

Lesson 32: Acts 25:1-26:32 The Gospel's Message for the World

Introduction

Paul held out two years in prison, never giving in to Felix' hope for a bribe, and yet, Felix never turned him over to the Jewish authorities, either. The year is now 59 or 60 AD. Felix has ended a disturbance in Caesarea between Gentile and Jewish residents, but his response has resulted in the deaths of several leading Jews. The emperor has removed Felix from office to reduce tension and appointed Porcius Festus as the new governor over Judea.

We do not know much about Festus apart from what Luke tells us. Our only other report of him in the historical record are two brief mentions by the Jewish historian Josephus, who judged him a successful governor who suppressed "the brigands and revolutionaries who had so plagued the countryside during Felix's administration."¹

From Luke's account, we see similarities in Festus' treatment of Paul to other Roman governors of Judea, all of whom were caught between the obligation to carry out Roman justice and the political benefits of placating Jewish leadership. The Jewish people were not easily controlled by the threat of Roman violence. Too many were willing to die. But an inability to maintain order could create a black mark on a Roman governor's resume, as had happened both to Felix and to Pilate before him. Any governor looking to advance his position after his stint in Judea faced the tricky decision of when to exert Roman authority and when to give in to Jewish demands.

Festus' handling of the Paul problem provides the historical context for our fourth movement of Acts part VI. The narrative follows Luke's standard structure for this part of Acts, beginning with a danger avoided, moving to a misconception corrected and ending with a defense given. Paul's defense challenges gathered dignitaries to make a judgment on the Gospel's message for the world.

We begin with a danger avoided, a second attempt by Jewish leaders to ambush Paul on his way to inquiry before the Jewish Sanhedrin. It is recorded in Acts 25:1-12.

Danger Avoided (25:1–12)

¹ Festus then, having arrived in the province, three days later went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. ² And the chief priests and the leading men of the Jews brought charges against Paul, and they were urging him, ³ requesting a concession against Paul, that he might have him brought to Jerusalem (*at the same time*, setting an ambush to kill him on the way). ⁴ Festus then answered that Paul was being kept in custody at Caesarea and that he himself was about to leave shortly. ⁵ "Therefore," he said, "let the influential men among you go there with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them prosecute him." ⁶ After he had spent not more than eight or ten days among them, he went down to Caesarea, and on the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. ⁷ After Paul arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him which they could not prove, ⁸ while Paul said in his own defense, "I have committed no offense either against the Law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar." ⁹ But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me on these *charges*?" ¹⁰ But Paul said, "I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. I have done no wrong to *the* Jews, as you also very well know. ¹¹ "If, then, I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is *true* of which these men accuse

¹ J. B. Polhill. *Acts*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992) 488.

me, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar.”¹² Then when Festus had conferred with his council, he answered, “You have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you shall go.”

Paul remained a sore point on the Jewish agenda. Two years had passed and still certain elements within the Jewish establishment were prepared to ambush Paul while he was guarded by Roman soldiers. Festus does not give in immediately, but raises Jewish hope, inviting prosecutors to join him in Caesarea that he might make his own investigation. The best case would be to convince Festus that Paul is guilty of Temple desecration and gain permission to execute Paul. Second best would be to convince Festus to transfer Paul to Jerusalem for trial. Since that might take the possibility of a death penalty off the table, they would murder Paul in an ambush on the way. And in that, Jewish leaders might even be able to avoid connection to the plot, considering the problem of bandits and rebels that have plagued Roman administration of Judea.

After a short stay in Jerusalem, Festus proceeds back to his new home in the provincial center, Caesarea. Jewish prosecutors follow him. Paul is brought forth for another inquiry. Luke does not here repeat the prosecution charges, which we can imagine to be similar to the accusations made in the trial before Felix. We are told later in this text that Festus came to the same conclusion as all the Romans who have tried Paul in Acts, that the charges are matters of religious law, not transgressions against Roman law, civil or criminal.

In agreement with the previous trial, Luke adds that the charges were made but not proven. He then summarizes Paul’s response as a denial of offense against Jewish law, the Temple, or Caesar. And that reference to Caesar foreshadows the strategic decision Paul is about to make.

Festus responds to Paul’s defense asking, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me on these *charges*?” Festus is not outright agreeing to hand Paul over to the Jews for trial. He asks, “Are you willing to stand before me?” He has in mind something similar to the court of inquiry held by the commander Lysias. He will retain control as the Roman governor but grant the Jews their request of a trial in Jerusalem. And that is going to be enough for the Jews because they are planning to ambush Paul on the way anyway. Paul responds by appealing to Caesar.

I have read some scholars who suggest Paul’s appeal was made too quickly, too rashly. He did not give Festus time to consider his response, to consider the case. Agrippa’s comment at the very end of this movement we’ll get to later in verse 26:32 supports that idea. He is going to say, “This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.” Did Paul jump the gun? Might he have been set free? Well, no. That is not likely at all. We need to give Paul more credit than that. Luke is only summarizing the content of this inquiry. Much more was said, as we will see in the following section.

We can assume that Paul had enough information to read the way the wind was blowing. Festus desired strongly to do a favor for the Jews. He may have asked Paul whether he was willing to stand trial in Jerusalem but is not going to base his decision on the response of a prisoner. Paul *could* have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar. But he *would* not have been set free. Paul assumed Festus was going to give in and have him sent to Jerusalem. Whether Festus was aware or not of the earlier plot to ambush Paul, we know that Paul remembers. And what Festus may or may have not done is not really the primary point, anyway. Walking in the power of the Holy Spirit, trusting his strategy to God, Paul appealed to Caesar. His ultimate hope is not in this strategic decision. He is not trusting in Ceasaer. His hope is in the sovereignty of God.

Listen carefully to Paul’s appeal, and you hear a rebuke of Festus.

¹⁰ Paul said, “I am standing before Caesar’s tribunal, where I ought to be tried. I have done no wrong to *the* Jews, as you also very well know. ¹¹ “If, then, I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is *true* of which these men accuse me, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar.”

Paul points out that Festus knows he has done no wrong to the Jews. He willingly accepts the right of the government to carry out judgment, even the judgment of a death penalty, if indeed he is found

guilty of a capital offense. Then he points out to Festus the illegality of being handed over without proof of guilt. “I stand before Caesar’s tribunal...” Festus is a representative of the Roman government. “No one can hand me over to them.” He means, “No Roman judge should hand me, a Roman citizen, over to a non-Roman body for trial if I have not been found guilty of any charge.” Based on Roman law he should not be given over to the Jews. But he discerns that is exactly what Festus is planning. Festus will relax Roman justice in favor of political expediency to score points with the Jewish leadership at the beginning of his rule. Paul takes the only legal action left open to him. It is a course familiar in modern judicial systems. He makes an appeal to a higher court. In this case, it is an appeal to the highest court. Here is Bruce’s explanation to give us more background on this point of Roman law.

There are many unanswered questions about this process and how it worked in the middle of the first century, Acts itself being one of the main sources for this period. Paul seems to have made use of an ancient right of Roman citizens that goes back to at least the fifth century B.C., known as *provocatio*, it gave a citizen the right to appeal a magistrate’s verdict to a jury of fellow citizens. Under the empire the emperor himself became the court of appeal, replacing the former jury of peers. Although governors seem to have had the right to pass capital sentences and even to deny appeal in instances involving established laws, in cases not involving well-established precedent (*extra ordinem*) such as Paul’s, the right of appeal seems to have been absolute; a procurator such as Festus would not have been in the position to deny it. Though appeal was generally made only after a verdict had been reached, Paul’s appeal *before* condemnation seems to have been in order. It is unclear whether the process was irrevocable, i.e., whether a magistrate could stop the appeal should the innocence of the appellant be determined before remission to the emperor. Probably in Festus’s case it would not have made much difference. He really had no desire to establish Paul’s innocence for fear of the repercussions from the Jews. He probably was relieved by Paul’s appeal. It took the whole troublesome matter out of his hands.²

That is Bruce’s explanation. So now the danger of ambush is avoided, and we turn to the misconception corrected. The correction comes from Festus’ own lips in a private conversation with the visiting King Agrippa and his sister Bernice. This is Acts 25:13-22.

Misconception Corrected (25:13-22)

¹³ Now when several days had elapsed, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and paid their respects to Festus. ¹⁴ While they were spending many days there, Festus laid Paul’s case before the king, saying, “There is a man who was left as a prisoner by Felix; ¹⁵ and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews brought charges against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. ¹⁶ “I answered them that it is not the custom of the Romans to hand over any man before the accused meets his accusers face to face and has an opportunity to make his defense against the charges. ¹⁷ “So after they had assembled here, I did not delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought before me. ¹⁸ “When the accusers stood up, they *began* bringing charges against him not of such crimes as I was expecting, ¹⁹ but they *simply* had some points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive. ²⁰ “Being at a loss how to investigate such matters, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there stand trial on these matters. ²¹ “But when Paul appealed to be held in custody for the Emperor’s decision, I ordered him to be kept in custody until I 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.”

An appeal to Caesar implies disagreement with a lower court’s verdict. An observer hearing Paul had appealed would logically conclude Festus found Paul guilty of some crime. Paul then appealed the

² Polhill, 491.

verdict of guilt. But that is not what happened. Festus states his inability to discover any crime that Paul is guilty of. It is the same admission Lysias made when he sent Paul to Felix. So, Festus is glad for Agrippa's interest in the case, because he needs to come up with some explanation to the emperor for why a man not charged with any crime has appealed to Caesar's judgment.

This section follows the pattern already established by Roman judges, who continue to clear Paul of any credible charges. We do see in Festus' words that there was much more to the trial than reported by Luke. Apparently, Luke did not hear anything he wanted to add to the record of Acts, except for this one comment made by Festus.

¹⁸ When the accusers stood up, they *began* bringing charges against him not of such crimes as I was expecting, ¹⁹ but they *simply* had some points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive.

Okay, we have heard that before. Romans, listening to the prosecution and defense conclude, this is a matter of Jewish religion. The interesting bit here is how Festus understood the disagreement about Jesus. He says, "[they disagreed] about a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive." We have repeatedly heard Paul argue that he is on trial for hope in the resurrection. I have interpreted that hope to be based on the specific resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a hope in general resurrection for everybody, that everybody who believes in God would be raised to eternal life. But it is based on the specific resurrection of Jesus. This comment supports that interpretation. They were discussing Jesus, is He dead or is He alive. And even though Luke doesn't go into more detail about the disagreement between Paul and his Jewish accusers concerning the resurrection, we see from this account of Festus who was listening to the disagreement that it revolved around the resurrection of Jesus. Our own resurrection to eternal life is grounded in our belief that Jesus defeated death, He took care of sin, He was raised again, and He ascended to eternal life. As Paul told the Corinthians, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain (1 Corinthians 15:14)."

This is the Gospel message to the world. We call all people to accept the historic reality that God took on flesh and lived among us as the man Jesus Christ. In His crucifixion, He became an atoning sacrifice for the sin of all humankind. In His resurrection, He has accomplished victory over death and proved by the power of the Spirit that he is God.

Paul has argued this message of Good News to the Jews. Now, once again, the message of the Gospel is to put on trial before representatives of the world. The defense given in Acts 25:23-26:32 is not another trial. It is an evaluation of Paul in front of King Agrippa without any prosecutors present.

Defense Given (25:23-26:32)

Of Paul's seven speeches in the book of Acts, the defense before Agrippa is his longest. Not by much. It is similar in length to the first speech we were given, in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch, and his speech before the mob in the Temple courtyard. Because it is long and because it follows a pattern similar to the trial before Felix, rather than read through the whole at one time, I will divide it into three simple subsections: introduction to the defense given, Paul's speech, and conclusion to the defense given. We will need to further sub-divide Paul's speech. But we start with the introduction to the section, Acts 25:23-27.

Introduction to the Defense Given (25:23-27)

²³ So, on the next day when Agrippa came together with Bernice amid great pomp, and entered the auditorium accompanied by the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. ²⁴ Festus said, "King Agrippa, and all you gentlemen here present with us, you see this man about whom all the people of the Jews appealed to me, both at Jerusalem and here, loudly declaring that he ought not to live any longer. ²⁵ "But I found that he had committed nothing worthy of death; and since he himself appealed to the Emperor, I decided to send him. ²⁶ "Yet I have nothing definite about him to write to my lord. Therefore I have brought him before you *all* and especially before you, King

Agrippa, so that after the investigation has taken place, I may have something to write. ²⁷ “For it seems absurd to me in sending a prisoner, not to indicate also the charges against him.”

Imagine the scene. My translation says they came together with Agrippa and Bernice “amid great pomp.” “Fantasia” is the Greek word translated here as, “pomp.” Its where English gets the word, “fantasy.” It is an appearing. It is magnificent splendor, solemn and formal. King Agrippa, the last of the Herodians, educated at the court of emperor Claudius, ruler over lands bordering the Sea of Galilee to the north and east, interacts with people at the highest level of Roman society. He will later in history plead with the Jews to submit to Roman rule, siding with the general and future emperor Titus Vespasian, and retire to Rome after Titus destroys Jerusalem.

Bernice, or in Greek, “Berenice,” was one of the two most famous names repeatedly used in the long line of Ptolemaic Queens, who were Macedonian rulers of Egypt. You are very familiar with the other name that was handed down for generations. That name was, “Cleopatra.” This Bernice is sister to Agrippa and a power-player in her own right. She has already outlived two husbands and separated from her third, the king of Paul’s home province Cilicia. She will become the lover of Titus during his campaign in Judea and return with him to Rome. Like Cleopatra the VII, she almost becomes a Roman empress. But also like Cleopatra, there is popular resentment against an eastern queen, considered to be a seductress. Giving in to that popular opinion, Titus will send her away.

When God sent Ananias of Damascus to open Paul’s eyes at his conversion, he said to Ananias, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.” Paul has lifted up the name of Jesus to Jew and Gentile. He now lifts that name up to a king on his way to the court of the king of kings, Caesar.

All the pomp surrounding King Agrippa and Queen Bernice includes the Roman governor Festus, commanders of the Roman legion, and prominent men of this Gentile city Caesarea. Mostly Gentile but maybe some Jews, as well. This one moment encapsulates the commission given to Paul through Ananias to bear the name of Jesus before the world. This is a specific fulfillment of the prophecy God gave through Ananias.

Festus brings Paul in and repeats the persistent message we get in the second half of Acts. “The Jewish establishment wants him dead. I find nothing wrong with him.” Festus goes on to tell Agrippa he needs help coming up with something to say to Caesar, “For it seems absurd to me to send a prisoner, not to indicate also the charges against him.”

That’s our introduction. Now we turn to Paul’s defense. And it is going to be less of a defense, and more of Paul’s message to the world that is gathered to judge him. The speech also subdivides into introduction, body, and conclusion. Here is Paul’s introductory statement to his speech, 26:1-8.

Paul’s Defense (26:1-23)

Introductory Statement (1-8)

¹ Agrippa said to Paul, “You are permitted to speak for yourself.” Then Paul stretched out his hand and *proceeded* to make his defense: ² “In regard to all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, I consider myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I am about to make my defense before you today; ³ especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among *the Jews*; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently. ⁴ “So then, all Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, which from the beginning was spent among my *own* nation and at Jerusalem; ⁵ since they have known about me for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that I lived *as a Pharisee* according to the strictest sect of our religion. ⁶ “And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; ⁷ *the promise* to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve *God* night and day. And for this hope, O King, I am being accused by Jews. ⁸ “Why is it considered incredible among you *people* if God does raise the dead?

Paul begins with respectful remarks to Agrippa. That is appropriate. When Paul says Agrippa is “an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews,” that is casting Agrippa’s knowledge in quite a positive light, but it is not wrong. His great-grandfather Herod the Great converted to Judaism and his great-grandmother was a Jewish princess. Rome did not make him king over Judea but did grant him authority over the affairs of the Temple, with the responsibility of appointing the high priest. Agrippa used his influence with Rome to argue for moderation in the treatment of the Jews. Both he and Bernice had palaces in Jerusalem. Paul is rightly able to speak to Agrippa as a Jewish insider in a way he could not communicate to Festus.

In verses 4-8 Paul provides a summary of his defense focusing on his consistent main point of emphasis: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul establishes his own credentials as an expert of the customs and questions of the Jews, having grown up in Jerusalem and studied and practiced Judaism according to its strictest sect, the Pharisees.

Paul skips over his conversion and missionary work among Gentiles to immediately establish the bottom line that he is on trial for the hope of resurrection. Referring to the fathers of Israel, Paul makes sure to establish his belief in line with Jewish Scriptures, not in opposition with them. Paul’s belief is in the promises of God that go all the way back to Abraham. Abraham received a promise of land, and descendants, and a name with the purpose that through him all the families of Earth might be blessed. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Abraham saw past the physical land in which he sojourned, looking ahead to “the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10).” Abraham’s faith was an “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).” The promise of a heavenly Zion is a hope that Paul can describe here as one “which our twelve tribes hope to attain.” The hope of Israel looks ahead to a new Heaven and a new Earth; a new Jerusalem.

As a historical aside, Paul’s reference to the twelve tribes of Israel is very interesting here. A student recently asked me in an Old Testament class which tribes returned to Israel after the exile. Tribes returning from Babylon would have been Judah, and Benjamin, and Levi. Simeon fell out of the Biblical record a long time before the exile. Those are the tribes that made up the Southern Kingdom of Judah, that had been defeated and exiled by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. The presence of Judah in the 1st century is necessary to carry on the line of David into which Jesus was born. And Levi is necessary to carry on the Levitical priesthood. But what about the other tribes?

The ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom were exiled 120 years earlier by Assyria. The poor remnant of the north intermarried with other peoples and became the Samaritans. But Paul here speaks of twelve tribes in the present. Closer study shows that the myth of the lost ten tribes (you may have heard that, that they are lost, and nobody knows where they are) is not supported in the New Testament. Political organization of Israel on tribal lines is not present in this time period so we get very little reference to the tribes. But we can assume Jews scattered throughout the eastern and western empires had returned to Israel. There is little additional evidence in the New Testament apart from Paul’s comment here, though the prophetess Anna, who recognized baby Jesus in the Temple in Luke 2:36, was identified as from the tribe of Asher, and James addresses his letter “to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad (James 1:1).” It seems to be a New Testament assumption.

Paul’s language of twelve tribes here includes all Jews together as one whole, while also connecting us back to the historical promises. It is a very Old Testament way of describing Israel. The hope of an eternal future planted in the promise to Abraham had become intertwined with salvation and blessing through the Messianic Son of David. So, by the end of the New Testament, through the Prophets, the plan of salvation is very focused on this “Messiah.” In stating his thesis, Paul switches to the second person pronoun, “you”, directing his thesis towards Jews. You know, either rhetorically, or to those who are present, or both. How can you piously speak of a spiritual hope and then reject out of hand the evidence so powerfully displayed among you in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ? “Why is it considered incredible among you *people* if God does raise the

dead?” In light of your hope in the promises of God, it is irrational to not even acknowledge the possibility that God has fulfilled His promise through the resurrection of Jesus. You have this religious tradition that you want to hold on to, but you don’t really want to believe it.

With his thesis established, that he is on trial for the hope of the resurrection, Paul launches into the body of his speech. Rather than defend himself, Paul gives witness to Jesus by sharing with them his personal testimony. This version of Paul’s testimony includes main points already communicated in Luke’s narration of his conversion in chapter 9 and Paul’s witness before the mob in chapter 21. This is our third example of Paul’s testimony. There are notable differences as Paul fits his words to the present context, dropping out some details and including others. So, we want to pay attention to those differences. I’ll read the whole text, verses 9-20.

Body of the Speech (9-20)

[We start with life before meeting Jesus.] ⁹ “So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ “And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ “And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.

[Then we get how Paul met Jesus.] ¹² “While so engaged as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, ¹³ at midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me. ¹⁴ “And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ ¹⁵ “And I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶ ‘But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; ¹⁷ rescuing you from the *Jewish* people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, ¹⁸ to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.’

[Paul then goes on to life after meeting Jesus.] ¹⁹ “So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but *kept* declaring both to those of Damascus first, and *also* at Jerusalem and *then* throughout all the region of Judea, and *even* to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.

Paul’s description of life before meeting Jesus is briefer in this account than in the previous two accounts of his conversion. Paul had already made reference to his personal biography in the introduction of this speech, pointing out that he studied from his youth in Jerusalem and joined the ranks of the Pharisees. And this sharing of his testimony is to point more towards his audience than towards himself. He does point out that he, too, had once stood in judgment over Christians, and he cast his vote to put them to death. That’s an interestingly honest admission for a prisoner trying to avoid the same kind of injustice being done to him.

Paul mentions the bright light, but he does not mention being blinded. I think that is an example of how Paul is crafting his words to be a Gospel witness for this audience and not as a description about himself. The description of the bright light is for his listeners.

This is the first time Paul tells us that the time of day was midday and that the light shone brighter than the sun. This light was not the sudden appearance of the sun coming out of dark clouds to shine in the faces of the travelers. This was an unmistakably miraculous light. And from that light a voice spoke.

The God of Israel is the God who speaks. And Paul is going to give us more of what Jesus said here than in the previous two tellings of the story. There is a reason for that. Jesus gave Paul a

commission. That commission was repeated several times. In the first account of Paul's conversion, Luke tells us a version of the commission that was given to Ananias to give to Paul. And he doesn't give us the one spoken directly from Jesus. That commission included the idea of witness before Jews, and Gentiles, and Kings. Luke used it to foreshadow what was to come in the book of Acts. You know, this final standing before kings. In the testimony before the mob, Paul spoke of a later repetition of the commission that came to him in a vision while he worshiped in the Temple. Paul's choice to communicate that version of the commission fit well with the context of a mob having dragged him away from worship in the Temple. That vision was in the same context. This is the first time we are getting the commission that was spoken directly to Paul as the bright light shone on him. And as we consider the words of Jesus in that commission, we will see why Paul chose to communicate that commission at this time to these people.

In recounting Jesus's question, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Paul here adds for the first time the further words of Jesus, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." A goad was a sharp stick used for driving oxen in the desired direction. Jesus is saying, "You are an ox and I am pointing you in a direction. The goad is not going to hurt much unless you press back against it, kick against it." To kick against the goads is a futile act of resistance against the will of one's master that only brings pain and possible injury to oneself. Bruce cites examples of this proverb occurring in Greek and Roman sources. Jesus had used a known metaphor that had meaning for Paul and would also have meaning for this Gentile audience. Everyone present would understand the idea that Paul has just realized holy inquisition against Christians is, in fact, a persecution of God. He is resisting God. It's an ultimately futile act that brings harm to the one who is engaged in it.

Paul responds, "Who are you?" Jesus answers, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Then Jesus commissions Paul.

¹⁶ 'Get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you; ¹⁷ rescuing you from the *Jewish* people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, ¹⁸ to open their eyes...

The idea of being rescued from Jews and Gentiles fits this context exactly. Paul has been rescued from the mob. Paul has been rescued from Jewish animosity and Paul has been rescued from Roman expedience. He is going to Caesar. He is leaving this place. And did you catch the wording of why Paul has been rescued? He has been rescued so that he might open the eyes of those he has been rescued from. That is what Paul is doing right now. He is seeking to open eyes. Paul's conversion story is a story about how he himself came to see and about how through him Gentiles will come to see. He didn't talk about his blindness here. He is not talking about what happened to him. His emphasis is on the second part: opening the eyes of his audience.

What does he want them to see? This is the rest of the quote.

...to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.'

In sharing the words of Jesus, Paul turns the tables on his judges. They are among those judged by Jesus. They are the ones who walk in rebellion, in darkness, in the kingdom of Satan. They are the ones in need of forgiveness and the sanctification that may be only found in Jesus.

Paul continues, sharing the words communicated to him, knowing that these words apply to his audience.

I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but *kept* declaring both to those of Damascus first, and *also* at Jerusalem and *then* throughout all the region of Judea, and *even* to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.

Is Paul telling his own story or is he inviting a response? Paul's speech concludes with the atonement of Christ, and an invitation.

Conclusion of the Speech (21-29)

²¹ "For this reason *some* Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death. ²² "So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; ²³ that the Christ was to suffer, *and* that by reason of *His* resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles."

Paul is not the source of light to the world. Jesus is the light. Jesus is all that is true and good and beautiful. The light of His gracious and just nature shines through His suffering, death, and resurrection. And this saving plan of God in Jesus Christ flows from the Old Testament Scriptures. Just as Jesus did, Paul consistently connects his Gospel message to what came before. The resurrection is not something new. It's not our only focus. We want the world to hear that this comes from a very old and ancient context. Faith in Jesus is not a movement away from the Prophets and Moses but a fulfillment of the Prophets and Moses.

²⁴ While *Paul* was saying this in his defense, Festus said in a loud voice, "Paul, you are out of your mind! *Your* great learning is driving you mad." ²⁵ But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth. ²⁶ "For the king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner. ²⁷ "King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do." ²⁸ Agrippa *replied* to Paul, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian." ²⁹ And Paul *said*, "I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains."

Festus and Agrippa understood rightly the goal of Paul's testimony. He shared his story with the hope of leading all who listened to personal faith in Jesus. Festus recognized Paul as a man of great learning, but he could not wrap his mind around Paul's claims. The story sounded foolish to him. Agrippa, on the other hand, found Paul persuasive. Paul's response to him was an invitation to repent and believe – an invitation to everybody. "I wish you all might become such as I am, except for these chains."

Every person present stood at a crossroads. Each one existed in an ongoing life story of relationships and experiences. They are in a river, and the river of life has just intercepted the flow of their story. Will they resist its current? Or will they go with it? You know, Felix intersected with the story of Paul's life for a couple of years. He and Drusilla had their own illicit love story. They have their own problems, their own relationships. They heard the Gospel message, were challenged to recognize the judgment of God but then they moved on. Felix failed politically. He was recalled to Rome and protected by his wealthy brother. Felix and Drusilla had children. One son, Marcus, was later stationed in Pompeii, dying under the fall of molten ash blown out of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. There is always more of a story. In every name, in every person we meet there is more story.

We do not know what happened to Festus. He would leave Judea only after two years. Agrippa never married. Bernice continued to live with him. He pleaded with fellow Jews not to fight Rome. They did not listen. Jerusalem was destroyed, the Temple burned down, a million Jews dead or sold into slavery. Agrippa and Bernice would follow Titus to Rome. Bernice will be sent away eventually. Agrippa will die there.

This moment is a crossroads. King, queen, governor, commanders, influential citizens, attendants, slaves, they all hear Paul's story: his witness to Jesus Christ. And King Agrippa understood Paul was speaking to him even as he told his own story. "You will persuade me to become a Christian."

²⁹ ...I wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains.

What had Paul said to them?

¹⁸ ...open [your] eyes!...turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God...receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in [Jesus].’... ²⁰ ...repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance...²³ [believe] the Christ was to suffer, *and* that by reason of *His* resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles.”

Who in that room took a turn on the road? Who left the kingdom of darkness and entered into the Kingdom of light? At that moment or later in life? We don’t know. God knows. It is the task of the witness to proclaim the truth about Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit and entrust the results to God. This movement ends in Acts 26:30-32.

Conclusion to the Defense Given (Acts 26:30-32)

³⁰ The king stood up and the governor and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them, ³¹ and when they had gone aside, they *began* talking to one another, saying, “This man is not doing anything worthy of death or imprisonment.” ³² And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

The gathered dignitaries turned from Paul’s words back to the task at hand. They had gathered to judge the prisoner and concluded, “This man is not doing anything worthy of death or imprisonment.” We recognize that statement to be the consistent judgment of all the Romans who have considered Paul’s case. He has committed no crime.

We also notice that Paul’s defense was not a defense of himself. The Book of Acts is not primarily about the defense of Paul. Paul would not want to be the primary focus. The book of Acts is about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is what Paul made this trial about. In telling his story the way he did, his primary goal was not his own defense. His primary goal was the salvation of his listeners. Amidst their own pomp and splendor, Paul lifted up the name of Jesus Christ. He gave the Gospel to them to judge. Paul will take this witness to Rome. He is not ashamed of the Gospel. He believes it to be the power of God for the salvation of the world. He will take this message to Caesar and to all who listen on the way.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 25:1-22. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Paul again faces the danger of ambush. He avoids the danger by appealing to Caesar. Did Paul need to appeal to Caesar? Why do you think Paul thought appealing to Caesar was necessary?
3. How are misconceptions about Paul corrected in 15:13-22? And by whom?
4. Read Acts 25:23-26:32. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
5. What new information do you see in this version of Paul’s testimony? How does Paul adjust this version for this specific audience?
6. Considering the way the trial ended, would you say that Paul’s goal in the trial was primarily his defense of primarily evangelism?