

New Testament Survey

Paul Before Agrippa - Lesson 26

When I was 12, I remember going to San Angelo during the summer to visit my grandparents. My grandfather's job required him to drive his pickup around West Texas ranches gauging oil tanks and keeping various oil equipment working. The summer of 1972, he decided it was time I learn the basics of driving. So, we went out to one of the leases on an old caliche road, and he put me behind the wheel.

I had no trouble with the basics of the gas pedal, breaking, or steering. Similarly, I was able to stay on the road (if you could call it a road). My problem was avoiding the potholes in the road. There were depressions, dips, and potholes that when hit, could rattle out a healthy man's teeth. After my first strike, my grandfather said, "Try to avoid those potholes; they mess up the truck's suspension." It was a few yards later when I hit my next pothole. Granddaddy Tommy's next comment was, "Now that's what I'm talking about. That's what I want you to avoid!" I agreed and kept driving, very soon hitting my next pothole.

At this point, my grandfather made me get out of the truck and see where the wheels were so I would know how to steer around the holes. I got back in the truck and promptly hit a particularly nasty pothole. As he was jostling around the cab from the impact of the hit, my grandfather yelled, "Watch it boy!!! Can't you see what you're doing???" I then told him, "I was trying as hard as I could, but no, I really could not see the potholes." He had me stop the truck and move to the passenger side explaining to me I needed glasses before I was going to be allowed to drive his truck again!

When we got back and he filled in mom and dad, they made an appointment for me with an eye doctor. As I was finishing the exam, the doctor wrote me a prescription for glasses explaining to my mother that I could not see the side of a barn. Mom replied, "I don't know about the barn, but I hear he certainly has trouble with chug holes."

Vision is a funny thing, in more ways than one. We can look at the world and see it in very physical terms—one of politics, economics, work, family, friends, entertainment, *etc.*; but there is another view of the world, one that is greater and yet, less obvious. This is God's view. We learn from scripture and church history that God works in the midst of the world to bring his own plans to fruition. God has the grand design that brings about his purposes, using even those who do not acknowledge him.

We see this as we come to some of the concluding chapters in Acts. For the last two weeks, as we have continued through his life in the late 50's A.D., we have seen God give Paul the assurance that God is going to have Paul take the facts of the gospel to Rome for teaching. This assurance came while Paul was in a Roman barracks in Jerusalem, under arrest and subject to Jewish plots against his life. Paul was sent to Caesarea where he was held under guard for two years.

The two years Paul spent in Caesarea did not make God a liar. God's promise was still valid. God would have Paul in Rome. But in the meantime, God had other work for Paul to do in Caesarea. Paul was on a major stage interacting with big players in a huge drama that was unfolding for the Jewish people in Judea. The players in the drama were unaware of what the future held, and they acted out their roles as a natural part of day-to-day living. Yet, God was at work with his message proclaimed. When the time was ripe, God fulfilled his promise and brought Paul to Rome. Even that, however, God did in his own way.

In this lesson, let us consider the events in Paul's life with double vision! We should see the way God was working to fulfill his purposes. We should also see it against the fabric of those blind to God and his purposes merely going through the process of living day to day in the world of politics, economics, family, and life. By necessity, we will include some post-Paul history in this lesson to help us better see what God was doing over all. Luke's history ends with just a few more years of Paul's life, but we will also consider what other historians have told us happened after Luke's account ended.

PAUL BEFORE FESTUS

Last lesson, we went into detail about Paul before the governor Felix. For two years, Felix held Paul and would visit with Paul over religious matters. We know that at least the first visit included Drusilla, a young Jewess who was Felix's third wife. While Paul was one of Felix's problems, he was hardly the biggest problem. As we discussed last week, the Jewish/Roman historian Josephus (37–after 100 A.D.)¹ gives us a great deal of insight into the situation where we find Paul.

¹ Because we rely on Josephus in this lesson so heavily for understanding the Jewish/Roman times surrounding Paul, we might briefly identify him in more detail. Josephus was born 37 A.D. in Jerusalem into a family of Jewish priests. Josephus received a top Jewish education conversing with priests about legal issues while still a teenager. Josephus spent his last three teenage years exploring the different Jewish sects before settling on being a Pharisee. Josephus was politically active with many of the people we are considering in these lessons on Paul. Josephus sailed to Rome to negotiate the release of Jewish priests sent to Rome under arrest by Governor Felix. Josephus also gave his support to Agrippa and Bernice in their attempts to keep the Jews at peace against Rome. Ultimately, when war broke out between the Jews and Rome,

Caesarea was a hot bed of discontent and discord between the Jews and the non-Jewish locals. There was a fight over the rights of citizens in Caesarea based, in large part, on whether Caesarea was considered a Jewish city or a Roman one. The dispute soon evolved into physical violence. Governor Felix saw the quarrel as an early stage local war and brought his troops to bear. The troops ultimately killed a number of Jews and were allowed to plunder the Jewish homes.

Felix was not a natural for his job, and Roman historians show a rather unkind view of him among the Roman elite. As we quoted from Tacitus last week, “Antonius Felix, practiced every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of a king with all the instincts of a slave.”² Felix undoubtedly questioned his job security considering his inability to quell the riots and fighting. Ultimately, as Luke informs us, Felix lost his job and was replaced by Porcius Festus (Acts 24:27). We know from Josephus that as Festus was replacing Felix, “the leaders of the Jewish community of Caesarea went up to Rome to accuse Felix.”³ These were crosswinds that seemed to be dictating the life events of Paul. No doubt recognizing what was coming, and in an effort to protect himself, Felix kept Paul captive. As Luke recorded it, “When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. Desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison” (Acts 24:27) (The favor did not work; the Jews went to Nero and complained anyway.).

Into this barely controlled chaos came the “new man,” Festus, trying to do the job of governing the powder keg situation Felix could not handle. Festus had to know the problem concerned certain Jews and certain Syrians who were at each other’s

Josephus commanded Jewish forces in Galilee. He was beaten by Vespasian, but ultimately was used by the Romans as an intermediary and interpreter with the rebelling Jews. After the war, Josephus moved to Rome where he was given citizenship and a stipend to write the histories we have still today. Much of Josephus’s life is found in his autobiography (*The Life*). My favorite translations are those in the Loeb Classical Library, but the most cited is that of William Whiston. Whiston’s dates from the 1700’s, but is available at a reduced rate compared to buying the 13 volumes of the Loeb publishers. Should one wish to read Josephus first hand, get the Kregel edition of Whiston with excellent commentary by Paul L. Maier (*The New Complete Works of Josephus*). Everything Josephus wrote along with commentary by Maier is in one volume that brings the translation somewhat up to date. Maier has also produced a very readable modern translation of Josephus that is superb; however, it does not have all of Josephus.

² Tacitus, *Histories*, Book 5.9. Loeb Classical Library (Harvard 1931) translated by John Jackson.

³ Jewish Antiquities, Book 20.9 (Loeb translation Louis Feldman).

throats. Just three days after arriving in the province, Festus went up to Jerusalem, no doubt as part of his effort to gain intelligence on the local problems as well as to form relationships that would help him in his efforts to govern. It was during this visit that certain key Jews laid out their case against Paul.⁴ The Jewish leaders asked Festus for the favor of having Paul brought back to Jerusalem to stand trial. This was another effort to ambush Paul and kill him.

Festus was not willing to be fully compliant with the Jews and instructed them that Paul was in Caesarea, Festus was headed there shortly, and the case could proceed in Caesarea. Festus wanted the Jews to send those with the charges against Paul into Caesarea.

Festus stayed in Jerusalem for eight to ten days before going into Caesarea. The very day after arriving in Caesarea, Festus took his seat in the tribunal. This was the formal seat from which Festus would take on the role of judge and jury. It would be much like a judge assuming the bench in a courtroom in our culture today. The Jews tried to make their case against Paul, accusing him of violating Jewish law, the temple, and the laws of Caesar. The problem with their case, as Paul pointed out when his turn to speak came, was that there was no proof at all that Paul committed any offense. There were merely allegations.

Festus decided a way to appease the Jews and still handle Paul rightly under Roman law would be sending Paul to Jerusalem for trial. Perhaps in Jerusalem, the Jews could muster some witnesses to prove their allegations. Festus asked Paul whether he might want to go to Jerusalem. Paul declined stating:

I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:10-11).

“*Appello ad Caesarem.*” This Latin phrase was the right of a Roman citizen since at least 23BC. In the Roman legal procedure called *provocatio*, a citizen

⁴ Luke relays these facts in Acts 25. Luke does not tell us, but we may fairly surmise, that the Jewish leaders were, much like Tertullus their lawyer had done earlier (Acts 24) implicating Paul in the civil unrest. The leaders saw the regional chaos a chance to get rid of Paul if the authorities would believe that Paul was one of the instigators.

condemned by a tribunal had the right to appeal the decision to Caesar.⁵ That might seem remarkable to many today, for the idea of an ordinary citizen having a hearing before the President of the United States is inconceivable. However, Luke was writing in a different era and culture. We must never fail to put Luke into his historical timeframe. Failure to do so has led many scholars to faulty conclusions, often times wrongfully casting doubt on Luke's veracity.

This is an area that one can study fully without even delving into religious writers or scholars. We have great writings that give a good picture of Roman law in criminal proceedings, including the right of a citizen to appeal to Caesar. At this time in the Roman Empire, Caesar was ruler in the sense of ultimate administrator of law for the citizenry. Caesar used governors to handle the court matters in the outer provinces. As Roman legal scholar J. A. Crook explained,

In the provinces the governor was the sole independent jurisdictional authority, and although he could delegate his power, it is clear that one of his principal duties was to tour the province holding assizes ["court"].⁶

This was the role of the Governors Felix and Festus. Paul was not an "exception" to their normal duties. Handling cases like his was one of their core responsibilities. Similarly, Caesar handled appeals of cases involving the death penalty ("*provocatio*"). Interestingly, from a legal perspective, if the Jews had sought some other punishment for Paul other than death, then Paul's right to appeal to Caesar was not so automatic. Paul's enemies unknowingly stumbled into aiding in the spread of the gospel into the inner reaches of Rome's power structure, as we will see in the coming weeks.

Paul had his eye on where he knew God planned for him to go. Festus was unaware of God's plans, but Festus knew the legal rights of Paul. After conferring with his council, Festus answered, "To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go" (Acts 25:12).

PAUL BEFORE AGRIPPA AND BERNICE

Before arrangements were made and Paul left for Rome, Festus received some very important visitors: King Agrippa and his sister Bernice. Festus laid the case of Paul before Agrippa for Agrippa's insight. Agrippa said he would like to hear Paul's case personally, so an opportunity was made for the presentation the very

⁵ Berger, Adolf, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law*, (The American Philosophical Society 1980), at 660.

⁶ Crook, J. A., *Law and Life in Rome*, (Cornell 1967), at 70.

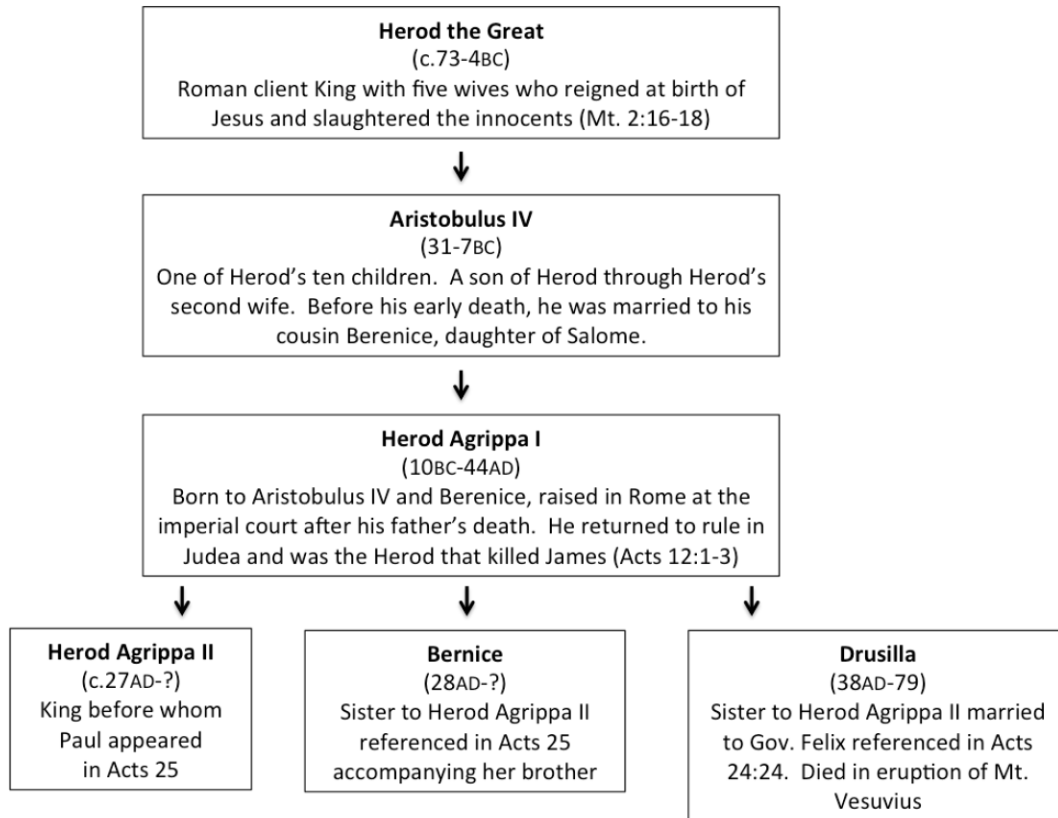
next day. We should pause from Luke's history and consider a few facts about King Agrippa and Bernice.

King Agrippa came from a family that had various roles of leadership in Judea for generations. King Agrippa's father was Herod Agrippa I, referenced in Acts 12:1 as simply "Herod the king" ("About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also." Acts 12:1-3). King Herod's grandfather had been Herod the Great who had rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem and had ordered the slaughter of the innocents out of fear of Jesus (Mat. 2:16-18).⁷ King Agrippa had three sisters, two of which Luke writes about. The oldest sister was Bernice who lived with Agrippa and accompanied him to visit Festus.⁸ Subsequent to the time period we are reading of in Acts, Bernice came to live, for a time, in Rome as a wife to the Roman Emperor Titus.⁹ Agrippa's youngest sister was Drusilla, the wife of the recently fired Governor Felix.

⁷ Josephus sets out the lineage of the Herodian dynasty in Jewish Antiquities Book 18 chapter 4.

⁸ This sibling relationship was evidently subject of much gossip. A generation later, the satirist Juvenal wrote of Bernice as the "incestuous sister" to "the barbarian Agrippa." *Satire* 6 at lines 156-158.

⁹ Evidently, Bernice never formally married Titus. Tacitus (c. 55 – 120) wrote of Titus's "passionate longing to see again Queen Bernice" (*Histories*, book 2.2). Suetonius would add that Titus had a "notorious passion for queen Bernice, to whom it was even said that he promised marriage." *Lives of the Caesars*, book 8.7. Dio Cassius (c. 150-235) recorded "Bernice was at the very height of her power and consequently came to Rome along with her brother Agrippa. The latter was given the rank of praetor, while she dwelt in the palace, cohabiting with Titus. She expected to marry him and was already behaving in every respect as if she were his wife; but when he perceived that the Romans were displeased with the situation, he sent her away." *Roman History*, book 65 at 15.3ff.



It is worth noting that about 35 years later, King Agrippa wrote Josephus having read Josephus's history of this time and applauded the works and their accuracies. According to Josephus, Agrippa wrote:

King Agrippa to dearest Josephus, greeting. I have perused [meaning "read carefully" not "scanned!"] the book with greatest pleasure. You seem to me to have written with much greater care and accuracy than any who have dealt with the subject. Send me the remaining volumes. Farewell.¹⁰

Looking through the lens of historical knowledge that even Luke had not experienced, we must be amazed at what was happening here. Paul was wrongly held in Caesarea. For two years, he testified to Felix. Felix left Paul as a favor to the Jews and Festus got to hear Paul's defense. Then, because Paul appealed to Rome, Paul was still in Caesarea to be brought before Agrippa and Bernice. In the eyes of faith, this was no mere coincidence. Through the connections Paul made in this time in Caesarea, Paul was testifying before people who would ultimately walk the highest walls of power in Rome.

¹⁰ Josephus, The Life section 365 (Loeb Classical Library translation by H. J. Thackeray).

Returning now to the Biblical narrative, we read that King Agrippa and Bernice entered the audience hall “with great pomp” along with the military tribunes and the prominent men of Caesarea. Festus then ordered that Paul be brought in. Upon Paul’s arrival, Festus began the proceeding:

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 (Acts 25:24-27).

With the agenda thus set, Agrippa instructed Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself.” Paul struck the orator’s pose, with hand extended, and made his defense. Of course, Paul knew who Agrippa was. Paul addressed him by his title, “King Agrippa,” emphasizing that Agrippa was “familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews” (Acts 26:3).

Paul went back to his beginning, telling Agrippa of his life as a Pharisee. Paul kept his emphasis on the core issue: God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. Paul explained it had not always been his conviction, but on the Damascus journey, Paul’s disbelief fled before the resurrected Jesus appearing and speaking to Paul personally. Jesus not only appeared to Paul, he explained, but he also commissioned Paul to take the good news to the Jews and beyond proclaiming to Gentiles forgiveness of sin and life in the light instead of darkness. Paul took that message to the Gentiles teaching them to live holy lives worthy of their calling, and for that, the Jews were after him. Paul knew and explained he was proclaiming the promise of Moses and the prophets; Jesus Christ was the first of many in resurrection for Jew and Gentile alike.

At this statement, the newcomer Governor Festus interrupted loudly claiming, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind!” (Acts 26:24). Paul politely replied, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner” (Acts 26:26-27).

Having politely responded to Festus, Paul then returned his focus to Agrippa. “King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” Agrippa seemed a bit taken aback by how boldly Paul took an academic discussion into the king’s personal zone. Agrippa answered Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” The import of what Paul was saying was not lost on Agrippa, the man who would one day be walking the halls of the Emperor of Rome.

Paul did not hedge. He spoke his heart: “Whether short or long, I would say to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.” Amen!

After this King Agrippa, Bernice, and Governor Festus rose, along with those in their company and left together. Once they were alone, they said, “This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.” Agrippa then added, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.” Luke ends our narrative of Agrippa at that point. Next week, we study Paul setting sail for Rome.

CONCLUSION

Vision is a funny thing. It can be deceiving when a glasses-needed 12-year old is trying to dodge chug holes he doesn’t see in an old dirt road. But equally blind are those who operate out of their own sight rather than the eternity-piercing, all-knowing sight of the Lord. Events occur; people come and go; history repeats itself, but He is always there.

Paul’s Jewish enemies wanted him dead. Pursuing their vision resulted in the opposite result. Instead of ending Paul’s ministry, Paul was able to spread the gospel into the halls of the powerful, all the way to Rome. Paul had faith in God’s promise, so Paul walked by his faith in God’s sight rather than faith in his own. God’s sight proved right.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “*Now when some days had passed...*” (Acts 25:13).

God’s timing is profound. It is tied to his plans and his purposes. We see in a mirror, but dimly (1 Cor. 13:12). We are not in a position to know why and how God is working. But while our world goes on, while leaders are elected and deposed, while the economy roars forward or retreats, while generations are born and generations pass away, God is at work bringing history to its proper close. At the end, we will see more fully. We should readily join the words of Daniel 2:20-23: ““Blessed be the name of God

forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness and the light dwells with him. To you, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise.”

2. “*I am speaking true and rational words*” (Acts 26:25).

Paul’s words were true; but even more, Paul makes the point his faith was rational. Faith is not some pie in the sky wishful thinking. Karl Marx wrote, “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people” but Marx was wrong as he referenced the faith of orthodox Christianity, the faith of Paul. Paul never taught a faith of feelings. He had fought against the very faith he ultimately gave his life for. Paul came to belief almost kicking and screaming. But with the enlightenment of the Spirit, Paul found a faith that made perfect sense with the Law and Prophets he had studied his whole life. It was a reasonable faith. Unfortunately, we live in an era when among some educated circles, a literal belief in Christian orthodoxy is often ridiculed or at least punctuated with the idea, “you must be out of your mind!” Yet, we are not. We are more rightly in our mind than ever before!

3. “*Do you believe the prophets?*” (Acts 26:27).

Paul rightly brought the point home for Agrippa as we do for us today. God is not simply a God of history who has worked his miracles on Golgotha and throughout his people. God seeks everyone on an individual basis. Do *you* believe?