

Governor Felix had been called to Rome to answer for his excessive use of force. He escaped punishment but Festus took his place as governor at Caesarea.¹ *Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea.*

² And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, ³ asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. Acts 25:1-3

We know very little about Festus, only a few lines from Josephus and what we read in this chapter and the next. That is because his tenure was only two or three years at most when he died (A.D. 61 or 62). Josephus implies that he was more honest and able than Felix or the following governor. He also tells us that Festus quickly dealt with the Sicarii (daggermen), and also eliminated a messianic pretender who had gathered a following in the desert.

After just three days in Caesarea Festus went to Jerusalem to meet with the Jewish authorities. The office of governor, or procurator, had to work with the local authorities to try to maintain peace. He would surely have met with commander Lysias and might have received a firsthand report about the situation with Paul, though that was probably the least of his concerns, that is until he met with the chief priests.

The chief priests and influential men were also opposed to those who would upset the status quo, so one would think Festus would be inclined to side with them against Paul. They asked for a favor from Festus, hoping he hadn't learned about the previous plot to assassinate Paul. They asked for Paul to be brought to Jerusalem for a new trial in hopes that they might again give the forty zealots a chance to ambush the guards and murder Paul (Acts 23:12-15^j).

⁴ Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. ⁵ "So," said he, "let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him." Acts 25:4-5 Festus may have been warned by Felix or Lysias of their devious schemes and absolute hatred of Paul. Or it may have been the fact that Paul was a Roman that caused Festus to insist that accusations take place in Caesarea. The "men of authority" were invited to travel back with him to the palace and present their case there. Like Felix before him, Festus is trying to walk that tightrope of pleasing the Jewish leaders while protecting a Roman citizen. He may have already heard that the whole case was a matter of whether or not Jesus was the Messiah. In some ways, Rome would be quite pleased if Jews accepted Jesus as their Messiah. Jesus did not promote revolution and instead encouraged His followers to pay their taxes and be peaceful and loving toward all men (Matthew 22:21ⁱⁱ; Matthew 5:44ⁱⁱⁱ; Luke 6:27-28^{iv}). Rome would have much preferred that over a revolutionary who would start a religious war against Rome.

⁶ After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. ⁷ When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood

around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove.

Acts 25:6-7 Apparently the leaders took Festus up on his offer and the first order of business in Caesarea was the case against Paul. There was a new high priest at this time, Ishmael ben Phiabi. Former high priests were most likely present, including Ananias, and also influential elites. These were most likely all Sadducees. Festus may not have known that most Jews were not of the same mind as these leaders and despised their corruption. The elites were also in a power struggle with King Agrippa II, the last of Herod's ruling line. He had authority over the temple and the northern parts of the kingdom. High priests Ishmael and Ananias used gangs to attack those delivering tithes to the poorer priests to seize the money for themselves even when those priests were starving. This shows us that this narrative of trying to assassinate Paul is quite in line with extrabiblical sources we have about those priests.

Roman law was such that the accusers had to personally face the accused and make their claims. Paul went before them and they brought many and serious charges, but Luke adds that there was no proof. Did Festus ask them to back up their claims, or perhaps this was Luke's comment as no proofs were given? We can tell what their charges were by Paul's response.

⁸ Paul argued in his defense, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense." Acts 25:8 Paul denied all the charges. He claimed he did nothing against the laws of the Jews. The accusers must have made the claim that Paul had broken Jewish laws. Paul said he did nothing against the temple. In other words, he did not bring a Gentile into the temple (Acts 21:28-29^v). That claim was what started this whole thing. Remember that at the time, they closed the doors of the temple (Acts 21:30^{vi}). If there was a Gentile there he would have been caught and killed. That did not happen. Paul's final defense was probably the most telling. He said he did nothing against Rome. The accusers may have again tried to make the claim that Paul started riots throughout the Roman empire (Acts 24:5^{vii}). Disturbing the peace of Rome would be a serious crime and even in some cases punishable by death. Once again it is the word of this Roman citizen who happens to be Jewish against the elites who hold power and influence in Jerusalem.

⁹ But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?" Acts 25:9 Festus is playing a dangerous game. He wants to do the elites a favor to consolidate his influence, but he must have known that it would result in the death of some soldiers and Paul, the Roman citizen. That was a steep price to pay to gain their favor.

¹⁰ But Paul said, "I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well." Acts 25:10 The opportunity to appeal to the court of Caesar was available to every Roman citizen. Paul believed Festus understood that he had not broken Jewish law, and therefore the only case to be made against him was disturbing Rome's peace. The ESV uses the phrase "ought to be" which can also translated "must." Paul knew he *had to* go to Rome for Jesus had stood by him and told him as much (Acts 23:11^{viii}).

¹¹ If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar." Acts 25:11 Paul was willing to face justice, but knew his rights as a Roman citizen. It is a good example for us to follow when we are attacked by the elites who reject Jesus. Know your rights and insist on them. But if you have broken the civil law, then be willing to face the consequences. Since the Jewish leaders can't prove their charges, Paul knew he had the right to refuse to be delivered over to their corrupt court and could appeal to Caesar. It is like an American citizen asking for a lawyer. They have the right to one if they are in the USA. He may not be a good one. Things may not go in your favor, but it is still a right. However, Roman rulers in remote provinces often took matters into their own hands depending on the power structures with whom they had to cooperate. Festus could have turned Paul over to the Jews. Perhaps he was afraid to do so as he just replaced Felix because of Felix' abuse of power. While Paul was right saying no one could give him up legally, it was occasionally done.

¹² Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, "To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go." Acts 25:12 Festus had his council as witnesses and he had to see if they were on the side of the law or thought appeasing the Jewish leaders was more expedient. We know the answer because we read what Jesus said to Paul. He was going to Rome. If God has a mission for you, no outside force can prevent you from fulfilling that mission (Isaiah 46:10^{ix}).

¹³ Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus. Acts 25:13 Agrippa II was the great-grandson of Herod the Great. He was raised in Rome and was a favorite of the emperor Claudius. When Herod died, he was too young to rule the same large region, but was given a small region to get his feet wet. Gradually he was given more and more territory. Nero came to power after Claudius, and he too liked Agrippa and expanded his region. Agrippa and the high priests had become competing powers in Jerusalem. Agrippa had charge of the temple and could remove a high priest from office. He kept the sacred vestments.

It was another of those meetings of power when king Agrippa and Bernice, who was Agrippa's sister, came to greet Festus. They had to work together because of Agrippa's role with the temple and Festus' rule over Judea. Remember that Agrippa does not get along with Ishmael and Ananias.

¹⁴ And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, "There is a man left prisoner by Felix, ¹⁵ and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. ¹⁶ I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him. Acts 25:14-16 The king stayed many days, and why not stay awhile with a fresh water pool on the Mediterranean Ocean and live entertainment in a palace built by his great-grandfather.

Festus decided to ask Agrippa about Paul's case. He explained how the Jewish leaders wanted Paul condemned and about the proceedings that had taken place.

17 So when they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought. Acts 25:17 The case was brought so urgently that we can read into this that the high priests saw Christianity as a growing threat to their power. Paul's powerful testimony to the Jews in the temple and before the Sanhedrin must have been bearing fruit. Of all the issues that were taking place at the time, stopping Paul was at the top of their list. In a way they were right to be concerned. The Jewish public was going in two directions, neither of which favored the Jewish leaders. Many were turning to Jesus as the Messiah while others were looking for a militant Messiah. The latter group would forever end the reign of these evil men in less than one decade. In just five or six years, Ananias would be executed. All their schemes to cling to power would fail them. John the Beloved tells them and us, *17 And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.* 1 John 2:17 Temporal pleasures can take our eyes off of what matters.

18 When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. 19 Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. Acts 25:18-19 Festus saw through the charges and knew this was all about whether or not Jesus was the Messiah who conquered death. And this is the issue for the ages. Did Jesus conquer death? Your answer should influence everything you do, the reason you live, and according to Jesus, it will result in where you spend eternity (John 3:36^x; Romans 10:9-10^{xi}). The spear that pierced Jesus' heart made certain that he was dead (John 19:33-34^{xii}). 500 witnesses said they saw him alive (1 Corinthians 15:6^{xiii}). Disciples went from hiding behind locked doors to boldly proclaiming in the streets that He had risen (Acts 2:14^{xiv}, 24^{xv}). Everyone has to decide what they will do with those facts. And if Jesus indeed conquered death, what then about those disciples He handpicked who wrote the words of Jesus down for us? What will you do with those words? Eternity looms before us just as it did before Festus who would die in a year or two, and before these high priests who had just six years before they would stand before God and give an account for their words and actions (Romans 14:10^{xvi}).

20 Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. 21 But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar. Acts 25:20-21 I wonder if Agrippa saw through Festus offer to have Paul tried in Jerusalem. Agrippa knew of the brutality of those high priests and may have already known of their previous plot to kill Paul. Since things turned out as they did, Festus can say he did what was legally right by receiving the appeal to go to Rome. That put Festus on Agrippa's side in this feud with the high priests. In fact, later, Festus will side with Agrippa when Ishmael tries to get permission from him to build a tower looking into the temple. So this was the start of a friendship like that of Pilate and Herod Antipas when Jesus was tried (Luke 23:12^{xvii}).

22 Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," said he, "you will hear him." Acts 25:22 Agrippa wanted to hear of the resurrected Jesus. He probably heard the gospel before, but this was a chance to hear the amazing testimony of one who turned from a Christian hater to one of its most ardent supporters. This is Paul's first opportunity to witness to someone with the actual title of king, just as Jesus had predicted.

23 So on the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. Acts 25:23 The big shots all enter together in their royal attire along with leading military tribunes and the prominent men of Caesarea. Agrippa and Bernice would have been in purple and had a gold band of a crown on their heads. Festus would have been in bright red. This royal entourage now seated, in walks the humble Paul in a common robe and in chains. According to tradition, he was only a little fellow and unprepossessing in appearance, balding, with beetle brows, hooked nose and bandy legs, yet 'full of grace'^{xviii}. Paul has something about his appearance that royalty of this world rarely possess, the anointing of Almighty God in the fullness of His Spirit.

24 And Festus said, "King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. 25 But I found that he had done nothing deserving death. And as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him." Acts 25:24-25 The "whole" of the Jewish people is probably referring to the leadership rather than the nation. It is used in that sense elsewhere in Acts (Luke 23:1^{xix}; Acts 4:32^{xx}). The Jewish leaders wanted Paul executed. But like Pilate with Jesus long before (John 18:38^{xxi}), Festus found nothing in Paul deserving of death.

26 But I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write. 27 For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him." Acts 25:26-27 Festus wants this case out of his hands and passed on up to Rome but it would be embarrassing to send him without a real charge against him. It would imply Festus was not only unreasonable but incompetent, so Festus asked for Agrippa's help.

We'll have to pick up at this point next week. I trust you have seen how God brings His will to pass regardless of how men plot to have their way. Before long, we are all standing before God's throne giving an account of what we have done on this earth. What matters in the end is if we loved Jesus and receive His saving grace or rejected that grace for our own passing desires.

In just two years Festus would be dead. A few years after that Paul would be executed. And shortly after that Ananias the former high priest would be executed. I heard of an illustration that helps us get a picture of our short time here. Our existence in time is like the space this little knot takes up on the string of eternity. Felix, Festus, Ananias,

and Paul would go from the knot to the string in just a few short years. Felix, Festus, and the high priests, Ananias and Ishmael, had lived only with the knot in view. Paul lived with the line before him. I ask you to consider the focus of your life. *¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.* 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 (ESV)

(An interesting side note: In Galatians 4, written a decade before this trial, Paul gives the analogy of Hagar and Ishmael as representing bondage to the law, and Sarah and Isaac representing grace and God's promises. How fascinating that the high priest at this time was named Ishmael and is trying to kill Paul for preaching grace and for teaching Gentile converts that they did not have to follow Jewish laws. In the Galatians 4 passage Paul declares that Ishmaels will always persecute the Isaacs. *²⁹ But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now.* Galatians 4:29)

Questions

- 1 What happened to Felix?
- 2 What is your impression of Festus?
- 3 Why was there such a rush to judge Paul?
- 4 What was Festus dilemma?
- 5 What was the case against Paul?
- 6 How did Paul get out of escape the plot?
- 7 Why do you think Agrippa wanted to hear Paul?
- 8 Describe the scene when Paul met Agrippa?
- 9 What will happen to these men in a short time?
- 10 Are you living for things that endure?

i Acts 23:12-15 (ESV)

¹² When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. ¹³ There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. ¹⁴ They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near."

ii Matthew 22:21 (ESV)

²¹ They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

iii Matthew 5:44 (ESV)

⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

iv Luke 6:27-28 (ESV)

²⁷ "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,

²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

v Acts 21:28-29 (ESV)

²⁸ crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place."

²⁹ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple.

vi Acts 21:30 (ESV)

³⁰ Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut.

vii Acts 24:5 (ESV)

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.

viii Acts 23:11 (ESV)

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."

ix Isaiah 46:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,'

x John 3:36 (ESV)

³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

xi Romans 10:9-10 (ESV)

⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.

xii John 19:33-34 (ESV)

³³ But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.

³⁴ But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.

xiii 1 Corinthians 15:6 (ESV)

⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.

xiv Acts 2:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words.

xv Acts 2:24 (ESV)

²⁴ God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

xvi Romans 14:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God;

^{xvii} **Luke 23:12 (ESV)**

¹² And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other.

^{xviii} Stott, John *The Bible Speaks Today – The Message of Acts: To the ends of the earth*

^{xix} **Luke 23:1 (ESV)**

¹ Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate.

^{xx} **Acts 4:32 (ESV)**

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.

^{xxi} **John 18:38 (ESV)**

³⁸ Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" After he had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, "I find no guilt in him."