

Words and Deeds: Kicking Against The Goads
By Jason Huff
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Ezekiel 1:28-2:7; John 3:16-21; Acts 25:22-26:32

Our final Scripture reading today is from Acts 25:22-26:32. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "Then [Herod] Agrippa said to Festus, "I would like to hear this man [Paul] myself." He replied, "Tomorrow you will hear him." 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 to live any longer. I found 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."

So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: "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. That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts 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."

At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane." "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 believe the prophets? I know you do."

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" Paul replied, "Short time or long -- I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains." The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. They left the room, and while talking with one another, they said, "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment." Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

Rebellion is a loaded word. I grew up thinking "rebellion" was a good word because of *Star Wars* – the good guys were known as the Rebellion or the Rebel Alliance. They were rebelling against the tyranny of the evil Galactic Empire. Our nation was in large part founded on rebellion...many people came here to practice their own religious beliefs that rebelled against the status quo. The American Revolution was a rebellion against England. Our American nature rebels against being told what to do or how to do it.

Sometimes it's a good thing. Sometimes it's not. The South rebelled against the North over slavery. Rebellions in Russia and China meant to be "for the people" led to the murder of tens of millions and the oppression of hundreds of millions more under Communism. Rebelling against genuine injustice can be a good thing, but rebellion often leads to pain and heartache and bloodshed. And in the case of our relationship with God, our rebellion against Him has led to fearful consequences that have shook the world time and time again.

This passage, in several different ways, is about rebellion. It's the third variation we're heard on Paul's conversion story, but despite how long it is, that's not really the point this time. We're told different details, and those details engage directly with Paul's primary hearers: Herod Agrippa and Festus. The details relate to us all, and this passage should make us contemplate our own rebellious hearts and what is to be done about them.

Rewinding just a little bit as a reminder: Paul is under arrest, having been sent to Caesarea on charges that he had desecrated the Jewish temple, taught against the Jewish faith, and was involved in starting riots through his preaching throughout the Roman Empire. Governor Felix put him under a form of house arrest for two years. When Festus became governor, he once again heard Paul's case. Knowing the trial was a sham, that Festus wanted to do a favor for the Jewish leadership, Paul appealed to Caesar, as he had the right to do as a Roman citizen. Before sending him to Rome, Festus met with Herod Agrippa, the grandson of the notorious Herod the Great, and gave him the lowdown on Paul. That's where we're at.

This time, Paul is not on trial before his accusers. Instead, he's before the men who will help Festus decide what to say to Caesar about the case. Festus had complained in the past that he didn't know enough about Jewish and Christian beliefs and culture to rule fairly. So Festus creates a show trial before Herod Agrippa and all the important people in Caesarea to advise him what he should do. Now Festus had just become governor in the last month – from his speech and from the people invited to hear Paul, you can tell Festus is trying to ingratiate himself to all the important people in the region. Paul is being used as part of a political game where Festus gains favor, Herod Agrippa gains status, and all the well-to-do are delighted.

Now Paul's defense changes a little bit this time, probably because he knows that Agrippa understands Jewish issues and beliefs and, while he may not be won over, he can legitimately explain the squabble between the Jewish leaders and Paul. Paul's defense is not based on their lack of evidence. Instead, he gets to the very heart of the matter – why the Sanhedrin and the Pharisees are after him.

As a strict Pharisee, Paul knew the Scriptures forwards and backwards. He understood the promises God had made to His people. And ultimately, what Paul argues is that the Jewish leaders are actually in rebellion against God and His promises, but Christians are the ones who are accepting the promise.

From the time of the forefathers, the Jewish people had been waiting for a Messiah, one who would lead God's people into triumph. They had also awaited the resurrection of the dead they believed would come on the day of final judgment. As the prophets of old had said, even though most people didn't understand their words, the Messiah would suffer and be the firstborn from the dead, fulfilling both of God's promises. Paul preaches that this perfect Messiah is Jesus, and He has fulfilled what God had said would come to be. When the Pharisees and Sanhedrin reject Jesus, they are rejecting the very fulfillment of the promises their people had been waiting on for over two thousand years!

Paul's testimony about Jesus rings true because he was once one of the foremost Pharisees, rounding up the Christians, having them arrested, having them tried and executed. Paul was unwavering in his commitment to getting rid of what he saw as a crazy cult that were teaching the people false doctrines about a lunatic. It was only when the risen Jesus came to him on the road to Damascus that Paul learned the truth, directly, that Jesus is the Christ, the savior. It was only at that point that Paul became the foremost evangelist, spreading throughout the world that forgiveness through Jesus' blood was available through repentance from sin and faith in Him.

He was obedient to that vision, and that is why the Jewish leadership wanted him dead. Some of them didn't believe in the resurrection; others didn't believe in repentance because they thought their strict adherence to the Law made God owe them something. None of them wanted Jesus because He would overthrow all their power, all their teachings. They would have to admit they were wrong. And they wouldn't do it.

Now there's a very interesting phrase in this particular telling of the story. Jesus tells Paul, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." It's a bizarre phrase, something we don't hear at all now. However, when we understand it, we get the heart of this passage. When someone tied up a team of oxen to go out into the fields and plow, they'd set up a pointy stick behind them called a goad. Because just like all of us, oxen aren't that interested in working hard, and when they get tired of pulling the plow behind them, they kick backwards. And when they kick, they kick into the goad. That bit of pain tells them, don't fight back, don't look back, keep moving forward, keep doing what you're supposed to be doing.

In effect, Jesus was calling Paul a stubborn mule who'd been kicking against what was genuinely true. Paul had been in rebellion, but now God had given him the opportunity to set right what he'd done. And through Jesus' appearance beside him, Paul was absolutely convinced that Jesus was the resurrected Messiah that the Jewish people had awaited for so long.

But then Festus and Agrippa show their own rebellion. Festus calls him mad, driven crazy by all his learning. Paul comes back and says, "Um, no, this is true and reasonable. It has been prophesied, for one, and it also hasn't taken place in a corner. All of this – Jesus' life and death and resurrection, my preaching – they weren't done in a corner. They were done in full view of Israel herself."

Festus is rebelling against God, and his excuse is logic. Paul, what you're saying goes against my understanding of the world, so it's got to be false and you've got to be nuts. How much rebellion in our world today is driven by so-called logic? How many think, "Science and faith don't mix, and I'm going to choose science"? How many think, "Nobody comes back from the dead, so I won't believe it even if thousands of witnesses testify to it"?

Logic has its place. Logical thinking keeps us from making poor decisions and irrational choices. But we as the human race know so little. We cannot hope to understand everything or solve everything. Instead, we have to turn to the Maker of logic and pray to Him that we might first have faith, then seek understanding based on our faith. If we want to understand everything perfectly about God before we believe, it won't happen.

Agrippa's rebellion comes from a different place – not logic but time. He asks Paul, “Do you think you can convince me to be a Christian so quickly?” And Paul makes a joke about it, “Short time or long, I pray everybody here would be just like me – except these chains!” And everyone agrees that he's innocent, that there's nothing Paul has done worth a trial, but now that things are in motion, he *has* to go to Caesar. But Agrippa sidesteps the question of faith by saying, “It's too soon. I couldn't possibly decide so quickly.”

But the time to follow God is always now, not later, not some day in the future. When we hear the good news of Jesus, the only proper response is one of faith – as Paul put it, for us to “repent and turn to God and prove our repentance by our deeds.” Would have it been embarrassing for Agrippa in that moment to come to faith? Surely. And yet the gospel is worth the embarrassment. Going from disobedience to obedience is our only real choice once we understand the incredible gift God has given us in Jesus. To delay is to stay in rebellion. We may not have tomorrow. Today is the day of turning to Christ; today is the day to love our neighbor as ourselves; today is the day to become a person of integrity. No other moment is promised to us – all we have is now to live as God instructed us.

And that really leads us to the whole thing we've got to contemplate today: how are we still in rebellion? From knowing everyone here, I've got to believe that you have faith, that you have turned to Christ, that you have made an initial prayer of belief and you have followed that up with some deeds. If you haven't, again, don't rebel like Agrippa did and wait. But most of us have. The question is, what in us still needs to be brought in line with God?

The rebellion in our hearts goes deep. We love the idea of a Savior, but not the need for repentance. We love that God chose us, but we find it hard to choose to do what He commands. We love that God loves us, but we love the darkness, and when we hear that Jesus sent Paul to “open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light,” we recognize that often we'd rather flee into the darkness than to come into the light where God is and have our evils exposed.

The key I keep hearing from this passage is, *don't kick against the goads*. Don't kick against those things that have been set up to teach you the truth. Don't kick against the solid teaching of Scripture. Don't kick against your faith when the world tells you that you're wrong or bigoted or on the wrong side of history. Let Jesus guide you as the One behind the plow, steering you where you need to be. When we rebel against God, we only hurt ourselves and others; the goad gets us. But if you don't kick against God, against His Word, against His Truth, the rebellion in your heart will die day by day, just like Jesus said it had to do.

There have been a couple of big news stories in the last few weeks about two prominent Christians who have essentially renounced their faith. One is Joshua Harris. He wrote a book in the '90s called *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* that was extremely influential to many Evangelicals. The book ran with the idea that purity was something you could never get back, and so you should stay as far away from anything that could dent your purity, including dating. He recommended courtship, basically supervised dating intended to lead to marriage. If you did this, he wrote, your marriage would be wonderful and you could give your spouse the gift of your purity and God would bless you in all sorts of ways. The other is Marty Sampson, a songwriter for Hillsong Church – and in full disclosure, we've used some of his songs.

We always grieve when someone says, “I was a Christian but now I’m not.” We pray for them to come into the light of truth. And yet it’s not at all surprising that it happened. Joshua Harris’ book was an extension of the Word of Faith heresy, which teaches that God will always reward you in certain specific ways if you do what the church tells you to do – whether that’s giving money to the church or not dating or whatever. While a lot of Hillsong’s music is theologically sound, guess what? The main preacher at Hillsong Australia where the movement started preaches the Word of Faith heresy! These two gentlemen were taught a false gospel, and unfortunately, rather than being steered correctly, they have kicked against the goads hard, abandoning the faith rather than abandoning the poor teachings they learned and taught. It’s the same rebellion we see in Festus and Agrippa: the refusal to embrace the true Jesus.

Friends, don’t kick against the goads. Keep turning to God in prayer, in Scripture, learning what is really there, following Jesus as He is seen there, obeying the Father as He has instructed us in His Word. May we examine ourselves carefully. May we pray that the Spirit would empower us to kick out any false beliefs we have and any sinful actions that betray our Lord. But also go encouraged. Paul once fought Christianity tooth and nail; yet he became one of the greatest instruments of God’s love and grace. Let God lead you, and you will fulfill Paul’s prayer that we would be like him – fully devoted followers of Jesus the Christ who live in His joy and love every day.