As we return to our journey through Acts, we return to the Herod’s Praetorium in Caesarea where Paul is defending his faith in front of King Agrippa, his powerful sister Berenice, the Roman provincial governor named Festus, along with many other tribunes, generals, and political leaders in the region. Paul has just given his testimony as part of his defense, so let’s pick up the story there. Please stand and let us read together Acts 26:19-32.

The first thing for us to remember here is that Paul is making his case primarily to King Agrippa, the Roman appointed “King of the Jews,” because Paul is hoping that Agrippa is familiar with the Jewish scriptures and will come to understand that Paul’s faith in Jesus as the resurrected Messiah of God is consistent with the promises of God as found in scripture. Paul has just borne witness to his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, where the Lord corrected his wrong thinking and then charged him to be a witness both to the Jews and the Gentiles….which is exactly what Paul has been doing—first in Damascus, then Jerusalem, then all of Judea and even among the Gentiles in Asia Minor. Paul then makes clear that the Jews seized him in the temple and tried to kill him simply because Paul was being obedient to the Divine commandment that he received on the road to Damascus. Nevertheless, Paul remains committed to his mission. As he says in vss. 32-33, “To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the 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.”

First, notice that Paul equates standing before the “royals” as a prisoner in chains as “the help that comes from God!” Do you see how ironic that is? Most of us would NOT equate spending two years in chains under false charges as “the help that comes from God,” right? Most of us would be shaking our fists at heaven and crying out, “Where are you God? Don’t you care that I’m suffering injustice?” Scores of people equate their suffering as evidence of God’s absence…but not Paul. The irony of this statement is one of the reasons that Festus will accuse Paul of being mad. We’ll come back to that in a minute.

Now notice Paul’s closing argument. He won’t get to unpack it due to Festus’ interruption, but Paul makes a very bold claim: “So I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the 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.”

Again, Paul argues that his proclamation of Jesus as the risen Messiah is consistent with Judaism, because, according to Paul, both Moses as the writer of the law and the prophets of God pointed to a Messiah who would 1) suffer; 2) rise from the dead; and 3) serve as the “light” for both the Jews and the Gentiles. I know we’ve covered some of this ground earlier in our journey.
through Acts, but let’s revisit those scriptures for just a moment because Paul is assuming that Agrippa would be familiar with these scriptures.

First, Paul argues that the ancient scriptures predicted a “suffering” Messiah. The Greek word *pathetos* used here is an adjective that describes the nature of the Messiah as “one who would undergo rejection.” The most famous scripture that Agrippa would have certainly been familiar with was Isaiah 53:3, “He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” Paul would have also been referring to Psalm 2:2, “The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together against the LORD and against his Anointed…” Paul would also appeal to Psalm 118:22, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”

Next, Paul argues that the scriptures predicted a Messiah that would raise from the dead. Paul would have appealed to Psalm 16:9-10, “Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.” We’ve seen Peter appeal to Psalm 110:1 as a prediction of Christ’s resurrection: The Lord says to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.”

Finally, Paul argues that the Messiah brings light and hope both to the Jews and the Gentiles. He would point to Isaiah 49:6, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Again, Paul doesn’t unpack all of these scriptures for the court because the vast majority of the people in the room are pagans with little or no exposure to the Jewish scriptures. But Paul’s hope here is that Agrippa will recall these scriptures that he has been taught since his childhood, and that the Holy Spirit will bring these things to mind for the king as God did for Paul.

Now…before Paul finishes his presentation for Agrippa, the Roman governor, Festus, interrupts. In vs. 24 we read, “And 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.’”

Festus interrupts because he can…he’s the most powerful person in the room, and quite frankly, he has no frame of reference to understand what Paul is talking about. Festus acknowledges that Paul is brilliant, but he asserts that Paul’s brilliance has led him to believe the impossible and to think like a crazy person…he has “lost touch with reality.” Why would Festus react in such a way?

Dr. Charles Cochrane points out in *Christianity and Classical Culture* that the typical Roman worshiped imperial fortune—the prominence and success of the Empire. Festus, being first and last a politician, worshipped power and was a practical materialist. (Hughes, *Acts*; p 325). Thus, as a pagan and a materialist, the resurrection of a dead man was beyond his imagination. Even if
that were true, to think that allegiance to Jesus would be worth persecution, chains, and suffering was even more of a stretch for Festus. Remember, for the practical materialist, the greatest good is pleasure and power…so any claim of truth that would require suffering, sacrifice, and even martyrdom was unthinkable. Thus…Paul comes across as crazy.

Notice, Paul is not put off by Festus’ interruption and insult…he has been called worse things to be sure! Paul responds in vs. 25, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner.”

Paul’s response is brilliant, and I will circle back to dwell upon his words in just a minute. But for now, notice that Paul doesn’t get sucked into an exchange of insults. Church, people may call us names…they may call us “Jesus freaks” or “religious nut-jobs,” but it is never OK to retaliate with name calling of our own. Remember Paul’s dignified and thoughtful response when you are defending the faith on social media or you get into a debate with your family members. The Jesus-follower must rise above insults and argumentative tactics…we have to keep our cool under pressure and bear witness to Jesus even when we are treated poorly. Amen?

Paul is a cool cucumber…he simply disagrees with Festus, but does so with respect and honor, referring to him as “most excellent Festus.” Paul asserts that he is telling the truth, and that what he believes and what he has said is actually quite rational. Again, we’ll come back to that at the end of my message.

Paul really doesn’t skip a beat here, but he recognizes that due to Festus’ interruption and limited attention span, this hearing is quickly coming to an end. So Paul does what every great evangelist does: he calls the question. He looks directly at King Agrippa and he says, “King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.”

Paul clearly puts Agrippa on the spot. As the King of the Jews, it would literally be heresy for him to deny the inspiration of God’s prophets, and at the same time Agrippa is not about to align himself with a prisoner in front of all the royals assembled in that room. So Agrippa masterfully counters with a question of his own, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?”

It’s hard to know what tone Agrippa was using when he asked this question of Paul. Some suppose that Agrippa was mocking Paul…but I don’t think so. I think he was carefully dodging the question to avoid a political snare, but his words simply suggest that it would take more than a few minutes for Agrippa to be convinced. Agrippa’s question actually registers a little admiration for Paul’s direct approach in calling the question, even if it’s a bit unrealistic to expect the listeners to “convert” so quickly. Nevertheless, since he has asked Paul a question, Paul takes full advantage of having the last word. He boldly responds, “Whether long or short, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.”
Paul is not a religious pluralist, nor is he in doubt that eternity for all people is on the line. Paul states with passion and conviction that his prayer to God is that every person in the room would become a Jesus follower…not just tolerant of Christianity, but full-fledged disciples who would be sanctified by faith in Jesus and join him on the mission to reach the world for Christ.

Now…note the irony of this statement. Every person in that room is currently enjoying a better “quality of life” than Paul. They have wealth, power, freedom and privilege. They enjoy pleasures that Paul has never known, and following this hearing, they will go on to enjoy such pleasures while Paul will return to the isolation of a prison cell.

In what world does a prisoner in chains say to the wealthy, “I would wish to God that all of you might become like me.” That’s bizarre, right? The normal perspective of this world would be exactly the opposite. We would expect the poor, imprisoned man in chains to say, “I would wish to God that I may one day become like you…wealthy, privileged, and in power.” You see the irony, right? The irony was not lost on the court. And remember that Rome was the center for religious pluralism. It was an “anything goes” culture as far as religion was concerned, just as long as your religion did not threaten “the Roman way.” And yet here Paul has the nerve to say that he would hope that all of the people…Jews and Gentiles…would surrender their lives to Jesus. At the moment which Paul utters these words, the meeting is over. We read in vs. 30, “Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them.”

Paul’s faith may have been rooted in Judaism, but what just happened in this courtroom was not typical Jewish behavior. Judaism was never “evangelical” in nature per se, particularly when it came to engaging the Gentile occupiers. But the royals in Caesarea now understand that Paul has not just been defending himself to the court…Paul has been proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ in hopes of converting them all. When the trial began, everyone in the room believed that Paul had been invited to defend himself before their judgments…but they have now become unconsciously aware that they are the ones who now stand before a Judge. They are quite suddenly the ones who must give an account for how they respond to the Risen One…the Resurrected One wrapped in brilliant light who completely transformed this man before them. There is an undeniable Presence in the room who even now seems to be pressing down upon them in a way that demands an answer.

I’ve seen this scene played out many times all over the world when the Gospel has been proclaimed. I have even seen a similar scenario every so often on a Sunday morning as people stream out of our sanctuary, particularly those who wandered into the church quite unaware of the power of the Gospel. The look is always one of frustration, confusion, and a desire to get out of the building as soon as possible. After all, no one enjoys being put on the spot…no one enjoys being confronted with the blinding light of truth that reveals their current darkness and the threat of impending judgment. No one enjoys the dread-like conviction of the Holy Spirit as he presses down upon a sinner who is not yet ready to yield in repentance. Time and again I’ve seen people shut down and walk away…on a desperate search for “normal” air, such that they can avoid looking upon the deeper matters of the soul. Such is why the one who bears witness to
the Gospel can expect anger, insults, and even persecution…it’s not you—it’s not me—it’s the Holy Spirit of God who presses down upon sin-sick souls in a way that they are unaccustomed to experiencing. It is a claim of truth that is so comprehensive, so inescapable, that we either kneel, or we get out as fast as possible.

On this day, the court rises and makes a hasty exit, and Paul returns to his cell…frustrated? Probably. Discouraged? Likely. Defeated? Not at all…Paul was faithful to bear witness. He scattered the seeds of the gospel as the Lord commanded of him…perhaps some seed would land upon fertile soil, perhaps not. Paul understood that the results of his testimony were beyond his control…so I suspect he slept soundly that evening knowing that he was faithful to bear witness to the Truth…he did what he was saved to do.

Now, I think it’s likely that someone in that hearing eventually became of follower of Jesus, and I’ll tell you why. Because right here at the end of the passage we get access to information that only an insider…only a royal…would have had access to. Luke writes, “And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, ‘This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.” And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

I can’t help but wonder how Luke got access to what was said privately between Agrippa and Festus. Perhaps he overheard the conversation…I think that’s unlikely. I think it’s more likely that Luke eventually had a conversation with a member of the court…perhaps Berenice, or her sons, or one of the many members of the court who felt strangely led to pursue the Christians to learn more about this man, Jesus of Nazareth. Isaiah 55:10-11 state, “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth: it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” The proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is never a wasted effort…the Holy Spirit is always at work in those moments…there is always movement…there is always a supernatural shift at work, though we who proclaim the Gospel may never see what comes of it in our lifetimes. I have grown accustom to sharing the Gospel as an act of love for people and an act of obedience to my Lord, knowing full well that I may see little in terms of measurable results. That used to bother me, but over the years I have come to “see” what the eyes cannot see…I have come to “see” those things that are eternal…the love of God, the promises of God, the power of God, the sovereignty of God, and the providence of God. I have come to see that this actually is my Father’s world, and I am just a small…a very small…character in a much larger story. Such is why I have grown content to bear witness with all the passion I can muster, and then rest in the knowledge that the results belong to God. He never charged me to convince people…He charged me to be His witness. The same is true for all who are disciples of Jesus…bear witness…call the question…and rest knowing you have been faithful servants of your King.
Now, let’s conclude by once again considering Paul’s response to Festus for just a minute. Paul says something that I want to unpack, and it’s these words, “I am not out of my mind, oh excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words.”

Like Paul, Christians today are often considered “crazy” or at the minimum, anti-intellectual. We are accused of embracing “fairy tales” and “irrational beliefs.” Those who critique Christianity often use such insults, and they say it in such a way as though their comments are obvious to any sensible person. “After all,” they say, “nobody has ever seen God. Nobody can prove that God exists by a mathematical formula or by the naked eye, so clearly it is irrational to believe something that you cannot see or measure or prove through observation.” They scoff at the notion that Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead because “everyone knows that dead people always stay dead,” so any claim to the contrary clearly must fall into the category of irrational thought or wishful thinking at best.

What breaks my heart even more than the insults is to see our college students and many within the Christian church slowly nod their heads in consent, giving up the “rational” ground to “modern science” and the skeptics; thus resigning themselves to a faith of “irrational wishful thinking,” or even worse, walking away from their faith altogether in an effort to be “sane” and “realistic.” So…is that true? Are we Christians in spite of the evidence? Have we lost our minds?

Nothing could be further from the truth. As Paul said to Festus, the claims of Christianity are both true and rational; more so, I would submit, than any other competing worldview. Such is why countless millions of thinking people over the past 2000 years…professionals in every field…have subscribed to the claims of scripture with absolute intellectual integrity. You disagree? Think you are smart and rational as an atheist? Let’s put that to the test, shall we?

Consider the basic premise of the atheist who must hold fast to the conviction that the everything came from nothing. Let me ask you a rational, logical question: what comes from nothing? Nothing, right? Any conviction that the universe somehow created itself out of nothing completely defies the logical law of causality…that all things that come into existence must have a cause. To defy logic and basic observation is the essence of irrational thought…thus to believe that the universe created itself out of nothing is nothing short of irrational, wishful thinking.

The atheist must also believe that human beings are purposeless, impersonal, without design and amoral. Does that conviction align with what we can observe in our own experience and history as the human race? Could anyone deny that from the very beginning of human history, the record clearly shows that people have always thought themselves to be moral, purposeful, designed and personal? Is that not consistent with your own experience? Remember: for a truth claim to be rational, it must be consistent with reality. To insist upon a truth claim that defies the way things actually are is, again, the essence of irrational thought. So who is being irrational?
Consider the biblical worldview which attributes the existence of personal, purposeful, designed, and moral creatures to a personal, purposeful, moral Designer—a creator that made us in His own image. Such a conviction aligns both with observation and logic. There is not one iota of “irrational” thought attached to the conviction that God exists and that God is responsible for the universe. Things look designed because they are designed; we seem to be moral creatures because we are moral creatures who live under the Moral Law set in place by God; we know ourselves to be personal because we were created in the image of a Personal God; we strive to identify our purpose in life because the One who created us made us for a purpose. Makes sense, right? Nothing irrational there at all.

“Ah,” you say, “but I believe in science…not the Bible.” Ok, let’s put your belief in science to the test. Modern science asserts that the earth is 4.5 billion years old and that dinosaurs roamed the earth 66 million years ago. This claim is based upon the strata, or the layers that we find in the rocks when we drill down hundreds of feet into the earth. This dating of the earth is necessary to support the Darwinians’ claim that life on earth evolved over billions of years through time and chance…which means the Genesis account of creation is wrong, and that God is unnecessary. Here’s my question: Is it rational to believe that the dinosaurs roamed the earth 66 million years ago when paleontologists have discovered soft-tissues and blood cells in the bones of dinosaurs in addition to copious amounts of carbon 14 in the oil, in the coal, and in the dinosaur bones as well? If carbon 14 is in the bones of dinosaurs, and the half-life of Carbon 14 is 5730 years, then those bones cannot be older than 12,000 years…period. That’s the science. So what is a rational, reasonable conclusion regarding the observable scientific facts that soft tissue is in the bones of the dinosaurs, carbon 14 is in the dinosaur bones, and carbon 14 is in the oil, and in the coal…all of which are said to be at least 66 million years old? Church…help me out…I’m just a “wishful thinking Bible beater”…but I’m pretty sure a rational, reasonable hypothesis based upon the observable evidence is that the dinosaurs are less than 12,000 years old, as are the oil and the coal, right? Which means that the whole theory of macro-evolution is an irrational, contrary-to-the-evidence, wishful thinking fantasy for those who don’t want to accept what is actually observable and inescapably true: God created the heavens and the earth…and we are all accountable. Those are true and rational words, based on the evidence.

Let us consider the claims of Christianity, specifically that Jesus Nazareth rose from the dead three days after his public execution. All of our faith hinges upon this claim of the empty tomb, and the atheists love to point out that it is illogical and wishful thinking to believe a man ever rose from the dead. Is it?

It may be illogical and wishful thinking to believe that dead people regularly rise up out of their graves and walk around the earth…there is no evidence to suggest that is the case. But is it illogical or irrational to conclude that God raised one man…a man born to peasants…a man who was basically homeless…a man who died a criminal’s death on a Roman cross …is it irrational to conclude that this ONE man rose again from the dead?
When you consider the evidence, it is not only logical to believe in the resurrection of Christ, I would go so far as to say that any other “theory” surrounding the resurrection accounts are doomed to the camp of “irrational” at an epic level. In other words, there is not even a logical, rational alternative to the resurrection account of Jesus. Think about it: apart from Jesus raising from the dead, how is it that we would know anything at all about this carpenter King? Movements die when the leaders die. Yet Christianity exploded throughout the ancient world in an unprecedented way AFTER Jesus was crucified. If the disciples lied about his resurrection, what was their motivation? Why would they willingly die for something they knew was a lie? If Paul never encountered the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus, how can we account for his life, his letters, his suffering, and his martyrdom? All he would have ever had to say is, “I was wrong…I just made it up…Jesus is dead. It’s all good.” End of story…no more stonings, no more prison, no martyrdom. But Paul, like countless others, testified to what he had seen and heard, even at the cost of his life. These witnesses did not die for make believe ideas…they died bearing witness to events that happened. Try fashioning a reasonable alternative explanation for any of the four gospels and the Christian movement following the death of Jesus on a cross, and you will quickly find yourself in the land of irrational wishful thinking that breaks every rule of logic. There is only one reasonable conclusion: the God who created the universe raised Jesus from the dead, just as was predicted hundreds of years earlier. That’s not a normal occurrence, it happened ONCE, which makes Jesus extraordinary…the resurrection validates His identity as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Friends… I would submit to you that Christianity is true for many reasons, not the least of which is this: Christianity and the biblical worldview accounts for what we can observe, beginning with ourselves and the world in which we live. Christianity provides reasonable, rational, and true answers regarding how we got here, the age of the dinosaurs, the fossil records, and the brilliant design that we observe in the human body and throughout the universe…the Bible accounts for why everything is beautiful and yet broken, the problem of evil, why we all long for justice and stink at justice, what the purpose of life is, what happens after we die, and most importantly, the way back to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Do your homework…and be encouraged: we have not lost our minds, as followers of Jesus, we are speaking true and rational words.

So…I’m calling the question: Jesus Christ is LORD. Do you believe? What do you believe? Do you know? This fall I will begin preaching through a 30 week series called, BELIEVE, in which we will unpack the 10 core beliefs of the Christian faith, the 10 core practices of the Christian faith, and the 10 core virtues of the Christian faith. This series is designed to equip you and your family to BE the Light of Christ. This series will be for every member of the family…so it will be taught in our children’s Sunday School classes, our youth ministry, our small groups, and from the pulpit. If ever there was a time to begin a neighborhood group in the hope of sharing the gospel with your neighbors…this fall will be that time. You’ll be hearing more about Beli system in the days and weeks to come, but right now, I hope you’ll begin to ask God if He wants you to host a group for your neighbors or your co-workers or your classmates—so they, too, can dig into the Word and discover the 30 greatest claims of the Bible. If you might be
willing to host a group, please inform your campus pastors. I’m telling you right now…the Believe series is going to be a game-changer…it will ignite our mission to Be the Light.

As many of you know, I will be taking the next few weeks for study leave and vacation, so I want you to know what’s coming up in my absence. Next week is Youth Sunday, so come with great expectations as our teens lead the worship and share the Gospel. The following three weeks will feature a series on Oneness in Marriage, featuring Pastor Tami and Pastor Greg. I will return to the pulpit on August 19th to begin our wrap up of Acts, and our Believe series will kick off on Sept. 9. That’s the plan…but for now, let’s close our time in prayer, and let’s ask God to empower us to be the light of Christ in this hurting culture… …praying first, creating safe harbor, pouring into relationships, empowering our youth, loving generously, and speaking words that are both true and rational…so that the lost are found, the broken are made whole, the fatherless find hope, and our city is blessed. Let’s pray.