

CONCERNING THE WAY

May 25, 2010



LESSON 103: THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Chapter 25

Acts 25:1-3 Three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem. (2) The high priests and Jewish leaders informed him of their charges against Paul, urging (3) and asking Festus to have Paul brought to Jerusalem as a favor. They were laying an ambush to kill him on the road.

After two years of getting no cooperation from Felix other than to keep Paul in prison, the Jewish leadership quickly goes after Paul now that a new governor is in charge. They brought formal charges against him within three days of Festus' arrival in the province. And they had not forgotten their original plan of having Paul killed on the way before he could stand trial. I wonder if the Jewish leaders used those same assassins that made the vow two years ago to kill Paul before they would eat and drink. Those guys were probably pretty hungry by now!

Acts 25:4-6 Festus replied that Paul was being kept in custody at Caesarea and that he himself would be going there soon. (5) "Therefore," he said, "have your authorities come down with me and present their charges against him there, if there is anything wrong with the man." (6) Festus stayed with them no more than eight or ten days and then went down to Caesarea. The next day he sat on the judge's seat and ordered Paul brought in.

The judgment seat (bēma) was a raised platform with steps and sometimes having a seat, used by officials in making a speech or making pronouncements, often on judicial issues. The judgment seat was a familiar sight in Greco-Roman culture, usually located in the agora, the public square or marketplace in the center of a city.

Acts 25:7-9 When Paul arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem surrounded him and began bringing a number of serious charges against him that they couldn't prove. (8) Paul said in his defense, "I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews, or of the temple, or of the emperor." (9) Then Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, asked Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem to be tried there before me on these charges?"

These are the same charges brought against Paul years before – breaking the law, defiling the temple, and sedition against Caesar. This was the standard charge made against early Christians. Paul argues that he has not disturbed the peace at any level. Festus didn't care about Paul or justice, he was just concerned about ingratiating himself to the Jews.

Acts 25:10-12 But Paul said, "I am standing before the emperor's judgment seat where I ought to be tried. I haven't done anything wrong to the Jews, as you know very well. (11) If I am guilty and have done something that deserves death, I am willing to die. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can hand me over to them as a favor. I appeal to the emperor!" (12) Festus talked it over with the council and then answered, "To the emperor you have appealed; to the emperor you will go!"

The appeal to Caesar was known as the “provocatio ad Caesarem”. It was a Roman citizen's right to ask for a direct judgment by the emperor. It was one of the oldest rights of Roman citizens. Festus was thinking he could use Paul to gain favor with the Jews, but that plan is now kaput. The emperor at that time was Nero, who is infamous for his excesses, but at this point he was still considered to be a fair-minded ruler.

Some might say that Paul did this to save his own skin, because he knew that his chances of surviving another trip to Jerusalem were slim. He wasn't about to get justice in Jerusalem and he could be killed before even getting there. But remember, his goal was to get to Rome. And now, to Rome he would go.

Being a citizen of the empire meant you had certain rights, responsibilities, and status. A citizen had to pay Roman property taxes and municipal taxes, but also had the right to vote in Rome (although during Paul's time different social classes had different rights). A Roman citizen was guaranteed a fair trial and was protected against certain forms of harsh punishment. A Roman citizen could not be executed without a trial and could not be crucified except by order of the emperor.

Paul was intelligent enough to know all of his rights and clever enough to know how to use them to his and especially God's advantage. Not only did his rights as a Roman citizen often save his life in dangerous situations (22:25), they also allowed him to carry the gospel message to jailers, shipmates, and kings. This was a wise move by Paul. He knew he couldn't go back to Jerusalem, and he had already spent two years there in Caesarea waiting to be released. He was about 54 years old now, so he didn't know how much time he had left.

Acts 25:13-15 After several days had passed, King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to welcome Festus. (14) Since they were staying there for several days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king. He said, "There is a man here who was left in prison by Felix. (15) When I went to Jerusalem, the high priests and the Jewish elders informed me about him and asked me to condemn him.

King Agrippa was Herod Agrippa II (A.D. 27-92/93), son of Herod Agrippa I (see Acts 12:1). He ruled over parts of Palestine from A.D. 53 until his death near the end of the century, which ended the Herodian dynasty.

His sister Bernice is a very interesting person in history. She was married at a very early age. After her first husband died she married her uncle, yet another Herod, King of Chalcis. But she was widowed again when he died in A.D. 48. From then on she lived with her brother Agrippa. Rumors that they were having an incestuous relationship were getting out of control, so she decided to marry Polemo of Cilicia, but she left him before long and came back to Herod Agrippa II again. Their relationship became the gossip of Rome according to the historian Josephus.

She did have some redeeming qualities however. While she was in her role of queen, she apparently interceded with the Roman government for her people the Jews, putting her own life at great risk. Later in her life, after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, she became the mistress of the person that engineered the city's destruction, the Roman general Titus, who later became emperor.

The visit of Agrippa and Bernice gave Festus the opportunity to get some Jewish advice. Herod Agrippa II was a trusted adviser because he was known to be very loyal to Rome, which did not make the Jewish people happy with him. They saw him as only a Roman puppet.

Acts 25:16-22 I answered them that it was not the Roman custom to sentence a man to be punished until the accused met his accusers face to face and had an opportunity to defend himself against the charge. (17) "So they came here with me, and the next day without any delay I sat down in the judge's seat and ordered the man to be brought in. (18) When his accusers stood up, they didn't accuse him of any of the crimes I was expecting. (19) Instead, they had several arguments with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus who had died but whom Paul kept claiming was alive. (20) I was puzzled how I should investigate such matters, so I asked if he would like to go to Jerusalem and be tried there for these things. (21) But Paul appealed his case and asked to be held in prison until the decision of his Majesty. So I ordered him to be held in custody until I could send him to the emperor." (22) Agrippa told Festus, "I would like to hear the man." "Tomorrow," he said, "you will hear him."

Festus made it clear that he saw no guilt in Paul. The issue was a simple religious dispute. And Agrippa is interested in hearing him. I'm sure he had heard all about Paul, but now he would hear personally from him and find out what the fuss was all about.

Acts 25:23-24 The next day Agrippa and Bernice arrived with much fanfare and went into the auditorium along with the tribunes and the leading men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. (24) Then Festus said, "King Agrippa and all you men who are present with us! You see this man about whom the whole Jewish nation petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer.

The "royals" were getting their look at Paul. Everyone who was anyone would have been there. The auditorium was a large hall where a king or governor would hold audiences. King Agrippa and Queen Bernice made their entrance first, with great pomp and ceremony. Following them would have been Festus, the governor, with five military tribunes, each one a commander of a thousand troops stationed in the city. The most prominent (mostly Gentile) men of the city" came next. Finally, at Festus' command, Paul entered the auditorium, shackled in chains. Paul once spoke of himself as a "spectacle" to the world (1Corinthians 4:8-13).

Acts 25:25-27 I find that he has not done anything deserving of death. But since he has appealed to his Majesty, I have decided to send him. (26) I have nothing reliable to write our Sovereign about him, so I have brought him to all of you, and especially to you, King Agrippa, so that I will have something to write after he is cross-examined. (27) For it seems to me absurd to send a prisoner without specifying the charges against him."

Festus' opinion of Paul sounds a lot like Pilate's of Jesus (Luke 23:4, 23:14, 23:22). Festus is saying it is hard to even write down any charges against Paul. He would have looked like an idiot if he sent Paul to Rome without any charges, so he was looking for some help from Agrippa, some accusation of wrongdoing he could pin on Paul.

Chapter 26

Acts 26:1-3 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." So Paul stretched out his hand and began his defense. (2) "I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, that I can defend myself today against all the accusations of the Jews, (3) since you are especially familiar with all the Jewish customs and controversies. I beg you, therefore, to listen patiently to me.

Stretching out the hand may have been a normal orator's gesture in those days, like a dramatic gesture by an actor in a play as he begins a speech.

Paul knows he is going to Rome so he is not going to be released any time soon, but he sees his first chance to witness to a king here. This is the final defense Paul makes in Acts, and is considered the climax of the book, and as usual it is a masterful speech, even judging the portion that Luke has given us. Since there are no real charges against him at this point, Paul doesn't really even defend himself, but gives more of a personal testimony of his life.

Acts 26:4-8 All the Jews know how I lived from the earliest days of my youth with my own people and in Jerusalem. (5) They have known for a long time, if they would but testify to it, that I lived as a Pharisee, adhering to the standards of our strictest religious party. (6) "And now I stand here on trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our ancestors. (7) Our twelve tribes, worshiping day and night with intense devotion, hope to attain it. It is because of this hope, O King, that I am accused by the Jews. (8) Why is it thought incredible by all of you that God should raise the dead?

Paul identifies the resurrection of the dead as being "the promise made by God", and the great hope of his ancestors the Jews. This is also our great hope as Christians, and that's the point that Paul is making, that he was being accused of something that the Jews historically believed in. And he asks a great question – if there is a God, wouldn't He be able to raise the dead?

Notice Paul's reference to the twelve tribes in verse 7. He recognized that representatives from all twelve tribes of Israel were still in Judaea, all still practicing their ancient religion. There is no mention in the New Testament that there were ten lost tribes somewhere else in the world. Israelites were scattered all over the known world, from each of the tribes.

In case you don't know what I'm speaking of, the popular thinking is that when the northern kingdom of Israel (which consisted of ten of the twelve tribes – Judah and Benjamin comprising the southern kingdom of Judah) was conquered by Assyria in 723 B. C., the ten tribes were exiled to other parts of Assyria and have never been heard from again. It is said that those tribes became lost, and the Bible never speaks of them again. Well, there is a vast amount of literature on this subject, but the fact is that these tribes were never lost. For one thing, there wasn't a strict division of tribes by the time of the split between the kingdoms. There were people living in both kingdoms from all twelve tribes.

Paul blows the lost tribes theories away in verse 7. The "lost" tribes of Israel are a myth. There were representatives from all twelve tribes in Israel in Jesus and Paul's day, and there will be twelve Jewish tribes during the Tribulation, when 12,000 are sealed from each tribe to be God's servants (Revelation 7:3-8).

Acts 26:9-12 Indeed, I myself thought it my duty to take extreme measures against the name of Jesus from Nazareth. (10) That is what I did in Jerusalem. I received authority from the high priests and locked many of the saints in prison. And when I cast my vote against them, they were put to death. (11) I would even punish them frequently in every synagogue and try to make them blaspheme. Raging furiously against them, I would hunt them down even in distant cities. (12) "That is how I happened to be traveling to Damascus with authority based on a commission from the high priests.

Paul relates his story once again, beginning with what he was like before his conversion. We see more clearly his role in persecuting the early church before his conversion. He was a Pharisee of Pharisees and he hunted down these Christians mercilessly. He may not have been a member of the Sanhedrin yet, but we see here that he was in a high enough standing that he was allowed to vote against the people he arrested for their execution by stoning.

Acts 26:13-14 On the road at noon, O King, I saw a light from heaven that was brighter than the sun. It flashed around me and those who were traveling with me. (14) "All of us fell to the ground, and I heard a voice asking me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me? It is hurting you to keep on kicking against the cattle prods.'

Some of your translations may say "kicking against the goads", which were pointed sticks used to steer a draft animal, and it was used as an idiom for stubborn resistance, and in Greek culture it meant opposing the gods. This translation gives the phrase a more modern understandable meaning. Paul was fighting against God and only hurting himself.

Acts 26:15-18 "I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' "The Lord answered, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. (16) But get up and stand on your feet, for I have appeared to you for the very purpose of appointing you to be my servant and witness of what you have seen and of what I will show you. (17) I will continue to rescue you from your people and from the gentiles to whom I am sending you. (18) You will help them understand and turn them from darkness to light and from Satan's control to God, so that their sins will be forgiven and they will receive a share among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

This is Luke's most comprehensive description of the commission Jesus gave to Paul. He was to be His servant and personal eyewitness. He would rescue Paul from both hostile Jews and Gentiles, which we have seen. And he would help both groups to understand the gospel so that they would turn from darkness to light, from Satan's control to God. That is repentance that leads to forgiveness of sins, and is one of the most important themes in the New Testament (Luke 1:79, Romans 2:19, 13:12, 2 Corinthians 4:6, 6:14, Ephesians 5:8, Colossians 1:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:5).

Notice the end of verse 18. All who turn to Christ in repentance will receive an inheritance (share) and all of them are sanctified by faith in Christ.

Acts 26:19-20 "And so, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. (20) Instead, I first told the people in Damascus and Jerusalem, then all the people in Judea — and after that the gentiles — to repent, turn to God, and perform deeds that are consistent with such repentance.

Paul's defense is that he was just obeying the risen Jesus. He knew that it was God that appeared to Him and that it was Jesus, so he had no choice but to obey. So he was arrested for obeying heavenly direction and preaching the opportunity to turn to God. Notice that Paul includes not only repentance in this gospel message, but what the response should be to that repentance. True repentance should produce "deeds that are consistent with such repentance". In other words, not just talking the talk, but walking the walk. If your repentance is real, you should be avoiding sin and producing fruit.

Acts 26:21-23 For this reason the Jews grabbed me in the temple and kept trying to kill

me. (22) I have had help from God to this day, and so I stand here to testify to both the powerful and the lowly alike, stating only what the prophets and Moses said would happen — (23) that the Messiah would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead and would bring light both to our people and to the gentiles."

Paul was saying he was only teaching what Moses and the prophets taught, which is true, but was very difficult for the Jews to accept. They were only looking for a Messiah that would come and defeat their enemies and make them a world power again. They kept stumbling over the idea of a King who came but did not bring the kingdom that they expected.

Acts 26:24-26 As he continued his defense, Festus shouted, "You're out of your mind, Paul! Too much education is driving you crazy!" (25) But Paul said, "I'm not out of my mind, Your Excellency Festus. I'm reporting what is absolutely true. (26) Indeed, the king knows about these things, and I can speak to him freely. For I am certain that none of these things has escaped his notice, since this wasn't done in a corner."

All this supernatural mumbo-jumbo was too much for Festus. With his Greek viewpoint, he thought that resurrection was impossible and he called Paul insane. He could not understand why a man would go through multiple murder attempts, beatings, and trials for something that seemed ridiculous. I love what Festus says, though – too much education is driving you crazy! That may be true in a lot of cases today! I have also heard them referred to as “educated idiots”. Well, Paul was not insane nor was he an idiot. Everything he was saying was true and Paul points out to King Agrippa that they were all verifiable.

Acts 26:27-29 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you believe them!" (28) Agrippa asked Paul, "Can you so quickly persuade me to become a Christian?" (29) Paul replied, "Whether quickly or not, I wish to God that not only you but everyone listening to me today would become what I am — except for these chains!"

Agrippa was in a corner here. Paul was making the point that it was unthinkable that a man who was an expert in Judaism, warden of the temple and its high priesthood would not take the prophets seriously. If Agrippa answered that he accepted what the prophets said he would be forced to admit that Jesus fulfilled them. If he said no, that would anger the Jews. So he answers Paul's question jokingly to avoid the issue, as many of us do when we don't know what else to say.

Paul actually pushes the king for a decision on whether he believed his message or not! He quickly turns from defending himself to preaching the gospel message, and Agrippa ends up defending himself. If Agrippa had let Paul persuade him, he would have converted to Christianity. But Agrippa, like many others since, put the decision off, probably for political and financial reasons.

Acts 26:30-32 Then the king, the governor, Bernice, and those who were sitting with him got up. (31) As they were leaving, they began to say to each other, "This man hasn't done anything to deserve death or imprisonment." (32) Agrippa told Festus, "This man could have been set free if he hadn't appealed to the emperor."

Others had said Paul was innocent: Pharisees (23:9); Claudius Lysias, the commander in Jerusalem (23:29); and Governor Festus (25:25). Now Agrippa, a man of power, well-trained in Judaism and sympathetic with Jews, stated, "This man could have been set free, if he had not appealed to Caesar."

Here is yet another declaration of Paul's innocence, but he is still not released. It shows how unjust Paul's confinement was. They blamed Paul for his continued imprisonment. It may have been true, but the point is that God wanted Paul to go to Rome to speak to officials there, so being released was not going to happen yet.

Paul was following in the footsteps of His Lord Jesus Christ, wherever He led him. But Paul would not be led to crucifixion, but to the "ends of the earth" before God was through with him. Paul would now take his chances in Rome, with the infamous Emperor Nero.

Next time we'll finish up our study in the book of Acts with chapters 27 and 28. Luke finishes up with one of the most dramatic stories in the book. A terrible storm at sea, a shipwreck, and a snake, oh my!