

Paul before Agrippa and Festus

To please the Jewish authorities, the Roman procurator, Antonius Felix, imprisoned the Apostle Paul at Caesarea for two years. When Porcius Festus succeeded Felix as procurator of Judea, in about 60 AD, Festus again heard the charges brought against Paul.

In those days Judea was in a great unrest. As Josephus puts it,

Now, when these were quieted, it happened, as it does in a diseased body, that another part was subject to an inflammation; for a company of deceivers and robbers got together, and persuaded the Jews to revolt, and exhorted them to assert their liberty, inflicting death on those that continued in obedience to the Roman government, and saying, that such as willingly chose slavery ought to be forced from such their desired inclinations; for they parted themselves into different bodies, and lay in wait up and down the country, and plundered the houses of the great men, and slew the men themselves, and set the villages on fire; and this till all Judea was filled with the effects of their madness. And thus the flame was every day more and more blown up, till it came to a direct war. ¹

The land was seething with robbers and deceivers. So the Romans had imprisoned many, and not a few had died. Paul was in no small company to be arrested and prosecuted by the authorities. To make matters worse, the Jews hounded him, coming down from Jerusalem, bringing many and serious charges against him.”²

The Pulpit Commentary says concerning this incident,

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.” Thus, the charges against him fell under these three heads: he was the ringleader of an unlawful sect; he had profaned the temple; and he had stirred up insurrection.³

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?”

¹ Josephus, F., & Whiston, W. (1987). *The works of Josephus: Complete and unabridged*. Peabody: Hendrickson.

² Acts 25:7.

³ H.D.M. Spence and Joseph S. Excell, *The Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. 18 Acts and Romans vol. 2, p. 251, vs.8.

Since Paul was a citizen of Rome he had the right to appeal to the highest tribunal, so he said, “I appeal to Caesar.”

Festus conferred with his council and then said, “You have appealed to Caesar [Nero]⁴ to Caesar you shall go.”

Now when several days had elapsed, King Agrippa and Berenice arrived at Caesarea, and paid their respects to Festus. The king was King Herod Agrippa II, son of Herod Agrippa I, consequently he was the brother of Drusilla. His father died when he was seventeen, and so the Romans would not entrust all of his father’s dominion to him, but they gave him Chalcis.

Berenice was the sister of Agrippa II, but was thought to be living in an incestuous relation with him. Berenice had been the wife of her uncle, Herod, Prince of Chalcis, but on his death she came to live with her brother. Afterward, she became the wife of Polemo, King of Cicilia, but eventually she returned to Herod Agrippa. Later, she became the mistress of Vespasian and of Titus in succession.⁵

Caesarea was situated on the coast of Palestine about 70 miles from Jerusalem. It was built by Herod the Great, and became the official residence for Herodian kings and Judaeen procurators like Festus. The name of the site “kaisariyeh” lingers even today.

While the royal persons were there Festus laid Paul's case before the king. Agrippa had said to Festus, “I also would like to hear the man myself.”

“Tomorrow,” Festus said, “you shall hear him.”

Herod Agrippa II was the son of Herod Agrippa I, who had James killed with the sword. He was grandson of Herod Antipas, who had John beheaded. Herod Arippa II was also great grandson of Herod the Great (who murdered the children in Bethlehem, and attempted to murder the Lord himself). He was as they say an expert in Jewish law, and had the right to appoint the Jewish high priest. He had custody of the ceremonial robes the High Priest wore on the Day of Atonement—a power that gave him no small leverage over the Jewish authorities. He helped Caesar destroy his own nation, and went to Rome with Berenice. He died in AD 100, the third year of the reign of Trajan.

The historian Emil Schurer characterizes Agrippa as “...indolent and feeble.” An incident happened that revealed something about his

⁴ Nero was Caesar from AD 54-68.

⁵ *Ibid.*, *The Pulpit Commentary*, p. 251.

character: when he visited Jerusalem he was accustomed to occupy the house that had formerly been the palace of the Hasmoneans. This building was already large, but he added a tower, so that from the tower he might overlook the citadel and the temple. From there, in his idle hours, he would look down on the sacred proceedings within the temple. The Jews found this obnoxious and they built a higher wall to shut off his view. Agrippa appealed to Festus, but the Jews appealed to Poppea the wife of Nero. The Jews kept their privacy.

Judaism was to Agrippa not a matter of conviction, but only of interest in so far as it provided external ceremony. Schurer says he was interested only in the trifling and the insignificant points of the religion.⁶

Once, when the foundations of the temple began to sink, Agrippa had timbers of great size brought from Lebanon. The plan was to raise the foundation by 20 cubits (about 30 feet). But they never used the wood to improve the temple; rather, the Romans used it for engines of war.

Agrippa allowed the Levites who sang psalms in worship services to wear the linen of the priests—it was their distinctive badge, and it was a great offense against the law.

These were the Berenice and Agrippa II who sat at the trial of the Apostle Paul.

Acts 25:23 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.

25:24 And Festus said, “King Agrippa, and all you gentlemen here present with us, you behold 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 ...”

26:1 and Agrippa said to Paul, “You are permitted to speak for yourself.”

Surely Paul knew of the usavory and disreputable lives of the people who sat to hear his defense. Could he not have known about the conflicts Agrippa had with the Jewish priests, or the incestuous relationship Agrippa had with Berenice? If he did, the knowledge did not affect his bearing. He presented himself before the court with dignity and courtesy. He was the true Christian gentleman.

⁶ E. Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 1st Div. , Vol. II, p. 98.

Then Paul proceeded to make his defense,

26:2 "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.

26:4 "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.

Paul had been conscientious from the first, a friend of virtue, and a servant of the law. He had not sacrificed his youth to vice. Our impression of him is that Paul was a man of principle.

Paul said to his accusers and judges,

26:6 "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?"

Festus had said to Herod that,

"... They simply had some points of disagreement with him about their own religion and a certain dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive."⁷

We could ask the same question today of the infidels that occupy not just the offices of power but of the heathen who teach in our schools.

"Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead?" Why can't you believe that He creates life? That He Provides laws? That He rewards and punishes?

This is the appeal to faith. Alas, a faith that the world does not have, a faith that eluded the tribunal before whom Paul spoke.

You believe so much; why not this? The Jewish scriptures contained the doctrine of the resurrection. Job said, "Even after my skin is flayed, yet without my flesh I shall see God." Job 19:26; the Psalmist wrote, "God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave," Psa. 49:15; Daniel mentions it also.

⁷ Acts 25:19.

Do not even the heathen long for the perfection of humanity? Don't they feel the moral helplessness of mankind?

Here is the challenge of Christianity to personal acceptance. The credible ought to be accepted, if it comes with the evidence of fact. The real root of unbelief is personal and moral. It is an act of the will. Paul refers to himself—in a manner of speaking—as, “I was once as you are; but the facts were too much for me.”

The resurrection is not a mere speculative doctrine or unpractical mystery, but is the root of the whole system of Christianity; it stands at the entrance of the new way, into which we are all invited; both as sealing the testimony of Christ, and as opening the new world to our faith and setting our affection on things above.

In spite of the anti-Christian passion that had worked in him in those days when he remained unconverted (which he does not attempt to conceal), he had retained the Pharisaic hope of the resurrection of the dead. The zeal of the Jews, however, against the gospel, tended to cut them off from living connection with the religion of their fathers, and from the blessings of the better covenant that superseded the old. And this zeal of unbelief was blind. What was there incredible in the idea of the resurrection of the dead? The question may be put to the unbeliever this way: fundamentally, what is there so incredible in any of the beliefs and teachings of Christianity? What is there so incredible in its objects?

Next, Paul appeals to the facts. He points to the incontrovertible evidence: “Once I was a persecutor; now I am a disciple.”

Paul continued, saying,

26:9 “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. 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.

26:14 “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.

He had resisted conviction, so now he can speak with feeling to the skeptics and doubters because he had felt that same stubborn doubt and resistance himself. He had been under an illusion. He had thought it his duty to oppose Jesus.

The Pulpit Commentary says of Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road,

The splendour of that light from heaven shining on his path of blind fury can never be forgotten. And the first beam which breaks through the night of our sin and stubbornness is worthy of eternal recollection and meditation (2 Cor. 4:6). The glory of the once humiliated but now enthroned Saviour surpasses all. With the light comes the voice, which humiliates and raises, rebukes and cheers. The voice echoes the secret voice of his conscience, hitherto, in the intoxication of his passion, half heard or not heard at all. But it is also a voice that is loftier than that of the self-condemning conscience--divine, pardoning, and cheering. 'Stand up!' God slays and makes alive.⁸

His was the proclamation of a divine mission. Showing that there was reason in his firmness and confidence; he was divinely sent and would be divinely cared for.

Acts 26:16 “But arise, 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 delivering 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, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in me.”

The state of the world without Christ is grim because it is dominated by Satan, the father of the lie. His world is one of darkness, intellectual and moral, with no exceptions. Satan turned the light of the Greek and Roman worlds by sin into grosser darkness and superstition. Satan's world is pagan and heathen and in his kingdom of darkness mankind suffers under the rule of evil spirits who empower false teachers to deceive and to

⁸ A. C. Hervey (Ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Excell), *The Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. 18, Acts and Romans, p. 275.

destroy. His is the dominion of the sensual, a reign of fear beneath the terror of pain, sickness and death.

But God has condemned sin in the flesh, and Jesus has come to overthrow the kingdom of Satan for it is impossible that such ignorance could remain. This Paul asserts because he had met and had been commissioned by the risen Christ.

Paul said,

Acts 26:19 Consequently, 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 even throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance. 21 “For this reason some Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death. 22 And so, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying to both small and great, stating nothing but what the prophets and Moses said was going to take place; 3 that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He should be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and the Gentiles.”

It was an effective defense, more than adequate to exonerate him in the eyes of a reasonable man. But what was the effect upon the listeners?

Acts 26:24 And 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!”

Festus represents **the cynic**, the supposedly superior, worldly view of religion. He is the typical unspiritual man. Luther said, “The world esteems others as prudent so long as they are mad, and as mad when they cease to be mad and become wise.” The critics had said almost the same thing of the apostles on the Day of Pentecost, for they supposed the apostles to be drunk. And of Christ himself they had said, “He is mad, and has a devil.”⁹

Acts 26:25 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.¹⁰

⁹ John 10:20.

¹⁰ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 update*. 1995 (Ac 26:25–26). LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

Agrippa was the man who had desired to look into the inner precincts of the temple and see its services, and had been denied. God had prepared better for him. On this day Paul threw down the wall of secrecy and declared to the king the awful truth of the suffering Messiah and his resurrection.

Simon Greenleaf said about the death and resurrection of Christ, “It would be difficult to select any place or period in the history of nations for the time and scene of a fictitious history or an imposture which would combine so many difficulties for the fabricator to surmount, so many contemporary writers to confront him with, and so many facilities for the detection of falsehood ...” than the time in which the gospel originated.¹¹

Mark Hopkins wrote,

Few persons, perhaps, give due attention to the relative position of the Christian history, which stands upon the very point of the intersection where three distinct lines of history meet—namely, the Jewish, the Grecian, and the Roman. These three bodies of ancient literature, alone, have descended, by an uninterrupted channel of transmission, to modern times; and these three, by a most extraordinary combination of circumstances, were brought together to elucidate the origination of Christianity. If upon the broad field of history there rests the common light of day, upon that spot where a new religion was given to man there shines the intensity of a common brightness. The Jews had their own literature, they had been formerly conquered by the Greeks, and the Greek language was in common use; they were also a Roman province, and during more than a century, in the centre of which stands the ministry of Christ, the affairs of Syria attracted the peculiar attention of the Roman government. No other people of antiquity can be named, upon whose history and sentiments there falls this triple flood of historic light; and upon no other period in the history of this one people do these triple rays so precisely meet as upon the moment the voice of one was heard in the wilderness of Jordan, saying, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord.'

“Well, then, might an apostle say, 'These things were not done in a corner.' The time is not run back, like that of Indian legends, to obscure and fabulous ages; nor is it in what are called the dark ages of more modern times. It was a civilized and an enlightened age—a classic age—an age of poets, philosophers, and historians. Nor was it in Mecca—a city little known or visited by the civilized world, and where the people and

¹¹ I. H. Linton, *A Lawyer Examines the Bible*, p. 56.

language were homogenous—it was not there) that Christ arose. It was in Jerusalem, in Western Asia—the theater of history from the first—and from the bosom of a people with all whose rites and usages we are perfectly acquainted. It was, perhaps, the only place on Earth in which a Roman governor could have called upon three languages to proclaim the accusation and the true character of Christ. For the scripture says, 'And Pilate wrote an inscription also, and put it on the cross. And it was written, "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews." Therefore, this inscription many of the Jews read, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin and in Greek.'¹²

Here, then, was a mixed population, with different prejudices, different interests, speaking different languages, for that day a reading population, in a city to which not only the Jews dwelling in Palestine, but those from distant countries, and proselytes, came up yearly, as the center and seat of the only pure worship of God on earth. And was this the place to select for the production of forged writings? Or for an imposture of any kind to gather a force that should carry it over the earth?

Indeed, Christianity did not begin "in a corner," but in the center of its avowed and inveterate enemies, beneath the sovereign power of Imperial Rome, and at the open door of an empty tomb, which the world through all its trickery and cunning has not been able to conceal. Upon the weight of that evidence, that none of them could deny, Paul makes a personal appeal both to the Jews and to the Gentiles.

Paul then turns his attention to Agrippa. "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do." And Agrippa replied to Paul, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian."

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

And what was the difference in the effect on the listeners? I have often wondered what was Agrippa's tone when he replied. Had Paul recognized in him the first stirrings of faith? Does Agrippa show us the example of the awakened conscience? We shall never know this side of eternity. But, in any case, what Agrippa feels he will not avow. He would lead a double life—representing one thing to the world, thinking another of himself. He is the type of a numerous class who would gladly be

¹² John 19:19-20.

blessed were it not for the strait gate and the narrow way that they will not tread.

“How near we may be to bliss,” says the Pulpit, “Yet how far from it! The heart may be touched, the intellect illuminated, the will aroused, the hour acceptable, and yet—some deep stream of passion runs at our feet, which we will not ford; some 'cunning bosom sin' keeps out the good message of repentance and faith that would enter. The reply of Paul to Agrippa's light words again brings out a sharp contrast. Better be the “prisoner of Jesus Christ” than the prisoner of passion (or anything else). Better the regal freedom of the redeemed man's soul, in poverty and in chains, than the splendor of the potentate enslaved by lust and by the fear of men!

In the audience-chamber we had thus the most diverse attitudes of mind towards Christianity represented. Paul, in the full inspiration of faith and life in the Son of God; Agrippa, convinced but not converted; Berenice, probably obstinate, thinking on her incestuous relationship with Agrippa; Festus, hardened in cynicism. Some wanting little, others much, to make them Christians.

But there is one question that has to be asked, one question that has to be considered and answered: what is the practical difference between being almost saved and being quite condemned? What is it? Can you tell me? No?

Then, I'll tell you. None. None! There is no practical difference.

Acts 26:30 The king stood up and the governor and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them...

And so, the sermon ended, the audience dispersed. Everyone went to his own place; and everyone remembered that the Savior has died, but he remembered his excuses as well.

Righteousness, self-control, judgment to come. These are the issues that faced the ones who heard Paul's sermon.

Josephus records some of the deeds of Porcius Festus.¹³ He also tells of the death of Festus. He wrote the following,

“And Caesar [Nero], upon hearing of the death of Festus, sent Albinus to Judea as procurator ...”

Festus lived about 2 years after coming to Palestine. How long he lived after he heard Paul's sermon is hard to say. It is not likely that he was ever converted by what he heard.

¹³ *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book xx, Chap. 8, sect. 9 & 10.

Sometimes a person needs to think about a lesson before he is converted by it. In an address delivered at a church in Pittsburgh in 1884, the speaker told of a man named Luke Short, who died in New England at the age of 116. When he was over a century old, Luke Short was converted by a sermon he had heard a hundred years before in England. The text -- "If any one does not love the Lord, let him be accursed."¹⁴ -- and he remembered it.

There is always hope.

As we hear today the voice that spoke 2000 years ago, let us hope and pray that the message he brings to us shall not be without profit, and not be without inspiration, and not be without good result.

Jesus Christ was born of a virgin. He lived without sin under the Law of Moses. He was crucified for claiming to be the Son of God, the Messiah. He arose from the dead. And so, being highly exalted, he offers pardon to each and every one who would reach out and take it.

Don't give the excuse of Agrippa.

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 16:22.