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Acts 25-26

INTRODUCTION

III. Launching Out • Chs. 13-28

G. Paul at Caesarea • Ch. 24-26

1. The trail before Felix • 24:1-23

2. Felix procrastinates • 24:24-27

As we come to ch. 25, Paul is in prison in Caesarea, the Roman capital of Israel.

The Roman governor Felix who'd kept him in jail, hoping he'd try to bribe his way out, has been replaced by a new governor named Porcius Festus.

We know little about Festus, other than the fact that he was thrown into an extremely difficult situation when he was appointed governor of Israel.

Your see, what led to Felix's removal was his terrible handling of the Jews in Caesarea.

For years the Greeks & Jews of the city had argued over the essential nature of the city; Was it a Jewish or a Gentile City?

The argument became so heated it broke out in a riot in which the Jews bested their Gentile opponents.

Felix then ordered his Roman troops to aid the Gentiles & when the riot was suppressed, he allowed the troops to attack the homes of the wealthiest Jews of the city as a form of punishment.

But this was completely unjust & they appealed to Rome.

Felix was recalled to Rome where it was only the intervention of his brother Pallas that saved him from execution.

When Festus arrived the situation was a mess with the Jews & Greeks of Caesarea still at odds & the Jewish hostility toward Rome at the boiling point.

In fact, it was Felix's mistreatment of the Jews that eventually led to their all out revolt against Rome a few years later.

Part of Festus' challenge was to know what to do with Paul, who by rights ought to have been released by Felix.

He'd done nothing contrary to Roman law as the trials had proved.

But Felix had kept him in jail hoping to get rich off the bribe Paul would offer.

Problem is, Paul offered no bribe; so he remained in prison for 2 years.

Festus didn't know the particulars of Paul's case & decided to review the case instead of just letting him go.

3. The trial before Festus • 25:1-12

¹Now when Festus had come to the province, after three days he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem.

While Caesarea was the Roman capital of Israel, Jerusalem was the Jewish capital.

Festus' trip there would be meant to do 2 things;

- 1) Be a show of force to remind the Jewish leaders he was in charge.
- 2) Let them know that he was willing to work with them if they were willing to work with him.

²Then the high priest and the chief men of the Jews informed him against Paul; and they petitioned him, ³asking a favor against him, that he would summon him to Jerusalem— while *they* lay in ambush along the road to kill him.

Though 2 years have passed, the Sanhedrin's plot against Paul is still in full force.

Their chief leaders go to Festus and let him know that he can gain their support & favor if he'll join them in their plot to get rid of Paul.

Of course they don't tell Festus of their plan to ambush & kill Paul – but Festus knows there's more to their request than simply that Paul go to Jerusalem to stand trial.

⁴But Festus answered that Paul should be kept at Caesarea, and that he himself was going *there* shortly. ⁵“Therefore,” he said, “let those who have authority among you go down with *me* and accuse this man, to see if there is any fault in

him.”⁶ And when he had remained among them more than ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day, sitting on the judgment seat, he commanded Paul to be brought.⁷ When he had come, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood about and laid many serious complaints against Paul, which they could not prove,⁸ while he answered for himself, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all.”

When Festus returned to Caesarea, some of the Jewish officials went with him.

Festus took his official seat as judge and Paul was brought out of his cell to stand at trial once more.

His accusers laid the same, tired accusations at his feet they’d already tried with Felix.

Paul’s reply was that he was innocent of their charges, as their complete lack of any evidence revealed.

It’s not enough to merely accuse someone of something - you need to present evidence – of which these guys were unable to do because Paul was innocent!

⁹But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?”

While Festus was moved on a deep level by the Roman demand for justice, he was also anxious to patch up the serious rift between the Jews & Rome Felix had caused.

The entire Jewish Sanhedrin was on one side & Paul on the other.

Simple political pragmatism pointed out the wisdom of sacrificing one man if it would bring peace to a deeply troubled region – even if the one sacrificed was innocent of the charges against him.

It was ONLY Festus’ inner sense of justice that kept him from just turning Paul over to the Jews.

So he suggested that He & Paul together return to Jerusalem and let the Jewish high council decide the case.

The problem is – Paul knew how that would turn out; he knew of the plot to ambush them, a plot that would in all likelihood imperil Festus’ life as well.

So he took advantage of the only provision of Roman law left to him . . .

¹⁰ So Paul said, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. ¹¹ For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar." ¹² Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, "You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!"

If a Roman citizen felt he was not getting the justice he deserved, he could appeal to the Emperor.

The only cases that could NOT be appealed were murder, piracy, & when a thief was caught in the act.

In all other cases, anyone who appealed to Rome HAD TO BE SENT THERE.

So, when Paul claimed his right to have his case heard before Caesar, Festus hands were tied.

4. Paul before Agrippa • 25:13-Ch. 26

a. Agrippa visits Festus • 25:13-27

¹³ And after some days King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus.

This is Agrippa II, son of Agrippa I who murdered James & imprisoned Peter.

He was the last of the Jewish kings & really little more than a figurehead at this point.

He knew he owed his position to the favor of Rome so when Festus arrived, he made his way to Caesarea to pay his respects to the new governor.

His wife Bernice was a real piece of work.

She was Agrippa's sister!

At 13 she'd married her uncle. When he died, she went to live with her brother Agrippa II with whom she became incestuously involved.

She then left Agrippa & married the king of Cilicia. Then she left him & returned to her brother.

That's where she was here.

After this, she became the mistress of the future Emperor Titus.

¹⁴When they had been there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying: "There is a certain man left a prisoner by Felix, ¹⁵ about whom the chief priests and the elders of the Jews informed me, when I was in Jerusalem, asking for a judgment against him. ¹⁶To them I answered, 'It is not the custom of the Romans to deliver any man to destruction before the accused meets the accusers face to face, and has opportunity to answer for himself concerning the charge against him.' ¹⁷Therefore when they had come together, without any delay, the next day I sat on the judgment seat and commanded the man to be brought in. ¹⁸When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, ¹⁹but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive. ²⁰And because I was uncertain of such questions, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there be judged concerning these matters. ²¹ But when Paul appeared to be reserved for the decision of Augustus [a title used for the Emperor], I commanded him to be kept = till I could send him to Caesar."

Festus knew Agrippa was far more well versed in the Jewish religion than he was, so he asked Agrippa for help.

You see, Festus was concerned about sending Paul to Rome without a valid reason.

It was a serious thing to make an appeal to Caesar because it implied the lower court had been unable to do its job.

If Festus sent Paul to Rome without a serious enough charge, it would make him look incompetent & might well result in his being recalled.

Festus does an admirable job of summarizing Paul's case.

He doesn't spin it to make himself look better – he just explains it as it was & asks Agrippa if there's something he can do to help.

²²Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I also would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," he said, "you shall hear him." ²³So the next day, when Agrippa and Bernice had come with great pomp, and had entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at Festus' command Paul was brought in. ²⁴And Festus said: "King Agrippa and all the men who are here present with us, you see this man about whom the whole assembly of the Jews petitioned me, both at Jerusalem and here, crying out that he was not fit to live any longer. ²⁵But when I found that he had committed nothing deserving of death, and that he himself

had appealed to Augustus, I decided to send him. ²⁶I have nothing certain to write to my lord concerning him. Therefore I have brought him out before you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the examination has taken place I may have something to write. ²⁷For it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner and not to specify the charges against him.”

More than unreasonable, it would have been political suicide.

But Festus has nothing to send as charges & he can't delay Paul's trip to Rome indefinitely.

He'll have to be sent soon, so there's a real urgency to the task before them in this official meeting that's been called to which all the important officials of the City have been gathered.

b. Paul's testimony • 26:1-23

¹Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You are permitted to speak for yourself.” So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself:

Paul gave Agrippa a salute & honored him by the title assigned him.

²“I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, ³ especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently.

Paul knew of Agrippa's knowledge & experience in the religion & customs of the Jews.

You may remember that his father Agrippa I along with his wife had been observant Jews, at least when they were in Jerusalem.

They'd done everything they could to curry the favor of the Jewish people by appearing to be devoted to the Law of Moses.

They dressed & ate according to the Jewish kosher laws.

Agrippa II had followed in his father's footsteps, although his incestuous relationship with his sister Bernice revealed his commitment to the Mosaic Law was a sham.

Nevertheless, Agrippa's knowledge of the Jewish religion was something Paul thought he could use.

⁴“My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know.

Though Paul was born in Tarsus, he'd been raised in Jerusalem.

⁵They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee. ⁶And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. ⁷To this *promise* our twelve tribes, earnestly serving *God* night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews.

The hope Paul was referring to was the Messiah & the resurrection – things Paul knew Agrippa knew all about.

Questions about the identity of the Messiah & the nature of the resurrection had been the source of endless discussions among the Jews for generations.

These things were in-house debates that in no way ought to have escalated in Paul's case to a crime worthy of death, or even of imprisonment.

Paul is saying that both Felix & Festus ought to have let him go.

⁸Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?

Paul appeals to Agrippa's knowledge of Israel's history & the God the Jews worshipped.

He's the Creator & Sustainer of the universe.

That He could raise the dead was no big deal, it was nothing to stumble at.

Paul now turns to give some of his own testimony . . .

⁹“Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against *them*. ¹¹And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled *them* to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against *them*, I persecuted *them* even to foreign cities.

Before becoming a believer, Paul had led the Jewish opposition to the followers of Jesus. He tells Agrippa of this to convince him that the Gospel is true.

Paul had come to faith against the background of his own zealous opposition to & hatred of the Gospel.

He didn't start out as a sympathizer of the movement – he'd begun as its chief persecutor.

But something happened to change his mind while he was in the very midst of his campaign to wipe out the Church.

¹²“While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, ¹³at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me.

¹⁴And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? *It is hard for you to kick against the goads.*’ ¹⁵So I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. ¹⁷I will deliver you from the *Jewish* people, as well as *from* the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, ¹⁸to open their eyes, *in order* to turn *them* from darkness to light, and *from* the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.’

We covered these verses in depth a few Sundays ago in a message titled, *Converted*.

What Jesus told Paul his mission would be is a great summary of what happens when we come to a genuine faith in Christ.

¹⁹“Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and *then* to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.

Paul’s defense is that he was only doing what God had told him to do.

The implication was clear – God’s command overrides any earthly court – & Agrippa must weigh his judgment in light of how it will affirm or contradict God’s charge on Paul’s life.

But notice something else here in v. 20.

Paul said his message was one that called people to repent – turning from sin to God, & to do works consistent with that.

The Christian ought to be different from others.

Look at v. 10.

This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison

Paul calls believers “saints.” The word means “set-apart ones.” At its core it refers to a difference.

The Christian is someone who’s turned WAY from sin TO God.

If that turning is real, then one’s lifestyle is going to be different from that which marks the world & those who haven’t repented.

That’s what Paul means when he says believers must do works consistent with repentance.

This is what makes recent research & polling data conducted by *The Barna Group* so disturbing.

According to their findings, those calling themselves “Christians” are little different in either belief or practice from those **NOT** claiming to be believers.

Only 1 in 10 of those claiming to be born-again adults have a Biblical worldview.

Only 1 in 10 . . .

- Believe in absolute moral truth exists
- Believe such truth is contained in the Bible
- Believe the Bible is accurate in its teaching
- Believe Jesus lived a sinless life
- Believe Satan is real
- Believe all believers are responsible for sharing their faith in Christ with others
- Believe the only means to salvation is through God’s grace
- Believe God is the all powerful & all knowing Creator of the universe who still rules it today

The average believer spends less time each year reading their Bible than they do watching TV, listening to music, reading other material, or conversing about personal hobbies & leisure interests.

When asked what constitutes “success” in life, few believers define success in spiritual terms. Most describe outcomes related to professional achievement, physical accomplishments, or getting rich.

When given the opportunity to state how they want to be known by others, fewer than 1 in 10 believers mentioned descriptions that reflect a relationship with God.

According to a report from just a week ago, Barna says that 83% of Americans identified themselves as Christians, yet only 49% of these individuals described themselves as absolutely committed to Christianity.

When asked specific questions about the content of their faith, only 7% of adults qualified as Biblically-consistent Christians.

And according to lifestyle choices regarding the use of popular culture, there's statistically little difference between those claiming to follow Christ & those who don't.

While there's a tiny minority whose lifestyle is consistent with what they claim to believe, the fact is, most people claiming to be a follower of Christ live a lifestyle that is little different from those who don't make that claim.

They watch the same shows, go to the same movies, listen to the same stations, wear the same clothes, subscribe to the same magazines, marry & divorce at the same rate; just generally live the same lives.

Today, when pastors preach & teach on the call to holiness & urge their people to be different, they're called prudish, old-fashioned, out of touch, & unrealistic.

If they dare to challenge a church member caught up in blatant immorality, they're told to mind their own business, or worse, they're sued for defamation of character.

The Church is in a sorry state when those who make it up cannot see that being a follower of Jesus means being different – it means following Him who is Holy!

²¹ For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me.

Because Paul believed Jesus was the Messiah & had risen from the dead.

²² Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come— ²³ that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles.”

All of this was stuff Paul knew Agrippa would be well versed in. And indeed he was.

c. Festus' & Agrippa's response • 26:24-32

Now we get 2 reactions. The first is Festus', then Agrippa's.

²⁴Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!” ²⁵But he said, “I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason.” ²⁶For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that nothing of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. ²⁷King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe.”

Festus thought Paul had spent too much time in prison studying ponderous volumes of religious lore & gone a bit off his rocker.

Paul didn't really address his reply to Festus so much as to Agrippa who he thought he had a better chance of convincing – not to release him but to persuade him to come to faith.

²⁸Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian.”

Agrippa admitted that everything Paul said made perfect sense in light of the Jewish Scriptures.

The king was that close to yielding.

²⁹And Paul said, “I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains.”

Paul expresses his passionate yearning that those hearing him would come to faith.

³⁰When he had said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them; ³¹and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, “This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains.”

³²Then Agrippa said to Festus, “This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

There it is! Paul had committed no crime worthy of either execution or even imprisonment.

Agrippa has only thing to recommend – if it hadn't been for Paul's appeal, Paul could have been released right then & there.

But Paul's appeal to Rome required he go there to have his case heard by the Emperor.

We'll cover the last 2 chapters & our study in Acts next week.

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Feed My Sheep

Feed My Sheep

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