

Text: Ac 26.14

We are still in Paul's hearing before Agrippa. Last week we talked about the fiery trial that is persecution.

This week our subject is found in one phrase from Acts 26.14:

"It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

The phrase is famous but isn't fully understood to us who inhabit an era far removed from the ancient world.

Remember to whom Paul is speaking in our text:

Porcius Festus, Roman governor of Judaea

Herod Agrippa II, king over several regions and administrator of the temple in Jerusalem

Bernice, his sister, one who has her own political ambitions

The chief men of the city of Caesarea

The five tribunes (military officers) under Festus' command

Agrippa and Bernice have connections to Judaism, but they are well-versed in the pagan society of the Roman empire. They are thoroughly "Hellenized" Jews — very secular in their outlook.

In giving his testimony, Paul has two objectives in mind:

1. To make the case for his own innocence under Roman law
2. To preach the gospel to those who hear him

We will look at this part of Paul's speech to understand the gospel import this phrase has as Paul tells his story to Agrippa.

Read Ac 26.12-15

Proposition: Those who resist the gospel defy God; those who embrace gospel gain God's approval.

I. The background

A. The homely origin

1. Agricultural origin
2. Purpose of goads: drive your working animal as you will

3. Kicking against the goad: stubbornness, intractability (unsubmissive)

B. Our common understanding

“This homely proverb from agricultural life has been thought to suggest that Paul had already begun to suffer from the prickings of an uneasy conscience, from a half-conscious conviction that there was more in the disciples’ case than he was willing to admit.”¹

C. The Biblical usage

1. Not included in previous accounts

a. Acts 22.6-8

Ac 22.6-8 ¶ “But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me,⁷ and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’⁸ “And I answered, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said to me, ‘I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.’”

b. Acts 9.3-6*

Ac 9.3-6 As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;⁴ and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”⁵ And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He *said*, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,⁶ but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.”

(*But KJV: Act 9:5 And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: *it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.*)

¹ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 466.

2. Textual issue

- a. In Acts 9, some mss have the phrase, some do not
 - b. The Lord clearly said the phrase, since it is in Acts 26
 - c. Explanation
 - 1) Scribe, recalling Acts 26, thought it was missing in Acts 9, so added it
 - 2) Scribe somehow missed it in Acts 9 and left it out
 - d. Regardless, Jesus clearly said it
 - e. And, also regardless, it is left out in Acts 22
3. Why is it definitely included in Acts 26 and probably not included in the previous accounts? (Answer later)

II. The foreground

A. The Gentile context

1. The phrase is a common one in Greek literature
 - a. Very similar phrase in Euripides (*Bacchae*, 794-795)
 - 1) "I would sacrifice to the god rather [795] than kick against his spurs in anger, a mortal against a god."²
 - 2) Plot: a god, disguised as a mortal, gives advice to a man who threatens him
 - b. Also, Aeschylus in *Agamemnon*
 - 1) "Do you have eyes and lack understanding? Do not kick against the goads lest you strike to your own hurt."³
 - 2) Plot: a vile play, with all kinds of murder and immorality, but here at the end one of the evil characters uses the saying as kind of a prophecy of his own doom in a later play

² "Bacchae," in Euripides, *The Tragedies of Euripides*, trans. T. A. Buckley (Medford, MA: Henry G. Bohn, 1850), Lines 794-795.

³ "Agamemnon" in Aeschylus, *Aeschylus, with an English Translation in Two Volumes*, trans. Smyth (Medford, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), Line 1624.

c. And, Terence in *Phormio*

- 1) “I began to oppose them at first; but what need of talking? As long as I was trusty to the old men, I was paid for it in my shoulder-blades. This, then, occurred to my mind: why, this is folly to kick against the spur. [78] I began to do every thing for them that they wished to be humored in.”⁴
- 2) Plot: an old slave talks about being beaten for opposing her masters, then thinks better of it

2. In the Gentile world, the phrase commonly speaks of

- a. Resisting authority, esp.
- b. Resisting the gods

B. The audience

1. Recall that I mentioned the sophistication of this audience
 - a. Leading figures in empire, close to power
 - b. As educated as could be in the Greco-Roman culture
2. Remember who Paul addresses directly (see v. 19)

Ac 26.19 ¶ “So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision,

3. He wants to emphasize what this testimony means
 - a. He heard a voice from heaven
 - b. The voice turns out to be the voice of the dead prophet who he will turn out to follow (their perspective)
 - c. This phrase elevates who this dead prophet is

“Lest he be misunderstood as proclaiming only a Galilean prophet he had formerly opposed, he pointed out to his hearers what was obvious to any Jew: correction by a voice from heaven meant opposition to God himself”⁵

⁴ “Phormio” in Terence, *The Comedies of Terence*, trans. Henry Thomas Riley (Medford, MA: Harper & Brothers, 1874), 1.2.27.

⁵ Richard N. Longenecker, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Volume 9, John, Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 552–53.

III. The battleground

A. For Saul

1. Saul was on a course breathing out “threatenings and slaughter” against Jesus and his followers
2. The issue for Saul: will you submit to this Jesus you have pursued? Will you yield to him whom you hate?

It is hard for you, Saul, to kick against the goads — that is, to defy the God of heaven.

B. For Agrippa (et al)

1. These men had a kind of view of the supernatural world, peopled with the pagan gods (though some were cynical)
2. Here is the testimony of a man, whose integrity isn't in question, who claims God challenged him
3. What are they to make of this? Surely this testimony is a goad from God for them.
4. The question is: what will you do with Jesus? Is his voice the voice of God or not?

C. For all

1. The goad (“sharp stick”) in its original meaning referred to the sting of a bee
2. It extended in its definition to the prod in the ploughman's hand
3. In the Greek literature, it became the proverbial provocation from the gods
4. According to Paul, it is the challenge from Jesus Christ
5. Opposition to the goad is “hard”
 - a. An adjective derived from a stem meaning “to dry up” (we get “skeleton” from this stem)
 - b. Basic meaning: “dry, arid, hard, rough, unyielding”

- c. In the NT a few times, speaking of hard men, violent winds, intolerable situations
- d. Here it means this: it is hard for you to argue with this

Conclusion:

Proposition: Those who resist the gospel defy God; those who embrace gospel gain God's approval.

Which side of that line are you on?