

## **ACTS 25 and 26 – Paul’s Final Defenses: To Festus & Agrippa**

Last time Paul had his third defense before Felix. Two years have passed. Several key events have taken place during this time that are not covered in the book of Acts. A dispute broke out between the Jews and the Syrians of Caesarea. Governor Felix squelched this by using Roman troops. Many citizens of Judea were killed in that skirmish. As a result, Felix was called to Rome to give an account of himself. The end result – Felix was replaced as procurator of Judea by a man named Porcius Festus. So, while there have been some political changes, Paul remains a prisoner at Caesarea.

As Festus takes office, he is eager to make peace with the troublesome Jewish population in Judea. He travels up to Jerusalem to assess the situation, to meet with the Sanhedrin and to get their input. The Jewish leaders see this change in Roman governors as their opportunity to finally rid themselves of Paul.

So, with that, we will pick up the action in Chapter 25 and v 1...

READ Acts 25:1-3

It has been two years and they still want to kill Paul! Some things do not change. They request that Paul be brought to Jerusalem to again stand trial before the Sanhedrin. But they have underestimated Festus. He is not ignorant. He had obviously been made aware of their history with his prisoner Paul. It had been well documented what had happened.

READ Acts 25:4-5

Festus makes his position clear: “If you have an issue against Paul, then you are going to have to travel down to Caesarea to present your case before a Roman court.”

READ Acts 25:6-7

This is a virtual rerun of what happened in the previous hearing before Felix. Once again, just like before, the Jews bring their false accusations

against Paul and v 7 says, "that they could not prove." While Luke does not record the exact dialogue that takes place in this hearing with Festus, it is a safe to assume that the charges being brought against Paul are pretty much the same as were brought against him previously.

READ Acts 25:8

Once again Paul maintains his innocence against the charges brought against him. He has committed no religious offense and, more importantly, he has not broken any civil law against Rome. His defense is short and to the point. Same song, second verse!

So then, as with Felix before, the right thing for Festus to do is to release Paul. He has done nothing that violates Roman law. But Festus does not do the right thing, does he? He has his own agenda. He wants to get off on the right foot with the local Jewish population. He knows he cannot just release Paul. So, Festus poses a question for Paul in v 9...

READ Acts 25:9

For Festus this appears to be the simplest and best solution. If Paul agrees to go back to Jerusalem, Festus will simply turn him over to the Sanhedrin (and he will be done with him) and let them try him on their religious charges. At the same time Festus will gain points with the Jews. "Great plan, Festus!" And he pats himself on the head. But Festus does not know Paul. So, the Jews have underestimated Festus and Festus has underestimated Paul. On the surface Paul appears to be just a meek and mild old Jewish guy. But Paul is a fighter.

READ Acts 25:10-12

Now, we can understand Paul's frustration and his position here, can't we? He has been held a prisoner for two years having committed no crime against Rome. Paul's appeal to Caesar is a common-sense decision. If he agrees to go to Jerusalem and be tried before the Sanhedrin, that would be a major step backwards. He would certainly not get a fair trial. Also, he figures if the Jews plotted to kill him before, they might plot to kill him

again. Little does he know that have been. There is no way he is going to Jerusalem!

In addition, as we have seen previously, Paul's strong desire is to go to Rome and preach the Gospel there. He made that clear earlier in our study of Acts. So, Paul appeals to Caesar, which is his right as a Roman citizen. This guarantees him free passage to Rome. Festus declares, "To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go."

Between v 12 and 13 we have this unknown gap of time that takes place and we are introduced to our next character in this saga that is taking place here in Chapter 25 – King Agrippa. In our passage we will be referring to him as "Agrippa" or "the king." You need to know that this is Herod Agrippa II. He is Jewish. He is the great grandson of Herod the Great. You remember him. He is the King Herod who had all the baby boys killed a couple of years after Jesus was born. That is part of the Christmas story, isn't it? He is the son of Herod Agrippa I. We all know him as the one who arrested Peter with the intent of killing him. Of course, the angel miraculously delivered Peter from prison, right? He is also the one who had the apostle James (John's brother) executed. So, while we will be referring to this man as simply "Agrippa," I want you to understand that he has this relationship to the prominent and powerful ruling Herod family of that day.

READ Acts 25:13

Agrippa and his female companion Bernice drop by to visit Governor Festus. However, this is not a social call. This is official business. One commentary I read suggests that "Agrippa comes to Festus to meet and greet the new Roman governor of Judea. Since their territories are next to each other, he probably wants to establish ties with this new governor as soon as possible." So it is an official visit.

READ Acts 25:14

Festus begins to lay out for Agrippa benefit all the details surrounding Paul's case. Why does he do this? He has a reason. Well, he hopes that Agrippa, with his understanding of Judaism, can help clarify Paul's case

before the Roman authorities. Just for the record, the Bernice that we are told about (that king Agrippa came with), is not his wife. She is his sister and history suggests she is also his mistress. So, to put it nicely, they have a very, let's say, "unusual" relationship!

READ Acts 25:15-21

So, Festus is recounting, he is bringing Agrippa up to date on everything that has happened. Obviously, Festus's version of events makes himself out to look good. Here we have another great and noble champion for justice! The truth is that Festus is as much a weasel as Felix had been. He does not really want justice for Paul, does he? If he had really wanted justice, he would have released Paul. What crime had Paul committed against Rome? None! This is a religious dispute. His job as the Roman authority is to release Paul, to do the right thing. Instead, Festus is looking for the easy way out of this situation without angering the Jews.

It is interesting to note that, unlike Felix, Festus has no real interest in Christianity. Remember Festus had asked Paul a whole lot of questions about Christianity. He was curious. Festus views Jesus simply as One "who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive." Festus does not know Jesus nor does he care to know Him. This is really a sad commentary on Festus and his spiritual condition.

Well, Agrippa's curiosity about Paul's case is now aroused, having heard this. "This is a very interesting case."

READ Acts 25:22

Keep in mind that Paul, when he comes before King Agrippa here, will not be on trial. His case has already been officially forwarded on to Rome. The legal part is not an issue here. This would be a personal meeting between the two men and will have a relatively small audience in attendance.

READ Acts 25:23-27

Festus, like Felix before him, recognizes Paul is innocent of the charges that had been brought against him. And, like Felix, Festus did not release Paul for fear of the Jews. So now, he faces a dilemma and he hopes that maybe King Agrippa can help him out with it. He has no official charges against Paul to forward on to Rome. This is a little bit of a problem, isn't it? All the charges against Paul are on religious grounds. That does not matter to the Romans. They are not on civil grounds. He has violated no Roman law. By Festus's own admission it seems ignorant to send this guy Paul to Caesar to be judged with no formal charges against him. That is why Festus says, "I need something to write. Help me out, Agrippa."

What follows is the last of Paul's five defenses. This so-called fifth defense is really Paul's personal testimony. As it turns out, it will be the most noble and complete of Paul's speeches in his own defense. You could say that Paul saves his best for last.

So, we are going to pick it up in Chapter 26...

READ Acts 26:1-3

Paul respectfully addresses King Agrippa. He recognizes that Agrippa is a Jew and, therefore, he would be quite familiar with Jewish matters. Paul is going to make several references to the Jewish nation and to Israel's messianic hope – things Agrippa would understand as a Jew.

READ Acts 26:4-5

If you know anything about Paul (mentioned several times in scripture), his resume was very impressive. It would have been well known in Jewish circles. Every Jew in the area knows that Paul is a Pharisee. He had won the approval of the Pharisees when he stood before the Sanhedrin (his second defense in Chapter 23). The Pharisees among the group were impressed with Paul. They actually said, "He has not done anything wrong. He should be released." Now, Paul had been a zealous Jew and nobody who knew him back in the day (before he got saved) would dare deny that. Now, even decades later, Paul's reputation as a

zealous persecutor of the church, all the Jews knew about it. Paul basically says, "Ask them. They all know about me and my past."

READ Acts 26:6

God's promise started with the promise that there was going to be a Messiah. And then, that Messiah was going to be the One to save us from our sins. That was the great hope of Israel, right?

READ Acts 26:7-8

The point that Paul is making to this Jewish king is that the great hope of Israel HAS COME! Who is it? Who is the great hope of Israel who has come? JESUS! Jesus had been born in Bethlehem, as was foretold in the Old Testament. He had fulfilled the Scriptures, right? He had been betrayed, crucified and buried. He had risen back to life again. All of this was foretold by the prophets of old – "The promise made by God to our fathers."

Paul tells Agrippa, basically, that he (Paul) had been arrested and charged by the Jews. Why? For proclaiming the fulfillment of their national hope, Jesus as the Christ, as their Messiah. That is what they did not like.

As proof, though, that Jesus IS the Messiah, God raised Him from the dead. And Paul cannot understand why the Jews have such a hard time believing this. After all, their God is a big and mighty God. In their scriptures, which is our Old Testament, God is all-powerful and did amazing things all throughout their history – miracle after miracle for the nation and for individuals – they can see God at work. Why couldn't God raise someone from the dead?

Paul, having been in their shoes before, knows what the problem is. He used to think like they think and that is, "Yeah, maybe, but there is no way He is our Messiah." And why did they think that? Because Jesus did not fulfill their image of what the Messiah should be. They all thought that the Messiah was going to set up a kingdom and defeat the Romans, right? And He did not do that, so they just dismissed Him. So, Paul on the one

hand, he cannot understand. On the other hand, he says, "OK, I kind of know where you are coming from."

READ Acts 26:9. Paul confesses where he used to be before he got saved. He saw the whole Christian movement as heresy, as blasphemy.

READ Acts 26:10-12

He is telling the story about what happened before he was converted. He recounts a time when he hated Christianity and wanted to get rid of all Christians. He was on my way to Damascus to round up a whole bunch of these Christians when it happened. He then relates his conversion experience.

Now, we have already heard the amazing story of Paul's conversion twice before in our study of Acts. In Acts Chapter 9 there is the original conversion account of Saul on the road to Damascus. Then in Acts Chapter 22 he re-hashed it against in one of his defenses, before the Jewish crowd as he stood on the steps of the Antonian Fortress. Now again, in v 13 through 16 here in this chapter he is going to recount it again. So, we will not read it again. We are going to skip that part because you know the story, right? But what I want you to keep in mind is this – as Paul tells the story about the light and Jesus and the voice and how he was blinded, while it is familiar to us, King Agrippa is hearing it for the first time.

After Paul tells Agrippa the story of his conversion, he recalls then the commission that he received. Jesus is speaking to Paul...

READ Acts 26:17-18

This is Jesus talking to Paul. He commissions him, this direct commission to take the Good News to the Gentiles. Paul will take the message to the Jews also, but his main focus will be to the Gentiles.

READ Acts 26:19

In other words, Paul was obedient. He did as Jesus told him to do. And we have seen that through the book of Acts.

READ Acts 26:20

Paul spread the Gospel for the next 20-plus years. He took the Gospel throughout much of the Roman Empire. And we have read about that throughout the book of Acts – all the places that Paul went. Paul has a zeal for the Lord Jesus. He has that same level of zeal that he once had for the Law and for Judaism before he was saved. Only now this zeal is focused in a whole new direction, the right direction.

READ Acts 26:21

Here we have Paul, an innocent man, guilty of no crime under the Roman government's civil laws. He is now the object of intense religious hatred. Why? Because his views of Jesus Christ and about Christianity do not agree with those of his one-time Jewish colleagues. Here we have a Roman citizen who has been forced to appeal to Caesar because of the sheer incompetence of two Roman governors, Festus and Felix. Seeking to be opportunistic for their own political gains, Felix had experienced an uprising of the Jews anyway and he ended up being replaced as a result of it. And then Festus, he will soon come under scrutiny by his superiors for how he mishandles the Paul situation as well. So, lessons learned from the failures of Felix and Festus... just do the right thing! In the long run you will be much better off.

Paul now appeals to King Agrippa's knowledge of the Old Testament. Remember that one of Paul's strong points is that he knows his audience. He knows that King Agrippa is familiar with the Jewish scriptures. So here we go...

READ Acts 26:22-23

So, what do the Old Testament Scriptures say about the Messiah? King Agrippa would know these things. They predict that He will suffer (Psalm 22, Psalm 69 and Isaiah 53). Jesus certainly suffered. The Scriptures say that He will rise from the dead (Psalm 16:10). Jesus did that too! They say that He will bring light to the Gentiles (Isaiah, Hosea and many other prophets). Paul has been an instrumental part in taking this light, the truth



that Jesus gave him, to people across two continents, to Jews and Gentiles alike. Now, who is Paul talking to when he is saying all this? He is addressing King Agrippa, right? This is all for Agrippa's benefit. Right in the middle of his conversation to Agrippa, Paul is rudely interrupted by Festus.

READ Acts 26:24

Paul's continued insistence on the resurrection of Jesus (what Paul has been talking about) is crazy talk as far as Festus is concerned. That is nuts! But, the resurrection of Jesus Christ as we know and as Paul says later in his letters is a critical part of our Gospel message, isn't it? Poor Festus just cannot accept that. I found myself laughing at this. If you know anything about Greek and Roman mythology (they are interesting stories) – all these amazing things happened to these mythical characters that they actually believed happened. So, they cannot believe in the resurrection of Jesus but they believe in that other nonsense! I find it humorous. Festus' reaction here is an outright rejection of Paul's message. But notice Paul's response.

READ Acts 26:25-26

Paul reminds Festus in a nice way that he had been talking to King Agrippa. Paul then turns to King Agrippa...

READ Acts 26:27

King Agrippa is a Jew and so, Paul knows that he believes the Old Testament prophets. Well, how does King Agrippa respond?

READ Acts 26:28

Agrippa's reaction here is not one of outright rejection. Basically, his response is, "Not now, Paul. Maybe someday I will become a Christian." He is ALMOST persuaded to follow Christ, to receive the Gospel that Paul had just presented to him. This is a dangerous game to play. We do not know how much time we have left, how many more opportunities we are going to get. We do not know whether we will have another chance at all. What happens if you never get another chance? What if you never get around to it? What if it is never convenient? What if...

## READ Acts 26:29

Paul says in essence, "I hope and pray that someday you and Festus and Bernice and the Roman officers and the soldiers and the prominent men of Caesarea, and whoever else is in this room listening will become as I am." Paul is a man who has inner peace. He has joy, contentment and freedom. How can Paul have all that as a prisoner? How can he? That is strange, isn't it? How can Paul have joy and contentment in his situation? It comes from knowing Christ, through faith in Jesus. "I want you to have the same joy that I have. I want you to be like me except for these chains" – except for being a prisoner. Paul does not wish that on anyone. What Paul is saying here is, "I may be bound in chains on the outside, but I have been set free on the inside."

As far as we can tell, King Agrippa, like Festus, and like Felix, rejects the Gospel. Remember the point we made last week – a failure to respond in faith to Christ is the same thing as rejecting Christ. There is no evidence that the Holy Spirit ever gave King Agrippa or Festus another chance. Why not accept Christ? Well, people come up with all sorts of excuses not to. Luke does not state explicitly what Agrippa's response was and if he did reject Christ. I assume that he did because there is nothing stated in Acts that Agrippa did embrace Christ as Savior. If Agrippa did reject Christ, he had his reasons. We can surmise what some of those reasons might have been. Perhaps he did not want to give up his sins; he did not want a radical change in his lifestyle; he did not want to lose face before his peers, look bad, be ostracized; or he did not want to run the risk of Jewish spite, Roman snobbery and Greek scorn. Think about it. Arguably the greatest missionary teacher of all time, the Apostle Paul, has just presented the Gospel as clearly as Agrippa will ever hear it and Agrippa walks away. "Perhaps another day," he says. Sadly, as far as we know, that day never came.

## READ Acts 26:30-32

And with that Paul is finally, or will be shortly, on his way to Rome. And we will get to that next time.

Let me give you my take-aways, my applications from these chapters.

- Do not put off responding to the Gospel. We never know if or when we will ever get another chance. "NOW is the favorable time; behold, NOW is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).
- Life in our fallen world is unfair and many times justice is not served. Paul did nothing wrong and yet two Roman governors in a row failed to give him a fair verdict and release him. This is a lesson we need to learn early in our lives – life is not fair.
- Paul respected the offices that King Agrippa and Governor Festus held even if he did not agree with them personally. Paul showed his respect for them by his words and by his actions.
- Paul was not rude and condescending the way Festus had been to him. He addressed him politely. There is never a good reason for a Christian to be rude. Paul viewed Festus as a man who needed to be saved. Paul knew that he was more likely to reach Festus by being courteous than by being rude.
- God is sovereign. He can use even godless people to accomplish His purposes. Case in point: God took an incompetent government official's (Festus) ill-advised decision and actually worked it out for Paul's benefit. It provided an opportunity for Paul to present the Gospel to Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice. It also got Paul an all-expenses paid trip to Rome. The Lord really does work in mysterious ways, doesn't He?
- Always be prepared to tell your story – how God saved you!