

Acts 25-26

Lesson 8 Series 2

Chapters 25 and 26 serve a transitional role, continuing Paul's legal proceedings in Palestine before the new governor, Festus (24:27) and before Agrippa (25:23 ff.). In this chapter Paul will appeal to Caesar and the way will be prepared for Paul's journey to Rome that will begin at chapter 27. The introduction in these chapters to Agrippa and Bernice set the stage for Paul's most comprehensive defense speech, which will occur in chapter 26.¹

Three days after his arrival, Festus travels to Jerusalem and is immediately bombarded by the chief priests and the leaders of the Jews with accusations against Paul. They want Paul transferred to Jerusalem and ask the new governor to do this as a favor to them. They still had plans to ambush Paul and kill him on the way (verse 3). Felix indicates that he will be going back to Caesarea and

¹ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary Series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2007), p. 461.

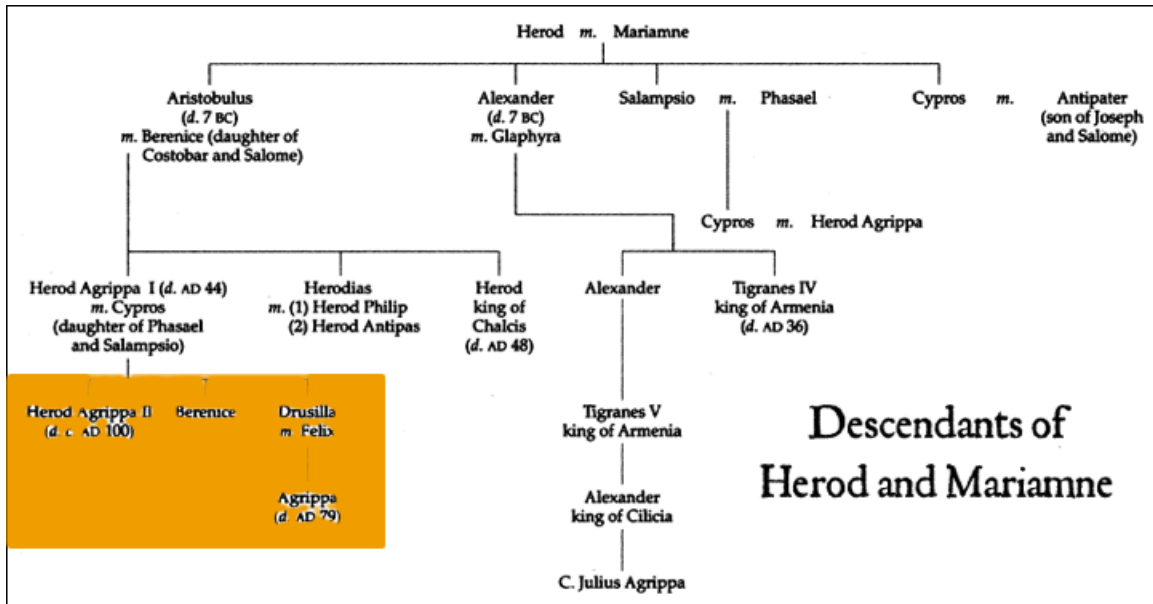
that if they have any accusations against him he tells them to come there and “accuse” him (verse 5).

He spends some more time in Jerusalem before returning to Caesarea and the day after his return he took his seat on the tribunal and orders Paul to be brought before him (verse 6). The Jews then begin bringing many serious charges against Paul, which Luke indicates they did not prove (verse 7). Paul, in his defense indicates that he has done nothing against the law of the Jews, against the temple or against the emperor (verse 8). In verse 9, Festus, rather than releasing Paul asks him if he wishes to go to Jerusalem for trial before Festus there. At this point (verse 10), Paul makes an appeal to the emperor for trial. Festus clearly has a desire to please the Jews and so this stops justice from being served for Paul. There have been many attempts to ascertain the motivation of Festus beyond what Luke says in the text, but whatever speculation might be given in this regard one thing is certain, Paul’s appeal to Caesar sets the stage for the prophecy of Jesus and the Spirit

to be fulfilled: that Paul would testify in Rome (19:21; 23:11).

At verse 12 Festus confers with his council and indicates that the appeal of Paul to Caesar is accepted and that this is what will be done. The right of appeal to Caesar by Roman citizens appears to be absolute. The emperor that Paul was appealing to was Nero, who had succeeded Claudius and reigned from A.D. 54-68 (cf. Suetonius, *Life of Nero*, 8). This right of appeal was a right restricted to those who had rights of citizenship in the city of Rome (cf. Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10:96, see attached handout). This clearly indicates that Paul's claim to Roman citizenship is true, as falsely claiming Roman citizenship was severely punished (Epictetus, *Discourses* 3, 24, 41), and at times the punishment was execution (Suetonius *Life of Claudius* 25:3).²

² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina Series, Vol. 5 (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 421.



At verse 13, readers are introduced to King Agrippa II and his sister Bernice who have journeyed to Caesarea in order to greet the new governor. This was a prolonged visit in order to allow the two rulers to discuss the many things that they needed to discuss.³ The name Agrippa was held by two Herodian rulers in 1st century Palestine. The one here is Agrippa II, who was given the Roman name, Marcus Julius Agrippa. Other children in this family that were born to Agrippa I and Cypros were Drusus, who died before his father, Bernice, Mariamme, and Drusilla. Agrippa II was born in A.D. 28, at the time of his father’s death in A.D. 44;

³ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 466.

he was in Rome where he was brought up at the court of the Emperor Claudius.⁴

Claudius thought it best at the death of Agrippa's father not to allow him to succeed his father onto the throne. At the age of 22 (around A.D. 50, he was made ruler over the kingdom of Chalcis, which is part of Syria. About 3 years later, this kingdom was exchanged for the former territory of his great uncle Philip, which was the territory to the northeast of Galilee. Later still, sometime around the mid-50s he was given rule over limited areas of Galilee and Peraea he was also given powers over the appointment of the High Priest.⁵ Festus lays Paul's case before Agrippa II indicating that it was left over from the time of Felix.

He tells him of the request and information that he had received from the chief priests and the elders of the Jews at Jerusalem (verse 15). At verse 16, he informs the Jews that in Roman law it is not customary to hand over the accused without a fair trial. He then recounts the event

⁴ David C. Braund, "Agrippa", in David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1 (Doubleday: New York, 1992), pp. 98-100.

⁵ Ibid.

concerning his trial of Paul and his appeal to Caesar.

Agrippa expresses an interest in hearing Paul and so on the next day (verse 23) Paul is brought before Agrippa and Bernice. At verse 24 Festus declares that he really thinks Paul is innocent, but he has appealed to the Emperor, (verse 26) and yet he has nothing definite to write to the Emperor regarding the case. He seems to be pleading with King Agrippa to help him find some reason for sending him to the Emperor.

The entirety of chapter 16 is devoted to Paul's final defense speech in the book of Acts. Agrippa gives Paul permission to speak for himself. Paul then employs the typical rhetorical gesture of the outstretched hand (cf. 13:16; 21:40) and proceeds with his speech. Paul indicates that he feels fortunate to be able to speak before Agrippa and to defend himself against all the accusations made against him by the Jews. He then pleads for patience as he does this. The assumption is that Agrippa is an expert in things Jewish even though it is never explicitly stated that he is a Jew.

Paul begins by stating that all the Jews know his way of life as he had spent all of his life among them and even a portion of his life right in Jerusalem itself. He states his credentials of affiliation with the sect of the Pharisees and states that they know this full well. At verse 6, he states that the reason he is on trial is because of his “hope in the promise God made to our ancestors”. Note that in this statement Paul seems to be including Agrippa with him as a fellow Jew. He states that it is for this hope that he stands accused and then he asks the question as to why it is thought incredible by any of “you” that God raises the dead.

The resurrection of the dead is central to the gospel message and Paul, in his speeches and preaching repeatedly refers to it, keeping attention focused on the message of Jesus Christ. All too often, today, we fail to keep this aspect of the Christian message at the center of our preaching and teaching. This then allows so much of what the church becomes a social club intent upon creating and fostering social justice, which is a good thing, but when this aspect of the church does not have at its heart the message of the

resurrection of Christ it is doomed to failure, because self-interest will eventually introduce corruption that will corrode the efforts of such a group. Paul understands this is the foundational element within his proclamation of the good news. Often our focus can change to this social justice aspect, which is certainly important in the Christian message, or even to focus solely on love without the centrality of the resurrection. When this happens the gospel is emptied of its true power to generate real and lasting transformation in the lives of people. The basis of Christian life is the resurrection. This hope allows us to begin to deal, in a meaningful manner, with our innate selfishness and ungodliness.

At verses 9 and 10, Paul proclaims that at one point he too resisted Jesus by working with the chief priests to lock up “the saints” (τῶν ἁγίων – “the holy ones”), the people of God. Paul here refers to the people of God using the term used by Ananias at 9:13 when he was still blind in Damascus. Paul voted against them when they were being condemned to death before he was a Christian. Verse 11, he

indicates that he punished them in the synagogues and actually tried to “force” them to blaspheme. The punishment spoken of here might well be a reference to the imposition of the 39 lashes and the blasphemy referred to here is not to blaspheme God but to renounce Christ.⁶ Paul pursued these followers of the “Way” even to foreign cities because he was so furious and enraged at them. His previous life was one driven by fury and rage rather than one driven by love and hope.

At verse 12 and continuing through verse 18, he begins recounting his conversion experience on the road to Damascus and the words spoken by Jesus concerning what he wanted him to do. His calling was to testify to the things that he has seen and heard and “to those in which I will appear to you”. This last sentence is a very difficult sentence to translate fully, but the meaning is certain and that is that Paul is to be a “witness” for Jesus Christ. It also seems to indicate that Jesus is going to appear to Paul through the agency of others, perhaps such as the way

⁶ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 478.

Ananias is sent to Paul after his experience on the road to Damascus. He goes onto indicate that indeed he will rescue him from both the Jews and the Gentiles in order for him to “open their eyes” that they may turn from the darkness to the light and away from the power of Satan to God, to receive the forgiveness of sins and be placed “among those who are sanctified by faith in me”. Notice the contrast between “the power of Satan” and the “forgiveness of sins”; forgiveness of sins nullifies the power of Satan when it works its genuine work. They are sanctified by their faith here not by any act or works that they have done, it is through Christ Jesus that this sanctification will come.

Still speaking directly to King Agrippa Paul makes it clear that he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision that he received, but he began testifying first in Damascus and then on to Jerusalem, throughout Judea and also to the Gentiles calling on them all to repent and turn to God and perform deeds that was consistent with their repentance. This demand for repentance is not a new demand, as John the Baptist used this same phrase, literally deeds “worthy of

repentance” (ἄξια τῆς μετανοίας ἔργα) in his preaching at Luke 3:8 (fruit worthy of repentance - καρπούς ἀξιούσ τῆς μετανοίας).⁷

At verse 21, Paul indicates that it is for this reason that the Jews seized him at the temple and tried to kill him. He declares that it is only through the help of God that he is able stand before him today declaring what Moses and the prophets said would take place. In verse 23 he is very specific in proclaiming exactly what he claims is prophesied would take place and that is that (verse 23) the Messiah must suffer, and be the first to rise from the dead. The inclusive nature of Paul’s proclamation of the gospel is what tended to get him in trouble. Because he proclaimed the message to Gentiles, it was often claimed that Paul was attempting to encourage Jews to turn away from the law and the temple (21:21). It is this misunderstanding, and misrepresentation, of Paul’s mission that led to the frenzy which resulted in Paul being attacked in the Jerusalem

⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina Series, Vol. 5 (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), pp. 437-438.

temple. The accusation initially was that Paul had brought a Gentile into the inner court of the Temple.⁸

In the middle of Paul's defense, Festus interrupts the proceedings indicating that he thinks Paul is out of his mind (μαίνομαι). He literally says that Paul's "many letters have changed him into a maniac". This intrusion allows Luke's readers to realize that this is a critical point in speech. It is interesting that there is every indication that Festus understands Paul to be a very learned man, although driven mad by his great learning. It is apparent that pejorative attitudes have prejudiced the attitudes of people toward those who think too deeply for some considerable time, and that it is not just a modern phenomenon.⁹

Paul's retort is immediate to Festus indicating that what he is saying is the "sober truth", literally "truth and rationality" (ἀληθείας καὶ σωφροσύνης).¹⁰ Paul also

⁸ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 483.

⁹ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 485.

¹⁰ Cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.1.16 περὶ μὲν οὖν τῶν ταῦτα πραγματευομένων τοιαῦτα ἔλεγεν: αὐτὸς δὲ περὶ τῶν ἀνθρωπείων ἀεὶ διελέγετο σκοπῶν τί εὐσεβές, τί ἀσεβές, τί καλόν, τί αἰσχρόν, τί δίκαιον, τί ἄδικον, τί σωφροσύνη, τί μανία, τί ἀνδρεία, τί δειλία, τί πόλις, τί πολιτικός, τί ἀρχὴ ἀνθρώπων, τί ἀρχικός ἀνθρώπων, καὶ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων, ἃ τοὺς μὲν εἰδόμενος ἤγετο καλοὺς καγαθοὺς εἶναι, τοὺς δ' ἀγνοοῦντας ἀνδραποδώδεις ἂν δικαίως κεκλησθαι. "Such, then, was his criticism of those who meddle with these matters. His own conversation was

immediately turns attention back to Agrippa, who Paul says knows about these things and so he feels he can speak freely, without being misunderstood. Of course, this is in the light of what we already know of Agrippa's family history with Christianity where his father has James killed and then he ends up dying an ignominious death (Acts 12). Paul also indicates that none of the things he is talking about has happened privately, in a corner. They have happened out in the open for all to see in time and space. Paul also makes the assumption that Agrippa believe in the prophets (verse 27).

All of this leads Agrippa to the assumption that Paul is taking the opportunity afforded him to convert him to Christianity. Paul not only does not deny this accusation he embraces the truth of it and says that not only does he desire to convert Agrippa but all that are listening to him.

At this the point, where Paul is clearly pressing Agrippa to

ever of human things. The problems he discussed were, What is godly, what is ungodly; what is beautiful, what is ugly; what is just, what is unjust; what is prudence, what is madness; what is courage, what is cowardice; what is a state, what is a statesman; what is government, and what is a governor;—these and others like them, of which the knowledge made a "gentleman," in his estimation, while ignorance should involve the reproach of "slavishness." E. C. Marchant, *Xenophon in Seven Volumes*, Vol. 4 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923).

make a decision it appears that he does indeed make a decision by ending the hearing and walking out. Paul seems to assume that Agrippa is not persuaded at verse 29, but it is Paul's deep desire that he would be persuaded.

The end of the proceedings are signaled by Agrippa standing and the others seated with him standing as well. The response of Agrippa is that Paul has done nothing to deserve "death or imprisonment". He also indicates had he not appealed to Caesar he could have been set free. This is now the fifth time that sanctioned, governing officials, have declared Paul's innocence. It is interesting, that just like Jesus, technical innocence does not necessarily provide any real protection for Paul as he continues to remain in chains.

Synopsis

This section begins with a change in the governorship from Felix to Festus. Not long after his arrival in the province he travels to Jerusalem where immediately he is bombarded with requests to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem and the chief priests and leaders planned to murder Paul during the trip to Jerusalem. Festus declines their request but does convene a hearing in Caesarea to hear Paul's case. During the hearing, Felix, wishing to do a favor for the Jews asks Paul if he wishes to go to Jerusalem to have his case heard. At this point Paul instead appeals for his case to be heard by the emperor in Rome. This request is granted.

Shortly after this, King Agrippa and his sister Bernice come to Caesarea to meet with the new governor. Festus asks Agrippa to hear from Paul in order to help him to give reasons for sending him to Rome for trial. Festus recounts the information that he had gleaned from his hearing with Paul and indicates that it involves matters of Jewish law.

Paul is most pleased to appear before Agrippa and he recounts his most detailed and elaborate defense so far focusing clearly upon the resurrection from the dead of Jesus the Messiah. He recounts his conversion account, his former affiliation with the Pharisees, and the chief priests, and is accused by Festus of being driven mad by his great learning.

He attempts to convert Agrippa, and all those with him to Christianity as part of his defense. Agrippa ends the session and once again, now for the fifth time before a government official, Paul is declared innocent. Despite this, Paul continues to remain in chains as he awaits transportation to Rome.

Main Points

1. The Jews still want Paul dead and are willing to spare no efforts, no matter how immoral or corrupt to murder Paul, God's spokesman.
2. The Roman government is also corrupt, but less so than the Jews.
3. Paul continues to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ to whoever will listen while imprisoned.
4. Paul focuses on the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a central point in his message of salvation.
5. Paul contrasts the power of Satan with the forgiveness of sins offered by God.

Questions

1. Why do you think that even after two years the Jewish leaders are still trying so hard to murder Paul?
2. What makes Paul such a threat to them?
3. Why do you think Festus does not return Paul to Jerusalem for trial?
4. Why do you think God just does not have Paul released as he did with Peter earlier?
5. Why do you think Luke recounts all the details of Paul's hearings?
6. How do you think Agrippa and Bernice will have felt about Paul; noting how their father died and his murder of James?
7. What gives Satan power over human beings?
8. Why does Paul focus so intently upon the resurrection of Jesus in his trial before Agrippa?
9. Why do you think Festus thought Paul was insane?
10. What is the importance of the resurrection for you?
11. Why is Paul so persistent in trying to convert people?