

Study 37: Acts 25

Introduction

Paul had been kept in custody for two years under Felix in the hope that he would gain a bribe for Paul's release. Felix was cruel and crooked, and had been recalled to Rome to face Nero. Festus arrived to replace him as the Governor, and tried to right many of the wrongs that had occurred under Felix's administration.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

Content: *What are the major events?*

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Body of the Study

Why would Festus have gone to Jerusalem?

What do the Jews want from Festus to "right the wrongs" of Felix?

What does Festus determine should happen?

What happened at the Trial before Festus?

What did the appeal to Caesar mean?

Who were Agrippa and Bernice?

How does Festus involve Agrippa?

How does Agrippa react?

How does Festus introduce Paul?

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *Paul was falsely accused, just like Jesus was. Why didn't he react in the same way? What was driving him to do what he did?*
- *How must Paul have felt to be appearing before such a large and dignified audience who want to hear what he has to say?*

Read chapter 26 in preparation for next week

Notes for study 37: Acts chapter 25

Introduction

Paul had been kept in custody for two years under Felix in the hope that he would gain a bribe for Paul's release. Felix was cruel and crooked, and Festus arrived to replace him as the Governor, and tried to right many of the wrongs that had occurred under Felix's administration.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

The chapter covers only a few weeks at the beginning of Festus' administration. The time is indefinite, but probably around mid-year AD 60.

Content: *What are the major events?*

Festus takes up his appointment as Governor; Paul appears before Festus, and then appeals to Caesar; Paul appears before Agrippa and Bernice.

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Paul, Festus, Jewish leaders, Agrippa and Bernice

Body of the Study

Why would Festus have gone to Jerusalem?

"...Now when Festus had come to the province, after three days he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem..." (25:1 NKJV). Festus made the trip very soon – *three days* – after arriving in Caesarea. Immediately on arriving he wanted to become acquainted with the local leaders – notably the Sanhedrin – the Jewish leaders. His objective was to rebuild the relationships that had been destroyed by Felix. He had one of the High Priests executed by a mob, and the same mob would enter amongst the crowds in the Temple and murder people with hidden knives¹.

Needless to say, Felix had not been held in great esteem by the Jews. If Festus delayed making contact, it would only enable rumours to develop about his character, which would not help right the wrongs and establish harmonious relationships. By making first hand contact immediately, a new platform of relationships could be built.

When Festus came to Jerusalem, the High Priest and the leaders of the Jews immediately made approaches concerning Paul. "...Then the high priest and the chief men of the Jews informed him against Paul; and they petitioned him, asking a favour against him..." (25:2-3 NKJV). It is most likely that Ananias still had great influence, although he was deposed from office in AD 59. The anger of the Jews towards Paul was still strong, even though he had been imprisoned (and out of circulation, although not without influence) for the previous two years.

What do the Jews want from Festus to "right the wrongs" of Felix?

As the new Governor came to get to know the Jewish leaders, the first thing that they wanted from him was retribution against Paul. Felix had left Paul in prison – *to do the Jews a favour* (24:27) – but that was not enough! Despite Felix's cruelty towards them, what the Jews wanted from Festus to "set things right" was to have Paul killed – or to allow *them* to carry out the execution "...that he would summon him to Jerusalem – while they lay in ambush along the road to kill him..." (25:3 NKJV). They presented a scheme which was along the lines of those that Felix might have used – You bring him to Jerusalem, and on the way we'll ambush him – in that way, Festus would not be directly implicated in the action.

There seems to be an implication that Festus would be just as bent as Felix – to even suggest such a thing to a new Governor! Festus seemed to be alert to their scheming (what leader

¹ See Insert from Josephus, *Antiquities*: 20:8:10
Study of Acts (Revised 2007) by Graeme Offer

wouldn't after being asked to be involved in an ambush scheme?), and he determined that Paul should remain at Caesarea.

What does Festus determine should happen?

Festus was not willing to put up with the “set up” from the Jews. He recognised that Paul needed to be dealt with quickly. He was not fully acquainted with all of the circumstances, and wanted to be assured about the problems with Paul. He agreed to deal with the matter promptly, and asked the influential men amongst Jews to come down to argue their case against Paul “...*Let those who have authority among you go down with me and accuse this man, to see if there is any fault in him...*” (25:5 NKJV).

Paul was clearly getting frustrated at all of this. He had been falsely accused (of bringing Gentiles into the Temple), questioned by Lysias without being found guilty of anything, tried before the Sanhedrin without being found guilty, tried before Felix without being found guilty and yet held in custody for two years, and now he must be examined again by Festus (and then again by Agrippa).

To be fair to Festus, he was placed in the position of having to make decisions about Paul, and he wanted to be sure of the facts. The corrupt ways of Felix would have provided no basis for him to have any confidence in the history of the case.

Immediately on returning to Caesarea (after around 10 days in Jerusalem) Festus “...*went down to Caesarea ... and the next day, sat on the judgement seat, and commanded Paul to be brought...*” (25:6). Once again, the urgency of dealing with the matter resulted from Festus trying to be just, and the importance that the Jews showed towards having this issue resolved. This was only two weeks after Festus had taken up office.

Festus held the office of Governor for a period of two years, and died in office in AD 62. He was replaced by Albinus from Alexandria, and during the delay in his appointment a new High Priest Ananus took opportunity to “round up” and persecute some Christians. James the Lord's brother was tried before the Sanhedrin, and then stoned to death. As a result, Agrippa had Ananus removed from office after only three months². Whilst this was a little after the events noted here (about 2 years later), it is worthy of noting.

9. Now when Porcius Festus was sent as successor to Felix by Nero, the principal of the Jewish inhabitants of Caesarea went up to Rome to accuse Felix; and he had certainly been brought to punishment, unless Nero had yielded to the importunate solicitations of his brother Pallas, who was at that time had in the greatest honor by him. Two of the principal Syrians in Caesarea persuaded Burrhus, who was Nero's tutor, and secretary for his Greek epistles, by giving him a great sum of money, to disannul that equality of the Jewish privileges of citizens which they hitherto enjoyed. So Burrhus, by his solicitations, obtained leave of the emperor that an epistle should be written to that purpose. This epistle became the occasion of the following miseries that befell our nation; for when the Jews of Caesarea were informed of the contents of this epistle to the Syrians, they were more disorderly than before, till a war was kindled.

10. Upon Festus's coming into Judea, it happened that Judea was afflicted by the robbers, while all the villages were set on fire, and plundered by them. And then it was that the sicarii, as they were called, who were robbers, grew numerous. They made use of small swords, not much different in length from the Persian acinacae, but somewhat crooked, and like the Roman sicae, [or sickles,] as they were called; and from these weapons these robbers got their denomination; and with these weapons they slew a great many; for they mingled themselves among the multitude at their festivals, when they were come up in crowds from all parts to the city to worship God, as we said before, and easily slew those that they had a mind to slay. They also came frequently upon the villages belonging to their enemies, with their weapons, and plundered them, and set them on fire. So Festus sent forces, both horsemen and footmen, to fall upon those that had been seduced by a certain impostor, who promised them deliverance and freedom from the miseries they were under, if they would but follow him as far as the wilderness. Accordingly, those forces that were sent destroyed both him that had deluded them, and those that were his followers also.

Josephus, Antiquities, 20:8:9-10

² Josephus; Antiq 20:9:1

What happened at the Trial before Festus?

“...the Jews who had come from Jerusalem stood about and laid many serious complaints against Paul, which they could not prove...” (25:7 NKJV). The Jews had come back to Caesarea with Festus (or perhaps had preceded him in anticipation of his return to Caesarea). Luke does not discuss the charges laid against Paul, and it is likely that it is essentially a repeat of the charges that were brought by Tertullus before Felix.

We do get some idea of the charges from Paul’s response (25:8)

- I have not committed any offence:
 - Not against the Jewish Law
 - Nor against the Temple
 - Nor against Roman Law

The Jews had not been able to prove their case, and Paul had pleaded *not guilty* to every one of them. If justice were to be served, then Festus should have released Paul, however that would have meant that the Jews would have taken the opportunity to have Paul murdered, and would have done little towards establishing harmonious relationships between the new Governor and the Jewish leaders.

Festus suggested that Paul could stand trial before the Sanhedrin, with he himself as an official observer and final arbiter to ensure justice and avoid violence “...*Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?...*” (25:9 NKJV). This outcome would mostly have satisfied the Jews, however it would have been a waiver of Paul’s rights as a Roman citizen. Paul called on his rights as a Roman – for he was standing in a Roman Court in Caesarea, being judged according to Roman Law before the highest official of the land, and had not been found guilty of anything. Essentially it meant that Festus was about to hand him over to the Jews (as Pilate did with Jesus). After the Jews had declared him guilty, Festus could have passed judgement of the death sentence to appease the Jews.

Festus was aware that the Jews wanted to trap Paul, and have him murdered. Their purpose of bringing Paul to Jerusalem for a trial was as a way to facilitate this. Therefore Festus suggested a trial in Caesarea. He further suggested that the able Jews come down and present the evidence. The trial took place in quick time, and there was no evidence to convict Paul. But Festus suggested another trial in Jerusalem *to appease the Jews*. Festus knew about Paul’s innocence (as he admitted such to Agrippa 25:18 & 19).

Paul had been pushed into a corner, and again proclaimed his innocence “...*if I have done anything worthy of death, then I am prepared to die or face whatever the penalty might be...*” (25:11) and so he was left no option but to appeal to Caesar.

What did the appeal to Caesar mean?

A Roman citizen had the ultimate right of appeal to the emperor. This would immediately end all other proceedings in the case, and the emperor himself would sit in judgement. This took the case immediately out of Festus’ hands.

Nero was the emperor at the time, however during the first few years of his reign there was nothing to give warning of the events that were to follow in AD 64 and after with the burning of Rome and subsequent persecution of the Christians.³

Paul had not appealed whilst Felix was in office, as he had essentially decided that there was no case against Paul, and he was deferring sentence (and hoping to gain a bribe to speed the process up). However when Festus came, the game changed, and there was a very real danger of going back to Jerusalem and being found “guilty” by the Sanhedrin. The appeal to Caesar took that option away, and Festus escaped the responsibility of having to deal with the case.

As a part of that appeal, a report needed to be written. The letter from Lysias and the records of the trial before Felix would have been some key documents, however Festus needed to

³ Bruce (2), p.454

provide a letter to the emperor outlining the facts of the case. The opportunity to gain further information came along with the visit of Agrippa and Bernice to Caesarea.

Festus responded to Paul “...to Caesar you shall go...” (25:12 NKJV), which has a certain amount of irony associated with it. It was delivered to a Roman citizen who had never visited Rome, from the Roman Governor who had just come from there with personal knowledge and associations of the emperor himself. It was almost as if *you really don't know what you are letting yourself into, but you'll get what you ask for!*

Who were Agrippa and Bernice?

Marcus Julius Agrippa 2 was the son of Herod Agrippa 1⁴. He was 17 years old and living in Rome when his father died in AD 44 (12:23). Bernice and Drusilla were his sisters, and his relationship with Bernice was questioned as incestuous⁵, although she was married on several occasions, in part to squash the rumours, but came back to her brother.

Agrippa had been deemed too young (at 17) to take up the responsibility of replacing his father as Herod and King over Judea, and he was given smaller areas to rule over. Eventually in AD 50 Agrippa was given more power over the kingdom of Chalcis (in Lebanon) together with the right of appointing Jewish High Priests⁶. In AD 53 he gave up his kingdom for a larger one consisting of the former tetrarchies of Philip and Lysanias. In AD 56, this territory was increased by Nero, who added to it the regions of Tiberias and Tarichaea, west of the Sea of Galilee, together with Julias in Perea and fourteen neighbouring villages⁶.

So, for four or five years he had been king of Galilee and Perea and for eight years had been in effect in control of the Temple, appointing and deposing the High Priests.

How does Festus involve Agrippa?

Agrippa was not only a powerful leader in the area, but would have been regarded as an authority in matters regarding the Jewish Religion. He would have been somewhat acquainted with Jesus – it was his great grandfather Herod the Great who tried to kill the infant Jesus, and had all of the young boy children in the land murdered in the process. His uncle had sat at Jesus' trial, and his own father had tried to suppress christianity and had James killed to please the Jews.

It happened that Agrippa and Bernice had come on an official visit to offer their respects to the new Governor. This gave Festus the opportunity to discuss the issues relating to Paul with Agrippa. He was probably hoping that Agrippa might be able to throw some light on the situation and what to do about it – although with the appeal to Caesar, the *what to do about it* had already been cast in stone.

Paul was introduced as follows:

- Left prisoner by Felix (true)
- The chief priests and Jewish elders asked for a judgement (true)
- I answered it is not Roman custom to sentence a man before he has had a fair trial (true)
- The next day, I sat in judgement on the matter (true)
- The accusers brought no accusations for things *I might adjudicate on* (true)
- Their accusations were matters of their own religion (true)
- It concerned Jesus who had died (true)
- Whom Paul affirmed was alive (true)
- I was uncertain concerning such matters (true)
- I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem to be judged on these matters (partly true – the statement is true, but the implications *in law* are a twist of the facts)
- Paul appealed to Caesar (true)
- I commanded him to be kept until I could arrange the journey (true)

⁴ Refer to Herod's Family Tree, p. 111

⁵ Josephus, Antiq 20:7:3; 19:5:1; 18:5:4

⁶ Bruce (2), p. 456

It is notable that Festus appeared to have little or no knowledge of Jesus, and His resurrection. Paul would have affirmed Jesus to be the fulfilment of the Jewish religion, whilst the Jews would have denied it. The facts about Jesus were not presented to Festus (at least Luke did not record them), and the only place Festus could have heard of them was in Paul's dissertation. In every sermon of Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is the strong and recurring theme.

How does Agrippa react?

Agrippa would have been aware of some of the ruckus that had happened when Paul came to Jerusalem, and he was certainly aware of Paul as he said to Festus "...*I also would like to hear the man myself...*" (25:22 NKJV). The opportunity to hear some more of the case and to meet Paul was met with enthusiasm. In fact, the Greek tense indicates that *this wish has not just been formed for the first time* – "*I was also hoping to meet him*".

The opportunity to hear Paul was given almost immediately "...*So the next day, when Agrippa and Bernice had come with great pomp and entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at Festus' command Paul was brought in...*" (25:23 NKJV). The occasion was met *with great pomp* and pageantry. It was not just a few people who had assembled, but the Roman commanders and prominent men of the city were also there. Five Roman Cohorts were stationed at Caesarea⁷ and so there would have been five cohort commanders present. (A cohort was made up from 6 to 10 centuries of soldiers, so there were between 3,000 and 5,000 soldiers stationed there).

Paul's appearance before Agrippa explicitly brings to fulfilment the promise that the Lord made to him "...*you shall bear my name before Kings...*" (9:15). This was not just a private audience for Paul, but provided the opportunity for him to preach to quite a large crowd of prominent citizens who had assembled with the prime purpose of hearing what he had to say.

How does Festus introduce Paul?

Festus began by paying due respect to Agrippa, and with due acknowledgment to the prominent men of the gathering. "...*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...*" (25:24 NKJV). Nothing less would be expected at an official gathering with such pomp and pageantry, and such is exactly what is done at official gatherings today.

Festus outlined the facts of Paul's case, and the circumstances of the assembly:

- The whole assembly of the Jews petitioned me (basically true)
- Both here and in Jerusalem (true)
- Saying that he was not fit to live (true)
- I found that he had not committed anything worthy of death (true)
- He himself had appealed to Caesar (true, but Festus omitted the bit about trying to send him back to Jerusalem again for another trial before the Sanhedrin!)
- I have nothing certain to write to Caesar about (true)
- Therefore I have brought him before you all (true – he was trying to increase his knowledge of the case)
- And especially before Agrippa (true, as Agrippa's knowledge of the Jews, together with the Roman Law, would provide expert counsel as to how to deal with the case)
- It seems unreasonable to send the prisoner to Rome without a written charge (true)

On the latter point, it would not only be *unreasonable*, but irresponsible on the part of Festus, and against the Roman Law. Such would have aroused Nero's displeasure against the new Governor in very quick time.

Before closing the chapter, reference is made in 25:25 as *Augustus* being Caesar, when at the time it was Nero. *Augustus* is from the Latin equivalent of the Greek word *Emperor*. The New International Version Bible Commentary provides the following information, and also comments on the use of "lord":

⁷ Josephus Antiq 19:9:2

A number of subtle touches in these verses are particularly appropriate for the situation. The title *Sebastos* ("Emperor," v. 25; GK G4935), found only here and in v. 21 in the NT, is the Greek equivalent of Augustus (a title first conferred on Octavian by the Senate in 27 B.C. to denote one who is lifted above other mortals). The addition of *Kyrios* ("Lord" or "His Majesty"; GK G3261) to the imperial title began in the time of Nero (A.D. 54-68). Despite its associations with deity in the eastern realms of the empire, the growth of the imperial cult, and the pretensions to divinity of such emperors as Nero and Domitian, *Kyrios* did not by itself signal to Romans the idea of deity but rather connoted that of majesty. Likewise, Festus's statement (v. 27) that he thought it "unreasonable" to send on a prisoner with unspecified charges against him is typical of the face-saving language used among officials, for the failure to specify charges was a dereliction of duty. (NIVBC)

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