

Acts 23:11–26:32 (NLT)

¹¹ That night the Lord appeared to Paul and said, “Be encouraged, Paul. Just as you have been a witness to me here in Jerusalem, you must preach the Good News in Rome as well.”

The Plan to Kill Paul

¹² The next morning a group of Jews* got together and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. ¹³ There were more than forty of them in the conspiracy. ¹⁴ They went to the leading priests and elders and told them, “We have bound ourselves with an oath to eat nothing until we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ So you and the high council should ask the commander to bring Paul back to the council again. Pretend you want to examine his case more fully. We will kill him on the way.”

¹⁶ But Paul’s nephew—his sister’s son—heard of their plan and went to the fortress and told Paul. ¹⁷ Paul called for one of the Roman officers* and said, “Take this young man to the commander. He has something important to tell him.”

¹⁸ So the officer did, explaining, “Paul, the prisoner, called me over and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you.”

¹⁹ The commander took his hand, led him aside, and asked, “What is it you want to tell me?”

²⁰ Paul’s nephew told him, “Some Jews are going to ask you to bring Paul before the high council tomorrow, pretending they want to get some more information. ²¹ But don’t do it! There are more than forty men hiding along the way ready to

ambush him. They have vowed not to eat or drink anything until they have killed him. They are ready now, just waiting for your consent.”

²² “Don’t let anyone know you told me this,” the commander warned the young man.

Paul Is Sent to Caesarea

²³ Then the commander called two of his officers and ordered, “Get 200 soldiers ready to leave for Caesarea at nine o’clock tonight. Also take 200 spearmen and 70 mounted troops.

²⁴ Provide horses for Paul to ride, and get him safely to Governor Felix.” ²⁵ Then he wrote this letter to the governor:

²⁶ “From Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings!

²⁷ “This man was seized by some Jews, and they were about to kill him when I arrived with the troops. When I learned that he was a Roman citizen, I removed him to safety. ²⁸ Then I took him to their high council to try to learn the basis of the accusations against him. ²⁹ I soon discovered the charge was something regarding their religious law—certainly nothing worthy of imprisonment or death. ³⁰ But when I was informed of a plot to kill him, I immediately sent him on to you. I have told his accusers to bring their charges before you.”

³¹ So that night, as ordered, the soldiers took Paul as far as Antipatris. ³² They returned to the fortress the next morning, while the mounted troops took him on to Caesarea. ³³ When they arrived in Caesarea, they presented Paul and the letter to

Governor Felix. ³⁴ He read it and then asked Paul what province he was from. “Cilicia,” Paul answered.

³⁵ “I will hear your case myself when your accusers arrive,” the governor told him. Then the governor ordered him kept in the prison at Herod’s headquarters.*

Chapter 24

Paul Appears before Felix

Five days later Ananias, the high priest, arrived with some of the Jewish elders and the lawyer* Tertullus, to present their case against Paul to the governor. ² When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented the charges against Paul in the following address to the governor:

“You have provided a long period of peace for us Jews and with foresight have enacted reforms for us. ³ For all of this, Your Excellency, we are very grateful to you. ⁴ But I don’t want to bore you, so please give me your attention for only a moment. ⁵ We have found this man to be a troublemaker who is constantly stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the cult known as the Nazarenes. ⁶ Furthermore, he was trying to desecrate the Temple when we arrested him.* ⁸ You can find out the truth of our accusations by examining him yourself.” ⁹ Then the other Jews chimed in, declaring that everything Tertullus said was true.

¹⁰ The governor then motioned for Paul to speak. Paul said, “I know, sir, that you have been a judge of Jewish affairs for many years, so I gladly present my defence before you. ¹¹ You can quickly discover that I arrived in Jerusalem no more than twelve days ago to worship at the Temple. ¹² My accusers never found me arguing with anyone in the Temple, nor

stirring up a riot in any synagogue or on the streets of the city.
¹³ These men cannot prove the things they accuse me of doing.

¹⁴ “But I admit that I follow the Way, which they call a cult. I worship the God of our ancestors, and I firmly believe the Jewish law and everything written in the prophets. ¹⁵ I have the same hope in God that **these** men have, that he will raise both the righteous and the unrighteous. ¹⁶ Because of this, I always try to maintain a clear conscience before God and all people.

¹⁷ “After several years away, I returned to Jerusalem with money to aid my people and to offer sacrifices to God. ¹⁸ My accusers saw me in the Temple as I was completing a purification ceremony. There was no crowd around me and no rioting. ¹⁹ But some Jews from the province of Asia were there—and they ought to be here to bring charges if they have anything against me! ²⁰ Ask these men here what crime the Jewish high council* found me guilty of, ²¹ except for the one time I shouted out, ‘I am on trial before you today because I believe in the resurrection of the dead!’ ”

²² At that point Felix, who was quite familiar with the Way, adjourned the hearing and said, “Wait until Lysias, the garrison commander, arrives. Then I will decide the case.”
²³ He ordered an officer* to keep Paul in custody but to give him some freedom and allow his friends to visit him and take care of his needs.

²⁴ A few days later Felix came back with his wife, Drusilla, who was Jewish. Sending for Paul, they listened as he told them about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ As he reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the coming day of judgment, Felix became frightened. “Go away for now,” he replied. “When it is more convenient, I’ll call for you again.”

²⁶ He also hoped that Paul would bribe him, so he sent for him quite often and talked with him.

²⁷ After two years went by in this way, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And because Felix wanted to gain favour with the Jewish people, he left Paul in prison.

Chapter 25

Paul Appears before Festus

Three days after Festus arrived in Caesarea to take over his new responsibilities, he left for Jerusalem, ² where the leading priests and other Jewish leaders met with him and made their accusations against Paul. ³ They asked Festus as a favour to transfer Paul to Jerusalem (planning to ambush and kill him on the way). ⁴ But Festus replied that Paul was at Caesarea and he himself would be returning there soon. ⁵ So he said, “Those of you in authority can return with me. If Paul has done anything wrong, you can make your accusations.”

⁶ About eight or ten days later Festus returned to Caesarea, and on the following day he took his seat in court and ordered that Paul be brought in. ⁷ When Paul arrived, the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem gathered around and made many serious accusations they couldn't prove.

⁸ Paul denied the charges. “I am not guilty of any crime against the Jewish laws or the Temple or the Roman government,” he said.

⁹ Then Festus, wanting to please the Jews, asked him, “Are you willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there?”

¹⁰ But Paul replied, “No! This is the official Roman court, so I ought to be tried right here. You know very well I am not guilty of harming the Jews. ¹¹ If I have done something worthy of death, I don’t refuse to die. But if I am innocent, no one has a right to turn me over to these men to kill me. I appeal to Caesar!”

¹² Festus conferred with his advisers and then replied, “Very well! You have appealed to Caesar, and to Caesar you will go!”

¹³ A few days later King Agrippa arrived with his sister, Bernice,* to pay their respects to Festus. ¹⁴ During their stay of several days, Festus discussed Paul’s case with the king. “There is a prisoner here,” he told him, “whose case was left for me by Felix. ¹⁵ When I was in Jerusalem, the leading priests and Jewish elders pressed charges against him and asked me to condemn him. ¹⁶ I pointed out to them that Roman law does not convict people without a trial. They must be given an opportunity to confront their accusers and defend themselves.

¹⁷ “When his accusers came here for the trial, I didn’t delay. I called the case the very next day and ordered Paul brought in. ¹⁸ But the accusations made against him weren’t any of the crimes I expected. ¹⁹ Instead, it was something about their religion and a dead man named Jesus, who Paul insists is alive. ²⁰ I was at a loss to know how to investigate these things, so I asked him whether he would be willing to stand trial on these charges in Jerusalem. ²¹ But Paul appealed to have his case decided by the emperor. So I ordered that he be held in custody until I could arrange to send him to Caesar.”

²² “I’d like to hear the man myself,” Agrippa said.

And Festus replied, “You will—tomorrow!”

Paul Speaks to Agrippa

²³ So the next day Agrippa and Bernice arrived at the auditorium with great pomp, accompanied by military officers and prominent men of the city. Festus ordered that Paul be brought in. ²⁴ Then Festus said, “King Agrippa and all who are here, this is the man whose death is demanded by all the Jews, both here and in Jerusalem. ²⁵ But in my opinion he has done nothing deserving death. However, since he appealed his case to the emperor, I have decided to send him to Rome.

²⁶ “But what shall I write the emperor? For there is no clear charge against him. So I have brought him before all of you, and especially you, King Agrippa, so that after we examine him, I might have something to write. ²⁷ For it makes no sense to send a prisoner to the emperor without specifying the charges against him!”

Chapter 26

Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You may speak in your defence.”

So Paul, gesturing with his hand, started his defence: ² “I am fortunate, King Agrippa, that you are the one hearing my defence today against all these accusations made by the Jewish leaders, ³ for I know you are an expert on all Jewish customs and controversies. Now please listen to me patiently!

⁴ “As the Jewish leaders are well aware, I was given a thorough Jewish training from my earliest childhood among my own people and in Jerusalem. ⁵ If they would admit it, they know that I have been a member of the Pharisees, the strictest

sect of our religion. ⁶ Now I am on trial because of my hope in the fulfilment of God's promise made to our ancestors. ⁷ In fact, that is why the twelve tribes of Israel zealously worship God night and day, and they share the same hope I have. Yet, Your Majesty, they accuse me for having this hope! ⁸ Why does it seem incredible to any of you that God can raise the dead?

⁹ "I used to believe that I ought to do everything I could to oppose the very name of Jesus the Nazarene.* ¹⁰ Indeed, I did just that in Jerusalem. Authorized by the leading priests, I caused many believers* there to be sent to prison. And I cast my vote against them when they were condemned to death.

¹¹ Many times I had them punished in the synagogues to get them to curse Jesus.* I was so violently opposed to them that I even chased them down in foreign cities.

¹² "One day I was on such a mission to Damascus, armed with the authority and commission of the leading priests.

¹³ About noon, Your Majesty, as I was on the road, a light from heaven brighter than the sun shone down on me and my companions. ¹⁴ We all fell down, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic,* 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is useless for you to fight against my will.*'

¹⁵ " 'Who are you, lord?' I asked.

"And the Lord replied, 'I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. ¹⁶ Now get to your feet! For I have appeared to you to appoint you as my servant and witness. Tell people that you have seen me, and tell them what I will show you in the future. ¹⁷ And I will rescue you from both your own people and the Gentiles. Yes, I am sending you to the Gentiles ¹⁸ to open their eyes, so they may turn from darkness to light and

from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God's people, who are set apart by faith in me.'

¹⁹ “And so, King Agrippa, I obeyed that vision from heaven. ²⁰ I preached first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that all must repent of their sins and turn to God—and prove they have changed by the good things they do. ²¹ Some Jews arrested me in the Temple for preaching this, and they tried to kill me. ²² But God has protected me right up to this present time so I can testify to everyone, from the least to the greatest. I teach nothing except what the prophets and Moses said would happen—²³ that the Messiah would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead, and in this way announce God's light to Jews and Gentiles alike.”

²⁴ Suddenly, Festus shouted, “Paul, you are insane. Too much study has made you crazy!”

²⁵ But Paul replied, “I am not insane, Most Excellent Festus. What I am saying is the sober truth. ²⁶ And King Agrippa knows about these things. I speak boldly, for I am sure these events are all familiar to him, for they were not done in a corner! ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do—”

²⁸ Agrippa interrupted him. “Do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian so quickly?”*

²⁹ Paul replied, “Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am, except for these chains.”

³⁰ Then the king, the governor, Bernice, and all the others stood and left. ³¹ As they went out, they talked it over and agreed, “This man hasn’t done anything to deserve death or imprisonment.”

³² And Agrippa said to Festus, “He could have been set free if he hadn’t appealed to Caesar.”

Jesus said to Peter, James, John and Andrew, ^{Mark 13:9} you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them.

And in a **vision**, He spoke to Ananias about **Paul**, and He said, ^{Acts 9:15} he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

And here he was, standing before kings and governors, testifying about Jesus Christ... This was his purpose.

First, he stood before Governor Felix, and his wife Drusilla...

Now, Felix was **not** a good man. He was violent and cruel, to those he governed. It was said of Felix, *that he “practiced every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of a king with all the instincts of a slave”*¹ – He wasn’t fit for it, and we can see that coming out – he kept Paul in jail, hoping that he’d pay him a bribe..

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But Paul got to preach the gospel to him. He told him about the resurrection. And he gave him the **whole** truth about the resurrection. He gave him the **uncomfortable** truth about the resurrection... He told him that the resurrection is for both the just **and** the unjust. The just – those who are in Christ, will be raised to eternal life, and the unjust (those who have rejected Christ), will be raised to judgment... ^{Acts 24:25} **And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, "Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you."**

You see, Paul was speaking directly to Felix – a man who's **lack** of self-control and **lack** of righteousness, was precisely what enabled him to **be** such a very cruel leader.

And many people today, are of the opinion that if death is the end of it all – they're happy with that. If they miss out on the resurrection, that's fine with them... But the full truth of the resurrection is, "We are **all** raised". Some to life. Some to judgment. And that's what Paul preached to Felix, and that's why the Gospel alarmed him so...

Now, let's look at some of the other characters who Paul testified to, and we're going to discover quite a **twisted** family tree...

First of all, he stood before Felix, and his wife Drusilla. When Felix was recalled to Rome because he wasn't coping as

Governor, he was replaced by Festus. And Festus brought in King Agrippa and Bernice...

Now, have a look at the bottom line of this family tree:

King Agrippa, was a brother to Drusilla (the wife of the previous Governor). He was also brother to Bernice (who was believed to be his mistress). Bernice had already been married to her uncle, but when he died, she ended up with her brother, and it was rumoured that their relationship was incestuous, and because of those rumours, she married somebody else (who also died), and she went back to her brother again. And then after that, she became mistress to the General Titus, who went on to become the Emperor of Rome...

There's some pretty big players here. And they didn't come from very good stock.

Their **Great** Grandfather (at the top of the family tree there), was Herod the Great – He's the one who had all of the little boys killed in Bethlehem (trying to get Jesus).

Their Mother (Herodias), in her previous marriage to Herod Antipas (I'm not sure if it was an official marriage or not, because Herodias was his brother's wife). Anyway, she was the one responsible for getting John the Baptist beheaded. And their half-sister (who is also their first cousin, once removed) (we don't know her name) is the one who danced and then asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

Their Mother's previous husband (Herod Antipas) (also their great uncle, by the way) is the one who Jesus thought so little of, that he wouldn't even speak to him when he was put on trial... And Herodias wasn't only their mother – she was also

their great aunt.... Because their father had married his aunt....

Oh man, that took some figuring out.... This was one mixed-up family....

Their Father (Herod Agrippa the first), was the one who had James killed, and Peter imprisoned. We also heard about his death in Acts 12, where he died because people claimed he was a God, and he accepted those accolades, without directing the glory to the Real God....

Now here they all are – Bernice, Agrippa, Drusilla – all hearing the gospel from Paul (well Drusilla heard him earlier – she’s not there now). And Paul didn’t hold any gripe against them – his wish was for them to be saved... Now, that’s a mark of real, Christian maturity – he’s been locked up for years; these people represent the powers that are against Christianity, and there’s no chip on his shoulder – he wants them to be saved....

And when Agrippa realised that Paul was trying to convert him, he said “It’ll take more than that to convert me”... but that was exactly what Paul was trying to do. He said “I want you to become like me (except for these chains of course)”.

Isn’t the Lord wonderful??? We all get to make our own choice, whether we’re going to continue down our own path, or whether we choose to repent, and believe in Jesus. It doesn’t matter what your history is. It doesn’t matter what

your family background is. It doesn't matter what your position in society is. Or how messed up you are...

And the message for all of us is the same. Paul's basic message that day, was: Jesus is alive. Believe. Repent. And do good deeds, that are consistent with that repentance.

Do you get that? It's not just **what** we believe – it's also how we live. It's also what we do, **because** we believe... We are saved by the blood of Jesus, and because we're saved, our deeds (what we do) , **must** be consistent with repentance.

There's 2 ways. We can either live in the darkness, or we can live in the light. And if we live in the light, then our deeds must be deeds of light...

That was the message he proclaimed.

Now, the interesting thing is, the Governors were Romans. King Agrippa, Bernice and Drusilla, were Jews. They'd been brought up to believe in God. But even though they believed in God, the way they lived their lives, betrayed the fact, that they were living in darkness – not light... And so, the choice was laid before them that day, by Paul.

On the day of judgment, they would have no excuse. They could not say "We never heard"... "I did not know"...

There's an age-old excuse for not following Jesus, that keeps getting trotted out, by those who don't want to believe – "What about those who have never heard of Jesus?" And my

response is, “Well, we leave that wise and just decision to our loving creator... But you’re not one of those who haven’t heard about Jesus – you have... You can’t hide behind that argument”...

To King Agrippa, Paul made a very cutting statement: “**this has not been done in a corner.**” Even before Paul had personally told him the Gospel, there was no excuse for Agrippa... He’d **heard** about Jesus. He knew about these Christians... It wasn’t hidden. It was all openly done in their society... The Christians were being publically executed, and were openly testifying as they died... None of this, has been done in a corner.....

Today,,,, it’s our job to make sure that we Christians don’t shrink **back** to the corner. The message of Christ, is still the message that saves, and our world still desperately needs to hear it.

I think I’ve said enough for today. The gospel – the good news – of Jesus Christ, does not belong in a corner....

Amen.

ⁱ Roman Historian Tacitus (Ann. 12.54; cf. Hist.5.9) in Witherington III Ben, The Acts of the Apostles – A Social-Rhetorical Commentary. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids. 1998. (p.699)