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A SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS

ACTS CHAPTERS 24, 25, 26

“TRIED BY A TRIO OF TYRANTS”

Felix, Acts 24; **Festus**, Acts 25; **Agrippa**, Acts 26

God had said of Paul, *“He is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.”* (Acts 9:15-16) We see the fulfillment of God’s plan for Paul:

- Before the Gentiles – Chapters 13-20
- Before the children of Israel and the Sanhedrin – Chapters 22-23
- Before kings and rulers – Chapter 24, 25, 26.

Paul is a model of one *“enduring hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.”* (II Tim. 2:3) He had been rescued from a mob in Jerusalem that intended to kill him; had been brought before the Sanhedrin court for a pressure-packed examination; taken at night to Caesarea where he was interrogated by Governor Felix; kept in house arrest for two years; examined by Felix’s successor, Festus, and then questioned by King Agrippa.

He must have been a notorious criminal and a single-handed serious threat to the Roman Empire! What great and grave crime had he committed? The irony of the situation was that he was no threat to the Roman government at all but more of a pawn in a political arena. It was the Jews who felt threatened and the occupying power, the Romans, in order to appease the Jews and keep a semblance of peace, acquiesced to the clamor from the Jewish religious hierarchy and kept Paul out of their hair. Of course, *“Behind the dim unknown, standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above his own.”* (James Russell Lowell)

PAUL BEFORE GOVERNOR FELIX – ACTS 24

Marcus Antonius Felix was the Roman governor of Judaea from A.D. 52 to A.D. 58. He is also known as Claudius Felix. He ruled in Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judea. Felix’s cruelty and licentiousness was well known as well as his propensity to accept bribes as is seen in Acts 24:26.

Felix notified Paul’s accusers up in Jerusalem that he would hear Paul’s case in 5 days which caused the high priest and other Jewish rulers to hasten from Jerusalem to Caesarea.

The Prosecutor Speaks

The Sanhedrinists brought with them a Roman lawyer, named Tertullus. They hoped to prove that Paul was a dangerous character - a sort of anarchist. After an introduction in which

Tertullus flattered Felix ad nauseam in order to win the favor of the judge, he made four charges against Paul:

(1) He said, "*We have found this man a plague...*" (v.5a NKJV) The Greek word translated "plague" means literally "A plague, disease, pestilence; a pest or pestilent fellow."

(2) He said that Paul was "*a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world...*" (v.5b) "*Throughout the world*"? Really?

(3) He continues, "*a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.*" (v.5c) What is meant by this word sect? It means something like: not belonging to the official religion; not being part of mainstream belief; a religious group that are a law unto themselves.

(4) He added, "*He even tried to profane the temple....*" (v.6) This was gross misrepresentation and downright falsehood. He had not gone into the temple to profane it and these pious Jewish rulers knew that, but gave assent to the lie for verse 9 says, "*And the Jews also assented, maintaining that these things were so.*"

Tertullus was an exaggerator if he was anything! The word "exaggerate" means: "To represent as greater than is actually the case; overstate; to enlarge or increase to an abnormal degree; to make overstatements." (American Heritage® Dictionary) This he certainly did to make Paul appear to be the worst kind of fellow.

These Jews claimed to be "Law of Moses Keepers." What about the ninth commandment: "*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*" (Exodus 20:16) This was a frame-up from the beginning!

The Accused Speaks

Paul was courteous, calm and dignified. He did not engage in flattery but made a fearless denial of the charges that Tertullus had made against him. Paul opened his defense by saying that "*it is no more than twelve days since I went up to Jerusalem to worship.*" (v.11) He began by setting a time-frame for his activities, showing Felix that he could not have had time to do all that he was accused of doing. One by one he denied the charges that Tertullus had lodged against him.

(1) Paul denied that he had profaned the temple. He said that: "*They neither found me in the temple disputing with anyone....*" (v.12a)

(2) He said he was not in town to raise an insurrection: "*.... nor inciting the crowd, either in the synagogues or in the city....*" (v.12)

(3) Paul boldly challenged his accusers by saying, "*Nor can they prove the things of which they now accuse me.*" (v.13) No witness had testified that he was found in the Temple either disputing or gathering a crowd.

(4) He protested strongly that he was not a member of a sect. He claimed to believe what all orthodox Jews believed. (vs.14-21)

(5) He testified, *"I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead..."* (v.15a) And, because he believed in the resurrection of the *"just and the unjust"* (v.15b) and consequently, a coming judgment before the Supreme Judge, he said, *"I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men."*

As Felix listened to the Apostle, he was conscience-stricken for he had lived a vile life. (v.25) Finally the governor dismissed him with the memorable words, *"Go thy way for this time. When I have a more convenient season I will call for thee."* (v.25b) Procrastination is one of Satan's deadliest weapons.

"He longed for bribes, and therefore retained his innocent prisoner. Men will do anything for gain. This man felt the power of Paul's sermon but loved the wages of sin too well to repent. If we also are saying, "When I have a more convenient season I will call forth thee;" is it not because we do not mean to give up our sins?" (Charles H. Spurgeon, Spurgeon's Devotional Bible, November 11)

Felix postponed making a judgment saying to Paul: *"When Lysias the commander comes I will decide your case."* (v.22) Paul was put on trial, but Felix never a pronounced sentence, because he was hoping for a bribe. (v.26) Paul was kept under house arrest for two years. It was left to Felix's successor, Festus, to deal with Paul.

PAUL BEFORE GOVERNOR FESTUS – ACTS 25:1-12

Porcius Festus was procurator of Judea from about AD 58 to 62, succeeding Antonius Felix. Festus was a very different man from Felix.

Festus wanted to placate the Jews. Within three days of arriving at Caesarea he had traveled to Jerusalem for a meeting with the Jewish leaders. Festus knew that Felix had antagonized the Jews and it ruined his career. So the new governor wanted to make a good impression. He wanted to generate some good will and get off to a good start and get along well with the Jews.

New Judge, Old Grudge

Festus experienced the same pressure from the Jewish leaders as Felix to condemn Paul but he was actually not nearly as well qualified to pass judgment as the previous governor. Felix knew about Judaism, his wife was a Jewess, but Festus had no religious background. He knew how to administer a Roman province but theology was not his strong suit.

The reappearance of Paul's opponents after a period of two years reveals something about their character. They were:

Remorseless

"Three days after arriving in the province, Festus went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem, where the chief priests and the Jewish leaders appeared before him and presented the charges against Paul. They requested Festus, as a favor to them, to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way." (Acts 25:1-3)

Revengeful

Paul had been out of commission for two years. He had caused nobody any trouble. That was not good enough for the Sanhedrin. The members of the Jewish Supreme Court had long memories and wanted Paul to pay for outwitting them and making them look foolish both before Claudius Lysias in Jerusalem and Felix in Caesarea. They thirsted for revenge. Such was their intense hatred of the apostle that they were prepared to murder him. They wanted Festus to transfer Paul to Jerusalem *“for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way.”* (v3)

No follower of Jesus Christ should be remorseless and revengeful. It is wrong to have a long memory, to nurse a grudge and desire for the opportunity to get even.

New Trial, Old Accusations

When the chief priests and other leaders asked Festus during his visit to Jerusalem to condemn Paul in his absence and transfer him to that city, Festus recounted that he answered: *“I told them that it is not the Roman custom to hand over anyone before they have faced their accusers and have had an opportunity to defend themselves against the charges.”* (v16) So Festus went back to Caesarea for the trial.

Paul’s Accusers

The Jewish leaders followed Festus back to Caesarea where Festus convened court. The Jews *“laid many serious complaints against Paul, which they could not prove.”* (25:7)

Paul’s Defense

“Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all.” (25:8)

Paul could honestly deny doing any wrong against the Law or the Temple but he certainly did not believe the same things about the Law or the Temple as the Jewish high priests and elders.

Paul’s Appeal to Caesar

When Festus suggested that Paul travel to Jerusalem with him to be tried, *“Paul said, ‘I stand at Caesar’s judgment seat, where I ought to be judged.’”* (25:10)

Paul appealed to Caesar because he could not trust his own Jewish people. He actually relied on the state to rescue him from the Jewish leaders with whom he had so much in common.

At the end of Paul's trial Festus conferred with his advisers before agreeing to send Paul to Caesar. *“Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, ‘You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!’”* (25:12)

This was one sure way of moving on from Caesarea, where he had been for two years, to Rome. We know that God's plan worked. Paul spent at least 2 years witnessing in Rome to the palace guard and the members of Caesar's household in particular. (Philippians 1:12-26)

He had further epistles to write including the letter to the Philippians and his pastoral epistles to Timothy and Titus. God used Paul's appeal to Caesar to assure the continued usefulness of his beloved servant and to bring many influential people to Christ.

The King Comes To Town

In the providence of God *“after some days King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus.”* (25:13)

Festus brought Paul before Agrippa to gather more information for his report to Caesar. Festus told Agrippa that Paul, faced accusations by the Jewish leaders, *“about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive.”* (25:19) What really divided Paul and the Jewish leaders was what they believed about Jesus. The advocates of Judaism did not, and do not, believe the truth about Jesus.

Why were the leaders of Judaism so determined to shut Paul up for good? It was because Judaism could not accommodate a resurrected Jesus. Paul fell foul of the Jewish authorities because he preached a risen Jesus. If God raised Jesus from the dead then all His claims were vindicated. He was without doubt the Messiah. That was the heart of the whole matter.

PAUL BEFORE KING AGRIPPA – ACTS 25:13 – 26:32

This was Herod Agrippa II, the son of the Herod who had jailed Peter and killed James. He was the last of the Herods who played a role in New Testament history. His great-grandfather was Herod the Great who reigned when Jesus was born.

In chapters 22 and following, Paul had to repeatedly defend himself, six times in fact, and no definitive sentence was handed down and carried out. Why then was Paul permitted by God to go through this trying time? In each of the hearings that Paul was subjected to, he had a platform and the privilege of giving a ringing testimony for God and a clear defense of the Christian faith before early Christianity's most vehement enemies.

God had said at Paul's conversion that he was *“a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.”* (Acts 9:15) He had borne testimony before Gentiles and children of Israel and now, here he was before a King.

The “Affluent” Court

The hearing before Agrippa was unofficial but unofficial or not, it became a grand spectacle. (Acts 25:23) There was King Agrippa and Bernice. She was not Agrippa's wife, but his younger sister. Rumors persisted of an incestuous relationship between them. Agrippa and Bernice were bedecked in their purple robes and golden crowns. Festus was dressed in a scarlet cape worn by Roman governors and Festus was accompanied by captains of Roman soldiers stationed at Caesarea. Then there were the members of the Jewish Sanhedrin in their religious garb. The rich, beautiful and powerful paraded into the courtroom and took their places accompanied by much pomp and circumstance.

The “Awesome” Paul

Then the little tent-maker from Tarsus, hands in chains, stood before the king and the assembled dignitaries. *“Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You are permitted to speak for yourself.” So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself....”* (26:1)

He used his hands when speaking, a sure sign that he was a Jew! Preacher Paul was in seventh heaven before this congregation of nobility. He wasted no time flattering platitudes but got right to the point. He began by re-iterating his conversion experience.

His Conversion Testimony

There are three key aspects to Paul’s conversion experience:

- He saw a light (v.14a)
- He heard a voice (v.14b)
- He received his commission.

The voice said to Paul: *“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.”* (v.16) Very, very few people have been commissioned at their conversion as Paul was. In this respect his experience was unique.

This is the third occasion in Acts that Luke records the testimony of Paul’s conversion – Acts 9:1-19; Acts 22:1-22 and here in these Scriptures.

His Communication of Scripture

“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—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.” (vs.22-23)

His Challenge to Believe

“King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe.” (v.27) That is, “I know that you believe intellectually – you have knowledge of what I have rehearsed before you.”

The “Aghast” Festus

“Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!” (v.24)

Whether Festus was trying to score points with King Agrippa or whether he was enraged at what Paul was preaching we do not know. But, as the old saying goes, “A hit dog howls”, so Festus shouted out, “Paul, you are crazy!” He shouted out what was no more than an unjustifiable insult. But Paul kept calm.

The “Almost” Agrippa

“Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian.” (v.28) Agrippa had advantages that Festus never had. He was born and bred a Jew. He was, in the words of Paul, *“expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews.”* (v.3)

Agrippa knew something of Jewish History - of God's numerous interventions on behalf of his people. Yet, as Agrippa makes plain, he is not going to become a Christian. He responds to

Paul's testimony by saying sarcastically, *"Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"* (NIV)

COURT ADJOURNS

"When he had said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them; and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, "This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains." Then Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar." (vs.30-32)

"Rome, here I come!" From this point onward, Paul is on his way to Rome. Luke records, *"And when it was decided that we should sail to Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to one named Julius, a centurion.... So, entering a ship..... we put to sea."* (Acts 27:1) The sea journey would not be smooth sailing!

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