

MBC – 10/25/2020 – Pastor Doug Thompson  
***“I Appeal to Caesar!”***  
 Acts 25

(Pray – Father, we wouldn’t be studying the Book of Acts if Jesus wasn’t alive from the dead. Help us to see Him this morning moving in His people, building His church and taking down every barrier to the Gospel. Encourage us to stay faithful and patient as You are doing the very same things in our lives and here at MBC.)

We come in our study of Acts this morning to chapter 25 if you would turn there with me. Backing up to ch.22: Paul was rescued from a Jewish mob that wanted to kill him; in ch.23 he defended himself before the Sanhedrin – who also wanted to kill him – remember those 40 very hungry, very thirsty Jews? In ch. 24 he was rescued by the Romans who took him under the cover of darkness to Caesarea, the capital of Judea, where he appeared before Felix the governor of Judea, to defend himself against the accusations of the Jews. Felix realized that Paul wasn’t guilty of any crimes against Rome, but he didn’t want to upset the Jews by setting Paul free, so he kicked the can down the road and just left him in jail – for 2 years.

- When we come to ch.25, it’s going to sound like a repeat of ch.24, only with the next governor, Festus: the Jews bring false accusations against Paul, Festus doesn’t want to deal with it, but he doesn’t want to upset the Jews so he tries to put it off on King Agrippa. . .

And again, you might wonder: Why is this in the Bible? Why does Luke record so much about a bunch of godless secular rulers? Festus talks more in this chapter than Paul does! I want to give you an important perspective here: Luke wants to show that Paul isn’t at the mercy of secular politicians or the plots of the Jews – but he is in the hands of a sovereign God who is providentially moving *every* minute detail, *every* circumstance to accomplish His perfect will, which is to use Paul to take the Gospel to the uttermost parts of the world!

- And if you are a child of God, the same is true of your life: God is guiding every detail, every twist, every turn, every trial – to accomplish His *perfect* will for you, which is to use you for the sake of the Gospel until He calls you home! There is no chance, or luck involved – and there are no setbacks. God is working all things according to the counsel of His will for your life and mine! Keep this in mind and you will never have a dull or boring day!

In Paul’s case, Jesus even revealed His sovereign plan—

- Acts 9:15 Jesus promised that Paul would be “a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.” (That’s Acts 22-26!)
- And in Acts 23:11 Jesus appeared to Paul and said, “Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.” (That’s Acts 27-28).

Beloved, Jesus is alive, building His church, and nothing can stop Him. In Paul’s life, or your life. Let’s back up to the last verse of ch.24—

***Two years packed into one verse.***

- Acts 24:27 <sup>27</sup>When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

Luke just slips this into v.27: Paul was in confinement for two years in the governor's mansion in Caesarea – What did Paul do while he was there? We don't know. He didn't write any epistles while he was there – at least that we have in our Bibles. We don't know about *any* ministry that took place during this time – except for witnessing to Felix, who only wanted a bribe! But Paul himself must have been wondering: “Jesus said I'm going to Rome, what am I doing here, twiddling my thumbs, and how long will this last?” How many of us have asked that question over the last 8 months?

- But we know this for sure: during this long, silent stretch, he kept his walk with Christ, and he kept his faith, until that chapter was over and the next one began here in ch.25. And that's a lesson in itself: The Christian life isn't about daily heroics as much as it's about daily *faithfulness* – just a long obedience in the same direction – takin' the bumps in the road while you keep entrusting yourself to God. Once in awhile, God gives us great opportunities and great fruitfulness. But most of the time, we just *plod*, one foot ahead of the other, faithfully. Elizabeth Elliot used to say, “Just do the next thing,”

And remember this when you pray and nothing seems to change: Delay doesn't necessarily equal denial. But finally, Caesar Nero fired Felix and sent Porcius Festus to replace him as governor of Judea. Let's read —

### I. Another plot and Paul's defense.

- Acts 25 <sup>1</sup>Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. <sup>2</sup>And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, <sup>3</sup>asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem— because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way.

Porcius Festus only ruled for two years before he died in office. We don't know much about him. He was a better man than Felix, but he was still a people-pleasing politician: After arriving from Rome he immediately makes the trip from Caesarea on the coast to Jerusalem. Caesarea was the Roman capital of Judea, but Jerusalem was the spiritual capital, and he wanted to get off on the right foot with the Jews by making this visit. But when he got there, the Jews were in his face about Paul: this would have been that awful high priest, Ananias, and his Sadducee cronies who had plotted to kill Paul. They tried to talk Festus into bringing Paul to Jerusalem to put him on trial – which was just another plot to murder him. But Festus wanted to be in control of the situation—

- <sup>4</sup>Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. <sup>5</sup>“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.” <sup>6</sup>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 (the *bema* seat of judgment) and ordered Paul to be brought. <sup>7</sup>When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, (like a pack of wolves around a sheep) bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove. <sup>8</sup>Paul argued in his defense, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.” <sup>9</sup>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?” <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>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.” <sup>12</sup>Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.”

This is the last we hear from Paul in this chapter. The Jewish leaders repeated their charges against Paul: he was badmouthing Moses and the Law, he had desecrated the temple, and he was a revolutionary and a threat to Rome. They knew that the only thing Festus would care about was that last charge. He didn't care about their Jewish religious squabbles, but it was his #1 job to keep peace in the province. If Paul was any sort of rabble-rouser, he would act on that. But they had no proof of that either.

- So notice v.9: *“wishing to do the Jews a favor.”* Typical self-serving politician – exactly the same thing Luke said about Felix in the last chapter! He's playing to the base, as they say. He offers to have Paul go back with him to Jerusalem to be tried there, which probably meant using members of the Sanhedrin for his judicial council – and Paul said, “No, no, no!” That would be his death sentence! His only faint hope for justice was from the Romans, not the Jews. Notice what Paul says next in v.10—

He gets in Festus's face and says, “You know good and well that I've done nothing against the laws of the Jews or the laws of Rome!” This is a rebuke. Festus wants to be seen as a just, righteous man – then how can he give in to these false charges? And then he says something that you might underline in your Bible:

- <sup>11</sup>If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death.

Paul is affirming the death penalty here. God instituted it back in Gen.9:6, and it's never been revoked. That's another sermon. . . So then, Paul took a deep breath, got really bold, and exercised his right as a Roman citizen—

- *“I appeal to Caesar!”* That's amazing isn't it? The Roman Empire prided itself on being just and fair, and an ordinary citizen could go over the head of a local magistrate to appeal to Caesar himself. This was the right of a Roman citizen, so Paul took advantage of it. Now it could take a long, long time. Caesar had slaves who acted as law clerks and handled most of the cases and decided which ones to kick up to Caesar to handle himself. For Paul, it took at least 2 more years, because he is still waiting when the Book of Acts ends.

So did he really appear before Caesar? Yes, we know for certain—

- Acts 27:24 and angel appeared to Paul in the middle of a storm at sea and said: ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar.’

And in Phil.4:22, Paul said that God was saving people in the Emperor's own household! Jesus kept His promise to Paul, he made it to Rome and witnessed to Caesar himself. Amazing.

\*But here's a question you might be asking: Didn't Paul know that Nero was Caesar at this time? Nero? I'm sure he knew, but this was in the early years of his reign before he went kookie. Now when Paul was arrested again, a few years later, Nero was a madman and he had Paul beheaded. That's a good argument for term limits!

- But Paul didn't appeal to Caesar Nero because he expected justice, he did it to get to Rome to share the Gospel with the Emperor and anyone else he could. It was all about the Gospel for Paul.

So back to our story—as soon as Paul appealed to Caesar, Festus figured this was his way to get off the hot seat. He could pass the buck to Caesar so he said, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.”

But Festus still had a big problem: If he sent a prisoner to the Emperor without a clear, detailed explanation of the charges against him – that could be a fatal career error. And Festus still couldn’t find that Paul was guilty of any crime. But this is when he got a break—

## II. King Agrippa and Bernice arrive.

- <sup>13</sup>Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus.

Now let me tell you about King Agrippa: He was a nominal Jew but he had the title “King of the Jews” because Nero had given him authority over the temple *and* to appoint the high priest. So if Festus was the secular ruler over Judea, Agrippa was like the figurehead religious leader.

As far as his family tree: This is Agrippa II, the great-grandson of Herod the Great – the Herod in the Christmas story. He was the *son* of Herod Agrippa I, the one who beheaded James and tried to do the same to Peter, back in ch.12 – and was struck down and eaten by worms.

- You say, “This all sounds familiar! That’s right, because we went over this two weeks ago when we looked at Felix’s wife, Drusilla, who was the sister of Herod Agrippa II. Are you following? Drusilla and Agrippa II had another sister just a year younger than Agrippa named *Bernice*. Read v.13 again: “Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus.” How nice, he brought his sister! Well, she was more than just his sister, if you get the drift. And this was quite a scandal

So Bernice, like her sister, Drusilla, was known for her striking beauty. She was known as the “Jewish Cleopatra.” She was married off to her uncle at the age of 13, but when he died, she moved in with her brother, Agrippa. To avert the scandalous rumors she married the King of Cilicia, but kept coming back to her brother. This is really interesting: Later, Bernice became the mistress of Titus, the son of the emperor Vespasian. If those names sound really familiar it’s because Titus, the emperor’s son was the Roman general later who wiped out Jerusalem in 70 A.D. – and his former mistress was a Jew! History is sure interesting. Titus wanted to marry Bernice, but it wasn’t socially acceptable, so they split up and she went back to her brother.

Because Agrippa was so friendly to Rome, the Jews forced he and Bernice out of Jerusalem in 66 A.D. and Agrippa actually fought with the Romans against the Jews when Rome levelled Jerusalem in 70 A.D.. This is the “King of the Jews” who comes to visit Festus in Caesarea with his sister who is known as the “Queen.”

Because Agrippa is the so-called King of the Jews, Festus thinks that maybe he can make heads or tails out of the Jews’ accusations against Paul about—

- <sup>14</sup>And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul’s case before the king, saying, “There is a man left prisoner by Felix, <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. <sup>19</sup>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.* <sup>20</sup>Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. (Now wait a minute: if Paul hasn't broken any Roman laws, why does he try to get Paul back to Jerusalem? Luke already answered this question: *"because he wanted to do the Jews a favor!"*) <sup>21</sup>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." <sup>22</sup>Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," said he, "you will hear him."

Why did Agrippa, this important man, want to hear Paul for himself? I don't think it was all the boring legal stuff that Festus brought up. I think it's what Festus said in passing in v.19: *"a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive."*

I don't know if Agrippa and Bernice even heard anything else Festus said after that statement. That statement stunned them. Could it be true? They knew all about Jesus, going back to their great-grandfather, Herod the Great – they knew about His life, His death on the cross, and the story that He rose, alive, from the dead. And I have to believe that their sister, Drusilla, told them all that she heard from Paul over the 2 years he was with her and Felix—

- Acts 24:24–25 (they) heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup>And he reasoned (with them) about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment.

They were fascinated: Could this Jesus really be the Jewish Messiah? And did He really rise from the dead? And was He really going to judge sin? That frightened them. They knew they were living in immorality. It was a public scandal. But this Jesus who was Judge, was also a Savior for sinners. They needed to hear from Paul himself about this Jesus. This is why he said to Festus: *"I would like to hear the man myself."*

And I want you to notice this: for Festus to bring up Jesus' "alleged" resurrection, means that the Sadducean Jewish leaders who didn't even believe in resurrection, had brought it up, which means that Paul was constantly talking about it. Which means that—

- At the dead center of everything that Paul preached and taught was the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. He couldn't stop talking about it. Why? Because it's the greatest fact of human history. If Jesus conquered death and rose bodily from the grave, then that seals God's approval on His death for sin – which means that your sins are *forgiven* when you trust in Him. It means that He is your Savior, and Lord, and King. It means that He is alive, ruling and reigning over His people, right now, from heaven. And it means that He really is coming again to make all things new, and you will be with Him on a new heaven and earth, forever – if you trust in Him.

### III. The Apostle and the King.

- <sup>23</sup>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.

The key word here is *"pomp,"* – the Gk. word is *fantasia* – Festus was using this as an occasion to honor the King and Queen and score political points, so he pulled out all the stops: this event was like the Os-

cars, or a dinner for dignitaries at the White House. The auditorium was decorated, the 5 military tribunes, who commanded 5,000 soldiers in Caesarea were wearing their dress uniforms with all their medals; Festus and the leading men of the city were all decked out in their best clothes and their wives had on their most expensive jewelry. And then an honor guard would have escorted in the King and Queen. Agrippa had on his purple robe, gold crown, rings, and a scepter, Bernice was dressed to kill. And they both were seated on thrones. Then at the end of v.23 we read—

- Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in.

What a contrast! Tradition says that Paul was a short, bald man with bad eyes, bow-legs, a unibrow and big nose – dressed in his jail outfit and in chains. And he was basically going to be the evening’s entertainment! I’m sure the whole room got quiet as he was brought in except for some snickering and whispering about this odd little man.

- They must have wondered why this strange little man was causing such a commotion around the Roman Empire – they really expected someone more impressive. The truth is, standing before them was one of the godliest, wisest, greatest men who ever lived – and they were a bunch of pompous fools!

And I think as he stood there, so peaceful and composed, he looked to that crowd like Stephen looked when he stood before the Sanhedrin back in ch.7—

- Acts 6:15 <sup>15</sup>And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Then Festus gives his explanation to crowd for why they brought Paul in—

- <sup>24</sup>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. <sup>25</sup>But I found that he had done nothing deserving death.

Stop there. Doesn’t this sound just like what Pilate said about Jesus? In Luke 23, five times Jesus is declared innocent by others. Of course, Jesus wasn’t just innocent, He was *sinless!* But in Acts, over and over, Luke shows that Christians are falsely accused, and persecuted without cause. Beloved, our personal holiness is so important to our witness for Christ! Don’t we see it constantly: some Christian leader, or President of a Christian University, falls into sin, and it completely distracts from Jesus and the Gospel.

Can you imagine how differently Acts would read if these Jews could have pointed to some sin in Paul – some rumor of immorality, or some financial indiscretion (like taking money from the Chinese. . .)? That would have been all they talked about, and the Gospel would have been forgotten. But Paul was above reproach: nothing detracted from what he proclaimed: Jesus – the resurrection – and the good news of the Gospel. Peter exhorted Christians this way—

- 1 Peter 2:15 <sup>15</sup>For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.
- 1 Peter 4:15–16. <sup>15</sup> . . . let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. <sup>16</sup>Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. (Back to v.25--)

\*I urge you not to let this day go by without asking God to examine your heart and show you anything that could hinder your Gospel witness to others. V.25—

- And as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him. <sup>26</sup>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. <sup>27</sup>For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him.”

The word for “unreasonable” means “senseless.” Well this whole thing was senseless and unreasonable. If Festus had any backbone he would have set Paul free. But he didn’t want to upset the Jews – just like Felix before him, and Pontius Pilate with Jesus a couple decades before that.

\* \* \*

But all of this is of God! Right? Every detail. All of Felix and Festus’s procrastinating – King Agrippa showing up in Caesarea for a visit: through it all, God is providentially giving Paul one opportunity after another to share the Gospel. And He is going to do that in this next chapter, where we’re going to hear one of the most gripping Gospel presentations in the NT.

- But beloved, Jesus *promised* Paul that he would proclaim his name before the Gentiles and kings. Jesus *promised* him that he would make it to Rome to be His witness and that he would stand before Caesar! Jesus is running the show, do you get that? Because He rose from the dead and He is alive, and He is Lord of all!

\*So – child of God: this means that through every twist and turn and trial and setback in your life, Jesus has His sovereign hand on your life, moving and guiding you to accomplish His Gospel purposes. Do you believe that? Do you really believe it?

Then look for opportunities and always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you! Are you ready for these opportunities? Make sure you are here next Lord’s Day because Paul is going to help you.

And don’t get discouraged by all the trials and tribulations that we are going through right now through this pandemic and a country that seems to be going crazy. How in the world does it work for the Gospel when churches are restricted and gagged (masks are like gags, aren’t they?) – and our governor tells us not to gather with our families for Thanksgiving, and if we do, don’t stay long! And put your mask on between bites. How does that work for the Gospel? We don’t know *how* it does, we just know that it does, because Jesus is alive and building His church – And He isn’t taking a break because of any pandemic or election.

And He wants us to hear again His final words to His church in Matthew—

- Matthew 28:18–20 “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” !

This command doesn’t have an expiration date. . . . And the promise of Jesus hasn’t lost its power or its comfort.