on Jesus? Yes. Leads to the third and final implication for us.
[36:36] The Apostle Paul is bold in his faithful obedience. He's bold. He pushes in this speech for this personal response.

He makes it personal. This is not a detached theological reading of a paper. Let's all go and enjoy hors d'oeuvres.
That's not what the Apostle Paul is doing. He wants a response. He wants to make this personal. Do you believe it?
Do you understand it? Will you live your life in the confidence of Jesus Christ and in his resurrection? And will you bear witness boldly?
Not trying to be awkward and weird and uncomfortable, but being willing to. Being willing to be perceived in that way, are we bold in our obedience?
[37:37] May God help us and grant us the faith and the conviction and the filling of his spirit to be bold and faithful like the Apostle Paul.

Let's pray together. Father, Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word, this beautiful story. Help us to be bold and faithful.
Help us to be filled with faith and true conviction. Help us indeed to bow the knee so that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

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