

PAUL BEFORE FESTUS (Acts 25)

For two years Paul remained in the home of Roman Governor Marcus Antonius Felix and his wife Drusilla in Caesarea. Following an outbreak of recent riots within his jurisdiction, however, Felix was recalled by Caesar to Rome and replaced by Porcius Festus (58 AD), who was a more fair and reasonable character. Festus was only three days (25:1) into his new position when he had to leave his headquarters in Caesarea and travel up to Jerusalem to try and conciliate the animosity in the aftermath of Felix's departure. Attempting to address the delicate and tenuous political and religious relationship between the Romans and the Jews, he met the high priest and the Sanhedrin.

The opening item on the Sanhedrin's agenda was *Paul*. Their acrimony towards him had not waned since their previous encounter during Felix's governorship. They hated Paul more than ever, and they cosied up to Festus and quite emphatically gave him their opinion as to how he should proceed. They were telling this new man who had recently arrived from Rome he should send the order to Caesarea to bring Paul up to Jerusalem ... and on the way, the Jews would be lying in wait to kill him (v.3). Festus would not comply though. Instead, he told them if they wanted to find Paul guilty, they would have to make their way down to Caesarea and contend with him officially, in a court setting (v. 4,5). ... As God ordains all authorities and powers, He had ordained Rome and *He* was in control of what was happening! Many years earlier, He had told Ananias, [*Paul*] is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel (Acts 9:15). Similarly, two years earlier when the Roman commander was holding him in jail in Jerusalem, the Lord appeared to Paul and told him, Acts 23:11 Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, *so must thou bear witness also at Rome*. ... The enemy would not slay Paul in Jerusalem at that time for *God* was in control and *He* was working out His purposes, even in such contentious times as these.

Not more than eight or ten days later, - during which the Jewish leaders would have been putting their non-existent case together, - Festus left Jerusalem and returned to Caesarea. A day afterwards he set up his own hearing and Paul was again brought out to answer the allegations made by his accusers who had travelled down from Jerusalem. As they surrounded him with their unproven accusations, he enraged them even more by saying, ⁸ Neither against the law of the Jews, neither against the temple, nor yet against Caesar, have I offended any thing at all. Annoyingly for the Jews, they knew he was right because there was no valid case for him to answer, but they nonetheless persisted.

Festus, though, knew if he dismissed the case against Paul the Jews would be against him because they were so adamant. Nothing less than Paul's death was acceptable to them, regardless of how innocent he was! ... So, Festus needed to be expedient, and he had to find a compromise which would accommodate the members of the Sanhedrin. He, - the governor, - asked Paul, - the prisoner, - if he would be willing to go up to Jerusalem to be judged (v.9). Paul knew there was no way he would receive a fair hearing in Jerusalem, and with a shade of frustration in his voice he replied, ¹⁰ I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged: to the Jews have I done no wrong, as thou very well knowest, ... and so he invoked his Roman citizenship, I appeal unto Caesar (v.11).

Recognising his way out of the quandary, and with a great sigh of relief, Festus speedily conferred with his own council of officials, and he then responded officially to Paul, Hast thou appealed unto Caesar? unto Caesar shalt thou go (v.12). ... And the case immediately 'moved up a gear'. Paul was getting nowhere in Caesarea, Jerusalem was not an option either ... and the words of the Lord in the Jerusalem prison were opening up before him, ^{23:11} And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, *so must thou bear witness also at Rome*. ... Rome was also where he told the believers in Macedonia and Achaia he wanted to go, ^{19:21} Paul purposed in the spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, After I have been there, I must also see Rome. ... He knew and was convinced God is in control, - not the Jews, the Roman commander Claudius, Felix, or Festus ... but God, and He will take my case to the Caesar, to Nero!

Nero was *evil* though. Among his exploits, he killed the son of the emperor Claudius, Britannicus, by feeding him poison when he was only thirteen years old. He also killed his mother, Agrippina, to please his lover, Poppaea, who was already another man's wife. Then he burned Rome (64 AD), and was angry at Poppaea, and he killed her by kicking her in the stomach when she was pregnant. He wanted to marry his adopted sister, Antonius, but because she was not keen on the idea, he killed her. He married Messalina, after he assassinated her husband, and he spent his career busily assassinating all the best citizens of Rome, because he did not like good people. Finally, he committed suicide. ... In the will of God, this was the unscrupulous, corrupt, and immoral emperor Paul was appealing to for his case to be tried and to be declared innocent. Paul was also illustrating how every soul [*must*] be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God (Rom. 13:1). ... And Nero (v.21, Augustus) was in his own eyes and in the eyes of his people the self-proclaimed 'august' one, the honourable and glorified one.

Several days afterwards King Agrippa and his wife Bernice arrived at the home of Festus in Caesarea. Agrippa belonged to the infamous Herod dynasty. His wife Bernice had previously been married to her uncle, but when he died, she moved in with and married Agrippa, who was her brother. Also, Festus' wife Drusilla was Agrippa and Bernice's sister. Some years later, the Emperor Vespasian's son, Titus, began an affair with her, taking her off Agrippa and bringing her to Rome, but when he tired of her, she returned to Agrippa. ... *Such a family!* ... Anyhow, since Festus was not as familiar with Jewish issues and religion as Agrippa, he sought Agrippa's wisdom. In particular, Festus was affected by how the Jews had certain questions against him [*Paul*] of their own superstition, and of one Jesus, which was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive (v.19). After having related some more details concerning Paul's arrest, incarceration, and charge (v. 15-21), Agrippa was willing to listen to Paul and come to a judgment, - along with his wife Bernice (v.22).

On the next day, the proceedings began. With great pomp and ceremony, King Agrippa and Bernice (25:13,23; 26:30) adorned the occasion with their presence, surrounded by all the multitude of adoring dignitaries ... and when the moment arrived, at Festus' commandment Paul was brought forth (v.23). As Festus was required to introduce Paul as a criminal, there was no real accusation in Roman law to bring against him. Nonetheless, the Jews were convinced Paul had broken *their* law and Festus could see they were relentless. So, to placate the Jews, Festus knew he had to be seen to be seriously trying. Even though he would have been senior in authority to Agrippa, he was grateful Agrippa, the Jewish 'king', was present and willing to make his judgment. ... The Herod dynasty was a truly nasty regime. ... Herod the Great was the king when Jesus was born, and who tried to kill Him and *did* kill all the male babies under two years of age (Mt. 2). Herod Antipas had John the Baptist beheaded (Mk. 6) and sat in judgment in one of Jesus' trials (Lk. 23:7-12). Herod I had James the brother of John executed (Acts 12:2) ... This is now Herod Agrippa II, assisted by Bernice, his wife/sister/queen, overseeing the trial of Paul. How absurd this responsibility was relinquished to such a discombobulated profligate!

Festus began the charade (φαντασία, 'pomp'), unaware of how farcical it all was! Nonetheless, Paul's life was in danger *again*, ²⁴ And Festus said, King Agrippa, and all men which are here present with us, ye see this man, about whom all the multitude of the Jews have dealt with me, both at Jerusalem, and also here, crying that he ought not to live any longer. ²⁵ But when *I found that he had committed nothing worthy of death, lcf. Lk. 23:4 Then said Pilate to the chief priests and to the people, I*

find no fault in this man] and that he himself hath appealed to Augustus [*Emperor Nero*], I have determined to send him. ²⁶Of whom *I have no certain thing to write unto my lord [Caesar]*. Wherefore I have brought him forth before you, and specially before thee, O king Agrippa, that, after examination had, I might have somewhat to write. ²⁷For it seemeth to me unreasonable to send a prisoner, and not withal to signify the crimes laid against him. ... Please help me find something so I can pacify these incessant Jews! ... He had already privately given Agrippa some of the background to the case. He had told him how the Jews had brought many unanticipated charges against Paul (v.18), regarding issues of which he was unaware (v.19), concerning a Jesus he knew next-to-nothing about (v.19). Festus was being honest as he continued ... and when I asked the prisoner to accompany me to Jerusalem to pursue the matter in a court full of Jewish leaders, he refused (v.20), and to my surprise, he announced he was appealing to Caesar ... so I had to put him into custody and I'm arranging to send him to Rome (v.21). ... So desperate was Festus, he pleaded for help from Agrippa!

Meanwhile, standing chained before the court with no legitimate charges against him was Paul, middle-aged, not always in the best of health, with an eyesight impediment, wearing the same clothes he had been wearing throughout his two-years imprisonment, confined to quarters within Festus' jurisdiction ... he is standing alone with none to encourage or advise him. The courtroom was packed full of important and powerful men, including a Roman governor, a Jewish king and his queen, and a host of Jewish leaders who were intent on seeing him die. ... And yet, God's man was dominating the scene. It did not matter what was happening around him, God had *His* man in *His* place faithfully doing *His* work. ... Nonetheless, as in a different time but in a similar situation, Martin Luther sums it up, "One with God is a majority".