

Acts 25:1-27, No. 50**“A Citizen of Two Kingdoms”****October 23, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We left Paul last time in Caesarea where he had been incarcerated for the previous two years. At the end of the previous chapter we read that Felix, the Roman governor, had been replaced by Porcius Festus, whose responsibility Paul had now become. According to Josephus, Felix was recalled to Rome to answer for his savagery in suppressing some discontent in the province. Little is known about Festus since he died just two years after assuming the governorship of Judea. Josephus thought him a great improvement over Felix and a wise and just official. [*NBD*, 421]

Text Comment

- v.1 This was a courtesy call by the new governor. The first responsibility of the Roman governor of Judea was to keep the peace in what was one of the most unruly provinces of the empire. He no doubt wanted to begin his governorship on good terms with the local leadership.
- v.3 The Jews took the opportunity provided by an audience with the new governor to press their case against Paul, a case that had now hung fire for two years. That they still cared as much as they did to get Paul convicted is some evidence of the degree they felt Christianity in general and Paul in particular to be a threat. How Luke knew about this second plot to kill Paul, he does not say, but from Roman times to our modern day it remains the case that such conspiracies are terribly difficult to keep a secret; the more people in on the plan, the more unlikely keeping the secret becomes.
- v.5 So soon in his governorship, just getting his feet under him as it were, Festus was unwilling to alter standard procedure at the request of the Jews.
- v.7 They would have had difficulty in proving their charges had the alleged crime been committed recently; the fact that the case was now two years old made it that much harder.
- v.8 Paul’s reply indicates what the accusations were: viz. crimes against Jewish law, against the temple, and against the Roman state. The latter charge, like that against Jesus before him, was necessary because the Jews knew very well that the Romans were unlikely to be interested in a theological dispute among the Jews.
- v.9 The very thing that ought never to be said about a judge presiding over a case: that he wanted to do one side a favor! [Peterson, 645]

In other words, Festus was willing to make this gesture to the Jews, but Roman legal procedure required Paul to be willing as well.

- v.11 Paul clearly saw the proposed change in venue as tantamount to handing him over to the Jews (whether he already knew about the plot to ambush the company taking him to Jerusalem Luke does not say). The appeal to Caesar, a right of Roman citizens, put an end to any and all efforts to try the case in Judea, whether in Caesarea or Jerusalem. Once again, Paul did not take the Lord's promise that he would get Paul safely to Rome as a reason to put his head in the lion's mouth. He knew that he was more likely to get justice from a Roman court than a Jewish one.
- v.13 This Agrippa was the great grandson of Herod the Great, the King Herod of the Lord's birth, and the son of Herod Agrippa I, whose death Luke reported in chapter 12. Since he was only 17 when his father died and so too young to succeed him, the province of Judea reverted to rule by a Roman governor rather than by a client king. The Romans had instead installed him instead as a client king of some small territory in the north and north-east of Palestine. Agrippa knew much more than Festus did about the Jews and their religion which made it natural for Festus to consult him about Paul's case. Later, Agrippa would try his best to preserve the peace between the Jews and the Romans, but to no avail. Bernice was his sister, not his wife, just as Drusilla, mentioned in chapter 24, was his sister and so also the sister of Bernice. However, her tumultuous love life and the years Bernice spent in the company of her brother led to rumors of an incestuous relationship. Bernice would later have an affair with Titus before he became emperor in A.D. 79, the same year in which Vesuvius erupted, killing Drusilla and her son Felix.
- v.19 It is clear that Festus realized quite quickly that the charge that Paul was guilty of some offense against the peace of the empire was bogus and the dispute was really a squabble between Jews about Jesus.
- v.22 News traveled in those days as in ours, so it would be surprising if Agrippa had not already heard of the Paul affair. He was no doubt curious to hear more and all the more hear it first hand from the famous Jewish Christian.
- v.23 You remember that Jesus had prophesied that his followers would be hauled before governors and kings on account of him. Well here was both a governor and a king! This was not to be a trial in the technical sense since Paul had already appealed to Caesar. But Agrippa was curious and Festus was happy to oblige.
- v.27 The specific reason for what we would perhaps call a "hearing" was to provide material for the governor's report to Rome that would accompany the prisoner. He couldn't use the material he had so far gathered, as we read in v. 25, because the charges were either unproved or insignificant to a Roman court. He obviously didn't want to send a report that would prompt officials in Rome to complain that he was wasting their time.

Luke is going on and on in his account of Paul in Caesarea and providing a massive amount of detail, far more than he provides in his narrative of any other event or any other period of Paul's ministry or, for that matter, any of the events he narrates in the earlier chapters of his book before Paul came on the scene. The pace of Luke's narrative has slowed to a crawl. If you go back and read the book of Acts some Sunday afternoon, you will notice this immediately.

Some of the reason for that change of narrative pace, no doubt, is that Luke was himself present for these events, unlike many of the others he reports in his narrative; he knew the facts firsthand, and could tell the story with more detail. He was, no doubt also, for the same reason, more personally captivated by these events. He'd been there, saw these things happen, and either heard many of the speeches he was recounting or heard from Paul what had been said. It's just human nature to offer more detail about events of which one was an eyewitness and, much as the Bible is the Word of God, it is also, absolutely a book written by ordinary men.

But there is no doubt that Luke had other reasons for providing such a detailed account of these lengthy proceedings against Paul in Caesarea. Last week, we took note of what we might fairly regard as the beginning of the tradition of Christian apologetics (together with Paul's argument for the faith to the philosophers in Athens in chapter 17). Paul fashioned an argument for the Christian faith for a Gentile or pagan audience from the observation of human life and experience. It was, we might say, an argument from *reason*.

But then why all this detail about Festus and Agrippa that fills up the entirety of chapter 25? Well, it is the introduction to Paul's lengthy defense before Festus and Agrippa in chapter 26, the longest of Paul's five defenses recorded in chapters 22-26. What is more, Luke needed to explain how it was that Paul was sent to Rome. But all of that could have been accomplished in a few sentences. Indeed, there is a good bit of repetition in chapter 25.

There are, however, some important emphases here that we should not miss, as they were clearly important to Luke. *The first is the demonstration of Paul's innocence.* You will remember that the Gospels, and the Gospel of Luke in particular, make a point of the fact that Jesus was tried before and condemned by a Roman judge who nevertheless declared him innocent of the charges brought against him. Luke records Pilate, the Roman governor and so the judge in Jesus' case, as actually having said, "I do not find this man guilty of *any* of your charges against him." He executed him anyway, but not as a man guilty of any crime. It was important to the Gospel writers that Jesus was tried and condemned by a court; that he was not killed by a mob. It was a judicial execution, a criminal punishment. That was why he was hung between two thieves. But he was condemned to death by a judge who knew very well, who had indeed said in public, that Jesus was innocent and did not deserve to die.

His condemnation and crucifixion by a court that had declared him innocent is a powerful, historical confirmation of the theology of the crucifixion, namely that Jesus did not die for his own sins, but for the sins of others.

Well here too and, indeed, throughout this part of Acts, Paul is repeatedly portrayed as and then declared to be innocent of the charges brought against him. When before the Sanhedrin, when he was still in Jerusalem, after he made his defense, Luke records that members of the Sanhedrin stood up to declare, "We find nothing wrong in this man." [23:9] Then Claudius Lysias, the Roman tribune, in explaining why he was sending Paul to Felix, wrote, "I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment." After the trial that occurred before Felix, recounted in chapter 24, while Felix did not deliver a verdict – he was, after all, hoping for a bribe – he treated Paul in a way that

indicated clearly enough that he knew Paul was guilty of no crime of any interest to the Roman state. He was incarcerated but allowed access to his friends and, in any case, he was not condemned. Had Paul paid the bribe, he would have been let go. The trial was held but Paul was neither acquitted nor condemned. The Jews did not prevail in their case against him. But Felix needed to do the Jews a favor – he had burned his bridges with them to such a point that it was threatening his reputation back in Rome – and so he kept Paul in jail, an innocent man spent two years in prison. Once again, a man known to be innocent and judged by a court to be innocent was nevertheless punished.

Then, once more, Festus heard both the Jews and Paul and concluded, as we read in 25:25 that Paul had done nothing deserving death. Indeed, Festus now knew that the entire dispute was an internal wrangling among the Jews about Jesus and whether or not he had risen from the dead. Festus knew very well that no Roman court was going to convict Paul because he had theological differences with some other Jews. The entire section will conclude with another summary statement of the matter. In 26:25, after hearing Paul's defense, Festus, Agrippa and Bernice all agreed that "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment." And Agrippa went on to observe: "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

Over and over again we hear judges pronounce Paul to be innocent of the charges brought against him. That is not some coincidence. Luke is making a point. The point in large part, in the historical context and with a view to the purpose of Luke in writing the book of Acts, is that *the Romans have nothing to fear from the Christians*. They are law-abiding citizens, respectful of Roman law, and no threat to the peace.

In the second place, in all of this material Luke is clearly comparing Roman justice, flawed as it might have been, with Jewish justice. Again and again, we are given to see the Jews making their charges against Paul, charges that even the Roman governors could see were groundless. Pilate *knew*, the gospel writers tell us, he knew they were jealous of Jesus. That was the bottom motivation for their desire to get him killed – personal jealousy. These Roman men were not idiots; they could see the obvious. Either the Jews had no evidence to compel a conviction or it became obvious that the charges were not criminal but theological, nothing for a Roman court to concern itself with. The Romans look much better than the Jews in Luke's narrative! Luke is actually paying Roman justice a compliment!

You will notice in chapter 25 in particular how much emphasis falls on Rome, on the Roman state, and on the emperor himself. Caesar is mentioned eight times in chapter 25 – a concentration of attention unprecedented in the New Testament. Five times the term is *Kaisar*, twice the term is *Sebastos*, the Greek form of Augustus, and once the term is *Kurios*, or "Lord." [Stott, 367] In other words, the term occurs so many times, Luke's concern for style requires him to vary the nomenclature!

In order for us to appreciate what we have read, it is necessary for us to remember the situation Christians faced in the Greco-Roman world of the day. For some time after Pentecost the imperial authorities generally did not distinguish between Christians and Jews and, because Jews had long been treated as a special exception and were usually tolerated in the practice of their specific beliefs, Christians were tolerated as well. *They largely lived at peace in the Roman*

world because the Romans thought of them as Jews! The Jewish faith was registered – such a step as is still in our day required in many countries of the world – registered as a *religio licita*, a permitted or tolerated religion. [A new form of registration was just passed by the Duma in Russia creating great problems for the friends that we know who are seeking to plant churches in Russia.] That meant that Jewish practices were allowed, even though those practices were different and in some ways offensive to Roman sensibilities. Jews were offended at the very thought of idols, but idols were everywhere in the Roman world. Everywhere the Romans went they put up statues of their gods.

Roman governors in Judea, for example, were told to respect Jewish scruples regarding the Sabbath, clean and unclean foods, and their offense at idols, even though, as we know in the case of Pontius Pilate, the governors did not always comply. There were exceptions, of course, but for several decades after Pentecost there was no systematic persecution of Christians by the Roman state. If you remember from Acts 18, when Paul was in Corinth, Gallio, the Roman proconsul of Achaia, when asked by the Corinthian Jews to act against the Corinthian Christians (many of whom at that time were Jews), regarded the whole dust-up as a theological dispute between Jews of different stripes and took no action. For some time, then, Paul's was a relatively happy experience of Roman government and he benefited from the protection it extended him, all the more as he was himself a Roman citizen.

To be sure, more than once Paul found himself in jail and here he had been in jail for some two years. It was easy enough to run afoul of the state in those days and, then as now, jurisprudence was not consistent from place to place or from judge to judge. Most Roman procurators or governors were mediocrities and often failed to do their jobs conspicuously well. And from time to time, one emperor or another would form a dislike for the Jews and instigate some persecution of them, a fate the Jews have suffered regularly over the last two-thousand years! We read earlier of one such persecution that accounted for Pricilla and Aquila moving to Ephesus.

In any case, the more positive, peaceful, and congenial situation was soon to change and the situation for Christians became increasingly dangerous. Paul himself, though in this case eventually acquitted in Rome and released to continue his ministry, would several years later run afoul of the authorities and this time be put to death by the Roman government. Peter would suffer a similar fate. When Paul wrote Romans, just a few weeks before he landed in Judea and was arrested in Jerusalem, the situation was not as severe as it would become – Romans, remember, contains the great chapter 13 that commands Christians to be obedient citizens of the state – but, even then, no one thought of the Roman government as a friend of the Christian faith. Remember, it had put the Savior himself to death, however much at the instigation of the Jewish Sanhedrin. The rebellion in Judea in the 60s would harden Roman attitudes toward Judaism and that served to deepen their animosity toward Christians as well. By the end of the first century the adversarial relationship of the Roman state to the Christian faith was a fact of life and would continue to be so, in varying degrees, for another two hundred years and more. Christianity came to be regarded by the Romans as a subversive superstition that caused trouble wherever it was found.

So it can hardly be a surprise that Luke is providing in his narrative not only an accurate historical account, but a defense of the Christians as inhabitants of the Roman world. He wanted

the Romans to know that they had nothing to fear from the Christians, who were different from the Jews and would not be the problem to the Romans the Jews had been. They respected the Roman state. He wanted them to know that Christians were law-abiding citizens of the empire and that the accusations that they were not, when carefully examined, would prove without merit. And so one judge after another is enlisted in Luke's narrative to say that Paul was innocent of the crimes the Jews were accusing him of.

But Luke is interested in more than that. He is, to be sure, not telling us in this chapter what Christ Jesus did to save sinners or what it means to believe in him. What he is telling us is what is often going to happen to the followers of Jesus in this world. Christians are going to run afoul of the state; they are going to find themselves in jail; they are going to have to defend themselves at trial. Jesus had, after all, told his disciples to expect problems of this kind, to expect to find themselves hauled before governors and kings – not because they had broken any laws but because since the world hated Jesus, it would hate his followers also. And, of course, as we know, Christians have suffered such fates throughout the ages and suffer them today in many places in this world. There are Christians languishing in prisons today for no other crime than their belief that Christ is Lord and that God raised him from the dead.

It is striking to me, and I expect to some of you, how a passage like this comes to life for us today in a way it didn't only a few years ago. Suddenly it seems as if what happened to Paul might actually happen to us! Our country, our government now seems to have the sort of animosity toward us their world had toward the early Christians. The issues raised by this paragraph have been largely theoretical to American believers through the years. It is not so in other parts of the world and it has not been so through the ages, but they have been largely theoretical in our experience as American Christians for several centuries now, for so long that we've grown entirely accustomed to a different way of thinking about the state than most Christians think about the state in which they live. Such a passage as this one has been of *tremendous* importance to believers through the course of Christian history *but not much to us here in the United States*. But our experience as American Christians, taking history together, has been an outlier. For many more Christians, the proper behavior of Christians in the face of unjust arrest and prosecution has been one of the most demanding and radical obligations of Christian ethics. So many of them have been required by their loyalty to Jesus to say what Paul said here:

“If...I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death.”

So many Christian martyrs have said with a clean conscience as they were being led away to prison or to death that they were loyal citizens of the state, indeed, the most loyal of citizens, that from their heart they prayed for and forgave the king or the governor or the judge who had so unjustly sentenced him or her to prison or to death. It is the martyr, it is Paul here in prison and Paul some years later going to his execution, it is the martyr who in the book of Revelation – that book that describes the sweep of history from the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to his second – it is the martyr who *is the representative Christian*. That is, the Christian in prison for no fault of his own, the innocent Christian on the block or the gallows, is the Christian who most perfectly illustrates what it means to be a Christian in this world. You and I, young and old, male

and female, you and I are to see ourselves in Paul here, our calling to be his calling, our fate to be his fate.

That was always a difficulty for American Christians who lived secure, safe and very comfortable lives under the shelter of a largely like-minded government. Oh the government was not Christian, to be sure, but there were many Christians in it, it was nominally Christian – as late as the mid-20th century a Supreme Court opinion identified the United States as a *Christian* country – and it certainly by and large acted to protect the life and liberty of both Christians and the Christian church. In fact, it hardly ever occurred to anyone that that situation would ever change. But now, of course, all of that is no longer true. We are hearing every day rumblings in the elite culture and in the government itself that biblical Christianity is inimical in some ways to the interests of the state and the country. Our sexual ethics are perverse, discriminatory, barbarian and so on. They are more and more looking at us the way the Romans looked at the Jews and the Christians after them. They look at us – these important, powerful, influential people in our culture, in our state – the way the Saudi government or the Iranian government look at Christians within their borders, as the atheistic Chinese government has long looked at Christians in China, or the Hindu nationalist government of India looks at Christians in that land. Our government has ceased to be our friend and increasingly looks as if it is becoming our enemy.

So it is that passages like this one have taken on new life or should. Paul worked the system as he could, made wise use of his legal rights as he was able, but he spent two years in jail and would eventually lose his life as an enemy of the Roman state, when, in actual fact, he was in fact the best friend Rome ever had. He was a law-abiding man and kept to his own work and did nothing to provoke the government to act against him. He devoted himself to his calling and when that calling landed him in jail, he took it as the privilege it was, to suffer for the Name!

Are you ready to do what he did? Are you raising your children to be ready to do what he did? Are you ready, are they ready to join the long red line of those Christians who have suffered the loss of many things and of life itself in order to be counted worthy of the Lord Jesus who loved them and gave himself for them? Are you ready to be someone who scrupulously pays all the taxes he owes, to honor the government, even when it is deeply unjust in its treatment of you and your fellow Christians, to pray for your rulers, as generations of suffering believers have done before you? The one thing the Roman government could count on was that, even as they led these people away to the slaughter, Christians would pay their taxes and obey the laws. As Augustine would later explain in his *City of God*, “the patience and faith of the saints” wore down the fury of the church’s persecutors.

As Augustine reminds us, the church won the Roman world not by fighting but by suffering and in their suffering proving that there was a higher law and a greater love than anything the Roman’s knew.