

BEFORE GOVERNORS AND KINGS

by Ray C. Stedman

We are in the closing part of our study in Acts. The Apostle Paul is fulfilling the great prediction which Jesus himself made about him when he called him to be an apostle. The Lord Jesus said to Ananias, whom he sent to Paul to pray with him and welcome him into the Christian family: "This man is a chosen servant unto me. I will send him to the Gentiles to stand before governors and kings, that he may bear my name before them, as well as before the sons of Israel," {cf, Acts 9:15}.

In the two chapters we are going to examine this morning, Chapters 25 and 26, we will see that prophecy fulfilled.

First Paul appears before a pagan Roman governor, the second such governor he has appeared before. This part of the story serves as an introduction to his appearance before King Agrippa, upon which Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, largely focuses.

Let's read the account together and comment as we go along:

Now when Festus had come into his province, after three days he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews informed him against Paul; and they urged him, asking as a favor to have the man sent to Jerusalem, planning an ambush to kill him on the way. Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea, and that he himself intended to go there shortly. "So," said he, "let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them accuse him." {Acts 25:1-5 RSV}

It has been two years since Paul stood trial before Governor Felix. Now another man, Porcius Festus, has come in as governor of the Roman province of Judea, appointed by the emperor. We do not know much about him from secular history, other than that most historians record him to have been a just man. He appears somewhat to be so, generally speaking, here in this account.

But it is noteworthy that the Jewish authorities waste no time when this man takes office. They immediately meet with him and propose that he bring Paul up to Jerusalem, laying a plot against Paul to assassinate him on the way. It seems almost as if this is where we came in, does it not? That is exactly what was happening when Paul was taken down from Jerusalem to Caesarea, back in Chapter 23.

I have often wondered, as I am sure you have, what ever happened to those forty men who vowed, some two and a half years earlier, neither to eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. Either the ranks of Paul's enemies were reduced considerably, or they found some sneaky way to get out of it -- which I suppose is what happened, for I would surmise that they are probably among this group who again plot to ambush him. But Festus is a Roman, and he is sold on the idea of Roman justice. So he refuses to bring Paul up without at least having had a chance to talk with him himself. Luke now tells us about that hearing:

When he had stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea; and the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. And when he had come, the Jews who had gone down from Jerusalem stood about him, bringing against him many serious charges which they could not prove. Paul said in his defense, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended at all." But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem, and there be tried on these charges before me?" But Paul said, "I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried; to the Jews I have done no wrong, as you know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer, and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death; but if

there is nothing in their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar." Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, "You have appealed to Caesar; to Caesar you shall go." {Acts 25:6-12 RSV}

Paul has been in prison now for two years, hoping to be released. There was no legal reason why he should have been detained. He had already appeared in an open and full trial before a Roman judge, Felix, who had acknowledged that he could find no wrongdoing in him. Obviously Luke gives us a very contracted description of this second trial. Evidently the arguments were all the same, the charges as unfounded as in the original trial, and Luke simply gathers it all up in two brief sentences.

But still that politician's phrase creeps in here, not only with Felix, but with Festus as well: "wishing to do the Jews a favor." In other words, Paul had become a political pawn, bandied about for political purposes between two ideologically divided parties.

Surely Paul has been hoping, all through these two long, weary years, that God would allow the door to be opened for him to be free, that finally justice would prevail and he'd be turned loose again, because it looked as if that ought to have happened. Yet he couldn't help but remember that the Holy Spirit had told him that if he disobeyed the Spirit's voice and went up to Jerusalem, contrary to the Lord's purposes, then bonds and imprisonment would surely await him. Here we see the faithfulness of God in carrying out this limitation. Even though the apostle's heart and soul is one with the Lord once again, and there is nothing blocking the power of his ministry, nevertheless that ministry must be exercised only within the limitation of this otherwise strange, inexplicable inability for him to secure his freedom.

But now, I suspect, he is fed up with provincial justice. He knows that he will never stand a chance in Jerusalem for justice at the hands of the Jews. And he has never forgotten, either, that the Lord Jesus had appeared to him and told him he would go to Rome. So, at last, reluctantly I think, he says, "I appeal to Caesar." Perhaps he felt that this would be the way God would work out his promise to bring him to Rome. And Festus has no choice, according to Roman law, but to send him there to appear before the emperor.

Thus the fine hand of God is visible at work in the background of these events, carrying out his purposes. Paul is going to go to Rome. God will take him there.

At this point an interesting development occurs. A Jewish king comes onto the scene:

Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to welcome Festus. And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, "There is a man left prisoner by Felix; and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews gave information about him, asking for sentence against him. I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up any one before the accused met the accusers face to face, and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him. When therefore they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought in. When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed;" {Acts 25:13-18 RSV}

You can see that the Roman governor is troubled here. He thought that certain political charges would be leveled against Paul, since he was a political prisoner. But the accusations were of an entirely different nature. As he says,

"... but they had certain points of dispute with him about their own superstition and about one Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wished to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I commanded him to be held until I could send him to Caesar." And Agrippa said to Festus, "I should like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," said he, "you shall hear him." {Acts 25:19-22 RSV}

Thus the foundation is laid for the appearance of Paul before King Agrippa. We must remember, as we read this account, that this is not really another trial of the apostle. It is more like entertainment planned for Agrippa and Bernice. They had come to pay their respects to the Roman governor, to visit him at his capital city of Caesarea. And, as was the custom in those days whenever a king arrived, there was a great deal of pomp, ceremony, and entertainment. Part of it was this arrangement to bring Paul before the king. The Roman governor, knowing Agrippa's religious background, suspected that he would be intrigued by charges laid against the apostle.

We have already taken note of Festus. In many ways he was an honest and just man, although he was a politician who could be influenced by a desire to do a favor for the Jews. But now, beside Festus, are these two royal personages, King Agrippa and his wife, Bernice. King Agrippa was the last of the Herods. These were the kings who, although not exactly Jews, nevertheless belonged to the Jewish faith. They were Edomites, descendents of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob.

The first of the line was Herod the Great, who killed all the babies in Bethlehem when our Lord was born, in an attempt to wipe out the Messiah, whom he regarded as a rival to his throne. His son, Herod Antipas, had John the Baptist beheaded in prison. His grandson, Herod Agrippa I, put the Apostle James to death with the sword. Now his great-grandson, Agrippa II, has been appointed by the Romans to be tetrarch of Galilee, to have authority to appoint the high priest in Jerusalem, and to administer the temple. He was a Roman vassal, but all Jewish and Roman historians agree that he was a man of great mental acumen, expert in the affairs of the Jews.

With him was his wife Bernice. She was the sister of Drusilla, the wife of the previous Roman governor, Felix, and was also the sister of her own husband, Agrippa. They were full brother and sister. And yet, contrary to every law of the Jews, they were living in incest together as man and wife. It is before this morally profligate couple, enslaved by their own lust and passion, that the Apostle Paul is to appear -- the enthroned prisoner appearing before the enslaved king. You can see that it is a tense situation, full of highest drama.

As Luke goes on to paint this scene for us, we will see that there is a dawning hunger in Paul's heart to reach this king for Christ, despite his dark past. This is Paul's last chance to reach Israel, and he hopes against hope that perhaps the king will turn, in order that the nation might follow.

So on the morrow Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then by commend of Festus Paul was brought in. And Festus said, "King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this men about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both at Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. But I found that he had done nothing deserving death; and as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to send him. But I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore I have brought him before you, and, especially before you, King Agrippa, that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write. For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him." {Acts 25:23-27 RSV}

You can see that Paul continually puzzled these Roman officials. They did not know what to do with him. And Festus is particularly on the spot here because, by Roman law, he has the responsibility of sending Paul to the emperor to answer for charges. But he does not know what to write, for all the political charges have long since been disproved, and he knows it. Paul has recently reminded him of that fact: "You know very well that I have done nothing against the Jews." And yet he has to say something, because, if he sends a prisoner without a charge, he himself will be criticized for governing ineptly. So he has elicited the aid of King Agrippa to find something that will hold water before the emperor.

Now Paul is brought in, chained to a Roman guard, and given the opportunity to make his defense:

Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense:

"I think myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, because you are especially familiar with all customs and controversies of the Jews; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.

"My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and at Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. And now I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?"

"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem; I not only shut up many of the saints in prison, by authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme; and in raging fury against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities."
{Acts 26:1-11 RSV}

The substance of the Apostle's argument before King Agrippa is that he stands condemned because he was a good Jew. He is trying to appeal to the Jewish background and the Jewish sympathies of this king, in order to help him to understand that there are no grounds of accusation against him, and to use this as a way of reaching the soul of the king himself. Notice how neatly he does it:

First he points out that even the Jews present could testify to his Pharisaic background, to the fact that he was raised according to the strictest sect of the Jews. And second, he states that he believes nothing now, basically, that he did not believe then. He has not changed his faith at all -- he is still a good Jew. He points out that the Jews were looking for the Messiah -- that is the "promise made by God to our fathers" that he mentions -- and so was he.

And furthermore, the Jews believe in a resurrection. "And for this hope," he says, "I am accused by Jews, O king!" And then addressing himself to the whole court he says, "Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?" That is a good question, isn't it? Certainly a Jew should not think it incredible, because God had said he would do this. And even Gentiles should hardly question the power of a Creator who brought forth life in the beginning to restore it if he wants to. It is perfectly unreasonable for man to think of raising the dead. Nobody has ever been able to achieve that. But it surely ought not to be unreasonable to expect God to be able to do so. You see how earnestly he is trying to appeal to the intelligence, the rationality, and the Jewish understanding of this king.

His third argument is that he demonstrated how sincere he was in his commitment to his beliefs by the way he persecuted the church. All this is to show Agrippa that he is a true Jewish believer in every sense of the word, that basically he has changed none of his fundamental beliefs, except with regard to the character of the Christians that he persecuted. The only thing that he concedes was wrong is that he was persecuting people whom he ought not to have persecuted.

Now he marshals his forces and moves on to assault the citadel of Agrippa's will by telling him about his own conversion:

"Thus I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining round me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.'" {Acts 26:12-14 RSV}

Goads were the sharp spikes often mounted on the front of chariots. If a horse kicked back he would hurt himself against them. The Lord said, "That is what is happening to you, Paul. You're kicking against the spikes, resisting the moving of the Holy Spirit." Paul continues,

"And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from the people [the Israelites] and from the Gentiles -- to whom I send you to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'" {Acts 26:15-18 RSV}

Here is the heart of his message -- his own transforming experience with Jesus Christ. We won't dwell upon these now-familiar details, though they constitute a very powerful argument. But you'll notice that, in Verse 18, he lays the good news out before the king in a nutshell.

What a marvelous declaration of the gospel! There from the words of Jesus himself, as Paul recalls hearing them on the Damascus road, is an accurate analysis of the problem with humanity. Here is his description of humanity in its lost, broken, fragmented condition.

What is the matter with people? "They are blind," Jesus says, "blind and living in darkness."

And I submit to you that, two thousand years later, that is exactly what is wrong with our world. People do not know where to turn; they do not know where the answers lie. They do not even know how to analyze the problems accurately; they cannot see what is happening. They cannot predict the end of courses they adopt nor of the forces which they loose. They do not know where we are going. They are utterly blind, like men staggering around in a dark room, groping and feeling and trying to find their way through the course of history. This sense of lostness pervades our society. Two thousand years later we can see the truth of Jesus' words. How accurately he analyzes the problem!

And then the Lord Jesus analyzes why men are blind. "Because," he says, "they are under the power of Satan." Behind the darkness is the great enemy of mankind, who is twisting and distorting the thinking of men, clouding their eyes, and spreading abroad widespread delusions. He has loosed into this world a great flood of lying propaganda. And everywhere today men and women have believed these delusions and lies.

You hear them on every side. All the commonly accepted philosophies of our day reflect the basic satanic lie that we are capable and adequate and independent, able to run our own affairs. You also hear that if you live for yourself, take care of "number one," you will find advancement and fulfillment in life. And you hear that material things can satisfy you, that, if you get enough money, you will be happy. All these lies permeate our society. That is the power of Satan.

But the power of the gospel is that it comes in to turn men from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to the power of God. The gospel is that God has found a way to forgive men's sins, to wipe out all the guilt from the mistakes of the past, from all that they have done in their ignorance and enslavement to the lying propaganda of Satan, and to give them a resource from which they may live in fulfillment and strength. That is what Jesus means by "an inheritance among those who are sanctified." And how do you get this? Jesus says precisely: "By faith in me."

Friday night, in the living room of a large home in Boise, Idaho, we had a gathering of a group of people with various backgrounds. Present was a young woman who had just returned from the University of Idaho. She said, "This last year I had a number of non-Christians coming into my room to talk about Christianity. Almost every one of them asked me the same question: 'Why do you Christians insist that it is through Jesus that men must find God? Why can't they find him through Buddhism, or through Hinduism, or Mohammedanism, or some of the other great religions of earth? Why aren't these just as acceptable? Their adherents are devout, sincere, religious people. Why do you Christians insistently maintain that Jesus is the only way?'"

Well, the answer is: "Because that is what Jesus himself says. And if we are Christians, we follow him. We believe that he knows what he's talking about. We believe it because he has demonstrated that he understands life better than anyone else who has ever lived. The supreme demonstration of that fact is that he rose from the

dead. He has solved the problem of death. He has unscrambled the great riddle with which we constantly struggle, this mystery of death. And, until you find someone else who has solved that problem and who has that kind of credentials, I personally am going to follow Jesus.

"That is why, if we are Christians, we believe him when he says, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man can come unto the Father but by me.' You see, we Christians have no other choice, because it was Jesus himself who said that all this happens 'by faith in me'. And, of course, the great fact is that, through the course of the centuries, wherever men have turned to him, they have indeed turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to the power of God."

Now the apostle continues by stating that his ministry consisted in declaring this great liberating truth, but that thereby he has evoked the wrath of the Jews and they have tried to kill him for this reason. He also stresses again the two essential facts of the gospel: the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ:

"Wherefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those at Damascus, then at Jerusalem and throughout all the country of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and perform deeds worthy of their repentance. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to the people and to the Gentiles." {Acts 26:19-23 RSV}

At this point he receives an interruption. We read,

And as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are mad; your great learning is turning you mad." But Paul said, "I am not mad, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking the sober truth. For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely; for I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe." And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time you think to make me a Christian!" And Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am -- except for these chains."

Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them; and when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment." And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar." {Acts 26:24-32 RSV}

The application portion of this message began with the interruption of Festus. Isn't it interesting that Paul seldom ever got to finish a sermon? He was usually interrupted. I wish that would happen to me sometime -- that instead of sleeping through everything, somebody would cry out, "Wait a minute, I want to ask you about that!" Or even as this case -- Festus the skeptic, Festus the rationalist, could not take it when Paul referred to the resurrection. This was more than his Roman materialism could stand. So he said, "Paul, you're mad, you're crazy! Talking about raising the dead!" But Paul answered, "Most excellent Festus, I am telling you the cold, sober truth. That is what Christianity is all about. That is the tremendous, stupendous declaration which is at the heart of Christianity! Christ has solved the problem of death! It seems absolutely incredible perhaps, but it is true! God has broken through death and in Jesus Christ he has made life available to men once again, as God intended life to be."

Then he turns and looks at Agrippa. You can see that he is longing to reach this man, for this is his last chance, and he knows it, to reach the Jewish people. He says, "I am persuaded that none of these things have escaped King Agrippa's notice, for this was not done in a corner." That is, "Everything is open, nothing is hidden. The Lord preached and taught, lived and died, right out in the open before everyone, and I know that the king knows the story."

And then, speaking directly to Agrippa he says, "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you

believe." Do you see what he's saying? He is saying, "You know the historical facts of Jesus' life. And you believe the prophets. So put the two together. What did the prophets say the Messiah would do? Where does that drive you? Jesus fulfilled what the prophets wrote."

At this point this enslaved king, mastered by his own lusts, living with his own sister, is faced right into the issue. You can just see him squirming up there on his throne. Unfortunately his answer is to turn his back on what Paul says.

It is a little difficult to understand exactly what he replied. The Greek is a bit obscure. Certainly he didn't say what we have in our King James Version: "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." He is not saying, "You've almost got me, Paul. You almost have me convinced." Many a message has been preached on that theme, as though Agrippa had almost come to the point of becoming a Christian.

It is much more likely that he said what we have recorded here in the Revised Standard Version. With almost sneering sarcasm he says, "Do you really think, Paul, that in this short a time you're going to make me a Christian? You've got to do a lot more than that if your going to make *me* a Christian!"

But Paul's reply is magnificent. With a heavy heart he says, "King Agrippa, whether I had to spend a short time or a long time with you, I just want you to know that the hunger of my heart is that not only you, on your throne with your wife beside you, but that every one in this room could be like I am -- except for these chains." I think that last phrase is an admission that he had faced and understood the fact that those chains were not necessary, and that he wished he had not made them necessary by his disobedience of the Holy Spirit, as we have seen in previous studies.

But listen to this magnificent answer. It is hardly the answer of a prisoner, is it? As he stands there he says, "I wish you could be like I am. I wish you had the peace, the liberty, the power, the joy, the gladness of my heart and life."

What an appeal out of a great heart! What a revelation of the greatness of the gospel! It can rise above every circumstance, every situation, and fill the heart with joy, so that a man in chains, bound and a prisoner, can stand before a king and say, "Even though you are a king, and you have all that wealth can buy, I would gladly recommend that you become like I am, so great is this glorious liberty in Jesus Christ." It is a challenging moment, a marvelous presentation of the freedom that the gospel gives, that this manacled, chained prisoner could thus challenge a king upon his throne and offer to trade places with him.

But remember that Agrippa is a Herod. He is an Edomite, a descendent of Esau, and he is true to his heritage. For God had said through the prophet Malachi, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated," {cf, Mal 1:2b-3a}. The reason for that is that Esau stands throughout Scripture as a mark of that independent spirit which refuses help from God, which turns its back upon all the love of God poured out to reach us, and in independent arrogance refuses the proffered hand of God's grace. That is what this king does. And now he fades from history. He is the last of the line of the Herods.

But Paul's great words ring in our ears down through the centuries. There is nothing like the liberty of Jesus Christ. No external condition of wealth or prestige or power is worth a snap of the finger compared with the freedom and the power and the joy and the gladness that a man can find in Jesus Christ.

Prayer:

Our Father, we are stirred as we review this appearance of the great apostle before this royal court, and hear his stirring words, and feel the sincerity of his heart, and know the truth of what he said. And how grateful we are, our Heavenly Father, that today this same mighty, delivering power is just as available to men, that you can turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, and forgive their sins, and set them free, and give them an inheritance, a new position, a new resource from which they may live. Please let us be like Paul as he writes to the Romans: "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation for all those who will believe it," {cf, Rom 1:16}. How

thankful our hearts are that there are hundreds in this room today who are saying a happy "Amen," because they have found this to be true. And, if any among us today are without this liberty and freedom in Christ, but are looking for life, for peace, for power, we pray that even in this moment you will help them to surrender, to reject Agrippa's response, and cry out, "Lord Jesus, I need you in my heart. I ask you to enter in, and deliver me as you delivered Paul. Be my Lord. Save me now." For we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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