

The Context Bible

Life Group Lesson 42

October 13, 2014 – October 19, 2014

Acts 23:35-Acts 27:44

Have you ever wished the Bible was easier to read through like an ordinary book – cover to cover? Because the Bible is a collection of 66 books, reading it like an ordinary book is quite difficult. Compounding this difficulty is the fact that the later writers of the New Testament were often quoting or referencing passages in the Old Testament. In fact, much of the New Testament makes better sense only if one also considers the Old Testament passages that place the text into its scriptural context.

You are reading a running commentary to The Context Bible. This arrangement of Scripture seeks to overcome some of these difficulties. Using a core reading of John's gospel, the book of Acts, and the Revelation of John, the Context Bible arranges all the rest of Scripture into a contextual framework that supports the core reading. It is broken out into daily readings so that this program allows one to read the entire Bible in a year, but in a contextual format.

Here is the running commentary for week forty-two, along with the readings for week forty-three appended. Join in. It's never too late to read the Bible in context!

Week Forty-Two Readings

<p>10/13 Paul Sent to Felix the Governor Acts 23:23-23:35</p> <p>Esther 4-7</p> <p>10/14 Paul Sent to Felix the Governor Acts 23:23-23:35</p> <p>Esther 8-10 Luk 21:5-21:24, 21:29-21:38</p> <p>10/15 Paul Before Felix Acts 24:1-24:21</p> <p>Eccles 8:6-8:13 Pslm 24 Pslm 35 Prov 24:17-24:18 Prov 18:17</p>	<p>10/16 Paul Kept in Custody Acts 24:22-25:12</p> <p>Pslm 9 Prov 20:5 Prov 17:24</p> <p>Before Agrippa and Bernice Acts 25:13-25:27</p> <p>Titus 3 Eccles 8:1-8:5</p>	<p>10/17 Paul's Defense Before Agrippa Acts 26:1-26:11</p> <p>Isa 61:5-61:11 Luk 4:26 1 Kgs 17:8-17:24 Luk 4:27 2Kgs 5</p> <p>Paul Tells of Conversion Acts 26:12-26:32</p> <p>Pslm 32</p> <p>10/18 Paul Sails for Rome Acts 27</p> <p>1 Pet 1:3-1:7 Isa 48:1-48:11 Prov 15:29-15:32</p> <p>10/19 Off</p>
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BACKGROUND

This week's supplemental readings to the Acts account of Paul include the Old Testament writing of Esther. For the written lesson, therefore, we have a two-fold lesson. First, we look at Esther. Second, we consider the latter parts of Paul's journey along with some additional Old Testament readings that accompany the narrative.

Paul Sent to Felix the Governor (Acts 23:23-35; Esther 1-10; Luke 21:5-24, 29-38)

The story of Esther fits well with the story of Paul before Felix. In both stories, we have a Jew going before a pagan leader seeking justice. In Esther, Esther seeks the earthly salvation of the Jews. In Acts, we have Paul seeking eternal salvation of Jews and Gentiles alike. In Esther, we have the heroine seeking her own rescue and life. In Acts, we have Paul willingly giving himself up for his mission. Her calling to stand up for God's people surprised Esther. Paul could not have been surprised. Jesus taught that his people would be arrested and brought before kings and rulers (Lk. 21:5-24, 29-38). So we look at Esther, a remarkable story of God's hand moving in history.

Esther is a marvelous tale that can thrill old and young alike. It has multiple plot lines that weave storylines of intrigue in the Persian palace, heroic intervention into planned genocide of God's people, the rise of a foreign orphan to the world's most powerful woman, immigrant Jews reaching high posts in foreign government, and the humorous fall of a pompous fool who does himself in. The book has subtle word play in the Hebrew, a great awareness of Persian court procedures, some interesting plot lines that reinforce stereotypes of historical figures, and many other noteworthy features. The best way to explore these and other related issues (*e.g.*, is this a historical story or is it a historical novel/short story?) is to dig right into the story itself, pausing where appropriate to examine things in a bit more detail.

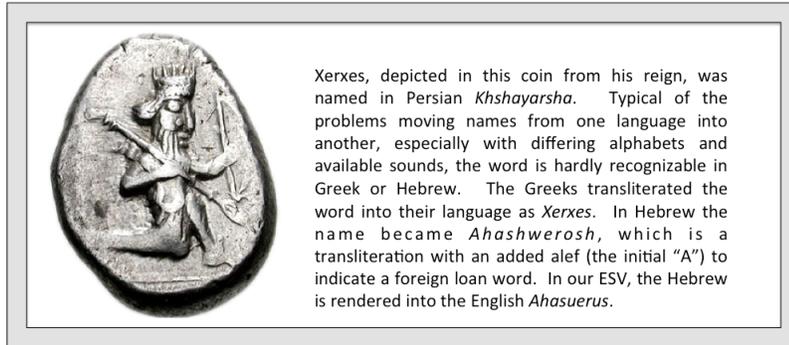
NARRATIVE STORY

The book begins,

Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants (Est. 1:1-3).

This places the storyline beginning in year three of the reign of Ahasuerus, known to most people by the Greek-derived version of his name, Xerxes I. Xerxes reigned from 486-465 BC. Xerxes was a king historically famous for his extravagant parties. History notes him as both arrogant and fickle. Most of the historical information we have on

Xerxes comes from the Greek historian Herodotus (c.484-c.430BC) in his books on the Persian Wars. Herodotus recorded Xerxes as overly confident in his abilities and that of his armies. He also noted Xerxes rapidly changed his mind in military matters, listening to one counselor, then another.¹ His interest in court luxuries, building programs and failed military campaigns caused notable increases in taxes, and many scholars attribute his reign as the beginning of decay of the Persian Empire.²



Some scholars consider the reference to “over 127 provinces” as inaccurate since Xerxes inherited the Empire’s 20 provinces (or “Satraps”) as his father Darius organized. Those twenty provinces, however, were subdivided into smaller sections for tax and governing purposes. The tax divisions did exceed 127, and did spread “from India to Ethiopia” as noted in Esther.³

The book then begins to detail its plot by placing the first set of events at a series of banquets. Banquets play a major role in the book, with ten banquets mentioned over the book’s ten chapters. From his capital of Susa, Xerxes gave two banquets and Vashti, his queen, gave the third banquet mentioned. The queen’s banquet was a feast for the women in the palace, and was apparently running concurrently with the King’s second banquet. On the seventh day of the King’s banquet, he ordered his seven eunuchs to bring Vashti in her regal splendor so he could show her off. The queen refused to leave her own bash and come. Xerxes’ anger “burned within him” over the flagrant disregard of his imperial edict. The King consulted his seven counselors over the legal ramifications of the queen’s disobedience, and the discussion evolved around the effect the queen’s disrespect would have over all women in the Empire. The concern was that all noble women would henceforth refuse the direction and instructions of their husbands (“there will be contempt and wrath in plenty” Est. 1:18).

¹ See, e.g., Herodotus, VII.1-14. It should be noted that as a Greek, Herodotus has a bias against Xerxes, which likely shows itself in his appraisals of character and events.

² T. Cuyler Young, Jr., “The Consolidation of the Empire and its Limits of Growth Under Darius and Xerxes,” *Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge 1988), v. IV, at 71 notes that Xerxes,

never lived up to his early promise and was certainly never the king, or perhaps the man, that his father Darius had been.

³ See the taxation districts noted by Herodotus at III.89-97.

The best solution suggested was that a royal decree and law be issued and published throughout the kingdom that:

Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she (Est. 1:19).

Historians cannot conclusively determine Vashti's identity. Herodotus (VII.61) recorded a wife of Xerxes to be *Amestris*. Of course taking a Persian name into Greek and into Hebrew is not a simple task, as noted earlier with *Xerxes/Ahashwerosh/Khshayarsha*. Among others, William Shea has articulated how the name Vashti could be a Hebrew version of a Persian name that might go into Greek as *Amestris*. See, "Esther and History," Andrews University Seminary Studies 14 (1976) at 236ff.

Sometime later, the king decides he needs a formal queen in addition to his large harem. His younger counselors suggested a national beauty pageant! Officers in all the provinces were to gather their prettiest virgins and send them to the head harem eunuch in Susa. Among the population at Susa was a Jew named Mordecai whose family had been carted off from Jerusalem during the Babylonian exile a century earlier. Mordecai, who seemingly

traced his lineage back to King Saul, was rearing his niece, an orphaned Jew named Hadassah in Hebrew, Esther in Persian. Knowing Esther's obvious beauty, Mordecai took her to the chief harem eunuch and entered her in the beauty contest. Before releasing Esther into the eunuch's care, Mordecai told her to tell no one of her Jewish heritage.

For a year, Esther learned the ways of court and prepared for her beauty audition with the king. Mordecai would wonder into the front court of the harem to check in on her each day. On the evening Esther had her regal audition, she dressed and carried herself exactly as the eunuch recommended. Esther's charms had already won over the eunuch, as well as others involved in the affairs.

Esther's efforts paid off:

The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti (Est. 2:17).

Following this decision, we have the fourth banquet, this one in Esther's honor. It was called "Esther's feast."

Some time later, Mordecai was in the king's gate when he overheard two men conspiring to kill the king. Mordecai got this information to Queen Esther and she in turn relayed it to the king. Esther still had not revealed her Jewish heritage, but gave the information in the name of Mordecai. After sufficient investigation, the allegations were found true and the two conspirators were hanged. The event itself was recorded in the king's chronicles and time passed on.

Some time later, the king promoted a man named “Haman the Agagite” high among his court officials. A Jew who was well grounded in history would have been on high alert over the possible interplay between the Benjaminite Mordecai and the Agagite Haman. Agag was the Amalekite king who was defeated by Mordecai’s relative King Saul. Saul was supposed to have killed Agag, but instead captured him. This was a straw that broke the camel’s back in Saul’s reign, precipitating his loss of the crown (see 1 Sam. 15). The story is almost setting up “Saul vs. Agag 2 – the Sequel!”

Mordecai’s name is not Jewish. It means “man (or “worshiper”) of Marduk, a pagan god. For a long time, critics and supporters of a historical Esther noted that the name Mordecai is nowhere to be found in Persian records. (See, Hoschander, J., *The Book of Esther in the Light of History* (Dropsie College 1923), at 297; Gaster, T. H., *Purim and Hanukkah in Custom and Tradition* (Henry Schuman 1950), at 4). Discovery and publication of Persian texts has changed that view considerably. We now have over thirty texts that date in a range of the Esther account and name up to four individuals as *Marduka* or *Marduku*, the Persian equivalent of Mordecai. Edwin Yamauchi notes that one of these four could even be the Biblical Mordecai. *Persia and the Bible*, (Baker 1990), at 235. With Mordecai frequently referred to as sitting at the King’s gate (Est. 2:19, 21; 5:9, 13), it indicates that Esther’s uncle was in some position of standing in the government.

Haman relished the fact that with his new rank, people were supposed to bow before him. Mordecai, however, was not going to bow to the Agagite! Haman found out about Mordecai’s persistent refusal to bow, and decided to take out not only Mordecai, but to kill all the Jews. Haman and his compatriots decided to cast dice to determine the day for the Jewish annihilation. The casting of the die was, in Persian, a casting of “*pur*,” *pur* being Persian for “lot” (the plural of “lots” is *purim*).

Haman went before King Xerxes and told him of a pernicious people in the land whose “laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king’s laws” (Est. 3:8). Haman suggested the king decree that the Jews should be destroyed. The king agreed, and the edict was issued throughout the empire that on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (the month of “Adar”), all peoples were free to kill any and every Jew, keeping the Jews possessions as plunder. Haman and the king then sat down for the story’s fifth feast/banquet.

Mordecai, and Jews throughout the empire, received the news with great terror. There was weeping and lamenting, as the people reverently began fasting, and wearing sackcloth and ashes. The queen, still a closet Jew, heard and sent fresh clothes to Mordecai, but Mordecai refused to wear them. Unable to meet with Mordecai face to face, Esther sent a eunuch to find out what was the problem. Mordecai informed the eunuch and sent him back with a copy of the decree and a request that Esther plead with the king for the life of the Jews. Esther sent the eunuch back explaining that no one can come before the king without first being invited. To do otherwise was to risk death, unless the king held out his golden scepter. Esther added that it had been a full thirty days since she had last been in the king’s presence.

Mordecai sent word back through the messenger eunuchs that Esther would not escape the penalty. In fact, her refusal to help would just mean help would come from another,

while she and her family's house would be destroyed. Mordecai then added the important encouragement,

Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? (Est. 4:15).

Esther sent back word that she would indeed approach the king uninvited, but first, she wanted Mordecai and other Jews in Susa to join Esther and her servants in a three-day fast. As we noted earlier the persistent theme of banquets in the book, we should note also the “anti-banquet” here of Mordecai, the Jews, Esther, and her attendants fasting. Following the fast, Esther assured her uncle that she would then do the illegal deed of approaching the king and accepting the consequences: “If I perish, I perish” (Est. 4:16). Mordecai did exactly as Esther instructed.

The book of Esther is built around a number of chiasms. That there are ten banquets is likely no accident. The first banquet mentioned (the 180 day feast) really does not add much to the story, but it does give a full five banquets before the fasting. There are then five banquets after the fasting. This centering of the fasts draws attention to the fasts, a matter considered again later in this lesson in the points for home.

After three days, Esther dressed in her regal best and went into the king's inner court. The king, seeing Esther, extended his golden scepter and welcomed her. Asking why she had come, the king offered to give Esther her heart's desire. Esther responded that she wanted the king and Haman to come to a feast she had prepared in honor of the king (banquet number six). This banquet stands in stark contrast to the one the king had held and commanded his queen to appear. Here, the king is asked by the queen to appear!

The king and Haman rush to get to the banquet while the food was still fresh! Knowing that the food was a road to a destination, at the banquet, the king again asked Esther what she wanted, offering to give her up to half of his kingdom! Esther responded that her only desire was that the king and Haman might come to a second banquet. Esther promised at the second banquet to pour out her heart to the king.

The evening after the first banquet, Haman skipped home, proud, happy, and excited about the future. Things, he thought, surely were coming up rosy! While going home, Haman came across Mordecai who still refused to bow. It filled Haman with wrath, but he restrained himself from immediate violence. Once home, Haman called in his wife and friends and told them all about his successes. He detailed how king and queen alike loved him. It is helpful to appreciate his attitude if we understand that the king of Persia was noted for *not* dining with others. It was rare for the king to do so (making the ten banquets in Esther even more important and attention-getting to the person knowledgeable about Persian court). Cuyler Young explains,

He remained in considerable seclusion a great deal of the time. Access to his person was tightly controlled, and when one was in his presence, the rules of decorum were complex and rigidly enforced.⁴

No wonder Haman was so proud! He told his audience,

Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she prepared. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king (Est. 5:12).

Yet in the midst of his excitement, he could not shake the anger over Mordecai. He complained that all the great events were “worth nothing” as long as Haman saw Mordecai alive. Haman’s wife and friends advised him to have a high gallows made and then at the next feast, tell the king to hang Mordecai and be done with him. Haman thought this plan splendid, and placed the orders for constructing the gallows.

With plans to hang Mordecai, Haman no doubt slept well that night. Not so King Xerxes. Plagued with insomnia, the king had his book of memorable deeds brought forth and read. One wonders whether the king was hoping the reading would help him sleep or would entertain him through the night. When the story was read of Mordecai’s report of the rebellion, the king asked what honor was given to Mordecai. The king’s attendants replied, “Nothing,” and the king determined to remedy that first thing. The king asked who was at court at such an early hour and the answer was “Haman.” Haman had come to work early to get about the business of hanging Mordecai on the specially prepared gallows.

Here the story gets absolutely funny, albeit on a morbid subject. The king called in Haman to ask about what honor should be given to Mordecai. Haman entered wondering how to posture his request about hanging Mordecai. Two ships were about to collide and Haman had no idea. The king asked Haman, “What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?” Haman, the pompous fool, thinks the king is talking about him! Haman said to himself, “Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?” So Haman answered that the one the king wishes to honor should be allowed to wear royal robes of the king, should be placed on a royal horse (one that wears a royal crown, which Persian horses of the king actually did!), and then one of the king’s most noble officials should have to lead the horse and rider around the busiest parts of town declaring the rider to be honored by the king. Next to hanging Mordecai, this must have been the highest dream of Haman.

One can only imagine the internal reaction of Haman as the words proceeded from the king,

⁴ Young at 81.

Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to MORDECAI THE JEW, who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned (Est. 6:10-11).⁵

Haman was forced to do this deed, the opposite of his plans for coming in early. Haman was the one who had to lead the horse and proclaim the praise on Mordecai. Afterwards, Mordecai returned to the king's gate, and Haman went home in mourning, telling his wife and friends how upside-down the day went. His wife and friends, these same folks who 24 hours earlier had suggested the gallows for Mordecai, now sang a different tune:

If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him (Est. 6:13).

It was during this conversation that the eunuchs arrived to take Haman to the feast, banquet number seven in the book. Haman just thought his day could get no worse.

After the food, during after-dinner drinks, the king re-asked his question of Esther. "What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted to you. And what is your request?" The story is written to show the king practically begging Esther to tell him what was behind the royal treatment! Esther plays it very carefully and simply: "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request" (Est. 7:3).

The king's body language must have been responsive to her request, probably indicating an amazement that she should even have to ask such. She continued,

For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated (Est. 7:4).

Esther explained that she would not bother the king if she and her people were merely being sold into slavery out from under the king, but the death and annihilation prompted her request.

The king goes crazy with anger demanding, "Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?" (Est. 7:5). Then the other shoe drops and Esther answers, "A foe and an enemy! This wicked Haman!" Then, the story tells us, Haman was terrified before the king *and the queen!* The king is so angry that he storms out of the room into the

⁵ One might wonder over this active involvement by the Persian king in such a trivial matter. Cuyler, at 81, explained that the Persian king "was all powerful: his words were law, and even small details of government were often referred to him for decisions." This was not an oddity, but was typical.

garden. Haman began begging for his life from Esther. The king returned, just in time to see Haman falling on the couch where Esther was reclined. The king saw it as Haman attacking the queen, and declared, “Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?”⁶ One of the eunuchs then spoke up and told the king that Haman had built a gallows for hanging Mordecai. The king put two and two together and ordered that Haman be hung on that very gallows. It was done immediately.

The king followed Haman’s hanging by giving to the queen the house of Haman, which Esther placed under the care of Mordecai. Esther then told the king that Mordecai was her uncle, and the king elevated Mordecai to a position of honor in the court. Esther then told the king the fuller plan of Haman the Agagite (the emphasis there again reminding the studious Jew of the final foil of Saul’s house over Agag’s). Esther begged the king to revoke his order, but the king said instead the plan would need to avert slaughter by another decree, not by revoking the first one.

The story of Esther makes great use of the Hebrew word *napal*, meaning to “fall.” The word is first used in Est. 3:7 where Haman let the “fall” of the Pur (or “lot”) determine the date of the annihilation of the Jews. Then the rest of Esther turns the word back upon Haman. In Est. 6:10, Haman is told to decorate and honor Mordecai and to not “fall short” in any of the praise. Then three verses later as Haman recounted his horrible day, his wife noted that Haman had “begun to fall” before Mordecai and that he would “surely fall before him.” The final indignity on Haman is found in Est. 7:8 and the word is used as Haman “was falling on the couch where Esther was.” Haman’s fate was sealed by his falling, even as he tried to seal the fate of the Jews with the falling lot.

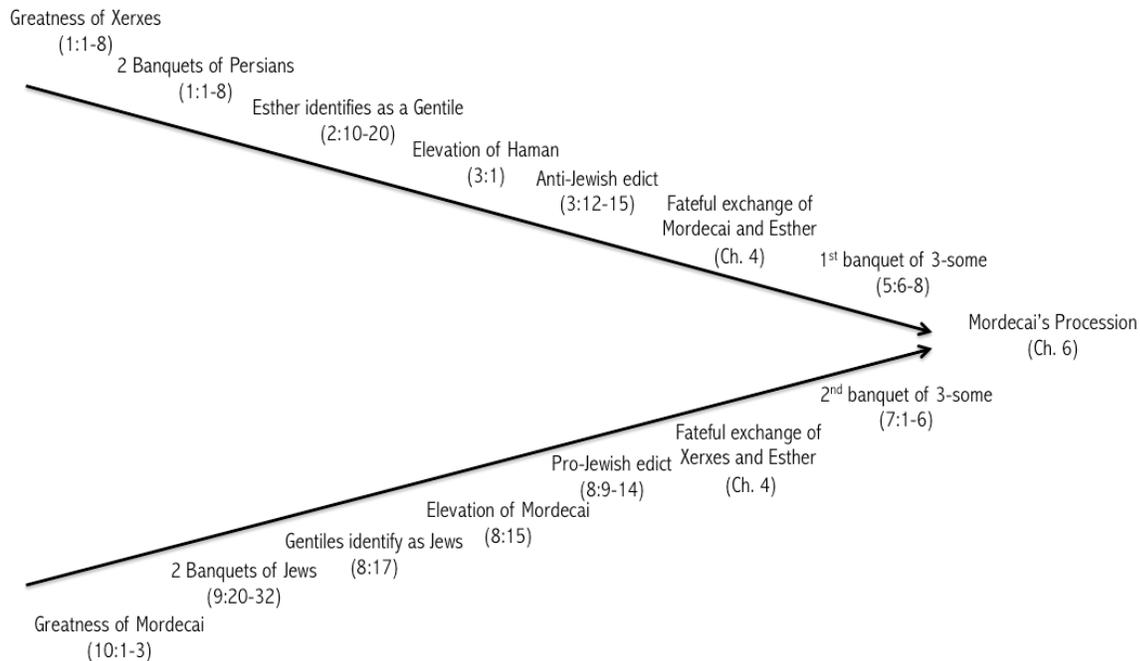
Mordecai then dictated an edict that allowed the Jews to defend themselves on the day that was set for their slaughter. The Jews were allowed to kill and plunder any who sought them ill will, throughout the empire. The news was received with great joy among the Jews in the empire, and it was celebrated with a feasting holiday (banquet number eight - Est. 8:17). Many Gentiles are so concerned that they identify themselves as Jews at this point! When the day came, the Jews were able to strike down their enemies that hated them, and the thirteenth and fourteenth days of Adar were days of Jewish victory. On the fourteenth, the Jews throughout the kingdom celebrated the victory with feasting (banquet number nine). The Jews in Susa had some cleanup killing to do on the fourteenth, so they held their feasting (banquet number ten) on the fifteenth of Adar.

The book closes with the explanation that in the future, Jews were to celebrate annually, the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar as future days of feasting and gift giving (gifts of food, of course. It is, after all, a banqueting celebration!) The holiday was called “Purim” after the plot devised with casting “Pur” or “lots.” Mordecai recorded the

⁶ Old Testament scholar Jon Levenson considers this “the funniest line of the whole book.” He credits the scene of Haman called before Xerxes to honor Mordecai the funniest scene of the book. *Esther* (Westminster John Knox 1997), at 3-4.

information that the book was based upon, as he continued to rise high in the ranks of serving King Xerxes.

Jon Levinson points out the strong chastic elements in portions of the Esther story that focus attention on chapter six Where Haman has to honor Mordecai rather than hang him. It was at this point that the story begins its reversal of fortune for the Jews. (below modified from Levenson, *Esther*, at 8).



CONCLUSION

Purim is still celebrated by Jews today. It is a holiday marked by reading the Esther story, often with the listeners squawking and making noise (with “graggers”) whenever Haman’s name is mentioned, while cheering at the mention of Mordecai. People use the day still to give gifts of food, especially to the poor. Of course, a banquet feast marks the festival as well. For dessert, many eat a cookie called “Haman’s ears” or “Haman’s pockets.” It is a wonderful reminder of a foiled attempt to blot out the Jewish race, something God has said will *never* happen.

Of course, Haman was not the last to try and thwart God’s promise and

Who wrote Esther?

This is a question that no one can answer with any certainty. Certain Jewish tradition ascribes authorship to the “men of the Great Synagogue” (*Baba Bathra* 15a). Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, believed Esther’s author to have been Mordecai, one of the main characters of the story. While there is no proof to support this belief, the author of Esther clearly used the writings of Mordecai (Est. 9:20). Most every scholar agrees that the story has insightful references to life in Persia’s court. Carey Moore noted a number of such facts: the extensiveness of Xerxes’s empire (1:1, 20); Xerxes’s nasty and at times irrational temper (1:12; 7:7-8); Xerxes’s extravagant gifts (5:3; 6:6-7); the rousing drinking parties and ornamental goblets (1:4-7); the seven princely advisers (1:14), the efficient postal system (3:13; 8:10), and more. “Archaeology and the Book of Esther,” *The Biblical Archaeologist*, 38 (1975), at 69f.

eliminate the Jews. Hitler and the Third Reich tried the same thing. Hitler banned the Jewish celebration of Purim and one of Hitler's staunch followers, Julius Streicher (1885-1946) gave a speech on November 10, 1938 accusing the Jews of "butchering" 75,000 Persians "in one night." His reference was to the Purim events set out in Esther. In some perverted manner, Striecher tried to persuade the German populace that the Jewish Purim was a threat to Germany. Striecher said the Jews would institute a Purim in Germany, killing mass Germans, if Germany did not get to the Jews first. Streicher fails to inform anyone that the Jewish killings in Esther were in self-defense because the Persians were trying to eliminate the Jews. Streicher did not have the defense of misreading the Persian, into Greek, English or German. He had the same clear Scriptures, but was contorting them for his own purposes.

Needless to say, Hitler was not ultimately successful. Tragically, he oversaw and orchestrated the murder of millions of Jews, but in the end, God's promise of a Jewish presence on earth was sustained, Hitler was defeated, and out of World War II arose a Jewish state for the first time in millennia. Purim is still celebrated.

Paul Before Felix (Acts 24:1-24:21; Eccles 8:6-8:13; Psalm 24, 35; Proverbs 18:17; 24:17-24:18)

Governor Felix was an interesting man. He had three wives who were all better bred than he was. Felix was a freedman whom many Romans looked down upon. The Roman historian Tacitus, born about this time, would later write of Felix:

Antonius Felix, practiced every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of a king with all the instincts of a slave; he had married Drusilla, the granddaughter of Cleopatra and Antony, and so was Antony's grandson-in-law."⁷

We should note that Tacitus missed a bit of his history here. Felix had three wives. The first of his three wives was the granddaughter of Queen Cleopatra from Egypt. The third wife, taken from another engagement when she was only 16, was a Jewish woman named Drusilla. She was the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa and sister to King Agrippa and Bernice who will figure into our story next week.⁸

After Paul waits for five days, his Jewish accusers come in ready for the hearing. They bring with them a lawyer named Tertullus. The lawyer lays his case before Governor Felix, but not before some schmoozing! "Since *through you* we enjoy much peace, and

⁷ Tacitus, *Histories*, Book 5.9. Loeb Classical Library (Harvard 1931) translated by John Jackson.

⁸ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* Ch. 4.132. See the analysis on Tacitus's error in the notes of Maier on pages 651 and 652. *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, translated by Whiston, commentary by Maier (Kregel 1999).

since *by your foresight, most excellent Felix*, reforms are made for this nation, in everyway and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude” (Acts 24:2-3).⁹

The actual case against Paul hinged on two or three charges (scholars differ in how they divide them):

1. Paul was a troublemaker (“this man...stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world” Acts 24:5).
2. Paul was the ringleader in a fringe religious group (“this man...is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” Acts 24:5).
3. Paul was a desecrater of the temple (“this man...even tried to profane the temple”)

The Jews who came in from Jerusalem were echoing and adding their assents to these charges. All of the Jews would have been well-served by reading Ecclesiastes 8:6-13. Sinners ultimately do not fare well, usually in this life, and certainly in the life to come. But for those who fear God, life sits well, even in difficult times.

Psalm 24 emphasizes the importance of truth and honesty in everyone’s life. The presence of God is found by those who have “clean hands and a pure heart,” by those who do “not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully” (Ps 24:4-5).

After Tertullus finished, Governor Felix motioned for Paul to begin. Paul begins by making a play on the Latin name of Felix. In Latin, Felix comes from *felicitas* meaning “happiness” or “cheerfulness.” While Paul was most likely speaking Greek, he does still make a play off Felix’s Roman (Latin) name as he begins,

“Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I *cheerfully* make my defense” (Acts 24:10).

From there, Paul proceeds with a clear, precise, and dead-on accurate rendition of the facts in his defense. Felix may or may not have smiled at Paul’s use of play on his name (it certainly showed Paul had some dexterity in Latin), but Felix must have been impressed at how Paul dealt straight with the facts. Paul did not resort to flattery; nor did he twist the truth to make himself look better. In fact, Paul even admits where he did make a statement that caused discord among certain Jews.

⁹ Flattery was no more approved of in Paul’s day than it is today. Plutarch (c. AD 45-120) wrote an essay entitled “How to Tell a Flatterer From a Friend.” The essay is found in vol 197 of the Loeb Classical Library (Harvard 1927) translated by Frank Babbitt. Plutarch set a flatterer as an enemy of truth and of the gods. Flattery was evil and flatterers were “those self-ministering trencherslaves...whose tongue will be wagging.” *Ibid.* at 3.

Paul gave verifiable time facts for his time in Jerusalem. Paul testified that no one saw him fussing with anyone or stirring up any crowd in the temple or the city. Paul pointed out Tertullus's absolute lack of proof, including his inability to muster even one eyewitness to back up any of the charges against Paul. Paul underscored that he had always walked the Jewish faith with integrity. Paul would not concede that his Christianity (called "the Way") was any kind of a sect. He believed it to be the true fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, of what we would call the Old Testament. Paul pointed out his purpose in coming to Jerusalem was to bring a contribution to the people there. Paul went to the temple to purify himself. That was it, plain and simple.

Paul pointed out clearly that all Tertullus could offer was hearsay. There was no evidence behind the accusations. Paul committed no wrong. Paul did admit, at the end, that he cried out in the Sanhedrin that it was over a belief in the resurrection of the dead that Paul was on trial, but that was no crime. Bruce wrote that, "Paul's lawyer-like speech is more than a match for the ineffective rhetoric of Tertullus."¹⁰ As a trial lawyer, I say, "Amen!"

Paul spoke clearly and without fear. As Psalm 35 teaches, the Lord fights for those who support him. This psalm teaches that as malicious witnesses rise up against the Lord's servants, the servant may not see the deliverance, but it is right to cry out to God, knowing he will bring forth justice and defense at *some point*. Of course, his timing is not ours!

The governor was obviously not swayed by the speech of Tertullus. Not only did it conflict with Paul's account, but it also violated common sense, was fluff more than substance, and was contradictory to the letter Lysias the tribune had already sent. Governor Felix declared the hearing over and held his ruling until he heard from Lysias.

Luke lets us know that Felix had "a rather accurate knowledge of the Way" no doubt because, at least in part, of his connections through his Jewish wife Drusilla. In fact, after a few days, Felix sent for Paul to discuss some religious matters with himself and Drusilla. They discussed faith in Jesus and the implications of righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment. These discussions "alarmed" Felix, but his reaction was to send Paul away, planning to discuss things again. Luke writes that Felix was also hoping Paul might offer an appropriate gift (*i.e.*, "a bribe") for his freedom, but Paul did no such thing.

So, Paul and the governor became frequent talking companions. But the governor never got his bribe, Paul never got his freedom, and the governor never decided Paul's case.

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text With Introduction and Commentary* (Eerdmans 1951) at 424.

Paul Kept in Custody (Acts 24:22-25:12; Psalm 9; Proverb 20:5; 17:24)

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. The Jewish/Roman historian Josephus (37–after 100 A.D.)¹¹ gives a great deal of insight into the situation where we find Paul.

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 quoted from Tacitus earlier, “Antonius Felix, practiced every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of a king with all the instincts of a slave.” 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.”¹²

¹¹ 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, 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 you wish to read Josephus firsthand, I recommend 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.

¹² Jewish Antiquities, Book 20.9 (Loeb translation by Louis Feldman).

These were crosswinds that seemed to be dictating the life events of Paul. But Paul was living Psalm 9. The psalm calls forth praise to the Lord, with a decision to recount God's wonderful deeds in praise (Ps. 9:1-2). As in the psalm, Paul's enemies had fled, even as Paul stayed locked up. Psalm 9 rejoices over the failure of enemies to defeat God and his servants (Ps. 9:3-6). The Lord is not a temporary judge, nor is he an unfair judge. The Lord is enthroned forever, and he judges in righteousness (Ps. 9:7-8). For that reason Paul could sing praises and rest in the Lord as his stronghold. With the admonition of Prov. 17:24, Paul set his face toward wisdom, not temporal circumstances.

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 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.¹³ 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

¹³ 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 as a chance to get rid of Paul if the authorities would believe that Paul was one of the instigators.

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 condemned by a tribunal had the right to appeal the decision to Caesar.¹⁴ 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 time frame. Failure to do so has led many scholars to faulty conclusions, often 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”].¹⁵

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

¹⁴ Berger, Adolf, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Roman Law*, (The American Philosophical Society 1980), at 660.

¹⁵ Crook, J. A., *Law and Life in Rome*, (Cornell 1967), at 70.

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).

After two years, Porcius Festus succeeded Felix. Felix left office without freeing Paul as a favor to the Jews. Paul was not worried. With the admonition of Prov. 17:24, Paul set his face toward wisdom, not temporal circumstances.

Before Agrippa and Bernice (Acts 25:13-25:27; Titus 3; Ecclesiastes 8:1-8:5)

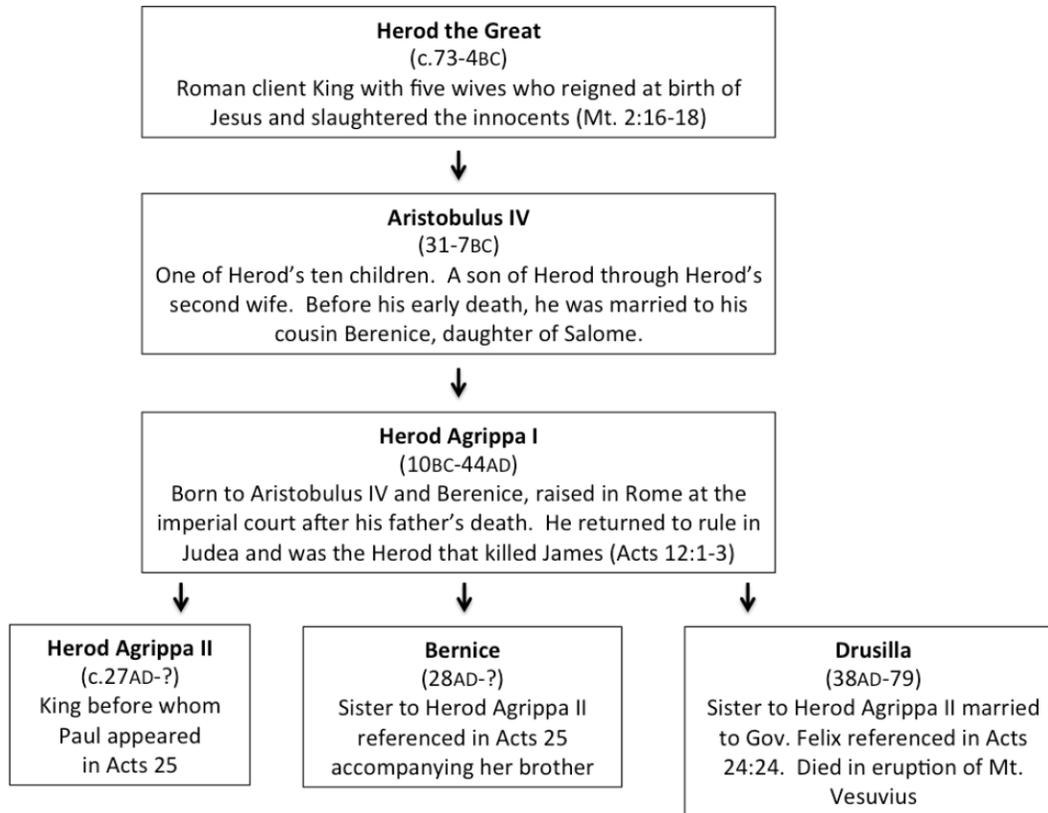
Before arrangements were made and Paul left for Rome, Festus received some very important visitors, King Agrippa and his sister Bernice. Festus laid the case of Paul before Agrippa for Agrippa's insight. Agrippa said he would like to hear Paul's case personally, so an opportunity was made for the presentation the very next day. We should pause from Luke's history and consider a few facts about King Agrippa and Bernice.

King Agrippa ("Herod Agrippa II") 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 Agrippa I'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).¹⁶ King Herod Agrippa II had three sisters, two of which Luke writes about. The oldest sister was Bernice who lived with Agrippa and accompanied him to visit Festus.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ Agrippa's youngest sister was Drusilla, the wife of the recently fired Governor Felix.

¹⁶ Josephus sets out the lineage of the Herodian dynasty in *Jewish Antiquities*, Book 18 chapter 4.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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



Understanding the relationships, and reading Josephus we get a glimpse at the magnificent timing and intricate work of God in Paul's life and through Paul's history. As the story unfolds below, we will see that King Herod Agrippa II, who will hear Paul's defense of the faith, was confronted with the decision of supporting or stopping Christian persecution after hearing of the Jewish authorities killing James the brother of Jesus. This occurred just a year or two after Paul's testimony. Josephus detailed the events and reported that it was King Herod Agrippa II who stopped the further persecution at the time.

It is worth noting that about 35 years later, King Herod Agrippa II 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

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.

me to have written with much greater care and accuracy than any who have dealt with the subject. Send me the remaining volumes. Farewell.¹⁹

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 in prison 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. Moreover, this placed Paul in the perfect position to teach about Jesus to the one man who could stop persecution of the church at the time that Jesus' brother was martyred for his faith.

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 was serious in what he said and how he conducted himself. As Ecclesiastes 8:1-5 warns, wise people are not hasty as they go before a king or one in authority. They are careful, circumspect, and mindful of the role of authority.

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).

¹⁹ Josephus, *The Life* section 365 (Loeb Classical Library translation by H. J. Thackeray).

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 who appeared and spoke 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!

I love to read this account in conjunction with Titus chapter 3. Paul instructed Titus in ways Paul had lived. Titus was to be submissive to rulers and authorities, speaking evil of no one, avoiding quarreling, and showing perfect courtesy to all (Tit. 3:1-2). This is a reflection of the goodness and loving kindness of our God and Savior, who mercifully saved us (Tit. 3:4-7).

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.

QUESTIONS

1. Esther always asks the important question: Do you see yourself in a unique place and time in history, one where God has special things for you and you alone to do? The real lesson is that all of God's children have such a charge!
2. Can you trust God and rely on God in the midst of events that are harsh and scary by the world's standards? Can you wait for God's timing to work through those events?
3. Looking at the authorities in your life, how can you live responsibly and still proclaim the message of God in your words as well as behavior?

Week Forty-Three Readings

<p style="text-align: center;">10/20 on Malta Acts 28:1-10</p> <p style="text-align: center;">10/21 Paul at Rome Acts 28:11-31</p> <p>Phil 1:1-2 Ex 21:1-6 Phil 1:3-20, 27-30 Prv 14:29-30 Phil 4:8-23 Prv 14:31 Phile 1:1-2</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">10/22 Paul at Rome Acts 28:11-31</p> <p>Phile. 1:3-25 Dt. 23:15-16 Col 4:1 Prv 29:19-22 Eph 6:5-9 Prv 17:2</p> <p style="text-align: center;">10/23 Paul at Rome (Cont'd) Acts 24: 28:11-31</p> <p>2 Tm 1:1-14 2 Tm 2:1-13 Mt 10:26-33 Prov 8:13-14</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">10/24 Paul at Rome (Cont'd) Acts 28:11-31</p> <p>2 Tm 2:14-21, 23-26 Prv 26:17-21 2 Tm 4:9-22 Prov 27:18 Prv 18:24 Col. 4:7-18 Prv 11:23 2 Tm 4:1-5 Prv 17:10 2 Tm 4:6-8</p> <p style="text-align: center;">10/25 John's Revelation Rev.1</p> <p>Rom 13:11-14 Col 1:15-23 1 Pt 2:1-12 Isa 28</p> <p style="text-align: right;">10/26 Off</p>
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