

Festus and Agrippa

At the conclusion of his third missionary journey, Paul returned to Jerusalem. For his next journey, he intended going to Rome and to Spain. Towards the end of this third journey, while he was in Corinth, Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. But while Paul was in Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders stirred up trouble for him and the Romans took him in custody, mostly for his own protection, but also as a favour to the Jews. The Roman governor Felix kept Paul in prison in Caesarea. By the time Festus replaced Felix, Paul had been in prison for two years.

Festus: Welcome to you King Agrippa and to you Bernice. I am pleased you have come to visit us, for there is a matter that is of deep concern to me. When I became the governor, I found that my predecessor Felix had kept a man called Paul in prison for two years, because he wanted to grant a favour to the Jews. (Acts 24:27)

Just three days after I arrived in the province, I went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem, where the chief priests and Jewish leaders appeared before me and presented the charges against Paul. They urgently requested me, as a favour to them, to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem. (Acts 25:1 - 3)

After I spent about eight to ten days with the chief priests and Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, I came down to Caesarea and some came here with me. I did not delay the case and convened a court the next day, ordering Paul to be brought before me.

When Paul appeared, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many serious charges against him. Then Paul made his defense: "I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar." (Acts 25:6 - 8) After I conferred with my council, I declared to Paul: "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!" (Acts 25:12)

Agrippa, this happened just a few days ago. (Acts 25:13) I know that you and Bernice plan to spend many days here in Caesarea. (Acts 25:14)

My dilemma is this: When Paul's accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus whom Paul claimed was alive. Agrippa, I am at a loss how to investigate such matters. (Acts 25:18 - 20)

I asked Paul if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges but when he made his appeal to be held over for the Emperor's decision, I ordered him held until I could send him to Emperor Caesar." (Acts 25: 20 - 21)

Agrippa: "I would like to hear this man myself."

Festus: "Tomorrow you will hear Paul." (Acts 25:22)

The next day, Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high ranking officers and the leading men of the city. At the command of governor Festus, Paul was brought in. (Acts 25:23)

Paul: King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently. (Acts 26:2 - 3)

First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. (Acts 26:20)

The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to you. I am convinced that none of this has escaped your notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do."

Agrippa: Paul, do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian? (Acts 26:26 - 28)

Paul: Short time or long--I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains. (Acts 26:29)

The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. They left the room, talking with one another, saying, "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment." (Acts 26:30 - 31)

Agrippa: Festus, This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar. (Acts 26:32)

Festus: My predecessor, Felix, had an advantage over me regarding this fellow Paul. Felix was well acquainted with the Way and his wife Drusilla was a Jewess. Felix understood what Paul was saying, so much so that when he listened to Paul, he was afraid.

Agrippa: And as you have told me, you are at a loss at how to handle these issues.

Festus: Indeed Agrippa, and when I watched you listen to Paul, I could see that you are well acquainted with the Jewish customs and controversies. I also saw that you are familiar with Paul's activities and that you believe the prophets.

Agrippa: Felix, I believe I can help you understand why the chief priests and Jewish leaders are so upset, why they feel their authority and their teaching on the Law is being undermined by this fellow Paul.

Agrippa: It just so happens that just a little while before governor Felix had Paul put into prison, that Paul wrote an excellent letter dealing with the Law to the believers at Rome. In particular, Felix, it will help you if we look at one part of his letter where he is writing to the believers who had been Jews.

He begins by saying to them that every person, Jew and Gentile is controlled by sin. Let me recite the very words for you: *What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.* (Rom 3:9)

Festus: That means everyone!

Agrippa: Exactly. But Paul goes further. He then quotes from the Jews' very own writings, which they call the Law, to back him up. He starts his list of quotations from the Law with: *As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one".* (Rom 3:10)

Then, after giving his list, Paul tells the people that they cannot be reckoned as being righteous on the basis of following the Jews' writings, the Law: *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law* (v 20)

Festus: Well, that would undermine the authority of the chief priests and Jewish leaders! Paul seems to be saying that the very writings which the Jews' leaders are using to give them authority is not to be recognised by the people as providing righteousness before their God.

Agrippa: You are right. And he says even more than that. Listen to this: *through the law we become conscious of sin.* (v 20) So the role of the Jews' writings, the Law, is to increase the awareness of sin, but it does not contain a remedy.

Festus: But if Paul is telling the people that the Law is powerless, does he provide them with the solution?

Agrippa: You are astute, Festus, for the very next thing he wrote to the people in Rome is just that. First of all he told them that the righteousness which comes from God does not rely on works of obedience. Listen to this: *But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known.* (Rom 3:21)

Festus: That's a very subtle use of the word "law" this time.

Agrippa: Yes. And it's very important to be conscious of these subtle nuances, which are quite clear to Paul's hearers who have a Jewish background. To make sure there is no misunderstanding, and that all people know he means all parts of the Jewish writings, Paul uses the term "the Law and the Prophets", saying that these give authority to what he is saying: *But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.* (Rom 3:21)

Festus: So he is using the very foundation that the chief priests and Jewish leaders use for authority as being his own authority! Very clever. But, how then **does** righteousness come?

Agrippa: You are always one step ahead, which shows you are now beginning to understand. Paul answers your question this way: *This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.* (Rom 3:22)

Festus: Everyone? If that were so, this would really remove the authority of the Jews' chief priests and leaders.

Agrippa: Let me recite Paul's next words: *There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.* (Rom 3:22 - 24)

Festus: So, very cleverly, Paul has said that all are under sin, that the Law only raises consciousness of sin, that righteousness from God does not come from obeying the Law but is freely available purely on the basis of faith. No wonder those leaders want him dead!

Agrippa: Well put. Paul puts your summary this way: *For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.* (Rom 3:28) And then, because he has made proper use of the Law, the Jewish writings, to uphold his position, Paul is able to say that this faith supports the Law: *Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.* (Rom 3:31)

Then, appealing to the greatest names of Jewish tradition, Abraham and David, Paul shows from the Law, that their righteousness was credited to them on the basis of their faith, not because of their obedience to the Law.

First, appealing to Abraham, Paul writes: *What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness". To the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.* (Rom 4:3, 5)

Next, calling on the record from David, Paul writes: *David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."* (vv 6 - 8)

Festus: Paul really makes telling points!

Agrippa: Abraham, says Paul, *is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.* (vv 11 - 12)

Just in case anyone has missed his point, Paul states very clearly that Abraham did not receive the promise through any works of obedience but through his faith: *It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.* (v 13)

Agrippa: The Law does not bring righteousness. Since the Law serves to raise the consciousness of sin, and can only *bring wrath* (v 15).

When we are reckoned by God as being righteous solely on the basis of our faith, then we are not transgressors. Because, *where there is no law there is no transgression*. (v 15)

As his summary, then, Paul says that *therefore the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace*. (v 16)

Festus: Thank you, Agrippa. I can see that Paul has made a deep impression on you. Now I can understand why the leaders of the Jews are so concerned.

To develop the objective of this piece, the above material makes use of the story described in Acts of the Apostles, from chapter 24:27 to 26:32. Apart from minor editing of that text to conform with the grammatical requirements of the format used in this article, the above text follows the New International Version (NIV) very closely. The quotations from Romans chapter 3:9 to 4:16 follow the NIV quite closely.

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