

Confinement *in* Caesarea



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 24, Acts 25, Acts 26, 1 Cor. 1:23.*

Memory Text: “‘Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains’” (*Acts 26:29, NRSV*).

Paul's transfer to Caesarea began a two-year imprisonment in that city (*Acts 24:27*), more precisely in Herod's praetorium (*Acts 23:35*), which was the official residence of the Roman governor. During those years, he had several hearings in which he would appear before two Roman governors (Felix and Festus) and a king (Agrippa II), thus further fulfilling the ministry that God gave him (*Acts 9:15*).

In all the hearings, Paul always claimed innocence, alleging that no evidence could be produced against him, as the absence of witnesses demonstrated. In fact, the whole narrative is intended to show that Paul had done nothing worthy of arrest and that he could be released had he not appealed to Caesar (*Acts 26:32*). These hearings, though, did offer him opportunities to witness about Jesus and the great hope found in the promise of the resurrection.

Yet, those were still years of deep anxiety, as well as of tedious confinement in which the apostle seems to have had no support of any kind from the church in Jerusalem, whose leaders “still cherished a feeling that Paul should be held largely responsible for the existing prejudice.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 403.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 22.

Before Felix

Five days after Paul's transfer to Caesarea, a group of important Jewish leaders—the high priest, some members of the Sanhedrin, and a professional lawyer named Tertullus—came down from Jerusalem and formally laid before Felix their case against the apostle (*Acts 24:1–9*).

This is the only trial in Acts in which the accusers employed a lawyer. In his speech, Tertullus tried an interesting strategy to win the governor's favor. It was simply not true that, under Felix, the Jews had enjoyed a long period of peace. In fact, no other governor had been so repressive and violent, and this repression generated an enormous antagonism among the Jews toward Roman rule. With a lot of ingenuity, Tertullus used the governor's own administrative policy to convince him that he would achieve political stability in this case also only by means of severe repression.

Then, he went on to press three specific charges against Paul: (1) that Paul was an agitator who constantly was fomenting unrest among Jews throughout the empire (*Acts 24:5*); (2) that he was a ringleader of the Nazarenes (*Acts 24:5*), which implicated Christianity as a whole as a kind of disruptive movement; and (3) that he had attempted to defile the Jerusalem temple (*Acts 24:6*).

Read Acts 24:10–19. How did Paul answer each one of the charges?

Two further points raised by Paul were devastating to the accusers' case: (1) the absence of the Asian witnesses (*Acts 24:18, 19*), which had the potential of rendering the trial invalid, and (2) the fact that the Jews there could speak only about Paul's hearing before the Sanhedrin the week before (*Acts 24:20*), and as such they had nothing to accuse him of except that he believed in the resurrection of the dead (*compare with Acts 23:6*).

Felix immediately understood the weight of Paul's arguments, also because he was somewhat acquainted with Christianity, probably through his Jewish wife, Drusilla. The fact is that he decided to adjourn the proceedings until further notice (*Acts 24:22*).

Felix's response (*Acts 24:24–27*) revealed much about his character: he procrastinated, he was able to be bribed, and he was opportunistic. Paul had little chance of a fair hearing with someone like Felix.

Read Acts 24:16. Paul said that he strove always to have a “conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men.” What does that mean? What, if anything, would you have to change in order to say the same thing?

Before Festus

After two years holding Paul in prison just to win the favor of the Jews, Felix was replaced by Porcius Festus as the governor of Judea (*Acts 24:27*). Festus ruled from A.D. 60 to 62.

Read Acts 25:1–5. How does this help reveal the hatred that preaching the truth can cause in those who don't want to believe it?

Probably because they already had failed once in their attempt to convince Felix of the charges against Paul, the leaders did not want to take any chances again. In what appears to have been Festus' first visit to Jerusalem, they requested, as a favor to them, a change of jurisdiction, asking him to hand Paul back to them so he could be tried by the Sanhedrin in accordance with Jewish law.

Yet, the request was only a camouflage to conceal their real intent: to kill Paul. Although Festus was willing to reopen the case, he said that the hearing would take place in Caesarea, not in Jerusalem, which means that Paul would be tried by Roman law.

As soon as Festus was back in Caesarea, he convened the tribunal, and Paul's opponents started laying out the charges against Paul (*Acts 25:7*). This time Luke does not repeat the charges, but based on Paul's answer (*Acts 25:8*) we can see that they were similar to the ones brought two years before, perhaps with the further emphasis that, for being an agitator, Paul also represented a threat to the empire.

Read Acts 25:9–12. When sensing that Festus could use him for political reasons, how did Paul react?

In the end, Festus turned out not much different from Felix with regard to his political strategies (*Acts 24:27*). Unwilling to lose the Jews' support so early in his administration by declaring Paul innocent, he thought of granting them their original request: to have the apostle tried by the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

This, however, was not acceptable to Paul, who knew he could not expect to be treated fairly there, left to the whim of his enemies. So, capitalizing on his Roman rights, he insisted that he was entitled to be tried by a Roman tribunal, and envisaging no other way out of that precarious situation, he resolved to appeal to the highest instance of Roman justice, which was the emperor himself.

Before Agrippa

Festus agreed to grant Paul's request to be sent to Rome (*Acts 25:12*). Meanwhile, the governor took advantage of a state visit by Herod Agrippa II to consult him concerning Paul's case, in particular regarding what kind of information he should send to the emperor in his official report. Festus was not yet acquainted enough with Jewish affairs, and Agrippa could certainly help him (*Acts 26:2, 3*).

Read *Acts 25:13–22*. What did Festus tell Agrippa about Paul, and how did the king respond?

Agrippa II, the last of the Herodians, came to Caesarea with his sister Bernice to salute the new governor.

In his description of Paul's case, Festus revealed his surprise that the charges against him were not related to any capital offense, whether political or criminal. Instead, they had to do with matters concerning Jewish religion, in particular a certain Jesus, "who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive" (*Acts 25:19, ESV*). Paul had already stated before the Sanhedrin that he was on trial because of his belief in Jesus' resurrection, and now Festus made it clear that this was indeed the real point at issue.

Read *Acts 25:23–27*. How does Luke describe the ceremony in which Paul appeared before Agrippa?

"And now Paul, still manacled, stood before the assembled company. What a contrast was here presented! Agrippa and Bernice possessed power and position, and because of this they were favored by the world. But they were destitute of the traits of character that God esteems. They were transgressors of His law, corrupt in heart and life. Their course of action was abhorred by heaven."—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 434.

What should this story teach us about how outward appearances, which may be pleasing to human sight, can often be deceptive about the reality behind the appearance? What about ourselves, too? How different is the appearance from the reality?

Paul's Defense

With the scene set and the royal guests seated alongside the governor, the prisoner was brought in to present his defense, which was aimed primarily at Agrippa, as Festus had already heard it before (*Acts 25:8–11*).

Read Acts 26:1–23. What was Paul doing in his speech before Agrippa?

Paul's speech was in fact an autobiographical report of his life both before and after his conversion. In terms of content, it recalls the one in *Acts 22:1–21*, which he spoke before the crowd in Jerusalem.

The apostle began by trying to secure Agrippa's favor. He acknowledged his gratitude for the opportunity to state his case before such an eminent person, all the more so because Agrippa was well acquainted with all the customs and issues related to Jewish religion. For that reason, Agrippa could be of great assistance in helping the Roman governor understand that the charges brought against him had no merit and were false.

The speech can be divided into three parts. In part one (*Acts 26:4–11*), Paul described his former Pharisaic piety, which was widely known among his contemporaries in Jerusalem. As a Pharisee, he believed in the resurrection of the dead, which was essential to the fulfilment of Israel's ancestral hope. The Jews, therefore, were being inconsistent in opposing his teaching, for there was nothing in it that was not fundamentally Jewish. But he understood their attitude quite well, and that was because he himself had once found it so incredible that God could have raised Jesus that even he persecuted those who believed that way.

In part two (*Acts 26:12–18*), Paul reported how his perspective had changed since his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and the call that he received to take the gospel message to the Gentiles.

Paul says, finally, that the impact of what he had seen (*Acts 26:19–23*) was such that he had no choice but to obey and to carry out his missionary activity, the only reason that he was now on trial. The real issue behind his arrest, therefore, was not that he had violated the Jewish law or desecrated the temple. Rather, it was because of his message of Jesus' death and resurrection, which was in full harmony with the Scriptures and allowed believing Gentiles to have an equal share in salvation.

Read Acts 26:18. According to that text, what happens to those who have salvation in Christ? How have you experienced this reality?

Paul Before the Leaders

Although Paul was speaking to Agrippa, Festus was the first to react, as seen in Acts 26:24. Festus would have had no problem if Paul had spoken about the immortality of the soul, but even the ancient Greco-Romans knew that both concepts—immortality and resurrection—do not go along well with one another. Thus, they kept the former and rejected the latter. This is why Paul says elsewhere that the gospel was foolishness to Gentiles (*1 Cor. 1:23*).

In a respectful manner, Paul defended the sanity of his ideas and turned to Agrippa, a Jew who could not only understand him but also who could confirm that what he was saying was in agreement with the Hebrew prophets (*Acts 26:25, 26*).

Read Acts 26:27, 28. What was Agrippa’s response to Paul’s pressing question?

Paul’s question put Agrippa in a difficult position. As a Jew, he would never deny his belief in the Scriptures; on the other hand, if he gave an affirmative answer, there would be no option but for him to accept Jesus as the Messiah. His reply was a clever escape from the logical trap he was in: “‘Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?’” (*Acts 26:28, NRSV; compare with ESV, NIV*)—this is a better translation of the Greek than the traditional, “‘You almost persuade me to become a Christian.’” (*NKJV*).

Paul’s rejoinder reveals an impressive level of commitment to the gospel: “‘Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains.’” (*Acts 26:29, NRSV*). In his last words in that hearing, the apostle did not plead to be free, as were those listening to him. Instead, he wished they could be like him, except for the chains that bound him. Paul’s missionary zeal greatly surpassed his care for his own safety.

Read Acts 26:30–32. How did Agrippa express his conviction of Paul’s innocence?

Festus needed Agrippa’s help only to fill in the report (*Acts 25:25–27*). Paul’s appeal to Caesar had already been formally granted (*Acts 25:12*). The prisoner was no longer under the governor’s jurisdiction.

Read Acts 26:24–28. What did Paul ultimately appeal to, and what should this tell us about what our final authority in matters of faith should always be?

Further Thought: “Did the mind of Agrippa at these words revert to the past history of his family, and their fruitless efforts against Him whom Paul was preaching? Did he think of his great-grandfather Herod, and the massacre of the innocent children of Bethlehem? of his great-uncle Antipas, and the murder of John the Baptist? of his own father, Agrippa I, and the martyrdom of the apostle James? Did he see in the disasters which speedily befell these kings an evidence of the displeasure of God in consequence of their crimes against His servants? Did the pomp and display of that day remind Agrippa of the time when his own father, a monarch more powerful than he, stood in that same city, attired in glittering robes, while the people shouted that he was a god? Had he forgotten how, even before the admiring shouts had died away, vengeance, swift and terrible, had befallen the vainglorious king? Something of all this flitted across Agrippa’s memory; but his vanity was flattered by the brilliant scene before him, and pride and self-importance banished all nobler thoughts.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, pp. 1066, 1067.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, discuss Paul’s decision to appeal to Caesar. Was this decision correct (*compare with Acts 25:25; 26:31, 32*)? To what extent can we legitimately make strategic decisions to protect ourselves instead of relying entirely on God’s care?
- 2 Reflect on Paul’s statement to Agrippa: “ ‘Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision’ ” (*Acts 26:19, NKJV*). What does it tell us about Paul? How faithful are we to our missionary calling as Christians (*1 Pet. 2:9, 10*)?
- 3 Paul had a passion for people—not for numbers, but for people. In his final hearing in Caesarea, he said to his audience that his heart’s desire was that all of them would be like him; that is, saved by God’s grace (*Acts 26:29*). He did not wish his own freedom or justice more than he wished them to experience God’s salvation. What can we learn from his example here? How much are we willing to sacrifice in order to see the gospel spread?
- 4 Agrippa had a chance to hear the gospel right from the mouth of Paul. And yet, he rejected it. How can we be careful not to miss great opportunities when they appear right before us? That is, how can we stay spiritually attuned to the realities around us?

Going House to House

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Kiyong Kwon, a business owner in South Korea, decided that he and other church members needed to go house to house to share the gospel and fill a church that he had planted. “House-to-house work is difficult,” Kwon said. “Most people are not home during the day. Those who are usually don’t want to talk. But I obeyed Ellen White’s advice.”

That advice is found in Ellen G. White’s book *Christian Service*, page 113, and reads, “Of equal importance with special public efforts is house-to-house work in the homes of the people. In large cities there are certain classes that cannot be reached by public meetings. These must be searched out as the shepherd searches for his lost sheep.”

So, every Thursday, Kwon and other church members went from house to house. They didn’t carry religious literature or offer Bible studies. Instead, they asked, “How can we help you and your family?”

One day, Kwon pressed many doorbells without any response. But the front door swung open at one house, and a woman said, “Come in.”

Kwon entered the house but expressed shock at the instant invitation. “Do you know who I am?” he said. “Why did you let me in?”

“I know that you are evangelizing,” she said.

“But most people reject me,” he persisted. “Why are you welcoming me?”

The woman explained that she had dreamed that night that a tall stranger would visit. In the dream, the tall man had opened her front door and told her, “Come out! Hurry!”

“When you pressed the door bell,” she said, “I saw you on the intercom TV screen, and you looked tall. So, I let you in.”

Kwon, growing more surprised by the minute, asked whether he could be of help. “My daughter is depressed,” the woman said. “Please help her.”

“Bring your daughter to the living room,” Kwon said.

“No, my daughter refuses to come out of her room.”

“It will be different this time,” Kwon said. “Just tell her to come out.”

Surprisingly, the daughter came to the living room, and Kwon prayed and read the Bible with her.

He returned the next Thursday and read the Bible with her again. The daughter started attending church and was baptized.

“This has been my experience repeatedly,” Kwon said. “It is God who does the mission.”



KIYONG KWON, 56, left, has planted three churches in South Korea. Part of this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help plant the first Adventist church in Sejong, South Korea. Read more about Kwon last week and next week.