

CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE- PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian
Church, 10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

DHW BIBLE CLASS LESSON 26

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

CHAPTER 25 B & 26

INTRODUCTION

Two years had passed since Paul stood before the judgement seat of Felix and his accusers, Ananias, the high priest and his council.

Then Felix, the Roman governor of Judaea, was recalled to Rome. Festus was his successor. The new governor seemed enthusiastic and immediately got down to business. Shortly after arriving in Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem. The Jewish religious leaders spared no time to gain the favour of the new governor. They were unhappy and dissatisfied as long as Paul, their arch-enemy was still alive. They brought the matter of Paul to Festus and suggested to him to send Paul to Jerusalem for trial. Two years had passed and they still harboured their hatred for Paul. Their secret intention was to assassinate Paul on the road to Jerusalem. God in His providence did not allow it. Festus acted wisely, and seemingly ignorant of the wicked scheme of the Jewish religious leaders, he said that if they had anything against Paul, they should go to Caesarea for Paul to be tried before him. Subsequently, Paul was tried before Festus, who could not find his

prisoner guilty of any capital crime. At the trial, Festus, desiring to favour the Jewish religious leaders, asked Paul whether he would be willing to go to Jerusalem to be tried. This would be pleasing to Paul's enemies and it would fall into their assassination plan. Once again by the providence of God, Paul exercised his right to appeal to Caesar. Festus' attempt to please the Jewish religious leaders backfired. He had to allow Paul to appeal to Caesar, but at the same time, he had to write a report for sending Paul to the imperial court. He had put himself in a quandary.

At this time, Festus had a visit from a very important dignitary in the person of King Agrippa together with his wife Bernice. Festus quickly sought Agrippa's help. Agrippa agreed to hear Paul. Unlike the other trials, this one is more of Paul's testimony of his Christian faith rather than a defence of the charges brought against him. A number of valuable lessons and wonderful truths could be drawn from Luke's divinely inspired record – the strongest evidence for the Christian faith, the various responses to the preaching of the gospel, the people's reasons for rejecting the gospel and the nature of true repentance. One wonders why people respond differently to the gospel message even when it is presented so convincingly and powerfully.

The trial before Agrippa is the longest of the five trials. The whole passage from Acts 25:13-26:32 can logically be divided under the following headings: (1) Festus briefed Agrippa concerning Paul (25:13-21); (2) Paul was presented to Agrippa (25:22-27); (3) Paul's testimony and defence (26:1-23); (4) Festus' and Agrippa's responses to Paul's challenge (26:28-32)

COMMENTARY

Festus Briefs Agrippa

King Agrippa's visit with his wife to Caesarea was a courtesy call to congratulate Festus as the new governor of Judaea.¹ Agrippa came with his wife, Bernice, who was actually his blood sister. This means that they were living incestuously. This is a sin against the law of God.² Agrippa had a reputation as an expert in all matters relating to Jewish religion and customs. His visit would give Festus an opportunity to get an opinion from him. Agrippa's judgement would help him in his writing of a formal letter to accompany Paul, explaining his reason for sending him to be tried before Caesar's imperial court. After staying for a few days, Festus briefed Agrippa about Paul. In his opening statement, Festus mentioned that Paul was first the prisoner of Felix. In other words, he had inherited this problem. He did not mention that Felix had found Paul not guilty of any crime deserving capital punishment. But Festus continued to say that the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem wanted to try Paul there, but he opposed the idea because it was not the practice of the Romans to have a

¹ He was King Agrippa II. His father was King Agrippa I who had executed the Apostle James, and imprisoned Peter, and the one whom God punished for allowing people to worship him as a god, right there in Caesarea (Acts 12:1-4, 20-23). His great-grandfather was King Herod the Great, who feared the birth of the Lord Jesus, and ordered the killing of all the male infants in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16). His grand uncle ordered the beheading of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:6-11).

² Leviticus 18:9 The nakedness of thy sister, the daughter of thy father, or daughter of thy mother, *whether she be born at home, or born abroad, even their nakedness thou shalt not uncover.*

man condemned to death without a trial before his accusers face to face. The accused must be given the opportunity to defend himself concerning the crime laid against him (25:18). Accordingly, Paul's accusers came and Festus sat in judgement. Festus stated that the accusations against Paul were not of the kind, which he had expected. Instead, the matter concerned a "superstition" held by the Jews themselves, and about "one Jesus, which was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive" (25:19). Festus continued that he was unable to probe the matter further and he proposed to Paul to have the trial transferred to Jerusalem. But Paul appealed to be heard before Augustus Caesar, and hence, Festus kept him in order to please the Jewish custody until he could send him to Rome. Observe that Festus hid from Agrippa his reason for detaining Paul instead of releasing him on finding him innocent. Festus kept Paul a prisoner and thereby selfishly gained their popularity and support.

Paul Presented to Agrippa

Agrippa responded that he would like to hear Paul himself. It seemed that Agrippa had heard about Paul and this was a great opportunity to hear him personally. Festus replied that he would arrange for him to hear Paul the next day.

Accordingly, the hearing was arranged. Luke called his readers' attention to the people, their positions, the power, the pomp and the pageantry as the dignitaries entered the hall. Agrippa and Bernice would have adorned their purple robes of royalty and the small gold crown on their brows. Festus would put on his scarlet robe, which Roman governors wear on state occasions. When all the important and

powerful men were seated, Festus summoned for Paul to be brought in. What a contrast: the grandeur and splendour on one side, and on the other side, Paul, the ordinarily clad and poor prisoner.

Festus rose to speak. This would be the official statement on the case. Festus addressed Agrippa and all the dignitaries present, pointing to Paul that all the Jews had dealt with him in Jerusalem and in Caesarea that he was not fit to live on earth. Festus confessed that in his judgement, he had found Paul not guilty of any crime that was worthy of death, and quickly added that Paul himself appealed to Augustus to whom he was bound to send. Festus further added that he had nothing substantial to write to his master, that was, Caesar. Hence the reason for bringing Paul before those present, especially, before King Agrippa that after the hearing, Festus might have something to write, and it was unreasonable for him to send the prisoner to Caesar without explaining the crime that the prisoner had committed (25:26, 27).

Festus' introductory speech looked convincingly logical to his hearers. But it was a mixture of truth and error, and significant omission and lack of decisive action. It was true that the Jewish leaders had petitioned for Paul's death. But since he found Paul not guilty of any crime worthy of death, he did not explain why Paul was not released and why he kept him in his custody. That was dereliction of his responsibility and duty as a governor and judge. His statement that he had nothing to write to Caesar was a lie. He knew what were the charges brought against Paul. He must have read the report of Claudius Lysias to Felix, his predecessor. He had things to write to

Caesar. He conveniently omitted the specific charges brought against Paul, and the fact that Paul was innocent. In fact, he could not write to Caesar stating that the matter concerned was about the Jewish culture and customs and that the issue was theological and not a crime against the state. He should have set Paul free, but he did not and did not explain why. Instead, he hoped that King Agrippa, who was an expert in Jewish affairs, could find something against Paul, who was a Jewish Roman citizen, which would justify Paul being sent to Rome. Festus had to write a clear statement to Caesar regarding the case of Paul. Failing to do so would land him in serious trouble.

PAUL'S TESTIMONY & DEFENCE

Paul as the Strict Pharisee

Paul faced a different group of people. They were not the high priest, chief priests and the leaders of the Jewish community. These men, who sat in judgement of him, were notable Roman dignitaries and officers, and King Agrippa II of the Jews. So, Paul no longer had to deal with trumped up charges of desecrating the temple or with breaking any particular Mosaic Law. His defence was more of a positive evangelistic testimony of the heart and essence of the Christian faith to show that the gospel was not a form of treason against Caesar or the government.

Paul began his speech politely by saying that he was happy to give his testimony before King Agrippa, complimenting him for being an expert in matters relating to the Jewish culture and customs which he was accused of going against. Paul started by saying that he was bred and brought up as a youth in his own nation at Jerusalem.

The Jews in Jerusalem knew him well, and if they would, they could testify that he was brought up a Pharisee, the strictest sect of their religion.³ Paul was stressing that he was a faithful Jew.

Paul declared that the reason why he had to stand and to be judged before them was for the hope, which God of their fathers promised to them. The twelve tribes of the Jews were praying continually for the establishment of the Messianic kingdom! God knows the ancestry of every Jew. Paul passionately and personally appealed to Agrippa that it was for this hope that he was being charged by the Jews. Paul then injected that statement (26:8): “Why should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?” The Jews believed in the general resurrection of the dead, both the righteous and the wicked. Paul now was alluding to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the Messiah crucified and risen from the dead, and then coming to set up His millennium earthly kingdom.

Paul the Fanatical Persecutor Turned Preacher

Paul then related his pre-conversion days. The reason Paul shared this experience was to provide the compelling evidence for his changed life. It was meant to convince Agrippa and the others of the truth of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. As a Pharisee, before his conversion, he thought that it was the right thing to do

³ The major sects during that time were: the Sadducees, who were an apostate sect which believed only the Pentateuch and rejected the rest of the Old Testament as we know it; the Herodians, who were like the modernists today and were more politically inclined than religiously; and the Essenes who were a fanatical group.

to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. He carried out his opposition to the name of Jesus of Nazareth even in Jerusalem, and imprisoned many “saints” (Christian Jews). He obtained authority from the chief priests to persecute and arrest them, and even voted for death for them (26:10). Frequently, he would go into every synagogue and persecute the believers, forcing them to blaspheme in renouncing the name of Jesus. The Sanhedrin sat in the synagogues where judges administered under Jewish law punishments against the guilty. He was so fanatically against the Christian Jews that he went even beyond Jerusalem to hunt them down. In this regard, he obtained authority and power from the chief priests to go to Damascus to persecute the Christian Jews there. But Luke recorded that he failed to accomplish that.

Paul the Commissioned Apostle

Addressing King Agrippa, Paul continued his testimony that at noon when he was on the road to Damascus, he saw a sudden burst of light from heaven, brighter than the brightness of the sun, shone around him and the others in his entourage (26:13). They fell on the ground, not in reverence but rather in terror, and Paul heard a voice speaking to him saying in the Hebrew tongue, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks” (26:14). Any persecution and punishment done to the disciples of the Lord Jesus for His sake are done against Him as well. The phrase “to kick against the pricks” was a common Roman, Greek and Jewish saying. The prick was a sharp six or eight feet pointed stick, which was held by the ploughman in one hand to drive his cattle in ploughing the ground. The

obstinate ox would kick at the goad. The harder it kicks the deeper the wound and more intense the pain. Paul was like the stubborn ox going against its master. Paul's response, "Who art thou, Lord", at the spur of the moment, suggests in all probability that God had been working in his heart before; and his mad rage against *the Way* was one way of ignoring God's prompting.

The voice replied that He was the Lord Jesus whom Paul persecuted. The Lord Jesus told him to rise up and stand upon his feet. Paul was cast down in order to humble him, and now he was called to rise and stand up to be of good courage. The Lord Jesus appeared to him for the purpose of giving him this experience and also other things which the Lord Jesus would subsequently reveal to him. Paul would be saved from the people and sent to the Gentiles "to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in Me" (26:18). There are many things here, which Paul did not say, in his previous testimonies. But in this case, Paul seemed to summarise all that the Lord Jesus had revealed to him either directly through the vision in the temple or through the prophets. The Lord Jesus' commission to Paul was explicitly clear. He was to be an apostle to the Gentiles. His ministry was to convince and enlighten them to be delivered from the power of Satan, so that they could see the truth and repent by just turning to God. Their result of repentance would be blessings and salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

At this juncture in his testimony, Paul punctuated in a negative way for

emphasis declaring that he "*was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision*" (26:19). Paul went on to summarily elaborate on his obedience, which he had just mentioned. He started from Damascus, and then in Jerusalem, and throughout the coasts of Judaea, and to the Gentiles, calling on men to repent, and to turn to God, and to do works proving their repentance. Then Paul paused to point out that it was for these reasons and work that the Jews arrested him in the temple, and sought to kill him. Paul then further testified that God came to his aid to rescue and protect him, so that he could stand before them to witness to both small and great what the prophets and Moses, that is, the whole of the Old Testament Scriptures, say that should happen: that Christ (the Messiah) should suffer and that He should be the firstfruit to rise from the dead, and that He should show light to the people and to the Gentiles (26:22-23)!

Festus' & Agrippa's Response to Paul's Challenge

Suddenly a loud voice interjected and declared: "Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad" (26:24). It was the voice of Festus, who interrupted Paul's speech. Festus could not take it anymore. There was nothing in Paul's testimony that he could use to write to Caesar. In addition, being a typical Roman, he worshipped power, fortune and pleasure. Paul's obedience to Christ's commission despite persecutions offended Festus' instinctive Roman philosophy of the purpose of life. Hence, Festus shouted, "Paul, you are mad!"

Paul immediately retorted, "I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness"

(26:25). Paul was saying that all he had said before them was the truth. He was not hallucinating. His testimony was not the product of a diseased and sick mind. Paul stressed that he was mentally and perfectly sober. And for further proof, Paul appealed to Agrippa, who knew all the things which Paul had openly spoken. Agrippa knew the Old Testament Scriptures and the life of Jesus, including His crucifixion and His resurrection. Nothing was hidden or done secretly.

Paul then challenged King Agrippa, "Believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest" (26:27). It seems strange that Paul who knew Agrippa believed should pose the same question whether he believed. Agrippa might agree with all that were written in the Old Testament – a mental assent. But he was short of believing in his heart. Agrippa was caught off-guard and was embarrassed. He countered Paul's heart-directed question with another question: "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian" (26:28). Agrippa's enigmatic answer revealed his fear of the truth. To accept the testimony of Paul and become a Christian would cost him his "wife" and his life as a servant of Caesar. There was no evidence that Agrippa was converted.

Paul answered Agrippa that he wished that all, who were present there, would be like him, a believer minus a prisoner.

Paul Was Innocent

King Agrippa, Bernice and Festus left the hall and talked among themselves. They all agreed that Paul had done nothing deserving the death penalty or even imprisonment. Then Agrippa said to Festus that Paul should have been acquitted had he not

appealed to Caesar. Now the appeal to Caesar blocked all other procedural avenues whether Paul should be set free or to be condemned, until his appearance at Caesar's court.

PRACTICAL VALUE

Sometimes Christians are thought to be crazy people. Christians believe in a very old Bible which they fervently declare to be infallible, inerrant, authoritative and divinely preserved through the ages that all the words of God have been preserved perfectly by His providential sovereign hand. In addition, Christians believe in God and the Lord Jesus Christ whom they have not seen, and also believe in the resurrection of the dead, even the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And in believing, they have been living a life that is contrary to the present day prevailing philosophy of "eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." Christians have denied themselves the pleasures and indulgences of life. So they conclude that Christians are therefore mad. Are we? Like Paul, we should be steadfast and unmoveable in our faith in Christ Jesus.

If King Agrippa were a believer in the Old Testament, he did not believe in the way as God expected. The Lord Jesus said that not every one who says to Him, "Lord, Lord" shall enter into the kingdom of God, but he that does the will of God (Matthew 7:21). This is one important way the Lord Jesus has given us to check ourselves whether we are His true disciples. Many of us say "Yes" to many things we have heard and been taught from the Bible, but do we really obey God's Word? So Paul testified that he was not disobedient to God's calling. One of the first marks of a true Christian

is that we obey Jesus Christ, the living Word, i.e. by obeying His Holy Word. If we are not obeying Jesus Christ, we are not His disciples. And if we are not His disciples, we are not saved. Festus was not saved because of pride of intellect. He could not believe in a literal resurrection. King Agrippa was not saved because he would not humble himself and repent of his sin. He lived incestuously with his sister.

In this study, we learn through Paul's testimony that one of the strongest evidences for the Christian faith is the story of our own conversion. Paul testified to this fact by his complete transformed life from a fanatic persecutor to a passionate preacher of the gospel. His life took a 180-degree turn around! How can I convince myself and others that the gospel of Jesus Christ including His resurrection is true? Answer: My transformed life! AMEN

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

Monday: Acts 25:13-21; Deuteronomy 17:4-6.

Tuesday: Acts 25:22-27; Matthew 10:16-20.

Wednesday: Acts 26:1-11; Philippians 3:5, 6; Romans 10:8-17.

Thursday: Acts 26:12-23; 1 Corinthians 9:1, 2; Luke 6:46.

Friday: Acts 26:24-32; Matthew 7:24-29.

Discussion Questions

1. In Festus' report to Agrippa, what is the main point about Christianity mentioned?

2. What did Paul say that he had done after the Lord had met him on his way to Damascus?

3. In His commission to Paul, how did the Lord Jesus describe the lost condition of mankind?

4. The challenge and invitation of the gospel came to four men; who were they? What was the response of each of the four men to the gospel message? What did each gain or lose in their respective response to the gospel?

5. What did Paul have to give up and to do in order to gain salvation?

6. In what way can Paul's speech in Acts 26:2-23 help you structure your own testimony before others?

7. Describe one thing that Paul had done as a good example for Christians to emulate?