

Paul's Defense Before Governor Festus

Acts 25

Acts 25:1-12: *"Now when Festus had come to the province, after three days he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem. ² Then the high priest and the chief men of the Jews informed him against Paul; and they petitioned him, ³ asking a favor against him, that he would summon him to Jerusalem—while they lay in ambush along the road to kill him. ⁴ But Festus answered that Paul should be kept at Caesarea, and that he himself was going there shortly. ⁵ "Therefore," he said, "let those who have authority among you go down with me and accuse this man, to see if there is any fault in him."*

⁶ And when he had remained among them more than ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day, sitting on the judgment seat, he commanded Paul to be brought. ⁷ When he had come, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood about and laid many serious complaints against Paul, which they could not prove, ⁸ while he answered for himself, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all."⁹ But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?"

¹⁰ So Paul said, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. ¹¹ For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar."

¹² Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, "You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!"

Background Notes

"After two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound" (Acts 24:27). Secular history records that Felix lost his position because he badly mishandled a conflict between the Jews and Gentiles of Caesarea. Meanwhile, the apostle Paul had already been imprisoned for two years in Caesarea, from about 56-58AD. Why so long without a decision? Because Felix wanted to do the Jews a favor! In addition, he was hoping for some bribe money from Paul and his friends.

The last verse of Acts 23 says that Paul was kept in Herod's Praetorium. Herod the Great had built the beautiful new city of Caesarea as the Roman military headquarters for the land of Israel. The ruins of many of his great building projects still can be seen in Caesarea today, including the large man-made harbor, and the recently excavated palace (the Praetorium mentioned here) that was situated right on the waterfront at Caesarea.

Felix gave orders to keep Paul under guard, but to allow him to have some freedom, and to allow his friends to visit him and provide for his needs while he was imprisoned in Caesarea (Acts 24:23). Who were these friends? Perhaps one friend was Philip the evangelist, who lived in Caesarea with his four prophetess daughters. Cornelius the centurion had lived in Caesarea (Acts 10) - and maybe still did. Cornelius and his relatives and friends had all become believers, and at least some of them may still have lived in Caesarea. And Acts 21:16 mentions “the disciples at Caesarea.” So a number of Christians would have come to visit Paul while he was in prison in Caesarea.

Of course some of Paul’s fellow workers, including Luke, were lodging around Caesarea, waiting to see the outcome of Paul’s case. In fact Luke, the author of Acts, gave us a first-hand account of what went on there. During those two years at Caesarea, Luke no doubt used the time to interview the disciples who had been with the Lord during his earthly ministry. He probably made several trips to Jerusalem and Galilee, collecting his material for writing the Gospel of Luke. Remember, Luke was not an eyewitness of the events in his Gospel, but he did his homework well, and his research was meticulous.

So the two years of Paul’s imprisonment at Caesarea were not wasted years. God certainly worked the events of those two years together for good, in a variety of ways.

Doctrinal Points

1. There is a time to appeal to Caesar.

When Festus arrived as the governor of the Roman province of Syria, which included Judea, he went up to Jerusalem. This was a wise move for the new governor, since Jerusalem was the religious capital, and it was important to keep a peaceful relationship with the Jewish people. No sooner had Festus arrived at Jerusalem than the Jewish leaders and chief priests requested that Paul be brought to Jerusalem for trial. They, of course, wanted to set an ambush and kill Paul before he got up to Jerusalem.

Festus, like Felix, said no. Paul would stay in prison at Caesarea, but he told the Jews that they could send their legal experts there if they wanted to reopen Paul’s case. Once again Paul defended himself, this time before Festus. Governor Festus, like Felix, could not find that Paul had done anything against Roman law, but in order to do the Jews a favor, he offered to bring Paul to Jerusalem to stand trial, if Paul was willing (v9). Paul was not willing. At this point he decided that his only option was to appeal to Caesar.

Appealing his case to Caesar was no small matter for the apostle Paul. It meant that he would have to go to Rome as a prisoner. If he won his case before Caesar there, he would be released - but if he lost his case, he would be executed.

Some Christians have found fault with the apostle Paul’s decision to appeal to Caesar. They feel that Paul should just have relied on the Lord. I believe Paul did the right thing here, because God expects us to use our common sense as we

depend on Him. Paul realized that Festus wanted to please the Jews, and thus he would not get a fair trial in Jerusalem or Caesarea. As a Roman citizen, he had the right of appeal. So Paul considered his options carefully. Using common sense and logic, he chose to appeal to Caesar. He believed this was his best option for furthering the ongoing work of the Lord. If necessary, we should appeal to the authorities. There is a time to appeal to Caesar.

Paul was not afraid to die and his decision was not based on making money or getting ahead in this world. It was based on what he felt was best for continuing to serve the Lord. The Lord could have overruled and closed that door, but the Lord actually used this door of legal appeal. There is a time to appeal to Caesar.

A few years ago some of my Bible college students were witnessing for the Lord in a local park in the Chicago area. Some town officials stopped them saying that they were not allowed to conduct religious activities on town property. The students thought, "But what about our First Amendment freedom of speech?" So they "appealed to Caesar"! They got a written ruling from higher city officials giving them the right to share their faith in public places. There is a time to appeal to Caesar!

2. There is a time to appear before Agrippa.

Acts 25:13-27: "And after some days King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus. ¹⁴ When they had been there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying: "There is a certain man left a prisoner by Felix, ¹⁵ about whom the chief priests and the elders of the Jews informed me, when I was in Jerusalem, asking for a judgment against him. ¹⁶ To them I answered, 'It is not the custom of the Romans to deliver any man to destruction before the accused meets the accusers face to face, and has opportunity to answer for himself concerning the charge against him.' ¹⁷ Therefore when they had come together, without any delay, the next day I sat on the judgment seat and commanded the man to be brought in. ¹⁸ When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, ¹⁹ but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive. ²⁰ And because I was uncertain of such questions, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there be judged concerning these matters. ²¹ But when Paul appealed to be reserved for the decision of Augustus, I commanded him to be kept till I could send him to Caesar." ²² Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I also would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," he said, "you shall hear him."

²³ So the next day, when Agrippa and Bernice had come with great pomp, and had entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at Festus' command Paul was brought in. ²⁴ And Festus said: "King Agrippa and all the men who are here present with us, you see this man about whom the whole assembly of the Jews petitioned me, both at Jerusalem and here, crying out that he was not fit to live any longer. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ I have nothing certain to write to my lord concerning him. Therefore I have brought him out before you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the examination has taken place I may have something to write. ²⁷ For it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner and not to specify the charges against him."

If Paul were writing this script, he would have undoubtedly had himself shipped off to Rome immediately after his appeal to Caesar. But God wanted Paul to witness to King Agrippa. This “Agrippa” was Herod Agrippa II, the great-grandson of Herod the Great, and son of Herod Agrippa I. Herod Agrippa I was the king who put the apostle James to death, and then died an untimely death himself (Acts 12).

King Agrippa and his sister Bernice made a visit to Caesarea to pay their respects to the new Governor Festus. Since Agrippa was the puppet ruler (under Rome) in the Galilee area and other Jewish areas, and he knew about Judaism, Festus told Agrippa about Paul and his appeal to Caesar. Festus was hoping that Agrippa could give him some insight into Paul’s situation, as well as some help in composing the official letter that he would send to the Emperor when he sent Paul to Rome. Agrippa said that he wanted to see and hear Paul himself, so the meeting was arranged. This unexpected appearance before Agrippa was a total surprise to the apostle Paul - but Paul took advantage of his opportunity to witness to this king, as we’ll see in Acts 26.

We never know when God may arrange for us to witness to an “Agrippa” - perhaps someone who holds a high government office, or someone with an important position in a large business corporation, or someone with a significant social or political position. The opportunity may come as a total surprise, as it did for the apostle Paul. So be prepared! There is a time to appear before Agrippa.

Practical Application

Always try to get the divine perspective.

Verse 23: *“So the next day, when Agrippa and Bernice had come with great pomp, and had entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at Festus’ command Paul was brought in.”* How do you think the secular press of that day would have reported this event? All the attention and photos would be of King Agrippa, Bernice, Festus, and the other prominent citizens of Caesarea - with their clothing and jewelry described in detail. Only a small byline would be given to the prisoner Paul.

How different that news report would be, if it were viewed from **God’s** perspective! This entire event was part of God’s plan to spread the gospel and to get Paul to Rome, where he would preach and teach and write more Scripture. The prisoner Paul was far more significant than Agrippa, Bernice, Festus, and all the other “prominent” people. All of them were just minor players, **from the divine perspective**.

Similar scenarios are going on today around the world. Too often we judge people and events through the lens of worldly power, wealth, and social status – all of which are passing away (1 John 2:15-17). Let’s try to remember to look at people and situations through God’s eyes. Always try to get the **divine perspective**!