

N. Paul's Trial Before Festus (25:1-12)

Promised by Jesus Himself that he would testify to Him in Rome, Paul found himself under house arrest in Caesarea with no end in sight. Repeatedly through endless months he was obliged to submit to Felix's greedy charade as the governor sought a bribe from him under the pretext of desiring to hear more about Jesus and the Way (24:26). This situation continued for more than two years, and Paul must have at times puzzled over the Lord's purpose in what, to all appearances, was a complete waste of precious time and opportunity in gospel witness.

- Jesus had pledged that he was going to Rome; why, then, was He keeping him in Caesarea? It was obvious that Felix had no interest in the gospel; quite the opposite, he was making a mockery of it.
- The Lord gave Paul no reason for his long incarceration in Caesarea; worse yet, He gave him over to a set of circumstances that pressed Paul's faith to its limit.

But for all this, Luke gives no indication that Paul wavered: Jesus told him he would testify in Rome and Paul knew that promise would be fulfilled in the Lord's good timing and in accordance with His appointed means. In the meantime, Paul remained in bonds in Caesarea, testifying to Christ as he had opportunity, trusting and resting in the One he proclaimed. For his part, Felix continued hardened against the gospel. Whatever conviction he may have felt from Paul's witness (vv. 25-26), Felix's heart wasn't seized by the "light of the glory of God in the face of Christ"; he remained captivated by the glory of personal status and recognition (24:27).

Thus Felix refused to release Paul, though he doubtless believed that his prisoner was innocent of any chargeable offense. Felix held Paul in the hope of obtaining money from him, but he also recognized that it served a secondary benefit by securing the favor of his Jewish subjects. And so Paul continued in Caesarea under house arrest for the balance of Felix's reign until his case was handed over to the new procurator Porcius Festus.

Festus succeeded Felix in 60 A.D. under direct appointment by Emperor Nero, Felix having been recalled to Rome in connection with charges of malfeasance brought by Caesarean Jews. The most spectacular was that the governor had responded to a conflict in Caesarea between Jews and Syrians by slaughtering many of the city's inhabitants. Felix stood trial in Rome, but was able to prevail with Nero through the influence of his brother Pallus. (Pallus had served as secretary of the treasury under Nero's predecessor Claudius). Though legally vindicated, Felix lost his governorship to Festus, and one of the first challenges the new procurator would face was the unusual case of a Jewish prisoner named Saul of Tarsus. Felix was gone, but the man he'd imprisoned remained at Caesarea, left there to become Festus' problem.

Festus served as Judea's procurator for less than two years before his death in 62 A.D. and relatively little is known about him. There is some indication, however, that he was a more noble person and ruler than Felix – not a difficult feat to achieve. The most notable thing about his brief rule in Judea was his involvement in the ongoing contention between Jerusalem's priestly class and King Agrippa II. The focal point of the conflict was the wall which the Jews had constructed to block Agrippa's view into the temple courtyard from the new wing of his palace.

This action only heightened the tensions between Agrippa and the temple establishment, which resented the king because of his appointment by Rome to oversee the temple and its activities and select its priests. This unbearable situation was made worse by the fact that Agrippa was the last ruler in the Herodian dynasty – the line of Idumean rulers that, for more than a century, the Jews had been forced to endure as usurpers to the kingship in Israel. Festus and Agrippa became allies when Festus sided with the king in his contention with the Jews, and this relationship would providentially lead Agrippa to Caesarea and the opportunity to hear Paul's gospel.

1. Luke's account of Festus' assumption of his new office notes only that he made a trip to Jerusalem shortly after arriving in the Judean provincial capital of Caesarea (25:1). No reason is given, but it was doubtless due to Jerusalem being the leading city of Judea and the cultural and religious epicenter of Judaism and his Jewish subjects. A successful rule over Judea depended upon a good working relationship with its citizens, and this meant proper attention to Jerusalem and its concerns and needs.

Festus had his own reasons for making this visit, but the Jews seized upon it as an opportunity to once again issue their appeal for Paul to be released to them. They'd tried and failed with Felix and two years had passed. Now, with a new governor in place, perhaps they could at last prevail and realize their murderous goal (25:2-3).

2. Festus denied the request and ordered Paul's accusers to return with him to Caesarea where they could bring their charges against him in a formal trial. While he continued in Jerusalem for several more days, they set about preparing their case. They'd learned from their failure before Felix and were not going to let that happen again.

As they had done two years earlier, the Jews presented a series of spectacular charges against Paul involving alleged offenses against the Law of Moses, the Jerusalem temple and the Jewish people. Paul's defense indicates that this time, however, his accusers upped the ante by arguing that he was guilty of crimes against Caesar himself (25:8). Most likely they reasoned that crimes against the Jewish Law and temple were threats to the peace and security of Judea (cf. 24:5), and therefore crimes of sedition that Caesar would never tolerate – crimes for which Festus himself would pay should he fail to act.

3. Festus was left in a quandary: He was only days into his rule as procurator, and he couldn't start off on the wrong foot by alienating the men who were the representative leaders of his subject people. Moreover, the Jews' veiled threats made it clear that they were deadly serious and would take their case to Caesar if necessary. Jews from Caesarea had done this with his predecessor, and Festus knew that his own governorship was the product of that appeal. Beyond all that, he already had a serious Jewish problem on his hands in the contention between Agrippa and the Jerusalem rulers.

There was absolutely no reason to complicate his situation; the wisest course of action was to do what Felix would not: return Paul to Jerusalem to be tried under the Jews' jurisdiction as Rome allowed. This would satisfy their demands and still permit him to oversee the proceedings. Thus, after allowing Paul to present his defense, Festus appealed to him concerning his willingness to return to Jerusalem (25:9).

4. Paul responded by affirming that he was fully prepared to suffer the just recompense of any crime or legal violation he'd committed. The Jews were accusing him of capital crimes, and everyone present recognized that their goal was Paul's execution. What Festus didn't know – but Paul surmised based on his history with his accusers – was that the Jews intended that Paul should never reach Jerusalem. But that matter aside, Paul assured Festus that he was willing to be executed if he had indeed committed crimes deserving death; he, too, was concerned with justice and wasn't seeking leniency. But for that very reason Festus could not justly hand him over to his accusers, for they had been unable to give any evidence of their charges against him (ref. 25:8-11, 25). (His language – *no one can grant me to them as a favor* – shows that he discerned Festus' true motive).

Paul wasn't aware of the conspiracy against him, but he had no doubt of what was in store for him should the governor grant the Jews' petition. Even if he made it back to Jerusalem alive, his execution at the hands of his countrymen was a foregone conclusion. Thus Paul ended his response with an appeal to Caesar himself (25:11b). Several things about this are worth noting:

- a. The first is the *grounds* for Paul's appeal. Paul was a Roman citizen and so possessed this right of appeal. It was certainly an unusual request that must have taken Festus by surprise, but it was fully within Paul's rights to make it. Corresponding to this was the fact that the Jewish charges against him were fabricated and entirely baseless. Justice therefore demanded that he not be delivered over to them as their prisoner.
- b. The second is Paul's *reasoning* and *purpose* in making his appeal. In the first place, agreeing to return to Jerusalem with his accusers was tantamount to signing his own death warrant. And since Jesus had revealed His intention that Paul go to Rome, handing himself over to the Jews would be a flagrant act of unbelief: The Lord was able to intervene and deliver him from death, but why would Paul put Him to the test by deliberately yielding to men determined to murder him?

Moreover, the very fact that Paul was destined for Rome made his appeal to Caesar all the more appropriate. Up until that day he likely was unsure how the Lord intended to fulfill His word. For more than two years Paul had lived under house arrest in Caesarea with no disposition of his case and no indication of how his present circumstance was serving the ultimate goal of his journey to Rome. But now it was clear that the charges against him weren't going to be dropped and Festus had no intention of releasing him except to the Jews for yet another trial.

- c. A final thing to consider is the *propriety* of Paul's appeal. As with his previous action in Jerusalem, Paul's present self-intervention might be viewed by some as an act of presumption or lack of trust in Jesus' word. But surely all of the above factors must have pointed in Paul's mind to the rightness of appealing to Caesar. Far from questioning or contradicting the Lord's pledge, Paul's decision honored it: He'd been commanded to testify in Rome and so wasn't about to sacrifice his life. An appeal to Caesar was his only other option.

Jesus' word was clearly in the forefront of Paul's thinking as he made his appeal, and it likely had a second influence on his decision. Given the way the various providences of the past two years converged that day, Paul had every reason to conclude that an appeal to Caesar was in fact the Lord's appointed means for fulfilling His promise to him. *But if he was right, it meant that Paul's personal vision for his ministry in Rome didn't correspond to what Jesus had in mind:*

- Paul's design was to travel to Rome as part of a larger mission journey and minister and fellowship with the body of believers in that city (ref. Romans 1:9-15, 15:20-24); Jesus' purpose was that Paul would go to Rome in chains as Caesar's prisoner and bear gospel witness, not to the Roman church, but the Roman emperor and his household.
- Paul didn't concoct his own vision in contradiction to the divine will; *Jesus hadn't promised any specifics to him*, and so Paul couldn't help but ponder what lay ahead and how things were going to work out. But his musings were according to faith and not presumption: He didn't construct a scenario in his mind and then impose it upon the Lord's promise; Paul's thoughts led him to be keenly sensitive and fully receptive and responsive to the Lord's leading and provision, whatever they may happen to be.

Faith is neither passive nor presumptive, but conforms itself to God's revealed truth and will in accordance with the providential circumstances, needs and responsibilities that present themselves in the course of daily life. Thus Paul's appeal to Caesar didn't in any way contradict or presume upon Jesus' promise to him. He was intervening on his own behalf, but in a way that accorded with faith – a way fully suited to what Paul knew to be the Lord's purpose for him.

5. Caught off guard by Paul's appeal, Festus immediately excused himself to confer with his council of officers and advisers. He was clearly in a tough spot: Paul was a Roman citizen and innocent of the charges brought against him; Festus couldn't convict and sentence him without violating Roman justice and jeopardizing his own governorship. On the other hand, he was just entering upon his rule of Judea and recognized that he couldn't afford to alienate the Jewish establishment by releasing Paul. The stability and success of Festus' rule depended upon a working relationship with his Jewish subjects.

Luke provides no insight into the discussion between Festus and his advisors. In truth, he probably had no way of knowing exactly what transpired in that private conference. But whatever counsel he may have received, in the end Festus determined that he had no choice but to grant Paul's appeal (25:12). That was the only way to uphold justice and not unduly offend the Jews. They wouldn't be pleased with that decision because it snatched Paul from their grasp, but at least in doing so it removed him far from Judea and delivered him to distant Rome as Caesar's prisoner. Eliminating Paul's life was the preferred outcome, but the next best option was eliminating his presence and activity. For Paul's part, his submission to Caesar testified to Festus that the gospel presents no threat to the civil authority; whatever its corruptions, it is God's minister for good.