

## Lesson 9 Acts 24-25-26

**24:1–21. They laid before the governor their case against Paul.** By being sent to Caesarea by the tribune, Paul has entered the jurisdiction of Roman law. The Jews fail to change things so that he can be tried by the Sanhedrin. In his defense Paul points out that the Jews, by failing to recognize Jesus, have failed to understand the true religious tradition of Israel, and also that their charges about creating a disturbance and profaning the temple are groundless and they have no proof for them.<sup>1</sup>

The tone of the address is serious and sober, as befits the authority by which he is being judged. This is in keeping with what the Gospel teaches us about the respect due to civil authorities: they should be obeyed by all citizens because they are designed to protect the common good. “A Christian”, Tertullian will write, “is an enemy of no one, least of all the emperor. Since he knows him to be appointed by his own God, he must love, reverence, honor, and wish him well, together with the whole Roman Empire, as long as the world shall last. [...] In this way, then, do we honor the emperor, as is both lawful for us and expedient for him, as a man next to God: who has received whatever he is from God; who is inferior to God alone” (*To Scapula*, 2).

“The political community and public authority”, Vatican II teaches, “are based on human nature, and therefore they belong to an order established by God; nevertheless, the choice of political regime and the appointment of rulers are left to the free decision of the citizens (cf. Rom 13:1–5).

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<sup>1</sup> *The Acts of the Apostles*. (2005). (p. 177-188). Navarre Bible; New York: Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.

**24:19. They ought to be here.** Paul's objection carries great legal weight because Roman law laid down that those who brought charges had to appear before the tribunal. (**See Handout –Some Aspects of Roman Law**)

**24:25. He argued about justice and self-control.** It is very daring of Paul to speak about chastity (self-control) to this couple living in adultery. "Observe", says St John Chrysostom, "that, when he has the opportunity to converse with the governor, Paul does not say anything which might influence his decision or flatter him: he says things which shock him and disturb his conscience" (*Homily on Acts*, 51). Felix's fear of future judgment has little to do with true fear of God, which is the beginning of wisdom and therefore of conversion. The governor's attitude shows that he does have remorse of conscience—but it does not make him change his lifestyle.

## Going Deeper

### Felix the Governor – Some background

Felix, the Roman procurator of Samaria and Judea, did not have a stellar reputation. He had been a slave and was freed by the mother of the emperor Claudius. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Felix "with all cruelty and lust wielded the power of king, with the mentality of a slave." Opinions about Felix's rule are almost universally negative, stressing his harshness and notoriously incompetent administration, which led to violent unrest. Several uprisings occurred during his term, including riots in Caesarea that led to the killing and plundering of many Jews by Felix's troops. A delegation of Jews traveled to Rome to bring charges against him for this fiasco and other injustices, but Felix

escaped punishment due to the powerful influence of his brother Pallas, who served as secretary of the treasury.

Felix's wife Drusilla was the beautiful daughter of Herod Agrippa I. The Jewish historian Josephus writes that Felix went to great efforts to seduce her away from her first husband, Azizus, king of Emesa in Syria. Drusilla was one of three queens that Felix married, one of whom was the granddaughter of Antony and Cleopatra.

The repeated conversations between a corrupt Roman governor and his Christian prisoner were most unusual. Besides the hope for a bribe, something else may have induced Felix to keep summoning Paul. As the adulterous King Herod had been both intrigued and disturbed by John the Baptist's preaching (Mark 6:18, 20), the truth of Paul's gospel message may have simultaneously attracted and frightened Felix.

Paul was a gifted evangelist. He knew how to talk winningly to all kinds of people (1 Cor 9:22). He did not shrink from speaking about moral issues and final judgment, but he did so skillfully, without causing unnecessary offense to his listener. Despite Paul's efforts, Felix did not repent but left the man he liked to talk to in prison. Like Paul, we are called to "proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching" (2 Tim 4:2).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kurz, W. S. (2013). *Acts of the Apostles* (P. S. Williamson & M. Healy, Eds.; pp. 347-348). Baker Academic.

**25:1–12. Now when Festus had come into his province.** What a way to start a new job. Within the first week the Jewish authorities are clamoring to get at Paul. Not even Paul’s two-year imprisonment had calmed the anger of the Jewish authorities, who immediately press **their formal charges against Paul** before the new governor. They even attempt the same plot to ambush him that some unsuccessfully tried two years before under Felix (Acts 23:12–21). Festus, perhaps knowing of the previous conspiracy, wisely replies that Paul will remain in the governor’s headquarters in Caesarea. He invites the Jewish **authorities** to bring their charges against Paul there. (**Ibid.** Kurz p. 349)

**25:9. Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem.** The governor is not thinking of handing the prisoner over to the Jewish courts. Festus is less interested in justice for Paul than in avoiding the conflicts with the Jewish leadership that characterized his predecessor’s tenure

**25:10–11. I appeal to Caesar.** Paul realizes what Festus intends to do, and he appeals to Caesar in order to avoid being tried in unfavorable circumstances. From a strictly judicial point of view, Paul’s action is not an “appeal” but what is termed in Roman law a *provocatio*. An appeal only operated once a lower court had passed sentence. A *provocatio* meant insisting that the case be brought to a higher court, for that court to decide whether the accused was guilty or not. Only Roman citizens could ask for their cases to be examined by the imperial tribunal in Rome.

**25:12. When he had conferred with his counsel.** Possibly Paul’s appeal did not take automatic effect: the governor may not necessarily have been obliged by law to send the detainee to Rome. But once the latter invoked his right of appeal, Festus would be able to escape the dilemma he faced, by sending Paul to Rome. If he did not transfer the case to Rome, this might have been taken

as an insult to Caesar—Involving political risk (cf. 26:32)—and if he set Paul free he would be needlessly offending the Jews.

**25:14-21. There is a man.** The conversation between the two politicians reveals a typical attitude of worldly men to matters which they consider far-fetched and irrelevant as far as everyday affairs are concerned. But what should concern them (and us) is that Jesus Christ is alive; he is the center of history and the center of each and every person's existence. “The Church believes that Christ, who died, was raised for the sake of all (cf. 2 Cor 5:15).

The Church likewise maintains that the key, the center and the purpose of the whole of human history is to be found in its Lord and Master. She also maintains that beneath all that changes there is much that is unchanging, much that has its ultimate foundation in Christ, who is the same yesterday, and today, and forever (cf. Heb 13:8)” (Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, 10).

“Stir up that fire of faith. Christ is not a figure of the past. He is not a memory that is lost in history. “He lives! ‘*Jesus Christus heri et hodie, ipse et in saecula*’, says Saint Paul, ‘Jesus Christ is the same today as he was yesterday and as he will be for ever’ ” (St Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, 584).

**25:22. I should like to hear.** Agrippa’s reply is reminiscent of a similar scene when his grand-uncle Herod Antipas expressed a desire to see Jesus (cf. Lk 9:9; 23:8). “His conversation with the governor awakens in Agrippa a strong desire to hear Paul. Festus meets his wish, and thereby Paul’s glory is further enhanced. This is the outcome of the plots against him: without them, no judge would have deigned to listen to such things, nor would anyone have heard them with such rapt attention” (St John Chrysostom, *Homily on Acts*, 51). (**Ibid.** Navarre Bible pp. 181-183)

**26:1–3. Paul made his defense.** Agrippa invites Paul to speak for himself, as he had in all his previous trials. Despite his chains (see v. 29), Paul gestures in the usual rhetorical manner. He begins his defense with a standard request for attention. The Greek word for ‘defense’ is *apologia*, from which we get the term “apologetics” for defense of the faith. He professes that he is fortunate to be able to defend himself in the king’s presence, for Agrippa is an expert in all the Jewish customs and controversies and is therefore able to understand his argument. (*Ibid. Kurz* p. 355)

**25:6–8. I am standing on trial.** In his addresses Paul frequently defends himself by referring to the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies and promises (cf. 23:6; 24:25; 28:20). In addition to revealing his own attitudes and convictions, he is saying that the fundamental question at issue is whether the Jews really believe in these prophecies or not.

Although he is speaking about resurrection in general terms, Paul’s words obviously refer to the resurrection of Jesus, which confirms him as the Messiah. “Paul offers two proofs of resurrection. One is taken from the prophets. He does not quote any particular prophet; he simply says that this is what Jews believe. His second proof the apostle takes from the facts themselves. And what is it? That Christ, after rising from the dead, conversed with him” (Chrysostom, *Homily on Acts*, 52).

**26:14. It is hard for you to kick.** The final sentence in this verse is not given in Paul’s two previous accounts of his conversion on the road to Damascus (cf. 9:4; 22:7). This third account adds a Greek proverb, with which Agrippa and Festus would presumably be familiar: “It is hard for you to kick against the goad.” A goad is a farmer’s pointed stick used to round up cattle. Fitzmyer explains: “In Greek literature the proverb expresses that is useless to try to

resist to divine influence in future conduct.” (**Ibid.** Kurz pp. 357-357) It was also a proverb known and used by Jews (cf. *The Psalms of Solomon*, 16:4).

**26:19. I was not disobedient.** The apostle asserts that he has embraced Christ and Christianity, being totally convinced of its truth, he explains his change of heart and obedience to the divine voice he heard. Paul’s experience is repeated in different (usually less dramatic) ways in the lives of every man and woman. At particular moments in life the Lord calls us and invites us to a new conversion which draws us out of sin or lukewarmness. What we have to do is to listen carefully to that calling and obey it.

“We should let our Lord get involved in our lives, admitting him trustingly, removing from his way any obstacles or excuses. We tend to be on the defensive, to be attached to our selfishness. We always want to be in charge, even if it’s only to be in charge of our wretchedness. That is why we must go to Jesus, so to have him make us truly free. Only then will we be able to serve God and all men” (St J. Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, 17). (*De perfecta christiani forma*). (**Ibid.** Navarre pp. 185-186)

**26:24. Paul, you are mad.** Because Festus does not know Israel’s Scriptures to which Paul refers, he loudly calls Paul **mad** from **much learning**. Paul calmly denies he is insane, insisting that he speaks **words of truth and reason**, terms that express Greek ideals of discretion, soundness of mind, and moderation. (**Ibid.** Kurz p. 360).

**26:27. King Agrippa, do you believe.** In addressing Agrippa, Paul’s only interest is in upholding the Gospel and bringing salvation to his hearers. He is trying to get Agrippa, who is presiding over this session and is Paul’s main questioner, to react interiorly and allow grace to move his heart. Likewise, our

mission of evangelization is a responsibility and a duty with which Christ charges every Christian at all times.

**26:28. You will soon persuade me.** The king's remark, which is angry yet serious, shows that Paul's words have touched him. He feels he cannot respond to the apostle's call, but his conscience and his position as a Jewish prince prevent him from denying that he has any faith in the prophecies God has given his people.

However, he resists the divine grace extended to him by what Paul has been saying and now by Paul's question. He lacks the inner dispositions which faith calls for—that is, the moral predisposition and attitude which allows someone to accept God's word and decide to give his life a new direction. He is not genuinely interested in seeking God. "If any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority" (Jn 7:17).

**26:29. Not only you but all who listen.** Once again Paul shows his practical zeal for all souls; he is not overawed by the circumstances in which he finds himself. "Charity with everyone means ... we, for our part, must really translate into deeds the great desire of God 'who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2:4). [...] For Christians, loving means 'wanting to want', 'wanting to love', making up one's mind in Christ to work for the good of souls, without discrimination of any kind; trying to obtain for them, before any other good, the greatest good of all, that of knowing Christ and falling in love with him" (*Friends of God*, 230f). (**Ibid.** Navarre Bible pp. 186-187)

**26:30.** In summary, Paul's defense before the Jewish king Agrippa and Roman governor Festus demonstrates that he does not have a naive or overly

spiritual view of what it means to rely on grace in defending himself before civil authorities (see Luke 21:15). While entrusting himself to the Spirit, Paul deploys his rhetorical, legal, and practical savvy, both to demonstrate his innocence and to bear witness to Jesus. Paul testifies respectfully, wisely, and boldly to the truths of the faith before these powerful rulers, despite Festus's ignorance and Agrippa's lack of true receptivity.

When God summons us to witness to our faith, he expects us to use the resources he has given us, but ultimately to rely on the Spirit. God has endowed us with natural talents, life experience, and various kinds of training that we are to use to promote the gospel and to persuade people about the truth. But in the end God alone can convince the hearts of our hearers. (**Ibid.** Kurz pp. 361-362)