

The Folly of Pride & Grace in Humility

Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 25 / September 13, 2026

Introduction:

Last week, we looked at Acts 24 which ended on an ominous note with Paul remaining in custody for two years until Felix is succeeded by Porcius Festus. Our passage today covers yet another trial before Festus where Paul proves his innocence. At first glance, it appears to be a simple story of how Paul appealed to Caesar, but the space it occupies in Luke's narrative suggests otherwise. As we examine it closely, we'll see Luke focus on Festus and the result of his pride in comparison to the humble and steadfast faith of Paul. Behind this story, one can hear Mary's song from Luke 1:50-52, proclaiming, "[God's] mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate." Our passage can be broken into two sections; the details of the trial, and the response of Festus to its outcome. First, we see,

A Foiled Plan, Cowardly Response & Bold Appeal

Do you remember the reason Paul remained in custody? Because Felix "desired to do the Jews a favor." Will Festus finally give justice to Paul? Look at verses 1-6, "Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were 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 bring charges against him.' After he 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." Felix's governorship was marked by political unrest with the Jewish population, so Festus immediately traveled to Jerusalem when starting his governorship to secure support from those in power. We know little of Festus, whose reign only lasted a few years before his death. Though Josephus comments positively on his rule as a stark contrast to Felix's brutality. Him meeting "chief priests" (plural) points to Ananias' continued influence over the council though he was replaced by Ishmael as the high priest by now. Note how the disdain for Paul had only grown over two years as the Jewish leaders are now directly plotting Paul's death. No one uncovers the plot this time, but Festus thwarts their plans by insisting on holding a trial in Caesarea. This suggests Festus may have some sense of justice and Paul will fare better this time. Yet, the story isn't over, and Luke moves straight to the trial beginning eight days later. Look at verses 7-9, "When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove. Paul argued in his defense, 'Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.' 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?'" Paul's accusers surround him in a threatening posture as they bring their charges, but Paul's defense is calm and calculated. As Charles Spurgeon once said, "We ought never to fear those who are defending the wrong side, for since God is not with them their wisdom is folly, their strength is weakness, and their glory is their shame" (C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, on Psalm 108:9). We can presume the charges mirror previous ones as the only new addition is Paul's comment of committing no offense against Caesar. Note how Luke moves quickly to Festus' change of heart and the reason for it. Rather than acquitting Paul after he refutes their charges, Festus asks if Paul wants to be tried in Jerusalem before him because he was "wishing to do the Jews a favor." Hope of him being more just than Felix is lost as he likewise caves to appease his constituents only eight days after insisting they prove their charges in Caesarea. Notice, then, the contrast established in verses 10-12, "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 yourself 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 to 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, ‘To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.’” Paul is bold, yet humble. He reiterates his innocence, something Festus knows well, but humbly says he will face death if he has committed a crime deserving of it. Then, to halt any return to Jerusalem, he uses his rights as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar, which Festus agrees to after council. Consider the boldness of this appeal. Paul had no certainty of any better outcome before Caesar and assured he would remain in custody. So why make this appeal? Perhaps he expected another plot to kill him, but I think it goes deeper than that. I am persuaded that, in appealing to Caesar, Paul understood how he would get to Rome. Could the Spirit have prompted this appeal? Maybe through an impression of the danger in Jerusalem, or a Spirit-given resolve to make it to Rome by any means necessary. Either way, while Festus cowardly concedes to the Jewish authorities, Paul boldly secures his path forward. Consider the second part of our passage, where we see,

A Pointed Disclosure, Dramatic Reminder & Telling Confession

This scene hinges on the predicament Festus now finds himself in. Look at verses 13-14, “Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus. And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul’s case before the king.” Pause there. Agrippa and Bernice come to welcome Festus, and are no small characters. Marcus Julius Agrippa II ruled over a kingdom northeast of Judea. He had no jurisdiction over Judea and Jerusalem, but, as Ben Witherington comments Agrippa II, “had been appointed by Claudius curator of the temple in Jerusalem, giving him the power to appoint the high priest, possession of the priestly vestments worn on Yom Kippur, and the task of looking after the temple treasury” (Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, p. 727). So, Festus saw the opportunity to get council for Paul’s case. Council, we’ll discover he desperately needed. Now, we should understand the mess that was Agrippa’s family. His great-grandfather was the Herod who murdered all the male children in Bethlehem at Christ’s birth. His grand-uncle, the one who executed John the Baptist. And his father imprisoned Peter and killed James. Bernice is also a rough character as there were rumors of her incestuous relationship with her brother, and she later became the Emperor Titus’ mistress before he sent her away over the moral outcry against her in Rome. So, Paul’s case is not about to be discussed with people of high character. Pick back up in verses 14-22, “There is a man left prisoner by Felix, and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him. So when 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. When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted 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 ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar. Then Agrippa said to Festus, ‘I would like to hear the man myself.’ ‘Tomorrow,’ said he, ‘you will hear him.’” Note Festus’ acknowledgement of the Jews desire for a sentence of condemnation and his attempt to suggest he sought justice, though we know that stretches the truth. As Festus continues, he discloses there was no real charge of evil brought, and only a dispute about the resurrection of Jesus. A point that once again becomes central in the narrative. I. Howard Marshall comments, “It is interesting that by this stage the question of Paul’s alleged desecration of the temple has quite disappeared from sight, and the topic of the resurrection (23:6; 24:21) has replaced it” (I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 408).

This is the first time Jesus' name has been mentioned in connection to the resurrection and the charge is certainly no reason for Paul to continue to be held in custody. However, leaving out his desire to do the Jews a favor, Festus says he was sure how to investigate things further and Paul appealed to remain in custody for a decision by Caesar after he offered to hold a second trial in Jerusalem. This scene closes with Agrippa desiring to hear from Paul himself, preparing for the next hearing, but we are not done hearing from Festus. Look at verses 23-27, "So on the next day 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, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. And Festus said, 'King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in 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 go ahead and send him. But I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so 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.'" The pomp and circumstance surrounding this trial draw us into the narrative and contrast Paul with the authorities. Their entrance reeks of pride while Paul's entrance is contrastingly humble. Yet, Paul will remain strong in the Lord and only get bolder in his witness. Festus opens by recounting the Jews' petition to have Paul put to death before making two confessions. First, he found Paul innocent of anything deserving of death, which was the only reason a trial would be sent to Caesar. Second, he has no charge to lay against Paul and hopes this examination may produce something to say. This is important because it was imperative that a sound report came with any case being presented before Caesar, or it would have negative ramifications on the one sending the case. These confessions highlight the folly of Festus' pride. Most scholars believe Festus had the authority to dismiss the charges even after an appeal to Caesar. But his self-centered desire to secure favor from the Jews kept him from doing so. Further, stressing the unreasonableness of sending a prisoner to Caesar without a report highlights how foolish and possibly career ending this was. The whole scene is a dramatic reminder of how unreasonable the entire trial of Paul has been. And how the pride of men was the only reason it kept going. His telling confessions land the plane by declaring Paul's innocence again and pointing to the difficult position Festus was now in because of his pride. This sets the stage for Paul's climactic defense before Agrippa, which we will consider next week. For this morning, I want to suggest two truths that should resonate in our hearts from Acts 25. First,

1) Pride Leads to Folly

Our story paints a poor picture of Festus, as his pride steers him to folly. Pride that ultimately stems from unbelief as he almost mocks Paul's teaching on Jesus' resurrection. Scripture constantly warns of the dangers of pride. Proverbs 16:18 says, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." Proverbs 11:2, "When pride comes, then comes disgrace." Proverbs 18:12, "Before destruction a man's heart is haughty." Proverbs 29:23, "One's pride will bring him low." Then, there are the stories of King Uzziah pridefully entering the temple to burn incense and being struck with leprosy in 2 Chronicles 26. Nebuchadnezzar being driven mad and eat grass like an ox in Daniel 4 after boasting in his strength. Edom's pride it is security preceding its downfall in Obadiah 3-4. And Satan's fall from glory and decent into the pit coming from his pride in Isaiah 14. Family, pride is something to quickly identify and fight against because it will lead to folly. Do you recognize it in your own heart? Do you dismiss it in leaders you support? Festus is a reminder of just how dangerous and foolish pride really is. We must learn to see the folly of pride and turn from it.

Second,

2) Grace is Given to the Humble

We likely don't look at Paul's situation and say, "I see grace." But consider what we have seen. He was almost scourged, escaped a riot before the Sanhedrin, and saved from a plot to kill him in Jerusalem. Once in Caesarea, he proves his innocence, witnesses to Felix for over 2 years, and escapes another assassination plot before proving his innocence again and appealing to Caesar. When confronted with repeated false allegations, did Paul cave under the pressure? Does he snap and ruin his witness? No. He consistently exercised humility, and receives wisdom and strength from the Lord. This is grace. Jesus promised Paul would stand before kings and suffer for his name's sake, but he would never be left alone. He also promised to provide the words to say and, at every turn, Paul received wisdom and grace to honor and glorify Jesus. This will be even more clear in his witness before Agrippa next week. God loves to give grace to the humble. Consider the second half of the proverbs we just read. Proverbs 11:2, "but with the humble is wisdom." Proverbs 18:12, "but humility comes before honor." Proverbs 29:23, "but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor." Grace is all over our passage if we have eyes to see it. And it is designed to call us to the same.

Conclusion:

As the worship team comes for our time of response, reflect on this story and let these truths resonate in your heart. Then, ask what God is calling you to believe, desire, or do in light of them. Maybe you need to address pride in your heart and humble yourself before the Lord. Maybe that humility needs to start with a confession of sin, belief in Christ's death and resurrection as your only hope, and cry to God for mercy today. Family, God means what He says when telling us He "opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). We just need heed His warning and recalibrate our understanding of what grace really looks like. Don't let your hearts be drawn into pride. Instead, as James goes on to say, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you" (James 4:10). Let's pray as we prepare to respond.