

# *Paul before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa*

## [PREPARATION]

### ✦ GETTING READY

Reflect on the people you have the opportunity to share the gospel with. Who is in your circle of influence? Who do you interact with on a daily basis? What is their circle of influence? How many people could they impact? If you were to share the gospel with all those people, and they shared it with all their circles of influence, what kind of impact would that make?

Read Acts 24–26.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you see what kind of gospel impact you can make on the world by sharing your testimony.

## [THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

### ✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Disciples of Jesus aren't afraid to share the gospel with anyone, even very powerful or highly influential people.

### ✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

In Paul's speeches to Felix, Festus, and Agrippa, Paul came before the three most powerful people in his area at the time. And he boldly shared the gospel. He spoke the truth, but he met each of them where they were. None of them accepted Christ. But that's okay, the message got out there. Scripture tells us we aren't responsible for people's response to our message; we are just responsible for sharing it. We plant the seeds and water the seeds, but it is God who makes it grow. All we can do is share the message in the most effective, loving-yet-strong way possible. And leave the heart change to God.

### ✦ MEDITATE

Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" (Acts 26:28).

## [GETTING STARTED]

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

**QUESTION** *Reflect on times you have seen people in our culture get an opportunity to share the gospel on a wide public platform in front of influential people? What did they say? How did it go?*

**QUESTION** *With social media, we all have a somewhat public platform. What does it look like for us to be careful about how we use that platform to share the gospel?*

This section is all about Paul having the opportunity to share the gospel with influential people—the governor Felix, the governor Festus, and King Herod Agrippa II. Paul had been sent to Felix by the Roman tribune because the Sanhedrin and the Sicarii had a plot to murder him on his way to a fake trial. As a Roman citizen, he had a right to a fair trial. When Paul shared the gospel before these men, he didn't give an elaborate theological or apologetic argument. He simply shared his testimony. This was fitting for the situation. He was on trial, of course he was sharing his testimony. But it was also a non-threatening way to share the gospel, testimony as opposed to debate. His story was much more convincing and intriguing to them than an argument. When he presented his case before Felix, Felix avoided making a decision but discussed the faith with Paul for two years while he waited in prison. When Festus took over Felix's position after two years, Festus also didn't want to make a decision, so he suggested sending him back to the Sanhedrin, at which point Paul appealed to Caesar. Then he came before Herod Agrippa II. Agrippa and Festus agreed he was innocent and could have been let go if he hadn't appealed to Caesar. But this was all part of God's plan for Paul, as Jesus had told him in his vision. Though it meant imprisonment and suffering, Paul wanted to go to Rome so he could spread the gospel even further there.

## + UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+ When Paul appeared before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa, he gained the opportunity to share the gospel with some very influential people. He didn't make a theological argument; he simply shared his testimony of what happened to him—how Jesus appeared to him and God called him into ministry. Felix was very intrigued by what Paul had to say and continued to discuss the faith with him for two years while he was imprisoned, awaiting a decision that never came. When Festus took over for Felix, he was not as amenable to Paul's message and threatened to send him back to Jerusalem to please the Jews, so Paul appealed to Caesar. Then King Herod Agrippa II arrived, and Paul was able to share the gospel with him.

Agrippa seemed very knowledgeable about the Scriptures and how they pointed to Christ, but he scoffed at the idea that Paul could persuade him so quickly. Festus and Agrippa agreed Paul was innocent and would have been able to go free if he hadn't appealed to Caesar. So, Paul stayed in chains, but that was exactly what God had planned.

1. *Paul before Felix*

2. *Paul before Festus*

3. *Paul before Herod Agrippa*

## **[GOING DEEPER]**

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 24–26.

### *1. Paul before Felix*

#### **+ READ ACTS 24.**

**QUESTION** *What did the Jewish religious leaders accuse Paul of? Why was this inaccurate?*

**QUESTION** *How did Paul explain that the Way wasn't just a sect of Judaism? What did he say it was?*

Marcus Antonius Felix was the Roman governor of Judea from 52–60 AD, appointed by emperor Claudius. Felix and his brother Pallas had been slaves of Claudius's mother, Antonia, but had been freed. It was very unusual by Roman standards to appoint a freedman to a post like this, but both Felix and his brother were favorites of Claudius. Pallas had an even higher role as secretary of the treasury. Felix's rule was marked by cruelty, corruption, and unrest. The Roman historian Tacitus described him as ruling with "the power of a king but the mind of a slave," great authority without noble character and wisdom. Felix ruled with extreme violence, deceit, and bribery. We can see his tendency toward corruption in this story, both in hoping Paul would pay him off to get out of prison and in keeping him in prison for two years with no verdict when he knew he wasn't really guilty of anything.

Drusilla was Felix's third wife. She was the daughter of Herod Agrippa I, who had died suddenly in Acts 12, and the sister of Herod Agrippa II and Bernice, before whom Paul testified later in this section. Felix had met her at Agrippa's palace and, struck by her great beauty, sent an emissary to convince her to break Jewish law by divorcing her husband and marrying him, a pagan. This is what Herodias had done before her, for which John the Baptist publicly condemned her.

When the high priest Ananias came, his spokesman Tertullus addressed Felix with flattery that was obviously fake if you know the historical context: He said 1) that through Felix they enjoyed much peace when he actually caused more conflict; 2) reforms were being made for their nation when Felix was actually making things worse for the Jews; 3) that they accepted all this with gratitude when they actually complained about Felix and rebelled against him; and 4) he asked for Felix "in your kindness" to hear their case briefly, while Felix was anything but kind. He was obviously trying to butter him up so he would find the case in their favor.

Then his accusations against Paul were false, that he 1) stirred up riots among the Jews, when in actuality others stirred up riots against him, and 2) tried to profane the temple, which he didn't. The only thing they said that was partly true was that he was "ringleader" of the "sect" of the Nazarenes. Paul responded that the first two accusations were simply not true, and they could not prove either one. Then he "confessed" that the last bit was sort of true, though the Way wasn't a sect. Paul still worshipped the God of their fathers, believing everything written in the Law and the Prophets, and had hope in the resurrection just as the Pharisees do. By this description, he was showing that the Way wasn't a sect of Judaism, it was the fulfillment of it—the final chapter, the hope in the resurrection. Then Paul told his story of what really happened. He hadn't profaned the temple; he was purifying himself in it. And he didn't cause the riot, some Jews from Asia did.

Felix had accurate knowledge of the Way, so he knew Paul was innocent. But he wanted to appease the Jewish leaders and try to get Paul to bribe him, so he put off deciding their case until the tribune came. After a few days, Felix and his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, sent for Paul to ask him about his faith in Jesus, but when he talked about righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed, because he knew he had been cruel and unrighteousness, lacking in self-control. He sent Paul away and kept Paul imprisoned for two years without making a decision, hoping Paul would bribe him to be released. He sent for Paul often to talk to him about his faith, but there is no evidence he ever converted.

**QUESTION** *What was holding Felix back from accepting the gospel and following Jesus?*

**QUESTION** *Why might talking about righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment specifically make Felix alarmed?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / Paul was able to share the gospel with the governor of Judea, who was close with the emperor Claudius and had a great deal of influence in the empire. Felix was intrigued by what Paul had to say, but when he felt convicted by the gospel, instead of repenting and turning to God, he sent Paul away. Felix represents many people who are intrigued by the gospel but recognize that surrendering to Jesus means a loss of status, power, control of their lives, or simply the physical pleasure of sins they enjoy. They know on a deep level that what they are hearing is the truth, yet they refuse to submit themselves to it. Mere exposure to the truth and “adequate knowledge” of the gospel does not necessarily change the heart. God is looking for a heart change, for people to not only know about Him but come to know Him in faith.

**QUESTION** *Reflect on those you know who are intrigued by the gospel but just don't seem to want to give their lives to Christ. What is holding them back? How can you show them that it is worth it?*

**QUESTION** *What do we learn from Paul about how to respond to false accusations?*

## 2. Paul before Festus

### ✚ READ ACTS 25:1-22

**QUESTION** *What was Paul's defense before Festus?*

**QUESTION** *Why did Festus ask Paul if he wanted to be tried in Jerusalem instead (v. 20)?*

In 59–60 AD, two years after he had put Paul in prison, Felix was replaced by Porcius Festus, who was described as fair and reasonable, more just and capable than Felix. After a particularly violent episode in Caesarea, the Jewish leaders formally accused Felix of mismanagement and cruelty, and he was recalled to Rome to answer those charges. This was after Felix had Jonathan, the new high priest, assassinated by the Sicarii because he had threatened to report him to Ceasar (58 AD). Festus was from a freeborn Roman family, not a former slave. Festus was a peacemaker; he worked hard to suppress crime and uprisings with less corrupt methods than Felix had.

When Festus took over, Paul had already been imprisoned for two years. The Jewish leaders tried to get him to transfer Paul to Jerusalem for trial before the Sanhedrin, not because they wanted to put him on trial but because they were plotting to have him killed on the way. Festus told them they would have to come to Caesarea and make formal charges against him the proper way. The Jews came and made many serious charges against him that they could not prove. Paul simply responded that he had not committed any offense against the Jewish law, the temple, or against Ceasar. At this point, Festus asked Paul if he wanted to be tried in Jerusalem instead. Festus told Agrippa later that he did this because this seemed like a religious dispute rather than a crime, so they should work it out among themselves. But the text tells us Festus was trying to do the Jews a favor. Festus was playing politics.

And Paul called him on it. “I have done no wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well” (v. 10). Paul didn’t shy away from speaking the truth. Festus may not have been cruel like Felix, but he knew what the Jews would do if he sent Paul back to Jerusalem. Festus knew Paul was innocent, but he refused to make that verdict. Paul said he was already standing right where he should be tried as a Roman citizen, in Ceasar’s tribunal. Trials were conducted in public forums so citizens could observe the proceedings to ensure transparency and fairness. The right to a fair trial was a fundamental right of every Roman citizen, and Paul had not yet received that right. He had been held in prison for over two years without a conviction. This was not part of the due process he deserved, and he was reminding Festus of that. Paul could have had a case against Felix and Festus for not giving him his right to fair trial.

To keep Festus from doing something shady and transferring him to Jerusalem, which would have been illegal, Paul appealed to Caesar. He wasn’t getting his fair trial here, even with the new governor. This would ensure he was tried fairly under Roman law. But he had another reason. Jesus had appeared to him in a vision and told him he would take his testimony to Rome. His appeal to Ceasar also gave him an opportunity to share the gospel of Jesus in the heart of the Roman Empire.

When Agrippa II and Bernice arrived at Caesarea, Festus laid Paul’s case before Agrippa, and in his words, we can see Festus’s reaction to the gospel. Festus told Agrippa that the charges the Jews brought against Paul weren’t real crimes, but just religious disputes “about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive” (v. 19). Festus said that was the impetus for him asking if Paul wanted

to go to Jerusalem to be tried there. He saw this as a religious dispute, not a criminal case. Felix was intrigued by the gospel, understood it accurately, but rejected it. But Festus didn't understand the gospel or didn't really seem to care. He seemed to not really listen to what they were talking about because it didn't concern him. His job was to judge whether Paul was guilty of a crime; this was just a religious dispute.

**QUESTION** *Why does it tell us about Festus that he was unconcerned with Paul's testimony once he saw it as a religious dispute among the Jews?*

**QUESTION** *Why didn't Festus understand what Paul was saying about the resurrection? How could he have understood it better?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / Festus wasn't necessarily being intentionally dismissive of the gospel. He was there to do a job, which was to try a criminal case. When he figured out no crime had been committed, that they were just arguing theology, he stopped listening because it didn't concern him. He wasn't a Jew; why would he care about their internal theological disputes? Yet he missed an opportunity to hear the gospel and be saved because he thought what they were talking about didn't apply to him. How often do people today miss out on the chance to be saved because they tune out the gospel? Because they don't think this "religious stuff" applies to them? Because they just don't think it matters? They're not necessarily hostile to the gospel, they're just indifferent. More and more people in our culture feel that way. The "rise of the nones" is a phrase that refers to the increasing number of people in our culture who claim no religious affiliation. Some have some sense of spirituality, but many don't. And America has seen a simultaneous rise in apathy. Pastors say their top challenge with Gen Z is indifference. They just don't seem to care.

**QUESTION** *How can we reframe our presentation of the gospel for people who think religious stuff doesn't apply to them? How can we help them see their need for God?*

**QUESTION** *Why do you think some people feel apathetic about God or even spirituality?*

**QUESTION** *Reflect on times you may have felt spiritual apathy. What situations in your life may have contributed to that? How can you reignite spiritual passion when you feel apathetic?*

### 3. Paul before Agrippa

#### ✚ READ ACTS 25:23-26:32

**QUESTION** *Why did Paul say it was fortunate he was making his appeal before Agrippa?*

**QUESTION** *What did Agrippa accuse Paul of trying to do to him? Why?*

King Herod Agrippa II was the son of Herod Agrippa I (who was struck dead by God in Acts 12 for his pride and idolatry in allowing the people to worship him as a god). He was raised and educated in Rome, where he developed a close relationship with the Roman emperors Claudius and Nero. When his father died in 44 AD, he was only seventeen and considered too young to rule. Judea was placed under Roman governors as a province of Rome.

In 48 AD, Agrippa II was given authority over the affairs of the temple in Jerusalem, including appointing the high priest, though he didn't rule over Judea. In 50 AD, Claudius appointed him ruler of Chalcis, a smaller Syrian kingdom. In 53 AD, he was made ruler over the territories previously ruled by Herod Philip, an area northeast of the Sea of Galilee. In 55 AD, Nero added some areas of Galilee to his realm. Essentially, Agrippa II was a Jewish king in title and religious affairs, but his political control was limited to territories north and east of Judea. Judea itself stayed under Roman administrative control by governors. So, when Agrippa came to hear Paul's case, he didn't actually have the authority to do anything about it. He was just offering an ear for Festus, to help him write the report to Caesar; Festus did not know what to say. When he took office, Festus often sought Agrippa's expertise on Jewish matters.

During Agrippa II's reign, tensions grew between the Romans and the Jews until the Jews revolted in 66 AD. Agrippa II was conflicted. He was deeply tied to Rome. He was educated there, was loyal to the emperors, and was dependent on them for his power. But he also tried to present himself as a faithful Jew, observing traditions and maintaining ties to Jerusalem. When Paul said he felt fortunate to be making his defense in front of Agrippa because Agrippa knew the customs and controversies of the Jews, he meant it. Because of his involvement with the temple and religious life, Agrippa was familiar with all the ins and outs of Judaism.

Paul first said he grew up in the strictest party of Judaism, the Pharisees. Yet now he stood on trial because of his hope in the promise of God to their fathers. Paul was connecting to Agrippa on the basis of shared beliefs. They had the same hope in the promise of God, and Paul had seen this promise come true. He made another point of connection, belief that God raises the dead. He talked about how he used to



persecute Christians out of zeal for the Lord, just like these Jews were doing to him now. Then he described his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. His next line, “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,” is another point of connection, belief that God communicates to his prophets through visions. Paul was just being obedient to God, and for that, the Jews seized him and tried to kill him. But to this day he’d had the help that comes from God, showing this is all from God. Paul ended by saying he was only preaching what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass. His message wasn’t new; it was just the end of the story they all knew and believed.

Festus shouted that he was out of his mind, but Festus didn’t know the Jewish faith the way Agrippa did. Paul hadn’t laid it all out this way for Festus because Festus didn’t know about the Jewish faith, nor did he care. But Agrippa did know, and Paul said he believed that none of these things escaped his notice. Agrippa got it. Paul prodded him further—“Do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe” (v. 27). Agrippa pushed back, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” (v. 28). Paul answered that his desire was that everyone who heard him would become a Christian. Agrippa represents those people who have head knowledge about God but no heart knowledge, people who know all the theology and can even connect all the dots but still refuse to believe and turn to faith in Jesus.

Agrippa, Bernice, and Festus met together and agreed Paul was innocent. But they couldn’t let him go because he had appealed to Caesar. He had to go to Rome. But that was just what Paul wanted, to share the gospel there too. Paul would preach the gospel to anybody. And though he never changed his core message, he changed the way he shared it to connect with different people in different ways, to meet them where they were. Paul wasn’t afraid to share the gospel with the most powerful people of his day, even though he was in chains on trial before them at the time. They controlled his fate, so if he made them angry, there was great danger. But Paul only saw great opportunity to spread the gospel far and wide. Imagine if any of these three men had said yes and become a Christian. Imagine the impact they could have had for the gospel. But even more than thinking about the impact, platform, or the size of his audience, Paul was simply being faithful to God. Going where God told him to go, sharing the message God gave him to share, come what may.

**QUESTION** *Why doesn’t knowledge of the Bible and theology automatically lead to faith? What else do you need?*

**QUESTION** *None of these three leaders responded positively to the gospel. What does this tell us about them? What would a positive response have looked like in each of their lives?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / Agrippa knew a lot about God, the Bible, even the prophecies that pointed to Jesus. He could have probably sat down with Paul and mapped out how Jesus fulfilled each one of those prophecies. But still he refused to believe. We don't know the reason, perhaps just simply pride—"You think you can persuade me?" Regardless, Agrippa shows us that head knowledge about God, the Bible, and spiritual things does not always translate to heart knowledge.

**QUESTION** *Reflect on anyone in your life who has a great head knowledge of Scripture, but their lives haven't been changed by Jesus. How can you tell when someone has heart knowledge of Jesus and not just head knowledge?*

**QUESTION** *Reflect on Paul's method of speaking before these three rulers. What strategies did he use? What things did he keep the same and what did he do differently for each person?*

## [NEXT STEPS]

This section shows Paul sharing the gospel with three influential people who could have had a huge impact on the world, people who had a strong public presence. This week make a list of the people in your circles of influence, people with whom you interact where you live, work, and play. Pray for opportunities to share the gospel with them this week and then, when the opportunity arises, do it!

## [PRAY]

*+Pray for the influence of the church in the world. Pray that our testimonies will have great impact in the world around us, whether we are sharing with kings or slaves. Pray for the Lord to widen your circles of influence to give you more people with whom you can share the gospel.*