

Let's open our Bibles tonight to the book of Acts 25.

We've mentioned, I think, a few times, but it bears repeating that the book of Acts basically is learning through narrative. Narrative means you are given the story line, you follow along, you put yourself in the place of the people that you're reading about, you learn from what God does with them and through them, and how He works. It isn't doctrinal in the sense of the epistles, but it certainly carries doctrine. It is what most of the Old Testament historical books are like; they're stories, one after the other. You learn from the narrative.

So, we are with Paul. And the book of Acts is about thirty years long. We are in the last four or five years of those thirty years. Paul has spent much of his life (in the book of Acts, anyway) on the road - nearly fifteen years or so. When he got done with his third of three missionary journeys, he really felt led of the Lord to try to gather money and support from Gentile churches throughout Europe and Asia and in Macedonia and Greece as well, and try to talk them into gathering some monies and sending them to the poor in Jerusalem. Not only could they help them from the financial standpoint, but Paul really wanted to bridge the gap between the Gentiles and the Jews who, early on in the church, were still at odds because the Jews just figured the Gentiles should become Jews first and then saved; and yet God had shown otherwise. So it was Paul's desire to minister to his people and to kind of draw them in together.

As Paul is traveling back towards Jerusalem, everywhere he stops there are warnings of the difficulties that awaited him there. He was sure, though, that the Lord had called him, and so he said, "I'll die, but I'm doin' this. This is the right thing for me to do." And when they arrived in Jerusalem, the church was happy to see them. They were grateful for their help. James, the pastor (the overseer) of the church in Jerusalem, and his elders listened to Paul tell them about God's work amongst the Gentiles, and they really couldn't do anything but praise the Lord. And so it says, "And they heard them, and they praised the Lord, and then they said...." Because as much as God had done, they were still stuck in a lot of legalism, and so they said to Paul, "You're going to have a hard time here in Jerusalem. Everyone thinks you're a guy that talks about grace a lot and the law not at all. It's almost

like you're opposed to our old ways, and people don't appreciate that very much. And so, to dispel your reputation, which is long on grace and short on works, maybe you could financially support four guys going through a Nazirite vow here at the Temple during the Pentecost Feast, and they'll see that what they've heard is kind of exaggerated, and you'll win them over." And so Paul, in compromise, did just that. They wanted him to show them that he valued the intricacies and practice of the law as much as they did, which he didn't; because he'd met Jesus and that was enough for him. He could set it aside; they couldn't.

So it went well. It cost Paul, financially, plenty to support four guys not working and then buy all the offerings that were required by the Law. It went well for the seven days. On the last day, though, of that week of devotion, some folks who had come from Ephesus - where Paul had spent the last three years planting a church - showed up in town and began to accuse him of bringing a Gentile into the inner courts of the Temple which was, from a religious standpoint, a major transgression. The religious folks in town were a little bit more zealous, maybe, than everyone else. The crowd was stirred. They grabbed Paul. They began to beat him, with a mob intending to kill him, and had it not been for the Roman army coming to rescue him, he'd have been dead. This didn't go the way Paul had planned. He had hoped to really make an impact.

When they pulled him out of the crowds, Paul said to the commander there, a fellow named Claudius Lysias, "Could I speak to the crowd?" And he, not knowing what was going on, said, "Go ahead." And Paul began to just give his testimony to all these zealous folks standing there at the base of the Antonia Fortress, and everything seemed to go well. He gave his testimony how God had saved him and what the Lord had done for him, and then he finally said, "And then one day the Lord showed up to me and said, 'Go to the Gentiles. I'm going to send you far away to the Gentiles with the gospel.' " Well, then, that's all they needed to hear, and the riot broke out again. And they had to manipulate Paul out of the crowds, and all hell broke loose. The commander, the next day, asked Paul and the Sanhedrin (these religious folks) to show up and meet with him. Paul saw that this was going to go against him. He understood that half of the Sanhedrin were Pharisees. They believed in life after death. The Sadducees, the other half, did not. So he said, "I hope I'm not here on trial with you guys because I'm a Pharisee," but anyway, another riot broke out; never got anything done. So Paul was kept in protective custody. During that time, a little nephew of his was on the streets, and he heard a plot that they had concocted to kill Paul. They were hoping to talk this

commander into letting them come down to the Sanhedrin and stand trial. And if they came, there were forty guys who were going to kill him as he was traveling. And can you imagine the little nephew finds out about that and goes and tells Paul, "Thank You, Lord," who goes and tells the commander who decides (at night) to send Paul under guard to Caesarea, about 60 miles away. There was a fellow named Felix who was the governor of that place. They wanted to keep him there for safe-keeping and hopefully to handle the turmoil.

Last week, in chapter 24, Paul appeared before this fellow Felix. Wicked guy, hateful guy. He is known in history for his cruelty, that he ruled by force. He was very aware of Jewish practices. He'd been around a long time. He was very aware of the Way, the life of the believer as well. The Sanhedrin came all the way to Caesarea just to accuse Paul. Paul shared with Felix and the elders, as their high-priced attorney stood by, what God had done in his life. Felix delayed his decision about Paul, sent the Sanhedrin home - 60 miles away. Over the next couple of weeks and months, went and met with Paul and asked him (with his wife) about personal faith in Christ. He trembled when he heard the gospel, but he didn't act upon it. And then he decided not to let Paul go or to rule in his favor. He would see him again at some point, put him off. It bothered him. But we are finally told, towards the end of chapter 24, that he was holding on to Paul so that he might get some money from his friends, maybe a bribe. He knew he was innocent, but if he could profit from it, he'd let him go that way.

We mentioned last week, as we went through chapter 24, that Felix might be the fellow that holds the honor for the greatest waster of opportunity. I mean, the greatest preacher, probably, the world has ever seen is in his prison, and he's accessible. And yet nothing really takes place. So Antonius Felix, as his name was. He was governor there in Judea until 62 A.D. or so, twelve years. He came through the line of Pilates. He got his job because his brother was a friend to Claudius Caesar. He was the only slave to ever become a governor, at least in record. It didn't soften him up; it just made him beat everyone a little harder, thinking the world owed him a life. He was finally recalled for breaking up the Sicarii's revolution that was taking place in that place at the time. As he was hauled off to Rome, where he just disappeared, his wife went to Vesuvius for shopping at the time of the eruption and was killed there. So Paul spends two years in prison. In fact, we skip two years - from verse 27 (in chapter 24) to chapter 25, two years go by. A change in leadership. We're back to square one. Paul still hasn't been found

guilty of anything. But here comes a guy who knows nothing about him, his culture or his faith in Christ. So it seems like he's gone backwards.

So we read, in verse 27 of the previous chapter, and it says this, "But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound. Now when Festus had come to the province, after three days he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem. Then the high priest and the chief men of the Jews informed him against Paul; and they petitioned him, asking a favor against him, that he would summon him to Jerusalem - while they lay in ambush along the road to kill him." Porcius Festus - his name means swine festival. (Laughing) I don't know who his parents were, but this wasn't funny. Pig Party, basically. We don't know anything about him. We know he was 70 years old when he came to power. We know that he died two years later. But he was more committed, it seems, just from a historical standpoint, to fairness and to justice than Felix was. Ultimately, however (and he is the story in chapter 25), he would fall to the fear of man. He would do the wrong thing or do nothing at all. He did so for his own benefit. And so we start the new year with Paul having been in jail for two years, and he's about to be in jail for several more. By the time we get to chapter 26, which is Paul's sermon to Agrippa, we will just about have finished Paul's time in prison; and the rest of the chapter and a half or two will take us to Rome, where we'll end the story of the book of Acts.

Notice in verse 1 that Festus (this new guy) wasted no time going to work, 70-year-old guy. Three days he was in power when he already went to Jerusalem for diplomatic introductions to see the place for himself. He had been informed (like every one of his predecessors) that there were lots of problems in Jerusalem. He was determined to avoid it. He'd been warned of the violence and the rioting and the political pressure and the fanaticism. I'm sure he felt he could handle it. After all, he's 70 years old; he'd seen it all. So get a picture of this old guy takin' over. Paul's still locked up. Trying to get off on the right foot. History tells us that the high priest, Ananias, was dead. His substitute, Jonathan, had been killed by Felix because Felix didn't like him. And now there was a fellow named Ishmael who was the man in charge. The Bible doesn't tell us that; we have historical books that do. No matter the person, notice that the hatred - religiously - for Paul is still steaming two years later in Jerusalem, 60 miles away. So when the new guy comes in, they don't say, "Welcome, we're glad to have you." They say, "Hey, we need a favor. We need you to bring this guy back here for trial." And their plot was already to take him out. The council hoped the new ruler would, I guess, be

easier to use for their own purposes. But look how deep bitterness runs here. It had been on their agenda, now, for years to kill Paul in any way they could. First it was forty guys taking a vow, "We won't eat till he's dead." Now the entire Supreme Court of Israel, the Sanhedrin itself, would handle the killing. "Hello, Festus. Nice to meet you. Glad to have you. Could you do us a little favor? We'd be much obliged." And here's a 70-year-old guy who wanted to get a grip on the problem being confronted by the most powerful men, certainly, in the country. So, "You have a prisoner in Caesarea. We'd like you to bring him here to the Sanhedrin." And they thought if he agreed, they could just ambush him along the way. But look how wicked things had gotten.

Go back in chronological time thirty years to the time of Jesus, who was hustled and betrayed and killed, if you will, by the Sanhedrin and their plotters. For the last twenty-five years, the Holy Spirit has reached out to the nation - many Jews getting saved, tons of Gentiles as well. In ten years or so from where we are reading, Titus and the Tenth Legion of the Roman army will surround Jerusalem, besiege it, burn it to the ground, and see a million people die in one day. They will absolutely obliterate the capital of Israel and wipe out the nation, and the Jews will have no place to call home. That's ten years down the road. For the next 1878 years from then, Israel will not have a homeland. They will have been dispersed through the entire world. No Temple, no sacrifice, no high priest, no Sanhedrin. And here you find (at least) the cause in some aspects - the plotting, the lying lips, the hateful ways, the political charades, the religious leaders in plain view. But understand, historically they're runnin' out of time. God has given great opportunity to the nation.

So they hit him up in the few days he comes to Jerusalem for diplomatic reasons. And verse 4, "Festus answered" and said "that Paul should be kept at Caesarea, and that he himself was going there shortly. '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.' 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." Festus' answer, I think, should tell you - and you'll find that to be so in the Bible - that the Roman justice system, for the most part, was fair and had processes that they followed. Corrupt nation, for sure. But their laws and their practices, typically, at least until the corruption came from the leadership, were pretty sound. We don't know if he knew about Paul. We do know that before he would deal with the case, he realized that if it's in a Roman court, he wasn't

about to kick it down to a lower court for review. So when these guys said, "We'd like to see him," he said, "No, I'm in charge. Maybe you didn't get that. I'm Festus. I'm the Pig Party. Don't mess with me." So Festus, understand, was wary of them. He wanted peace, but he couldn't be manipulated by them, certainly. And after all, Rome ruled the world not the Judeans, not the Sanhedrin. "So if you have a case, you can go with me down to Caesarea. You can bring your witnesses. But I'm not bringin' my prisoner to you. You can come and see me if that's what you want."

Notice he said, in verse 6, that he stayed there for over ten days. I'm sure that he was schmoozing, that he was living as a guest of the Sanhedrin or of the leaders - dinners, Temple tour, theater tickets. Maybe these guys will chill out. But the very day that he went home, these guys were there. That's how much hatred was driving them. Paul wasn't aware of any of this; he was locked up. But here comes this unwarranted anger towards Paul and the hatred that was burning two years later. So they sit down when they get back - in the judgment seat - which was right outside the amphitheater on the coast there. It is still there today. If you go to Israel with us, we have eighty-some people of you are going with us here in about two months, and that'll be our first stop - will be this place. It's the first stop on our tour, but it is a place where Paul stayed for several years.

Verse 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, 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.' " The accusations were pretty much like two years before; driven by hatred, non-existent evidence, no credible witnesses, they figured they could make it up by just screaming a little louder at a new governor they hoped would cave in. Paul had no one to defend him. His defense was pretty much like it had been two years ago with Felix. He just said, "Yeah, I didn't do it. Yeah, that didn't happen. Yeah, that's not true." And then he just folded his hands. "What else can I do? You've got no proof. It's a 'he said, she said.' You can accuse me of anything you want, but there's gotta be proof." This ongoing mess has now entered its third year for Paul. And I want to point that out to you. You're a believer, and you're servin' the Lord, and you've done the right thing, and for the third year, you are now locked up without any charges. What kind of attitude would you have about now? How would you like it if this is what had been happening to you? And Paul is driven to his knees. I'm sure that he prayed, "Lord, how long is this gonna go on? Fix this!" Felix had known that Paul was innocent, and he had done nothing. He had hoped to

get some bribe money out of Paul's friends. But Paul couldn't go that route. He knew that it was available, but he didn't think that was the way that the Lord would work. So he stays in prison. Now he stands before a guy - Festus - who knows nothing about Jewish law. He knows nothing about the Jewish religion. He knows nothing about Christianity, to speak of. He doesn't know about Jewish politics. He doesn't know anything at all, and yet he's in charge of this Jewish area. He knew nothing about Paul - Paul's faith, Paul's case. Here come the people - same charges, same baloney. And you want to say to yourself, "Well, Festus, 70 years old, he'll probably do the right thing."

Well, verse 9 tells us otherwise. As this Paul pleading not guilty and they accusing him continued, "Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor" (isn't that exactly what we just read of Felix back in chapter 24:27; he wanted to do the Jews a favor - here's the second guy wanting to do the Jews a favor; not do the right thing, just do a favor), "answered Paul and said, 'Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?' " ("I'll go there and hold court, but could we do it in Jerusalem?") In light of the evidence, in light of his better judgment, Festus chooses a politically expedient agenda for himself. Notice the words, verse 9, "But Festus." No witnesses, no truth, no testimony, no proof. "But Festus." It was true that much of what he was hearing was over his head. If you go to verse 20 for a minute (and we'll get there in a moment), he'll say this, " '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.' " This was beyond him. Verse 25 (just jump a little further), " '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.' " So, "I don't have any charges. I don't know what to accuse him of. As far as I know, he's innocent, but he's pushed my hand." That's not true, but that's what he's arguing. Right? So Festus does the wrong thing. "But Festus." He wants to be politically expedient.

The Sanhedrin had different ideas about Paul. If you go back (we're bouncing around a little bit) to verse 24, Festus writes to Agrippa, and he says, " '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.' " So these are the people he wants to please. They're standing in front of him going, "We want to kill him! He doesn't deserve to breathe another day!" "Hey, Paul, would you mind going there?" "Yes I'd mind going there!" He knew what he was up against. He knew this was a certain execution. He offered to

go himself, but that wouldn't have been enough comfort, I think. But just suffice it to say that both Pilate and Felix, and now Festus, countless others, were driven in their power by self-interest and a fear of man. And Paul is stuck in the middle. He's just servin' the Lord, faithfully, and all around him people are droppin' the ball. And this after years of being on the road - the most faithful guy you'd ever want to find, who couldn't have suffered more if he'd have tried. I don't think he could look for more trouble than he had. This is the reward of a life well-lived, if you will. So, "Paul, would you be willing to go?"

"So Paul said," verse 10, " 'I stand at Caesar's judgment seat,' " (he was a Roman, remember) " 'where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. 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.' " Paul was not short on words. He wasn't afraid to speak when necessary. I think that after two years of being locked up, he'd probably had enough. Here was just another cheap trick by a Roman governor that even violated Roman justice. And he's disgusted with being used as a political pawn, and so Paul plays his ace in the hole; and as a Roman, that is every Roman citizen has the right to have his case heard by the Supreme Court and, in this case, by the supreme leader, if you will, of the Romans - Caesar himself. "I know I'm innocent. You know what would await me there" (verse 24, we just read it). "If you want to render a fair judgment, fine. If not, then I want to exercise my Roman citizenship right. I want to appeal my case to Caesar. Maybe he'll have the backbone for a fair justice trial. But if not, I'm certainly not goin' with these wicked men back to Jerusalem. I'm not afraid to die if I've done something wrong. But I haven't done anything wrong, so I'd rather have Caesar decide that and have him adjudicate the charges than you or them." Pretty amazing place that Paul finds himself in.

We read, in verse 12 (very tersely), "Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council," (his council there in Caesarea) "answered, 'You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!' " I have to believe that (everything we read) Festus was shocked and taken aback at Paul's request, that he underestimated this little man with these polite manners. This was a bombshell! Remember, Festus is looking to curry favor with the Jews who are a captive people, and it has just exploded in his face. By the way, the person that is ruling in Rome (the Caesar) is named Nero at this time. For the first five years of his rule, Nero was a fairly stable guy; made fairly logical decisions as far as the world is concerned, if you will. He'd been fair

and just. He was influenced by one of his great, closest friends - a Stoic philosopher named Seneca, who was kind of a balanced guy. Sometime after five years, Nero goes out of his mind. It's like he falls off the edge of a cliff; he begins to blame Christians for the he burns down the poor section of Rome because he wanted to rebuild it and then pointed his finger at the Christians. And there are at least some Bible commentators that believe that what pushed him over the edge was this meeting that he had with Paul, who you know didn't mince words. "Hi, Nero. Let me tell you what's up." You can just imagine what happened that day. But we can't prove that. It's just the time is fairly close, but it is a guess at best on everybody's part. So I think that Festus was just freaked out about this. Festus knew that this meant problems. Think about it. He's been on the job for two weeks. Two weeks! And his first case is appealing to Caesar. He's been sent there to keep peace, take over, use his seventy years of experience to make an impact (that Felix always was stirrin' stuff up). And he hasn't been there more than two weeks, and his first case is going over his head. "How's that gonna make me look, and what charges am I gonna send to them? They said he did this stuff. I don't even know what they're talkin' about!" He doesn't want to stand in front of them; he'd rather risk it in Rome, and that could be death. I mean, that's a big gamble if you're wrong. So he confers with his council. He finds out what the law might be. And they tell him, "Look, if he asks to go, he's gotta go." I think you can almost hear like, maybe, bitter kind of anger in his voice. "You want to talk to Caesar? Okay, you go talk to Caesar. Fine. That's where you're goin'." And he just dismisses him, and he sends the guys packing. But now he's got this dilemma, "What do I do with Paul? And where does he go?"

Verse 13 tells us, "And after some days King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus. 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.'" So, Festus is brooding. Everybody's coming to welcome the new guy on the block when King Agrippa II (we'll call him KAI) shows up with Bernice to officially welcome Festus. Bernice was the daughter of King Agrippa I. When she was 16 years old, he died, and she married her uncle who then subsequently died as well. When he died, she moved in with this guy, who happened to be her brother - in an incestuous relationship and having an affair. All of Rome, as crooked as they were, frowned on this relationship. When, later, she wanted to get involved with Titus, the general - the guy who would overthrow Jerusalem, Rome warned Titus of her past, and he quickly got away from her and sent her back to her brother. Her brother, KAI (King Agrippa II), was 17 when his dad died. He was given this really small little

land in northern Lebanon to rule. He would acquire more over the years, but let's just say he was an insignificant ruler with insignificant power that everyone looked down their noses at because this guy was just a creep, and everyone knew it. KAI (King Agrippa II) was the last of the infamous Herods. There is nobody after him. He would die about 100 A.D. Didn't have any children. Both he and Bernice, his sister, converted to Judaism. Neither one of them practiced it at all, but they knew an awful lot about Jewish ways. In fact, when Paul finds himself standing before Agrippa to answer because old Porcius Festus didn't know what to do, Paul is able to say to Agrippa, this guy, KAI, "I'm glad that I can stand in front of you and talk about these things which I've been accused by the Jews because I know you're an expert in all of the customs and questions with which the Jews have been accusing me. I'm glad you know the background." So he was able to say to this creepy guy, "I'm glad it's you." It's an interesting picture. Paul is swimming with the sharks here, you know? There's nobody for him. Everyone is out for themselves. But, needless to say, Paul was happy when he finally got an opportunity to talk. Festus was in a quandary. He wanted help from this king, who was certainly more powerful than a governor. He turned on the charm. He let him hang out for many days, as many days as he wanted. "Hey, it's on the house. We'll cover it. Here's the credit card. Go down to town." But after many days of enjoying the royal treatment, Festus broached his dilemma with his guests.

He says there, in verse 14 (at the end - about being left a prisoner from Felix's time), verse 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. 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 charges against him." ' " And that sounds pretty reasonable, doesn't it? " 'Therefore when they had come together, without any delay, the next day' " (well, he forgot about those ten days of delay) " 'I sat on the judgment seat and commanded the man to be brought in. When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive.' " (That's really what the issue was.) " '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. 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.' " So, he tells the situation in light of his innocence. Right? "I got to it really quick." Didn't say about the ten days of unofficial

business, eating Jewish food. The real issue, as he saw it (verse 19), and this is his summation of what he understands: he asked something about the religious law and his belief that there's a Jesus who's alive that was dead. Right? That's what Paul's message was to everyone that he spoke to. We don't have that written down every time the Lord spoke through Paul, but we have it referenced here by the governor himself. Festus had a hard heart it seems. The real issue for him was the resurrection. He was right. But again, the most famous preacher in the 1st century stands before him, and here's his impression, "Yeah, it's a religious kind of decision, and they're not gettin' along and something about a dead guy who's alive, and Paul says He's alive. They're weird, man. I don't know what to do with him. So, he wants to go to Caesar, I'll just send him. But now I don't know what to say about him."

So he says, in verse 20, "I was unsure about those questions, those religious things. I asked him if he wants to go work it out in Jerusalem with his peers. He doesn't want to go there. He wants to go talk to Caesar. And I was surprised because, man, he just raised the ante, you know? This is dangerous. So, I have to send him. I don't know what to write under the charges list. I don't know what to charge him with. And I hope, King Agrippa II, that you could help me." King Agrippa II had heard of Paul over the years. I think he saw it as a great opportunity to have a conversation with him personally, to supposedly help him come up with some charges because the governor couldn't do anything. And so, in verse 22, "Then Agrippa said to Festus, 'I also would like to hear the man myself.' 'Tomorrow,' he said, 'you shall hear him.'" So, Agrippa is told by the governor, "I don't hand over prisoners. We don't let someone go to their death until they have a fair trial. I don't know what to do with this guy." And Agrippa said, "I'd like to see him," and Porcius couldn't be happier. "All right, man. Please. Take him for yourself." And Festus, he's punting, and he's happy about it. Right?

Now, all of the Herods seem to be involved with the early church in one way or another. There's Herod the Great. He killed all of the babies in Bethlehem when he heard that the Messiah had been born, and he wanted to make sure he got to Him. So every boy child two years old and under, he ordered killed. Herod Antipas killed John the Baptist. King Agrippa I killed James in prison and then was going to kill Peter until the Lord got him out of the way; it was a divine jailbreak. And now here's the last Herod. You want to say, "Good riddance!" to these guys. But, anyway, he's the one that Paul now has to stand before to make his case and hopefully get a fair judgment.

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." So in the morning everyone went to the amphitheater. By the way, in the amphitheater was where King Agrippa's dad had died. You might remember the story (Acts 12) that he had come with royal pageantry, that the men of Tyre wanted food from him, and they said, "Your voice is like the voice of a god," and he went, "Yes it is." And he was very proud of himself. And the Lord had had enough of this guy with his chest out, and he died a little while later, being eaten by worms from the inside out. That was his pop. In this same place, the judgment had fallen. Now this guy comes in and does the same thing. He's ridin' on his high horse, everybody's applauding, he's got all the pomp and circumstance that comes.....to a guy who's really a non-status guy at all. Right? But Festus is piling it on. He gives him a hero's welcome because he needs his help. And the guy couldn't be happier with it. So, it reminded me of Jesus saying, in Matthew 20:25, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant." This is just the opposite, you know? Everyone's trying to get this guy on board. The flesh knows no limits. And I suspect that Paul was very underdressed for this occasion. Coming out of prison, having been there for several years, not having a lot of support, I think it would have been a really kind of uncomfortable place for him to stand. There's a description of Paul in 2 Corinthians (we're going to be starting that this week on Sunday mornings) in chapter 10:10 (so we probably won't get there this Sunday). It says that "his letters are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." And most of the descriptions that we have read of Paul kind of describe him that way in history. He's short, he's bow-legged, he had kind of a hook nose, with a little hair, and a bulging, weeping eye. That's not a good lookin' guy. And the poor guy's just standing in front of these folks. It didn't move him at all. After all, he'd seen heaven, and he'd been to heaven and seen Jesus. You know? This was not a big deal. But to the world, this looked like, man, the end of the world. So there's this assembly gathering in Caesarea to hear from the apostle and hopefully come up with some charges.

Verse 24 says, "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. 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. 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. For it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner and not to specify the charges against him.' " Festus' flowery opening tells you his plans were to get some help.

We're not going to read chapter 26 until next week, but I would say this to you about that: if King Agrippa thought that he was going to be examining Paul, he was much mistaken. By the time he was done, Paul was examining him, and he was having to answer for his life, and there was a mess in his life for sure. Chapter 26 is the longest of any of Paul's responses in the book of Acts. We're going to take it all in one week, or maybe two, but it's long. He gets his time to pitch in, if you will, and God has preserved the sermon for us because I think He wants us to put ourselves where Paul was and see how he now defends himself.

I want you to notice, in verse 25, that Festus said he was innocent; in verse 27 said, "There're no charges I can bring against him, that Paul has been here for two years, and now he appealed to Caesar, so I've got to send him." Here's what he could have said, "Paul, you're not guilty, buddy, and you don't have to appeal to Caesar. You can just go home. Being the governor, I can do that." Man, governors today think they can do this stuff. I'm sure he could have done it in the Roman way of things. But he had been afraid of the Jews in Jerusalem. He still wanted to gain their favor. And now he hoped not to lose face with Rome. And so Paul, having used his rights as a Roman citizen to ask for the trial, is given it.

A couple things I want to tell you, just in your head. Paul will end up in Rome eventually and spend a long time waiting for this trial. The Bible does not give to us the results of the trial; history does. Paul will appear before Nero and be declared innocent. From prison, waiting, he will write a lot of the epistles (we'll cover those when we get there). He will get out for about eighteen months or so. Where he goes, we do not know. There's very little ability to track Paul's movement after he gets out of jail. He is re-arrested by Nero for the same charges of being a Christian and all and, eventually writing to Timothy his second letter, said, "I know that I'm done. There's no hope left. The Lord has shown me I'm out of here." Then Paul is beheaded, and he was killed after being kept in the Mamertine Prison in Rome (which, if you ever have a chance to go with us on the Footsteps of Paul, that's still there, too). But, needless to say, that's kind of Paul's

next five years: jail, jail, horrendous trip to Rome, waiting for a trial, finally got freed. In fact, in one of the epistles he said that he believed he was going to be free, and he was. And then, for eighteen months or so, he lives kind of out of the limelight. We're not really sure. There're some mentions in historical books, but they're small enough and not verified enough to preach his gospel, if you will. But, on the other hand, that's the way Paul ends up.

One of the things that we find is (the Lord gives these whole chapters to the accusation before Felix and before Agrippa and before Festus) how many men are moved by others. That there's something about living in this culture where we are oftentimes driven by what people think rather than what God might want. We did a study a couple of Sundays ago (maybe more than a couple) - Proverbs 29:25 about "the fear of man brings a snare." And certainly, look at these would-be Roman leaders. They were more concerned with their political gain than they were with doing the right thing. They were more concerned with their status than they were with justice. They were moved by peer pressure. Solomon tells us many people are more concerned with what man thinks than what God thinks, that there's more of a fear of man in their hearts than a fear of God. That's kind of frightening. But it's true. Jesus said, in Matthew 10:28, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." In other words, if you're gonna pick someone to fear, fear the God who has a say over your eternity; not over the temporal nature of man who can stifle you and make you suffer a little in this life, but they certainly can't do more than that. Fear will always - especially of men - lead to great sin. You see it here. We went over that, I think, on that Sunday morning.

Aaron (and the golden calf - Exodus 32) blamed the people. Saul, at Gilgal (1 Samuel 13), when he became a priest, though he wasn't called to be one, told Samuel, "I was worried along with the people." He was always blaming someone else. The fear was always driven by another hand. Samuel didn't come in time. Saul took it upon himself. Peter stands with soldiers on the night Jesus is betrayed (Matthew 26), and even a little girl at the gate - a "young maiden" is the description - makes him lie. He's fearful, not just of a big, tall soldier with a sword; he's fearful of the little girl going, "Answer the door, open the door." Because "the fear of man will bring a snare." That's what the Bible says. Peter, later in Galatians (chapter 2), the men of James - these guys show up, Peter moves to the kosher table, Barnabas follows, everybody stumbles. Fear of man. And Paul said, I think in the original Greek, "Dude," I'm pretty sure that's what it said,

"Dude, really?" Pilate was afraid to do the right thing for Jesus; surrendered an innocent man to the crowds because he was fearing man (Luke 23). And notice, here's Festus, and he wants to keep people happy. And Felix who wants to curry favor. Not only are they afraid, they're self-serving in their fear. They just want to gain, right? We read in John 12:42 that amongst the rulers in the Sanhedrin many of those seventy members believed in Jesus, believed in Him quietly and personally. But because of the Pharisees, they didn't confess Him because the cost would have been you'd have been put out of the synagogue, and so you would have no support, no social life, no doctor to go to, no work to report for, no income. You would just be shunned in the culture. And so it says that "they loved the praise of men more than they loved the praise of God." So they believed, but the fear of men and the cost of following shut their mouths and shut down their lives. The fear of man can keep you from being a witness for the Lord; it did for them.

I thought about Elijah, who single-handedly fought off 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18), watched the LORD wipe them out. Pretty cool. One word, though, from Queen Jezebel that she was going to be killing him by morning had him runnin' for his life (1 Kings 19), and he ran further than any man should run. And when he finally got to the middle of nowhere, in a cave deep in the Sinai, his prayer to the LORD was, "Just kill me." Sounded a lot like Moses all of a sudden. And he even said to the LORD, "You must be happy to have me. I'm the only guy left that's serving You." And the LORD said, "You're an idiot." (Laughing) It's the original Hebrew. I know Hebrew very well. He said, "I've got 7,000 other people I can count on. So would you like to go do what I've given you to do, or do you want Me to send somebody else?" "No, no. I'll go." Fear of man.

I was talking to one of the college kids today. He was taking a science class in college, and this teacher was just selling evolution like it made sense. How absurd, it's so absurd. And I said, "Did anybody stand up and say, 'That's hogwash' "? He goes, "No. Nobody wants to be unscientific." Well the truth is gonna come out one day, and someone's gonna say, "The king's naked! This is not true." "The fear of man brings a snare," but if you fear the Lord, what does it say? What does that verse say? You remember? "But whoever puts his trust in the LORD will be" "safe." You guys gotta pay more attention on Sundays, apparently. (Laughing) I'm startin' to feel like I'm not gettin' anywhere. The best answer for the fear of man is trust the Lord. Right? Trust the Lord. And be honest and tell the truth. In the same way that I trusted the Lord to be saved, I have to trust in the Lord to overcome the fear of man.

So, Paul's in a weird place. He served the Lord. This is the result of a faithful life. He's not gettin' punished. He's being used by God. And all around him are people self-serving. The Jews want him dead. Felix wants him dead. Get money. Festus wants to do someone a favor. No one wants to look bad. You know? They're all just usin' this guy, and he's standing fast in his faith in the Lord.

So next week, chapter 26, we get to see Festus on one side and Paul on the other and Agrippa in the middle; one who trusts in the Lord, one who's bound in fear, and we get to see them through the Lord's eyes. And chapter 26, like I said, is Paul's last statements, if you will, before others. It goes down through verse 18, and maybe we'll stop there next week. And then we'll go forward from there and take Paul to Rome, which will be an interesting trip in itself.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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