

The Naked Bible Podcast 2.0

Number 58

“Acts 23-26”

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With

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Acts 23-26

These chapters cover the trials and imprisonments of Paul before setting sail for Rome to appeal to Caesar. Rather than focusing on the trial scenes, this episode of the podcast for the most part focuses on several statements of theological importance nestled amid the narrative, such as the what the Sadducees denied about angels, whether it is proper to say that Christianity was viewed as a heresy in the first century (i.e., whether our typical understanding of that word applies correctly), and whether Jesus was a secretly a member of a religious sect that the New Testament writers don't want you to know about.

paper referenced in the show:

[Nazōraios – TDNT](#)

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 58, Acts 23-26. I'm your layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey Mike, how are you doing?

MSH: Very good. We got a lot of ground to cover today, Trey.

TS: We do. We got, what, four chapters.

MSH: Yup, Acts 23-26. A lot of these chapters are just Paul's appearances before different people. He repeats, again, his testimony in places or parts of it. So I'm not really going to worry about any of that stuff. I want to get to the more interesting biblical theological stuff that we run into along the way. So let's just jump in here with Acts 23. I'll begin reading at the beginning and then will skip around periodically and land in some places, too. So Acts 23. This is Paul speaking to the Jewish leadership.

And looking intently at the council, Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day."² And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.³ Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?"

MSH: Let's just stop there for a moment. This might strike some people, no pun intended, strike some people as a curiosity. What exactly is Paul talking about here when he says, are you sitting to judge me according to the law yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck? Apparently, what Paul has in mind and what Luke records here is a reference and a violation of Leviticus 19:15 which says, 'Do no injustice in judgment. Do not be partial to the poor or deferred to the great. With just shall you judge your associates.' So the idea would be that Paul is, who is he? He's sort of a, I don't want to use the word victim here. This isn't like a biblical theology of victimhood here, but he's obviously the disadvantageous position and he knows that the law says that people brought before the Jewish judges, the elders, should be treated with impartiality. And so he takes offense at the high priest commanding that he be struck and interprets that act as being a violation of Leviticus 19:15. So that's probably the reference. The other thing, this is sort of on under the current, Paul doesn't actually say this and there's no commentary, but that the high priest did this, to have this prisoner struck, he could have been in big trouble there because Paul was a Roman citizen. That's just something sort of a sub-current there. But that in fact would've been the case. You weren't supposed to do this to Roman citizens. And so the Romans, if they had known about this, could have come down hard on the Sanhedrin or done something in retaliation. But anyway, let's just keep going.

⁴ Those who stood by said, “Would you revile God's high priest?” ⁵ And Paul said, “I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.’”

⁶ Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.” ⁷ And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸ For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. ⁹ Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, “We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?” ¹⁰ And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.

¹¹ The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”

MSH: So we'll stop there at verse 11. I want to camp little bit on this scene where Paul divides the audience, detects by some means that we have Pharisees and Sadducees, both in the room. So he pits them against one another, which is brilliant, by appealing against the resurrection. So in verse 8, we get this line, ‘for the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angels, nor spirit but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.’ Now I actually got a question about this from someone who was watching my Logos Mobile Ed course on the Jewish Trinity. And I'm going to read that question for you and then I'll read my answer because it directly relates to this. And what I'm going to read for you is actually taken from the companion website, the website I created to go with my book, *The Unseen Realm*, which isn't quite out yet but there's a lot of information on that website that has hooks into the content of the book. And this is one of those, one case in point. So that will be the webpage for chapter 37 I believe will be what I actually read here. So here is the question. The questioner says, I've been watching Dr. Heiser's mobile ed 291 course on how the Old Testament reveals the Christian Godhead. I enjoy his teaching but in one segment, he makes a statement that I would like to ask him for some clarification. So here's the question. Here's what I say. I say in the video, let's take a look at this. We have some problems with it right away if we give it some thought. The same language is used in the heavenly beings of Yahweh or the Angels like the Lord of host, I'm talking about Elohim and some other things in that segment. So we can't assume, obviously, that the host of heaven and phrases like that are not real because there's a populated spiritual world in all branches of Judaism and Christianity are going to believe that point. So I'm saying, hey, Jews basically no matter what branch of Judaism, what little party they are, they're going to believe that there are angels and that they are real beings. So the questioner had Acts 23 in mind. He goes on and says, my question's related to Acts when Paul is before the Council and says for the Sadducees say there's no resurrection, nor angels, nor spirit but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. So what's up with that? How do we read that verse in light of what I had said? Here's my response to the

questioner. There's actually controversy and ambiguity about the meaning of Acts 23:8. Sadducees can read the Old Testament, which has lots of angels in it. The issue is whether to have a Jewish sect, the Sadducees, denying parts of their Old Testament or whether the phrase means something different. Note that Angel is singular in the verse and in the statement. And then I say, I think that the latter is what's going on. There's something specific about an angel that is what the Sadducees denied. Sadducees aren't denying that there are angels in their Old Testament. They can obviously read that. To illustrate the level of disagreement and point out what I think is the answer, here is what Darrell Bock says, and I quote from box commentary, and I'll do that right now. So in Bock's Acts Commentary, he gives a summary of what the possible positions are as far as what's going on in Acts 23:8. He says, 'No extra biblical text speaks of such a complete denial of angels and spirits by the Sadducees.' So no Second Temple text can say that they just deny everything, all belief in angels. 'In fact, the Pentateuch, which the Sadducees held as authoritative, affirms the existence of such beings.' So it's a very obvious issue there and I certainly agree with Bock. I mean Sadducees did hold the Pentateuch to be authoritative and it has lots of angels in it. Bock says, 'there are six possible explanations for Luke's claim of the meaning of Acts 23. Number one, it's possible that the Sadducees rejected angels and spirits altogether, he says. The view sometimes includes specific angels. But, again, because of what the Pentateuch says, this is probably the least likely answer. Second, Sadducees could've rejected excessive speculation about angels and spirits. That's a possible way to take Acts 23. Third, the Sadducees could be rejecting the idea that the righteous dead came back in the form of spirits between death and resurrection. This view argues that angel and spirit would mean the same thing in the verses 8 and 9 of Acts 23. There's an assumption there but it's one of the possibilities. But Luke says neither nor between verses 8-9. So he appears to be contrasting the two verses. And so this probably isn't the answer. Number 4, the Sadducees could be denying that the resurrection included coming back in the form of an angel or a spirit. Now the problem with this is that the Pharisees likewise would not have really been open to that sort of idea, a resurrection within the history before the ultimate end of days and the great resurrection, which is what Paul's argument seems to require. Now I think there's something in this fourth possibility that Bock lists, this idea that the Sadducees are denying resurrection included coming back in the form of an angel. I think there's something to that. I actually think that this is what the Sadducees are denying but I don't really like the way some scholars articulate it. So usually the objection to this one is, as I mentioned, you can't really have sort of a resurrection in the form of an angel before the ultimate resurrection, the end of days. I understand that but you don't have to marry the idea of angelification, a transformation of the dead person into an angel or divine spirit. We don't have to marry that idea to the ultimate resurrection or a competing resurrection. That really isn't the point. Angelification, this idea that when you died, if you are righteous, if you were a believer, when you died you would be glorified. You would be made like the angels in the presence of God, and then God could say or direct you to come back to the realm of the embodied living or not, that whole sort of thing. That idea, angelification was very common in the Second Temple period. It was held by several Jewish sects including the sect at Qumran. So depending on how you define this idea, this could also be a New Testament idea if we define it in terms of glorification to be made like angels. I actually think this is what the Sadducees were denying. So in Acts 23:8, Sadducees say there's no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit but the Pharisees acknowledged them all. I think the point is that the Sadducees say that there's no alternative resurrection where you come back as an angel or some spirit being. I think

that specifically what they're denying. They're not denying that there are angels because they can read their Old Testament. They can read the Pentateuch, and they considered it inspired. So I think this is the best way to parse what's going on in Acts 23:8. I'll give you two other possibilities Bock lists. Some scholars would say the Sadducees are rejecting the idea that an Angel or spirit could speak through a human being. And lastly, number 6, something that what Luke is describing here is the rejection of a full hierarchy of angels, like very specific levels of hierarchical relationships. There was a lot of speculation on that in the Second Temple period. So this view would say, well, the Sadducees just aren't buying any of that hierarchical stuff. Those are six views. I think the fourth one that the Sadducees are denying some sort of glorification as an angel or divine spirit, I think that's what they're denying because like I just said a few minutes ago, it's very obvious that there are angels in the Old Testament, in the Pentateuch, in the Torah, and the Sadducees held that as sacred. So I don't think that they're denying the existence of angels in total. Let's go back Acts 23. The rest of what's going on here, Paul in verse 11, the Lord comes and appears to him and says, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome." The rest of the story, in Acts 23 anyway, is about a plot that's uncovered where Paul's nephew hears about an impending ambush of Paul and goes and tells Paul. Paul says, hey, take this kid to the Tribune and make sure he knows. And the guards, huge guard, 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen in verse 23, are put around Paul when Paul makes a journey out of the jail to a different location to be heard by different authorities. So that's the rest of Acts 23. We don't really need to worry, really focus on anything in there. It's just a story of that foiled assassination attempt. We get into Acts 24. Let's just jump in here to the first verse because there's a couple things in here I think are interesting.

And after five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and a spokesman, one Tertullus. They laid before the governor their case against Paul. ² And when he had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying:

"Since through you we enjoy much peace, and since by your foresight, most excellent Felix, reforms are being made for this nation, ³ in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude. ⁴ But, to detain you no further, I beg you in your kindness to hear us briefly. ⁵ For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. ⁶ He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him. ⁸ By examining him yourself you will be able to find out from him about everything of which we accuse him."

⁹ The Jews also joined in the charge, affirming that all these things were so.

MSH: So they pull out Tertullus, a Roman guy, a Roman name. They pull out a "secular" figure because they don't want Felix to conclude this is just a religious matter, even though it is. And he starts off and says this is just a bad guy, and the Jews join in and say, yeah, what that Roman

guy said, that's true. This guy's a plague. He's a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. So the government nodded to Paul and Paul makes his defense. Before we go any further, we're stopping here in verse 10, there are a couple of things that are very easy to skip over that are actually fairly important. And they're especially important if you're interested in, one of them is anyway, if you're interested in what I call paleobabble. Some of the weird stuff people believe about the ancient world that I blog about in many cases it often is related to Jesus or the New Testament. So both of these have some importance to that but one of them in particular I think you'll find fascinating. But let's hit both of them. They're both in Acts 24:5. So here's the verse again. 'We have found this man a plague,' in other words, a pest or pestilence, 'one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world. He's a ringleader the sect of the Nazarenes.' First thing to observe is the word sect. Now in the Greek text, this is the noun *hairesis*. So Tertullus, this Roman guy, calls Christianity a *hairesis*, a sect which should mean, and would in this context mean something like a school, you've heard of the school of Plato or something like that, people who follow a particular teacher. It could refer to a school or a party, or a sect within Judaism. This term is used of the Sadducees. In Acts 5:17, we read, 'The high priest rose up and all who are with him,' that is the party, the *hairesis*, of the Sadducees were filled with jealousy.' It's also used of the Pharisees. In Acts 15:5 we read, 'but some believers who belong to the party of the Pharisees, the *hairesis* of the Pharisees, rose up and said it's necessary circumcise the Gentiles in order for them to keep the law of Moses.' So it's sort of a neutral term. It just refers to a sect within the religion. But you can obviously tell *hairesis* sounds a little bit like heretic and this is in a derivational way where our word heretic comes from. But really it's a neutral term that means a sect or a group within a larger picture, bigger picture. Now Josephus uses the term of the Essenes. He uses it of the Sadducees and the Pharisees just like the New Testament does. Paul himself in verse 14 when he is allowed to defend himself, let's just jump back in here, Paul says after the governor nods to him,

“Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense. ¹¹ You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem, ¹² and they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city. ¹³ Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me. ¹⁴ But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets,

MSH: So on and so forth. So Paul says, yeah, my enemies here call the Way, in other words those of us who accept Jesus as Messiah, followers of Jesus who were known as the Way, we've seen that before in Acts, they call the Way a sect, a *hairesis*. Now the wording is interesting because Paul isn't saying we are a sect. We're not a *hairesis*. We're not "heretics" here. But he's saying that's what the other people say about us, about the Way. So when the term is used by adversaries, it does take on sort of a negative pejorative meaning to it. Acts 28:22 is an instance of this where the word occurs again. 'We desire to hear from you, what your views are, for with regard to this sect, this *hairesis*, we know that every word spoken against.' Again, these are more officials that Paul is going to testify before at the end of the book of Acts. So when it's used by

one of your opponents, it can be used to demonize a group. So the fact that it occurs in Paul's mouth doesn't mean that he's accepting the fact that, hey, yeah, we're a bunch of heretics here and too bad for them. That's not what he's saying. He's alluding to the fact his enemies use the term of Christians, the original Christians this way. Now the adjective form *hairetikos*, is found once in the New Testament. Titus 3:10, 'A man that is factious or divisive,' the King James actually has heretic. A man that is a heretic after the first and second admonition reject, it has to do with church discipline there, but but basically someone who's factious. We can see how about that sort of works with school or party or sect. But *hairetikos* is where we get in English are word heretic. So here's the question. Here's why I bring it up. It's not just a point of curiosity. There are many people out there who want to defend, especially gnostic, understandings of Jesus. They want to make this argument. They want to say things like, look, this whole concept of heresy, and the Gnostics are always branded as heretics and boo-hoo that's just so unfair, and this whole concept of heresy is late. It's not in the New Testament. It's something that develops later after the first few centuries of Christian history. So that the Christians that God approved by the Roman Empire, by Constantine and later Theodosian, that was when the whole idea of what is orthodox arose so that you could look at somebody else and call them a heretic. And so their argument is that prior to the 300s or so, Gnostics would not of been looked upon as heretics. They would have just looked upon as sort of like the loyal opposition, just another opinion here and nobody's judging them. Their views are just as much in the mainstream as these other views that you could get in the New Testament with Pauline Christianity and whatnot. It was all sort of this level playing field but then when politics got involved and one particular version became approved by the Roman Empire, then you start have these councils like Nicaea, it was only then that alternative understandings of Jesus became heretical. This whole concept of orthodoxy and heresy didn't even exist until 3 or 400s. That's bunk and it's demonstrably the case because not only do you have what we just looked at, this term *haireisis* in the New Testament, you also, remember I mentioned that it was also in Josephus, Josephus's second Temple material, it's also in other text, the idea, the Hebrew word is *min*, to be a kind of Jew. There were different sects, *minim* is the plural of different sects or parties or divisions or kinds of Judaism. There wasn't just one kind Judaism, there were a number. And you can read in Second Temple texts that these terms, whether it's *haireisis* in Greek or *min* again in Hebrew, they do get used pejoratively directed at a set of ideas and people who hold a set of ideas as being out of the mainstream. That is not a late idea. It's an idea that's around even before we have a New Testament. So when we get to the New Testament, you see it's the Sadducees, where Paul says they are the ones that call us a sect and it's used pejoratively because the Sadducees and Pharisees are looking to Paul and saying you're a nutcase dude, and they're using the term to delegitimize Paul. Now what's going to happen with the New Testament writers outside of this trial scene, they're going to talk about divisions. They're going to talk about false teaching. They're going to talk about this danger. And so what becomes factious or divisive or "heretical" in the New Testament writings is going to be these alternative views of Jesus. If you don't embrace Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus as God come in the flesh, those sorts of things, you are not what we're teaching. You become a sect. You become an offshoot. You become an aberration of what we're saying. So these terms were used to evaluate religious views or religious ideas long before Emperor Constantine showed up to "legitimize" what we would think of as orthodoxy. Because Gnostics want to argue this all the time, like the gnostic views of what we call heterodox or nonorthodox views of Christianity, what we would give that

label to today, they would say, oh no, back then they were all legit. They were all on the same footing. They were all, you know, had equal status. That is not the case. You cannot exclude the New Testament and exclude the Second Temple period when you have that discussion. And that's what defenders of revisionist Jesus', one of those is the gnostic Jesus. They try to do this perpetually. So I thought this was a good sort of spring off point, jumping off point to get into that little bit. Now let's go to back Acts 24:5, the second part of the phrase 'sect of the Nazarenes.' The second word that it's important is Nazarenes. Now catch the way I pronounce this, *Nazorias*, notice there is a long O there, *Nazorias*. In Acts 2:22, we see the phrase again. 'Men of Israel,' this is Peter's sermon, 'hear these words. Jesus of Nazareth,' the Greek there is *Nazorias*, 'a man attested by God of mighty works,' and so on so forth. Now Jesus is elsewhere called a *Nazarenos*. Notice there's no long O there, *Nazarenos*, Luke 4:34, Luke 24:19. Why do we have these two terms? Do they mean the same thing? Do they both just refer to somebody from Nazareth? Well, *Nazorias* occurs in this place in Acts, occurs in a few other places, where it's used to label a Christian sect as opposed to *Nazarenos* which seems to be an indication of the place. And so why am I bringing this up? Well, here's the issue. Scholars have long disputed whether both of these terms, *Nazorias* and *Nazarenos*, whether they speak of the same thing or not. And the reason it's important was because there are some scholars, if you've read sort of the paleobiology literature, this revisionist Jesus stuff, you're going to run into authors that say look, *Nazorias*, the one with the long O, cannot be reconciled with *Nazarenos*. In other words, *Nazarenos* does not mean somebody from Nazareth. It means something else, and that something else is a, catch what I'm saying here, a pre-Christian sect. So what they're claiming, conspiratorial Jesus stuff will claim this, was that Jesus was actually a member of a religious sect himself prior to what we learn about and what they would say is fabricated about Jesus in the New Testament. Now this particular Christian sect is the Mandaeans. And there are these long arguments about how this different vowel, the different spelling, they can't be recognized and one indicates a specific religious sect that has nothing to do with what we think it was biblical Christianity. So it turns out to them, they argue, that Jesus wasn't even a Christian. Jesus was some other religious sect, the Mandaeans, the ones who referred to themselves as *Nazorias* in other texts, what church historians, what major religions what all the big players in Christianity think about Jesus isn't true. He actually had different beliefs than they did because the Mandaean theology is not what you people, you Christians running around saying is orthodoxy, The Mandaeans wouldn't have agreed with that, that Jesus was one of them. Now this is a long, really technical discussion. I mean I think you can tell we are already getting into vowel sounds and word formation and whatnot. I want to read you something and then I'm going to allude to something that I've given to Trey to post with this episode on the website. So, if you're into revisionist Jesus stuff or maybe you've come across this on some YouTube video or whatever, you going to have a resource here. But let me read first from a commentator, CK Barrett, he's deceased now but a very revered Greek scholar. He said this in his Acts commentary. "Christian preaching begins with the name of Jesus. He is first identified as *Ha Nazorias*. This is best explained as of or from the place called Nazareth. Other interpretations however have been given based on the observations that it's not easy to see how the O, the Omega in *Nazorias*, could be derived from the A, the Alpha, in the corresponding syllable of Nazareth. And that *Nazorias* is one of the names applied to the Mandaeans. Let me repeat that, *Nazorias*. This name has been derived from the Hebrew *natsar*, to guard or observe, that is, the Mandaean name, and given the meaning of the observants, that is, those who observe with particular care their rites of baptism

and purification. These other people argue that the name may have been given to Jesus and his followers as the observants. It may have arisen through their connection with John the Baptist and his disciples.” And here's how Barrett ultimately ends his little discussion. “The name, however, was discussed at great length by H. Schaeder in something we now call the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament and his conclusion is to be accepted end of quote so Barrett says look this is a technical issue if you want to know what the truth really is go to this article in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament by H. Schaeder in something we now call the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, and his conclusion is to be accepted.” So Barrett says look, this is a technical issue. If you want to know what the truth really is, go to this article in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament by Schaeder. That guy has it right. Well, lo and behold, I have that article. I just took it from TDNT, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. I will give it to Trey. Trey will put a link to that next to this episode. And the short answer, it's a long article and it is technical. You really need to have Greek and Hebrew, at least first year, to really understand Schaeder's article. But the short version is this. The long O can be explained and the two terms can be reconciled. Here's the way Schaeder ends his article. “We may confidently say that *Nazorians* like *Nazarenes*, is the Greek form of the Aramaic *Nazriya*, derived from *Nazrath* or Nazareth. They both point to being from Nazareth. Neither of them points to some obscure sect, pre-Christian sect, and so Jesus didn't come from some religious sect that would've disagreed with what we have, the New Testament. That's the bottom line. So if you want to wade into that article, to have a little Greek and Hebrew, that is the ammunition to basically blow to bits this idea you may have heard in a YouTube video or read in some book trying to prop up Jesus as not even being a Christian, as bazaar as that sounds. So back to Acts 24, that was a long rabbit trail but I think both of those things, the meaning of sect, when the whole discussion of when was heresy and orthodoxy actually even thought about, I think that's important, and then this whole issue about Jesus being from some pre-Christian sect, that's also important. So that was verse 5 and so Paul continues in his defense. He's accused of this. He says, look, none of this stuff is true. I was in the temple verse 17,

¹⁷ Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings. ¹⁸ While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult. But some Jews from Asia— ¹⁹ they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me. ²⁰ Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council, ²¹ other than this one thing that I cried out while standing among them: ‘It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.’”

MSH: We've read this in Acts 22 and 23, so Paul just relates what happened. And we read in verse 24, Acts 24,

²² But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, “When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case.” ²³ Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs.

²⁴ After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, “Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you.” ²⁶ At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him. ²⁷ When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

MSH: And then Acts 25 comes along. So Acts 25, the whole chapter, is about really a repetition where Paul brings his case before somebody else, before Festus and then Agrippa and Bernice of Caesarea. So it's just two more trials, and so I'm not even going to stop at anything in Acts 25 but I want to get some things in Acts 26 here. So let's jump into Acts 26 when Paul testified before King Agrippa or he's in the process of doing so, we read in verse 1,

So Agrippa said to Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself.” Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense:

² “I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, ³ especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.

MSH: And then he goes into his testimony and talks a little bit about his background, who he is. He says in verse 9,

⁹ “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹² “In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests.

MSH: And then Paul gets into his testimony on the Damascus Road. And then we read in verse 15, verses 15 to 18, part of Paul's testimony, we read this,

⁵ And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶ But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, ¹⁷ delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you ¹⁸ to open their 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.’

MSH: that's the end of verse 18. So the thing I want to zero in here is really verse 18 where Jesus tells Paul that part of what he's going to be doing is to open their eyes. I'm going to deliver

you from your people and from the Gentiles to whom I'm sending you to open their eyes so they may turn from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God. Now I bring this up because the language here is a little bit like what we find in 2 Corinthians 4:4. Now I don't know if I brought this verse up before or not. There's one or two places I could have. But 2 Corinthians 4:4, let's just start in verse 1 and you'll get the flavor of what Paul's writing here to the Corinthians and you'll see how the language is similar. Paul says to the Corinthians,

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.
² But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

MSH: So you see several words there. Let me go back and read verse 18, Acts 26:18. 'To open their eyes they may turn from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God.' The question is in 2 Corinthians 4:4, when you read the phrase, the God of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, everyone assumes that's Satan. There's actually a case that could be made that the one who's blinding the minds the unbelievers is God. And the reason that case can be made, or has been made, that's probably a better way to say it, has been made is because of what we read in Isaiah 6. So we're going all over the place here, Acts 26:18 then 2 Corinthians 4:4, now we're in Isaiah 6. This is what Isaiah 6 says. in verse 4. This is in the throne room vision with the Seraphim and all that stuff. Verse 4 says, let's go to verse 8.

⁸ And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me."

MSH: Isaiah hears that but the question, God is seated on the throne in the midst of his counsel room, his throne room, the question sort of put out there. And the wording there, for us, this is one of those instances, kind of like Genesis 1:26 when God is speaking to members the heavenly host, speaking to the audience, whom shall I send, who will go for us? Well, Isaiah hears that so it's sort of meant for him, too. Then I said, continuing in verse 8 with Isaiah speaking out here.

Then I said, "Here I am! Send me."⁹ And he said, "Go, and say to this people:

"Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive."

¹⁰ Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,

and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”

MSH: So God's saying, ok, Isaiah. I'm going to send you. Here's your job. Tell the people keep on hearing but don't understand. Keep on seeing but don't perceive anything. And then God says make the heart of this people dull. Make their ears heavy. Make their eyes blind. So in this chapter in Isaiah 6, God is the one, as a punishment who's sort of making this happen. Well, some scholars have taken that and going back to 2 Corinthians 4:4 and says well, the god of this world who's blinded the minds of the unbelievers, that might be God. Now why do I bring all this up? Is this some crazy rabbit trail? I bring it up because Acts 26:18 I think clarifies this issue. Let me read it one more time. Jesus said to Paul,

¹⁷ delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you ¹⁸ to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God,

MSH: Now I would suggest that this language here that Jesus is speaking to Paul is what Paul has in mind in 2 Corinthians 4:4, and that the God of this world in 2 Corinthians 4:4 is indeed Satan. Even though we have Isaiah 6, where God is the one blinding the unbeliever, it seems to me that Paul is drawing on this episode that was way back in his conversion. He draws on that in 2 Corinthians 4:4 and he actually has Satan in mind when he uses the phrase God of this world who has blinded the minds the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God. So I think Acts 26:18 helps inform our reading of 2 Corinthians 4:4, which is why I bring it up. Lastly here, one more thing in Acts 26, and we'll wrap up. As we keep going after Paul has said this, he says to Agrippa,

¹⁹ “Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.

MSH: So again, Paul continues with his testimony and he says in verse 23, let's go back to verse 22, he says,

²² 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: ²³ 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.”

MSH: Now this whole notion of proclaiming light to the Jew and the Gentiles sort of harkens back to what we just read in 17 and 18, again, light, darkness, turning from Satan to God and all that stuff. What Paul is essentially saying here and preaching is illumination for both Jews and

Gentiles. In other words, when Paul starts talking about the light, bringing the light, he's not talking about what new agers are talking about. He's not talking about personal enlightenment, like you're going to go contemplate your navel now, and you're going to get in touch with your feelings. You're going to discover yourself, all that sort of thing. No, he's talking about something very specific. He's talking about their eyes being opened so that they can see something very specific. And the very specific thing is the gospel. Jesus rises from the dead, the first to rise from the dead. Christ must suffer and rise from the dead. It's the gospel. This salvation, this light is a revelation given to the Jews and the Gentiles that is very specific. It's not this self-contemplation Oprah gospel kind of stuff, which is why I bring it up. It echoes Isaiah 49:6 where we read, 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob,' God again speaking to the individual who's called the servant. 'You should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel and I will make you a light for the nations and that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.' It's this whole idea of bringing the Jews back into relationship with God and also bringing the nations back, which is a big theme in the book of Acts. So I wanted to throw that in because I've seen this verse and other verses, just trust me here, used in just the way I sort of made fun of, that Christianity is about bringing us light. All this self-internalizing, self-reflection, self-discovery kind of thing, it's not. It's very specifically tied in this verse to the gospel and tied to the Old Testament program of God carving out his people, his family which included the nations, even in the Old Testament, even back in Isaiah 49.