

To Caesar You Shall Go!

By Dan & Brenda Cathcart

The video version is available at: <https://youtu.be/k6ajf7xdhGU>

The scripture reading is Acts 24:27-26:32

The Judean Procurator Felix had close ties with the Roman Emperor Nero. Felix's brother Pallas was part of Nero's administration. This connection did not protect Felix from his ultimate replacement due to his own savagery, mismanagement, and corruption in handling the affairs of Judea.

Felix had ordered Paul held in Caesarea for two years, having many conversations with Paul during that time. In fifty-nine CE, Nero ordered Felix be replaced with a new Procurator, Festus, and Felix was ordered to return to Rome.

Acts 24:27 NKJV 27 But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound.

Felix could have released Paul from his house arrest but knowing that many among the Jewish leaders held grievances against him, probably for his heavy-handed administration of the territory, Felix left Paul imprisoned for Festus to deal with him. Would Paul get a fair hearing before Festus? Festus faced several angry mobs among the Jewish population of Judea, all fighting among themselves and often attacking and sabotaging Roman interests. The situation with Paul, on the other hand, seemed tiny and ridiculous by comparison and a matter best left to the Jews themselves to handle. But, then again, Paul was a Roman citizen with certain rights.

Festus served as the procurator from 59 CE until his death in 62 CE. Festus inherited quite a mess from his predecessor Felix. Felix had done nothing to quell the growing hostility between several factions of Jews who were pitted against each other as well as fighting against what they saw as Roman occupation of their country. If Felix had done anything during his tenure as Procurator, he served to only add to the tensions already running at a fever pitch.

Felix used the various factions of the Jews against each other for his own gain. Festus, from the onset, sought to put a stop to the murderous practices of the Zealots and Sicarii and bring the territory back under some form of control. The historian Josephus, an eyewitness to these events, wrote about them.

“Festus succeeded Felix as procurator, and he made it his business to punish those who made disturbances in the country. He caught a majority of the insurrectionists, and killed a great many of them.”ⁱ

Festus was nearly overwhelmed with the troubles left to him by his predecessor. He had very little patience for the near constant and troublesome Jewish infighting. An incident near the beginning of Festus' tenure, also recorded by Josephus but not included in the scriptures, tells of another high-profile false Messiah promising to rescue the Jewish people from Roman rule. This false Messiah had gathered a large following in the Judean desert. Festus immediately sent Roman cavalry and foot soldiers to put a stop to yet another religious uprising. This time the imposter Messiah and all his followers, several thousand men, women, and children, were killed in their camp.

The more immediate problem facing Festus and his new administration was what to do with Paul? Festus may have been inclined to just release Paul. but realizing that doing so may cause more trouble, He took a different course of action.

Acts 25:1-5 NKJV 1 Now when Festus had come to the province, after three days he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem. 2 Then the high priest and the chief men of the Jews informed him against Paul; and they petitioned him, 3 asking a favor against him, that he would summon him to Jerusalem--while they lay in ambush along the road to kill him. 4 But Festus answered that Paul should be kept at Caesarea, and that he himself was going there shortly. 5 "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."

Festus had to quickly learn the dynamics of the local politics. By going up to Jerusalem without taking Paul along as had been requested, Festus was able to identify the motivations of the chief priests against Paul and this new sect among the Jews known as the Way.

Festus understood that the chief priests had no interest in Paul other than to kill him. This situation put Festus in a particularly sticky situation. With Paul being a Roman citizen, Festus was under an obligation to protect Paul. So, Festus suggested to the chief priests that Paul's case be heard in Caesarea.

Acts 25:6-8 NKJV 6 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. 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, 8 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."

Paul's accusers again reiterated their charges against him, that he violated the Torah, profaned the Temple, and instigated insurrection against Rome. Paul maintained his innocence of the accusations brought against him, and the chief priests had no proof to support their case.

Festus saw that there was no reason for Paul to be judged under Roman law. There was no evidence to show that Paul instigated any kind of insurrection requiring action on the part of Festus. It was a common practice for a new Procurator to dispense a few "favors" to the local population.

Acts 25:9 NKJV 9 But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?"

Festus would have certainly known that the chief priests had no intention of putting Paul on trial again in their court.

Paul understood that this was purely a political move on the part of Festus and did not trust him. And even though two years had passed, Paul was certain that the plot to kill him before he had any chance to testify again before the Sanhedrin was still in force. Paul gave the only answer he could that would save his life and also put both Festus and the chief priests in a bind.

Acts 25:10-12 NKJV 10 So Paul said, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. 11 "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." 12 Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, "You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!"

This appeal by Paul brought the trial to a dead stop! The right to appeal one's case to the Emperor was based on one of the oldest laws in the Roman Empire known as "Lex Julia". As a Roman citizen, Paul had the right to appeal his case directly to the people of Rome and, as the representative of the people, the Emperor would now hear Paul's case. It was out of the hands of both Festus and the Sanhedrin.

At the time Paul appeals to Caesar, Nero was a relatively new emperor and was not yet seen as the dark, evil character he really was. Here at the beginning of his reign, Nero was seen by most Roman citizens as a benevolent Emperor. It was Nero's mother and a small group of top advisors who ruled the empire from behind the façade of Nero. In this environment, Paul had no reason to think that Nero would not give him a fair hearing.

Festus faced a dilemma. Felix had left him a prisoner which the chief priests of the Jews wanted turned over to them. But the problem was that this prisoner was a Roman citizen. Festus decided to share this matter with king Agrippa and his sister Bernice who had come to Caesarea to greet Festus, the new Procurator.

Acts 25:13-16 NKJV 13 And after some days King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus. 14 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, 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. 16 "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 charge against him.'

Festus explained to Agrippa that this dispute the chief priests had with Paul made little sense to him. The charges that the priests brought against Paul were purely religious in nature and beyond his jurisdiction. Yet here he was at a loss as how to proceed in the matter.

Acts 25:17-22 NKJV 17 "Therefore when they had come together, without any delay, the next day I sat on the judgment seat and commanded the man to be brought in. 18 "When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, 19 "but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive. 20 "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. 21 "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." 22 Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I also would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," he said, "you shall hear him."

Agrippa, having heard Festus' explanation, said he too would like to hear from Paul regarding this matter. Perhaps Festus saw in Agrippa's interest in Paul's case a way to get out of the situation unscathed. If Festus simply let Paul go because there was no legal basis to put Paul on trial under Roman law, and the plot to kill Paul was successful, then Festus, knowing that Paul faced the possibility of assassination, could face a death penalty himself for allowing a Roman citizen to be murdered under those conditions. It was a no-win situation for Festus.

Paul would certainly have heard that he would be offered the opportunity to testify before king Agrippa the next day. Yeshua himself had told his disciples, and later to Paul, that they would speak before governors and kings.

Matthew 10:17-19 NKJV 17 "But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. 18 "You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a

testimony to them and to the Gentiles. 19 "But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak;

Festus had decided to make a big event out of Paul's appearance before Agrippa and Bernice. Festus brought in a large contingent of prominent men of Caesarea with great pomp and circumstance. As Paul was brought before this audience, perhaps he saw the irony of it. First Fruits of Zion in their work *Chronicles of the Apostles* comments on this situation:

"As a free man (Paul) never had such opportunities handed him. As a prisoner in chains, he had already testified to Drusilla, and now he would speak the good news of the kingdom to her older siblings Agrippa and Bernice."ⁱⁱ

The Agrippa which Paul faced this day was the great grandson of Herod the Great who tried to put Yeshua to death. His father Agrippa the first, had put James the son of Zebedee to death. Festus began the proceedings with a formal introduction of Paul.

Acts 25:23-27 NKJV 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. 24 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. 25 "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. 26 "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. 27 "For it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner and not to specify the charges against him."

Festus made a big production out of the proceedings, hoping that regardless of the outcome, he would have someone else to blame should it go sideways on him.

Most of Acts chapter twenty-six consists of Paul retelling his testimony before this assembly. For the most part, Paul addresses king Agrippa directly. He tells Agrippa and the gathered assembly about his early life; about how he was brought up from his youth in a prominent school of the Pharisees at the feet of Gamaliel himself.

Paul appeals to Agrippa's knowledge of the God Israel and the words of the prophets regarding the promise of resurrection.

Acts 26:6-8 NKJV 6 "And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. 7 "To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. 8 "Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?"

Paul explains how he was among the first to persecute the disciples and followers of Yeshua.

Acts 26:11 NKJV 11 "And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

Paul recounts his experience on the road to Damascus, encountering the risen Yeshua, being blinded for a time, and then commissioned to take the gospel message to the far corners of the world to both Jew and Gentile.

Paul then makes a powerful closing statement, appealing to Agrippa and all those assembled.

Acts 26:19-23 NKJV 19 "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 "but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance. 21 "For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 22 "Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come-- 23 "that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."

Festus listened to all Paul had to say and being a Roman and non-Jew, probably found Paul's testimony to sound like that of a crazy man. Knowing that Agrippa clearly understood what he was saying, Paul answered Festus' charge of being mad.

Acts 26:25-27 NKJV 25 But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. 26 "For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. 27 "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe."

Paul's question to Agrippa was a direct challenge. Agrippa said that he was almost convinced to believe himself because of Paul's testimony that day. Paul answered Agrippa with what amounted to a prayer for all those present hearing his words that day.

Acts 26:29 NKJV 29 And Paul said, "I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains."

With these final words from Paul, king Agrippa rose up along with the others present and conferred together for a time. Now that they have heard Paul's testimony, what were they to do with him? They reached the decision that there was only one choice.

Acts 26:31-32 NKJV 31 and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, "This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains." 32 Then Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

Paul had previously stated that he would someday travel to Rome. The Spirit confirmed that, telling Paul that he would go to Rome to testify before Caesar. Paul has now testified before five different groups: The Jewish crowd, the Sanhedrin, Felix & Drusilla, Festus, and Agrippa & Bernice. He will now go to Rome to testify before the Roman congregation and Caesar himself.

As he had traveled far and wide, Paul had spoken before all who would listen. He had spoken to free man and slave alike. He had shared the gospel of the good news of the risen Messiah to thousands of people wherever he had traveled. He had brought the message to both Jew and Gentile. The primary thrust of his mission had been to demonstrate that the Gentiles also received the inheritance and promises of Abraham through the death and resurrection of Messiah Yeshua.

It is said that "all roads lead to Rome." But it is also true that all roads fan out from Rome. It is from Rome, while in chains and a prisoner, that Paul had the opportunity to reach a greater number of people with the gospel message of salvation through Yeshua. When our journey gets rough and when we are weary and discouraged, we can look to Paul as an example of strength and endurance in trying times.

Study Questions:

1. Compare the similarities and differences between Felix, from last week's teaching, and Festus in how they each dealt with Paul and his accusers.
2. Why would Festus make such a show of Paul's testimony before Agrippa and Bernice? After Paul's appeal to Caesar, it seems a moot point and an unnecessary formality. How would this help Festus' standing with the Jews and with king Agrippa? Did this show of pomp help or hinder the gospel message?
3. After Paul finished his testimony, Festus voices his opinion that Paul was a mad man. Agrippa, on the other hand, knew the Torah and the Prophets and would have understood Paul's words. How does this situation illustrate Paul's words in 1st Corinthians 2:14 about spiritual discernment?
4. Paul's answer to Festus when asked if he was willing to return to Jerusalem for a trial is recorded in Acts 25:9-12 where he again claimed his innocence of the charges. But Paul opened his answer with the statement "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat." What does this statement mean in relation to the position of Festus as Procurator?
5. Paul's appeal to Caesar created a further dilemma for Festus in that Festus recognized there was nothing under Roman law with which to charge Paul. What would Festus hope to gain by bringing Paul before Agrippa as opposed to releasing Paul and sending him into hiding somewhere to protect him from the would be assassins?
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

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ⁱ Josephus, Jewish War 2:271/xiv.1.

ⁱⁱ FFOZ, Chronicles of the Apostles, D.T. Lancaster, Vol 3 p802-3