

Grace Church  
Roanoke, Virginia

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Lesson #56

ACTS  
Paul Before Festus  
Acts 25:1-27; 26:24, 25

Acts 25 is an introduction and is preparatory to the story contained in Chapter 26 where Paul makes his defense before King Agrippa. Chapter 25 sets the stage for Acts 26.

Acts 25 mainly tells us about the Roman procurator (governor) Festus. Festus replaced Felix as governor of the province of Judea in 59 A.D. Secular historians tell us that he was an honest official, dealing in fairness and justice with those whom he governed. Festus was characterized as a man who did something immediately. He did not wait. We will see this characteristic in this chapter, for we see his promptness, briskness, quickness and punctuality. This man was an administrator, but he was also unprincipled and a political expedient. Festus openly confessed Paul had done no wrong and yet he was willing to sacrifice Paul on the altar of political expediency. Festus held office for only two years and died in 61 A.D.

Acts, Chapters 24-26, gives us the actual fulfillment of prophecy concerning Paul's ministry. The resurrected Christ said of Paul when he was first converted, “. . . he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel” (Acts 9:15). In these three chapters in Acts, Paul stood before kings, governors, Gentiles and Israelites. The three main characters Paul faced were Felix, Festus and King Agrippa, and to each one of these Paul gave the truth of Jesus Christ. When presented with the claims of Christ, Felix, the governor of Judea, procrastinated and said, “Go away for the present and when I find time, I will summon you” (Acts 24:25). When Agrippa heard the gospel, he was an almost Christian and said, “In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian,” or as the King James Version says, “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” (Acts 26:28). However, after Festus, the rationalist, heard the gospel, he said, “Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad” (Acts 26:24). All three of these men heard the gospel and rejected it. Felix and Agrippa came close to truly yielding to Christ, but Festus was calloused and hardened to the truth, so that he never even considered it. Festus was a better leader, politician and moral man than either Felix or Agrippa, but he was the most blinded and obstinate to the truth of Jesus Christ.

PAUL'S APPEARANCE BEFORE FESTUS - Acts 25:1-12

Request of the Jews (25:1-3)

“Festus therefore, having arrived in the province, three days later went up to Jerusalem

from Caesarea.” -- As soon as Festus came into office, he immediately went to Jerusalem, the capital of religious activity, as a good governor should, to make himself acquainted with the affairs of the nation over which he was to preside.

“And the chief priests and the leading men of the Jews brought charges against Paul; and they were urging him, 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).” -- We have to assume that Festus and Felix had spoken about Paul, the pest, before Felix left to go to Rome. When Festus arrived in Jerusalem, these Jews had not forgotten Paul. It had been two years and their hatred for Paul was greater than ever. These Jews cleverly tried to get Festus to bring Paul to Jerusalem where he could be tried before the Jewish Sanhedrin. They were testing or feeling out this new governor. They were also trying to prejudice Festus' mind against Paul. Yet, at the same time, these devious Jews had no intention of ever having a trial for Paul. They were intent upon assassinating Paul, for some of these Jews had taken a sacred vow not to eat or drink until Paul was dead.

This verse teaches us that unless hatred is dealt with, it will intensify in one's thinking. Hatred can drive people to murder and justify it on the basis of malice alone. Such is the religious, unregenerate mind that always bends and compromises religious principles to further the ends of corrupt religion.

#### Refusal of Festus (25:4-6)

“Festus then answered that Paul was being kept in custody at Caesarea and that he himself was about to leave shortly. ‘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.’” -- Festus must have known about the previous plot to kill Paul and perhaps he sensed some foul play in this case. Whatever, he said he would try Paul in Caesarea and invited the influential Jews to come and testify against him.

God was providentially protecting Paul, for he surely would have been killed if tried in Jerusalem. Felix had no idea that he was part of God's plan to make sure that God's promise to Paul would be carried out, for Christ said to Paul, “Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to my cause in Jerusalem, you must witness at Rome also” (Acts 3:11). Paul was destined to bear the gospel to Rome, and no cunning on the part of man could change that destiny. God was behind Festus' decision not to let Paul go to Jerusalem.

“And 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.” -- With great alacrity, Festus immediately went back to Caesarea and promptly set up a trial as a good administrator should do. Festus was a Roman and was sold on Roman justice so he determined to give Paul, a Roman citizen, a fair trial.

#### Review of the Case (25:7, 8)

“And after he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him which they could not prove; 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.’” -- On previous occasions these Jews had charged Paul with being a revolutionary against the state, a heretic of the unrecognized religious sect called the Way, and profaning the temple. Now, after two years, they had time to think up many more charges, but Paul claimed he was innocent of all the charges. Festus was most interested in the remark, “I have committed no offense against Caesar,” for Festus did not care about his religious activities but was deeply concerned about his political activities.

#### Referral to Caesar (25:9-12)

“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 the charges?’” -- At this point, Festus should have dismissed the case against Paul, but now we find this man is a compromiser, always seeking to find the middle ground. He was a true politician because he wanted to please his Jewish subjects, and after all, it was more important to please millions of Jews than to release a man called Paul, the pest. Festus suggested that Paul be taken to Jerusalem to be tried, not by the Sanhedrin but by Festus himself.

“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.’” -- Paul was no fool. He knew if he could not get justice in neutral Caesarea, then it would be impossible to get justice in hostile Jerusalem. Paul, as a Roman citizen, was holding the governor to the Roman law.

“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.” -- Paul felt that if he was guilty, he should die, but he was not guilty. Paul believed in submission to existing government.

“Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good” (Rom. 13:1-4a).

He saw Festus as a minister of God in civil matters and knew he was to be subject to the laws of the land. Government is set up to do good and as long as a government does not ask a Christian to do something which would be unchristian and unbiblical, then the Christian is to submit to government.

“I appeal to Caesar.” -- Every Roman citizen had the right to appeal his case to Caesar, the highest court in the Empire. However, often the Emperor was more strict than the lower courts. The moment Paul realized Festus was not going to carry out justice, he stood upon his right as a Roman citizen and said, “Apello!” He appealed to Caesar. He exercised his right.

Some think Paul should not have appealed but merely trusted his life to God who would have supernaturally delivered him as He delivered Peter from prison in an earlier part of Acts. Not so. Paul had rights as a citizen and could use those rights. Furthermore, Paul realized that the whole system of Roman law was ordained by God and he could commit himself to it because God is providentially in control of government. God had permitted the whole Roman legal system to be formed to protect His servant Paul. It was not Roman lawyers and judges who saved Paul from death, but Roman law. If it had not been for Roman law, Paul would not have stood a chance. The Roman judges and lawyers were corrupt but the Roman law system saved Paul from certain death. Corrupt judges and lawyers were forced by their own law to protect the Apostle Paul.

Again we see God's hand at work. We left Paul in Acts 24 in jail with no apparent way to get out and be on his way to Rome. But in Acts 25, we have a change of administration, a new trial, a governor who upheld Roman law, and Paul's appeal which would take him to Rome as a prisoner to appear before Caesar. God works in strange and mysterious ways.

“Then when Festus had conferred with his council, he answered, ‘You have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you shall go.’” -- Festus was glad for Paul to appeal to Caesar. He dared not give Paul over to the Jews in violation of Roman law; yet he was not willing to render justice and set Paul free, thereby making himself unpopular with the Jews. He was glad for the opportunity to rid himself of all responsibility in the matter, little knowing that he was simply God's instrument, used of God to work out his eternal purpose in the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul.

FESTUS' APPEAL TO AGRIPPA - Acts 25:13-21

#### Agrippa and His Wife (25:13)

“Now when several days had elapsed, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea, and paid their respects to Festus.” -- King Agrippa and his wife paid a protocol visit to Festus, the new governor to Judea. Agrippa and Bernice were the scandal of Judea. They were blood brother and sister who had not married but were living together as man and wife. This Agrippa is Agrippa II who was the son of Herod Agrippa I, and grandson of Herod the Great. Agrippa was only seventeen when his father died the horrible death of being eaten by worms after putting James to death. He should have reigned, but Emperor Claudius thought him too young so placed his kingdom under the Roman governor until he came of age. After the death of Claudius, the Emperor Nero gave him a large domain. Agrippa was a Jew who was reared in Rome and was strongly attached to the Romans. So loyal to the Romans was Agrippa II, that in the destruction

of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., he turned his troops on his own countrymen, uniting with the Romans in the destruction of this great city. History tells us that he was a very capable ruler and he died in 90 A.D. in Rome at the age of seventy. Bernice was a very beautiful woman and was the blood sister to Agrippa II and to Drucilla, wife of Felix. Bernice made a fetish of incestuous relationships. She had been married to her uncle, Herod, King of Chalcis, but when he died she chose to live with her brother, committing the worst kind of incest. Later on, to avoid the scandal with Agrippa, Bernice left Agrippa and married Polemon, King of Pomins. She stayed married for only a brief time, and she divorced her husband. She then went back to Agrippa and together they went to Rome. Bernice then became the mistress to two successive Roman emperors, Vespasian and Titus, who were father and son.

#### Accusations Against Paul Reviewed (25:14-18)

“And while they were spending many days there, Festus laid Paul’s case before the king, saying, ‘There is a certain man left a prisoner by Felix; . . .’” -- Notice the stress on “many days,” for it was after many days when Agrippa and Festus ran out of governmental and personal things to talk about that Festus spoke to Agrippa about Paul. Festus had no burning heart for justice. Paul's case was not uppermost in his mind. In fact, it was down at the bottom of the list.

“. . . 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 upon him. And 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 opportunity to make his defense against the charges. And so after they assembled here, I made no delay but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal, and ordered the man to be brought. And when the accusers stood up, they began bringing charges against him not of such crimes as I was expecting; . . .” -- Festus laid this whole case out before Agrippa because he thought Agrippa, being a Jew and familiar with Jewish customs, could help him figure out some legitimate charges against Paul, for he had to have some charges if he was going to send Paul before Caesar who was then Nero.

#### Attitude of Festus about Christianity (25:19)

“. . . but they simply had some points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a certain dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive,” -- Festus had grasped clearly what the issue was between the Jews and Paul--the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Festus was a rationalist and could care less about Christianity, the supernatural, a man raising from the dead, a God in control of history or anything pertaining to true religion. Festus’ attitude was, “Did you ever hear of such a thing as a man coming back to life? Isn't that ridiculous? And isn't it ridiculous that these Jews, on the grounds of such a ridiculous charge that Paul believes this, want me to put him to death?” Festus was a thoroughgoing rationalist, humanist and anti-supernaturalist.

#### Appeal of Paul to Caesar (25:20, 21)

“And 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.” -- Festus had heard the gospel from Paul and understood the issue was the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, but being a rationalist, he was at a loss to investigate these questions. He had no capacity for spiritual truth. Festus did not make the slightest effort to understand more about the resurrection of Christ. He could have taken Paul aside and said, “Paul, I’m interested in knowing more about this Jesus who you say was raised from the dead. Please tell me more.” Why didn’t Festus do this? He was a man who was hardened in heart, blinded in mind and corrupt in his emotions. He was what the Bible calls “dead in sin.” Festus had heard the pure gospel from the lips of the Apostle Paul and he still didn’t care about Christ, or salvation or heaven. Why? Because as a spiritually dead man, he needed the Holy Spirit to enlighten his mind, soften his heart and awaken his affections so he could respond to Christ. Dead men need a miracle from the Holy Spirit if they are to truly believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. It is the Holy Spirit who supernaturally prepares a man to receive Christ, and Festus did not believe in the supernatural.

“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.” -- Festus, being a man who was selfish and desiring self-praise, took credit for going by the Roman law, but shamefully, at this point he said nothing to Agrippa of Paul’s innocence and that he should have been released.

#### AGRIPPA’S ATTENTION FOCUSED ON PAUL - Acts 25:22-27

##### Request of Agrippa (25:22)

“And Agrippa said to Festus, ‘I also would like to hear the man myself.’ ‘Tomorrow,’ he said, ‘you shall hear him.’” -- Agrippa had undoubtedly heard of Jesus of Nazareth and his faithful follower Paul, and he wanted to talk to him. Agrippa was curious and speaking with Paul was like entertainment for Agrippa and Bernice.

Agrippa’s desire to speak with Paul gave occasion for the noblest defense of Christianity ever made before a court of law.

##### Regalia Surrounding Paul’s Hearing (25:23)

“And so, on the next day when Agrippa had come together with Bernice, amid great pomp, and had entered the auditorium accompanied by the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in.” -- Festus really laid out the red carpet for Agrippa and Bernice. In a huge banquet hall, great pomp and pageantry was carried on. Agrippa and Bernice were garbed in the clothes of the splendor of royalty. Festus was arrayed in the scarlet of a Roman procurator, and around him were his tribunes, legionaries and servants. There was beautiful music and luscious banqueting. Paul was then commanded to come into this great auditorium. In

this magnificent crown, a man walked in leading the prisoner Paul whose hands were bound and whose clothes were tattered. Paul stood before this group of VIPs and gave them the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was not disturbed or frightened by the rank and splendor of the audience because he knew God had called him to speak before kings and governors.

Paul, while a prisoner, was the only person really free, for the others were slaves to sin, self, pleasure, greed, power and a hundred other sins.

#### Review of Paul's Case (25:24, 25)

“And Festus said, ‘King Agrippa’ and all you gentlemen here present with us, you behold this man about whom all the people the Jews appealed to me, both at Jerusalem and here, loudly declaring that he ought not to live any longer. But I found that he had committed nothing worthy of death; and since he himself appealed to the Emperor, I decided to send him.” -- Festus was basically an honest politician and wanted to do what was right but could not understand what made Paul tick because he was an anti-supernaturalist.

#### Remorse of Festus (25:26, 27)

“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 might have something to write. For it seems absurd to me in sending a prisoner, not to indicate also the charges against him.” -- Festus was in hot water and he knew it. By Roman law, he had the responsibility of sending Paul to Nero to answer for charges. However, Festus did not know what to write, for all the charges concerning Paul could not hold water. Festus was in a very embarrassing situation. Yet, this whole thing would not have occurred had he had the strength of his convictions and let Paul go free. No one in the whole banquet hall, including Agrippa, was able to find Paul guilty of anything.

#### FESTUS' ACCUSATION OF PAUL - Acts 26:24, 25

“Ad 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.’” -- We must skip ahead to Chapter 26 in order to learn something more about Festus. Paul had just finished his testimony and stated his deep-seated convictions on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and Festus blurted out, “Paul, you are crazy; you are off your rocker; you are not playing with a full deck!” Festus was a rationalist, an anti-supernaturalist and he regarded Christians as crazy. He was not only hardened to the truth but thought that everyone who did not think like him was mad.

All true Christians are going to be looked upon by the anti-supernaturalistic, humanistic and rationalistic skeptics as people who are a bit teched in the head” and in need of psychiatric treatment. If non-Christians do not say this about Christians, then perhaps Christians are not witnessing for Christ as they should.

“But Paul said, ‘I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth.’” -- This could be translated “words of sound mind” or “words of truth and rationality.” The question is who was really crazy -- Festus or Paul? Festus was the one who was not rational because he did not have a redeemed mind, as did Paul, to look at all of life from God's viewpoint. Sin had taken its toll on Festus so that he was an atheist with no world-life viewpoint other than that man came into the world through chance - evolution, man lives for today and for himself, and man dies like a dog, so enjoy life now for there is nothing beyond the grave. Yet, it was Festus who was mad not Paul.

## CONCLUSION

For you who are unsaved, let's look once more at Festus, a most interesting Christ - rejecter. Festus was a polite, educated humanist who denied the supernatural. As an atheist, he thought belief in Christ was ridiculous, and that Christian truth and religion were for those people who needed it as a crutch. He lived for today and worked hard to be a good governor to execute justice. Yet, he was an unprincipled man and unscrupulous, dominated by his own self-interest. Festus heard the gospel of Christ from the lips of the Apostle Paul, yet his heart was hardened, his mind was darkened and his emotions were corrupted to spiritual truth. He was dead in sin which is the spiritual condition of all men outside of Jesus Christ. Festus desperately needed the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit to soften his heart, enlighten his mind and awaken his affections and move his will towards Christ so he could believe in Christ as Lord and Savior, becoming a supernaturalist in his world-life viewpoint.

Festus is like the twentieth century man who is surrounded with the gospel of Christ and has absolutely no interest in it. The average person in America accepts as fact that he is a product of evolution which is nothing but chance, works hard and plays hard for today, and believes that the grave ends it all. Yet, he hears the gospel on radio and TV, and occasionally runs into someone who tells him about Christ, and is often married and buried in church but he is not the least bit interested in his soul or eternal realities. Christ and Christianity are a myth; legend and fairy tale to him. To be in this position is madness, for it will end up in the loss of one's soul for all eternity.

Are you mad? Have you lost your sense of rationality? To leave God and Christ out of your thinking is pure madness. Yet, if you never come to Jesus Christ, you are mad. May God the Holy Spirit work in your mind, will, heart and emotions so that you are awakened to believe in Jesus Christ, and Christ will deliver you from spiritual insanity.