

Acts 25:13-27: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 25 verses 13 to 27. Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus. And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, There is a man left prisoner by Felix. And when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defence concerning the charge laid against him. So when they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought. When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion, and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to

Caesar. Then Agrippa said to Festus, I would like to hear the man myself. Tomorrow, said he, you will hear him. So on the next day, Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. And Festus said, King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. But I found that he had done nothing deserving death, and as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him. But I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore, I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write. For it seems to me unreasonable in sending a prisoner not to indicate the charges against him. In the second half of Acts chapter 25,

Agrippa and Bernice visit Festus, and Festus invites them to hear Paul's case, as he would appreciate their insight. Paul had appealed to Caesar, and so, if Festus is to send him to Rome, he wants to be able to give a clearer sense of the case. Help and counsel from two powerful people closer to Judaism would be very useful in this situation. Herod Agrippa II was the only surviving son of Herod Agrippa I, who had died in Acts chapter 12. He ruled over northeastern parts of Herod the Great's old kingdom. He was a faithful vassal, trusted by the Romans, and he was allowed to appoint the high priest by them. He was pious, he was an expert in Jewish matters, and his sister Drusilla was the wife of the previous governor, Felix. He would later side with Rome in the war, and he was the last ruler of the house of Herod. By asking this favour of him, Festus would also be strengthening his relationship with another key ruler within the land. Bernice is the sister of Agrippa, although it was rumoured that she was also in an incestuous relationship with him. Later, she would be the mistress of both Vespasian and Titus, and is mentioned by several ancient historians for this reason, Deocassius, Suetonius, Josephus, and a number of others. As Festus suspects that the case is really about matters of Judaism, these are good people to consult. Paul here is protected by pagan procedure, and by Festus' unwillingness to hand him over. Nevertheless, we should not take all of Festus' statements at face value. Festus, as commentators like Ben Witherington and Robert Tannehill observe, is really serving his own interests here, and putting a positive spin upon all his dealings with Paul. In the book of Acts, neither Roman or Jewish justice are portrayed in flattering ways. Nevertheless, Roman justice is generally the more desirable of the two for Paul and the early Christians. The Jewish authorities don't even plan to administer justice. Their intention is to have Paul ambushed and killed on the way to Jerusalem. Felix delayed for over two years, while Festus

seems to be more eager to deliver justice more speedily. However, he doesn't seem to be able to bring himself to free Paul, even though, by his own admission, there don't seem to be any charges that a Roman governor could reasonably deal with. Relating the case made by the Jerusalem authorities, Festus makes clear that the substance of their case concerned religious questions, which he was not competent to judge, nor were they within his jurisdiction. Paul had seemingly done nothing contrary to Roman law. The situation is complicated by the fact that Paul has appealed to Caesar.

Paul understandably won't go to Jerusalem to be tried before his own people, as there is no justice for him to be expected there. The Roman governor has a difficult relationship with the Jewish authorities and can't easily free him, but doesn't feel able to condemn him either. Now Paul has appealed to Caesar, but it isn't clear that he has done anything that should be tried within the Roman court. Festus has got to get a better sense of this complicated case if he is going to inform Caesar.

[5 : 22] The following day they all gather together with great pomp. This is quite the hearing. There are military tribunes, prominent men of the city, Agrippa and Bernice, and Festus the Roman governor.

This is, among other things, a fulfillment of the prophecy of Christ in Luke chapter 21 verses 12 to 13. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. And then also in the calling of Paul in Acts chapter 9 verses 15 to 16, the Lord had said to Ananias, Verse 22 raises the possibility that Agrippa had already heard about Paul and was eager to hear him for himself. He was curious about what this man had to say. Given the opportunity to hear him by Festus, he readily jumped at it. Festus presents Paul to the gathered authorities and dignitaries.

He describes the hostility that the Jewish people had against this man, and the way that their authorities had sought a death sentence from him. Yet he had not found anything in Paul worthy of death. As Daryl Bach notes, this is a second of three declarations of Paul's innocence within these chapters of the book of Acts.

The first is from Claudius Lysias in chapter 23 verse 29. I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment.

[6 : 58] A similar statement is made at the end of this scene in chapter 26 verse 31. Festus presents the situation as if he knew that he was not qualified to judge the case, it belonged to the area of Jewish law, and so as an act of reasonableness he was going to send him to Jerusalem to be tried there. However, in the earlier account we see that he was going to grant him to the Jewish authorities. A far less favourable presentation. He knew that he was sending Paul to his death, that Paul would not get justice, but doing such a favour for the Jewish authorities would be to his advantage. Paul's appeal to Caesar was in part to avoid this situation, in hope that he might find more justice in another court. The Caesar to whom he appealed here was Nero. It would be absurd for him to be presented before him without some sort of charge. And so at this point, Festus is largely fishing for a charge. Even though he's found nothing wrong in Paul, he can't set him free without causing friction with the Jews, and so he's going to send him to the emperor. But he needs some sort of charge to send him with. What follows is less a matter of

Paul answering specific charges that have been levelled against him, and more a matter of a hearing to ascertain whether there are any charges that he could reasonably be sent with. A question to consider. Reading the narrator's description of Festus and his actions, and Festus' own descriptions of his actions, where might we see disparities and tensions? How do you think Luke wants us to regard Festus as a character?