



SERMON NOTES

US N^o. 127

Date: December 29th, 2013

Title: Paul's Appeal to Cæsar

#34 in the Series on the Acts of the Apostles

1. Paul stands before Governor Porcius Festus

- a. Around 60 AD Felix was replaced by Festus; this would have been about the 6th or 7th year of Cæsar Nero during his early “good” years. Festus was governor of the province for only 2 years.
 - i. We’re told in Acts 24:27 that *“Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound.”* However, this favor to the Jewish leadership did not have the desired effects for Felix. We read in Josephus that *“... when Porcius Festus was sent as successor to Felix, by Nero, the principal of the Jewish inhabitants of Cæsarea went up to Rome, to accuse Felix. And he certainly would have been brought to punishment, had not Nero yielded to the importunate solicitations of his brother Pallas, who was at that time in the highest reputation with the emperor.”* (Josephus Antiq. lib. xx. cap. 9)
 - ii. Nero owed much to his mother’s corrupt and evil influence for his rise to Cæsar at the young age of 17 in 54 AD. Nero’s first 5 years made a favorable impression upon the Roman people mostly because Seneca and Burrus undertook the management of affairs, with good results that justified the people’s opinion.
- b. History tells us that Festus was basically a good man and that he governed well, despite all the problems left him by Felix. The statement, *“after three days he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem”* suggests the good and vigorous leadership of Festus. Upon arriving at Caesarea, the capital of the Judean province, he immediately made the trip to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the seat of the Jewish religious life since the Sanhedrin held its meetings there and many great, rich, and learned men resided there. Festus had to go to Jerusalem to have a full knowledge of the state of the province.
- c. With the departure of Felix, the Jewish leadership pushes to have Paul’s case retried. They hoped to make Paul appear before them again in Jerusalem.
 - i. Paul’s liberal imprisonment in Caesarea was actually a providential provision of protective custody against the murderous intentions of the Jewish religious leaders. It was almost like a season of rest and replenishment after his years of hard missionary service.
- d. The Jewish leaders probably knew that Paul would be acquitted in a fair trial, so they didn’t really want Paul to be put on trial again; they wanted to ambush and murder him before the trial could take place.
 - i. Note that these were religious men. Their dealings reveal the inherent danger of religion that is not in true contact with God. If a religion makes someone a liar and a murderer, then there is something intrinsically wrong with that religion. *“We see a growth of corruption. In Acts 23, where the plot to murder Paul was first launched, we find that it was the zealots who*

were responsible. Now, in Acts 25, we find that the leaders are initiating the very thing they were only tangentially involved in earlier.” (Boice)

- e. Festus, however, refuses to put Paul on trial in Jerusalem, but he is willing for Paul to be tried again in Caesarea so that the matter may be resolved. Though he was a good man, Festus also understood that it was politically vital for him to have and keep good a good relationship with the Jewish people of his province. So Festus spends 10 days in Jerusalem, returning to Caesarea with the Jewish leaders.
- f. The next day, with his customary efficiency Festus convened the court by sitting down on the judgment seat (*bema*). *“This formality was necessary for his verdict to have legal validity...”* (Bruce 1988:451) The Jewish leaders *“laid many serious complaints against Paul, which they could not prove”* and continued to insist that Paul return to Jerusalem. We’ve seen how the Jews' persistent and pernicious opposition had corrupted the exercise of Roman justice in Palestine
 - i. In Mt 10:16, Jesus told us *“I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”* Persistence and deceit are the trademarks of the church's persecutors. Consequently, Christians ought to be wise like snakes, remaining realistic but neither naive nor cynical. Christians should not be taken by surprise; they ought to anticipate all eventualities.
 - ii. Rom. 14:10, *“But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.”*
 - iii. 2 Cor. 5:10, *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”*
- g. Paul’s defense summarizes first-century Christianity's two defining relationships.
 - i. As to Judaism, it has not betrayed its religious roots rather it stands in direct continuity with the Old Testament faith in its ethics and worship. The Jews can find no apostasy here.
 - ii. As to the State, Christianity is no revolutionary disrupter of the civil order, though in its own way it will produce a radical transformation of society, one heart at a time.
 - 1. *“We are persuaded that good Christians will always be good citizens, and that where righteousness prevails among individuals the Nation will be great and happy. Thus while just government protects all in their religious rights, true religion affords to government its surest support.”* (G. Washington)
 - 2. *“Whatever makes men good Christians, makes them good citizens.”* (D. Webster)
- h. A trial filled with unsubstantiated charges and a solid defense should be an acquittal. But we read that a miscarriage of justice is in the making when Festus's next question is motivated by a desire *“to do the Jews a favor.”* (cf. Acts 25:3; compare 24:27). Instead of declaring Paul innocent, Festus asks whether he is willing for the trial to be continued but with a change of venue to Jerusalem.
- i. Paul, however, sees through the plot against his life and he demands to stand trial before Caesar. Paul wasn’t afraid to face the lions, but it would be good if martyrdom could be avoided by not

putting his head in a lion's mouth himself. Paul's appeal made sense, the evidence was on his side and that he should have been able to win in a fair trial. But now he has reason to wonder if Festus was sympathetic to his accusers so an appeal to Caesar extricates Paul from the process. Every Roman citizen had the right to have his case heard by the Caesar himself, if the initial trials and appeals failed to reach a satisfactory decision.

- i. *"God, who has appointed courts of law, also gives his people liberty to use them lawfully."* (Calvin, cited in Hughes)
 - ii. Paul appealed specifically to Caesar Nero, who later became a notorious enemy of Christians, but during the first five years of his reign, under the influence of good men around him, Nero was regarded as a wise and just ruler. Paul had no reason at this time to believe that Nero would be anti-Christian.
 - j. *"Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, 'You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!'"* Acts 25:12
2. Shortly afterwards, King Herod Agrippa II comes to greet the new governor and Festus invites him to hear Paul and give his opinion so that Festus may have a more accurate description of his crime.
- a. Herod Agrippa II (*Marcus Julius Agrippa II (A.D. 27-100)*) ruled a small, client kingdom of the Roman Empire to the northeast of Festus' province. Herod was both an expert in Jewish customs and religious matters, and the supreme power in Jewish religious life because he had been given the right to appoint the high priest and custodianship of the temple treasure and the high priest's vestments (*Josephus Jewish Antiquities* 20.213, 222). He was the last of the Herodian line.
 - i. Of this King Agrippa, his great-grandfather had tried to kill Jesus as a baby; his grandfather had John the Baptist beheaded; his father had martyred the first apostle, James.
 - ii. Bernice was Agrippa's sister. History records rumors that their relationship was incestuous.
 - b. It is interesting to note that the limited knowledge Festus did have regarding Paul concerned *"a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive."*
 - i. Paul's preaching clearly emphasized the death and resurrection of Jesus. For Festus to know that Paul preached that Jesus died, he would also have known about how Jesus died.
 1. The centrality of the Cross to the Christian faith.
 2. The centrality of the Resurrection to the Christian faith.
 - ii. Festus' words reveal that Festus didn't know much about Jesus. It is good to remember that the great and important people of Paul's day didn't know much about Jesus, and they had to be told.
 1. Festus was surprised, thinking that their accusations against Paul were unimportant because their accusations focused only on matters of their religion.
 2. *"Brethren, this is why we must keep on preaching Jesus Christ, because he is still so little known. The masses of this city are as ignorant of Jesus as Festus was."* (Spurgeon)
 - c. *"But when I found that he had committed nothing deserving of death, and that he himself had appealed to Augustus, I decided to send him. I have nothing certain to write to my lord concerning him."* (cf. Acts 25:25-26) It was important for Luke to record these words of Festus

because they clearly state that Festus understood that Paul was innocent. Paul was so innocent that Festus could not actually describe or specify the charges against him.

- d. Agrippa's curiosity meant that Paul would have another opportunity to speak God's truth to a Gentile ruler. This would be the third such opportunity for Paul in Acts 24-26. This appearance before King Agrippa was a hearing that became more like an event. It was held in an auditorium and all the commanders and the prominent men of the city were there; this was a tremendous opportunity for Paul.
 - i. Surrounded by the important and powerful people of Caesarea and beyond, all the pomp and pageantry was meant to communicate who was important, and who wasn't important. *"All these very important people would have been greatly surprised, and not a little scandalized, could they have foreseen the relative estimates that later generations would form of them and of the prisoner who now stood before them to state his case."* (Bruce)
 - ii. Hearing the word of God is the first step on the path to saving faith; *"So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."* Rom. 10:17 (cf. Luke 8:8, 15, 18; Acts 4:4; 10:22, 33; 18:8). Agrippa and Festus at this point appear to model two essential prerequisites for receiving the gospel: a teachable spirit and a desire to hear the message.
 - iii. In Agrippa there was more curiosity than conscience. There may have been some desire to know what doctrine was stirring up people's minds. In general his words are taken as if he was not far from being convinced that Christianity was true: perhaps he would have been so if his passions had not stood in the way.
- e. Paul as prisoner lives out a paradox that persecution brings. Though he is innocent, he is treated as a criminal – in bonds, without freedom, knowing all the shame brought by incarceration and implied guilt. (cf. Acts 23:18; 26:29; 28:16). However, Paul's circumstances have resulted from fulfillment of prophecy and obedience to the path of suffering that all faithful witnesses to the truth must tread. (cf. Luke 21:12; Acts 20:23; 21:11)
- f. As we will see in the next chapter, Paul boldly proclaims the resurrection of Jesus before Festus, Agrippa and Bernice in the final missionary preaching in Acts. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the defining moment for all of human history and for every individual. The main point of dispute is *"a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive."* This shows us the prominent role it played in Paul's defense; Jesus' resurrection is the central point of contention.
 - i. Paul began with the objective historical fact of the resurrection, and so must we. It is the essential foundation for any supernatural work of meeting our risen Savior and entering into a personal relationship with him.
- g. We ought to also note that when persecutors use the state to further their ends and the result is a failure in the administration of justice, Christians must live in such integrity that even then their innocence before the laws of the state will be apparent to all.
 - i. Rather than complain about our present situation, we should look for ways to use every opportunity to serve God and share him with others; problems may be opportunities in disguise.

h. Paul eventually dies at Nero's "hand" in 68 AD.

3. Take aways

a. God's providence comes in many forms; Paul imprisonment at Caesarea.

b. If a religion makes someone a liar and a murderer, then there is something intrinsically wrong with that religion.

c. Persistence and deceit are the trademarks of the church's persecutors.

d. Christians ought to remain realistic but neither naive nor cynical. Christians should not be taken by surprise; they ought to anticipate all eventualities. *"I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves."* Mt 10:16

e. Judgment is a certainty. 2 Cor. 5:10, *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."*

f. Christianity's two defining relationships:

i. Judaism – it stands in direct continuity with the Old Testament faith in its ethics and worship;

ii. The State – it is no revolutionary disrupter of the civil order, though in its own way it will produce a radical transformation of society, one heart at a time.

g. *"God, who has appointed courts of law, also gives his people liberty to use them lawfully."* (Calvin)

h. The centrality of the Cross to the Christian faith.

i. The centrality of the Resurrection to the Christian faith.

j. *"Brethren, this is why we must keep on preaching Jesus Christ, because he is still so little known. The masses of this city are as ignorant of Jesus as Festus was."* (Spurgeon)

k. Hearing the word of God is the first step on the path to saving faith; *"So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."* Rom. 10:17

l. Curiosity v. Conscience

m. Christians must live in such integrity that even then their innocence before the laws of the state will be apparent to all