

Acts ~ Reimagine

Acts 25-26

Two years! That's how long Paul has now been in custody. Felix has been replaced as governor by Porcius Festus. History tells us that Felix was neither liked nor effective as a governor. History also tells us (namely through the Jewish historian Josephus) that Festus was more liked and effective. Even though he was only in office a short time (dying in office after 2-3 years) he got things done. One thing he's known for is dealing with the bandits that were terrorizing the countryside. More evidence that he was a get-things-done kind of guy is how quickly he dealt with Paul upon coming into office.

Also interesting, after all this time, dealing with Paul was still a high priority for the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem. Of all the things they could have bent the ear of the new governor about, Paul was near the top of their list. (Geez, don't these guys have anything better or more important to do?) And it appears they were still wanting to kill him (25:3).

Whether Festus knew of their intentions because Felix had briefed him on their previous plot to assassinate Paul, or because Festus was cautious of forementioned bandits on the countryside, or perhaps it was just logistically easier, he made the decision to hold a hearing in Caesarea instead of Jerusalem.

Unlike the trial before Felix, with their lawyer Tertullus, we are not privy to exactly what the Jewish leaders charged Paul with. Based on Paul's summary defense in verse 8, "*I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar*", we can gather that they added nothing new to their original charges. (Hmm, you'd think if it didn't work before, they would change their tactics/accusations...insert shoulder shrug.)

Like Felix, Festus also wanted to "*do the Jews a favor*" (25:9)--more of the seedy side of politics...quid pro quo over justice--so he asked Paul if he was willing to stand trial in Jerusalem. Paul's answer to this question would seal his fate, "*I appeal to Caesar*." Festus acquiesced, but also found himself in a quandary. What charges, exactly, would he be sending Paul to Caesar with? In Festus' own words, this was his understanding of what was going on, "*When his 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 who Paul claimed was alive. I was at a loss how to investigate such matters...*" (25:18-20).

Caesar would have no time nor interest in hearing, or weighing in on, religious debate between Jewish factions. To outsiders, Christians appeared to be just a different sect of Judaism...nothing criminal. Why waste the Emperor's time with such things? Festus would risk appearing incompetent if he sent Paul to Rome with no serious allegations.

Fortuitously for Festus, he was paid a visit by King Agrippa and his sister Bernice. Perhaps they could help him figure out what to write to the Emperor regarding Paul. When Festus described his dilemma to Agrippa, he was eager to lend a hand (25:22).

But first, a little background. Who is this Agrippa and Bernice? You may recall from chapter 12, a certain King Herod (Agrippa I) who died a rather sudden death for not giving glory to God (12:23). Here in chapter 25 is his son and daughter, Agrippa II and Bernice. This Agrippa was known for being an expert in Jewish affairs, and for being a Roman sympathizer (i.e. don't bite the hand that feeds you). There were rumors that he and Bernice had an incestuous relationship, but there's not much to back that up. In fact, Bernice would later be the mistress of the Roman general Titus, who led the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, and who would later become Emperor, at which point he distanced himself from Bernice. By the way, "*His Majesty*" (25:26) who Festus was referring to, trying to figure out what to tell him regarding Paul, was none other than the infamous Nero. The events of this chapter of Acts took place somewhere around AD 59-60.

In short order Festus was able to gather quite an audience for Agrippa and Bernice to hear Paul, "*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.*" (25:23)

At this point I want to remind us of something the Lord said to Ananias (the Ananias that assisted in Paul's conversion back in chapter 9). "*This man [Paul] is My chosen instrument to proclaim My name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for My name.*" (9:15-16) Now here we find Paul, in custody, in a room full of important people, as he is about to proclaim the Lord Jesus to them...and this is in preparation for doing so before Caesar. Amazing!

I think it's important and worthwhile to slow down and notice what Paul decides to say/share in this setting.

Paul was pleased to have the opportunity to speak to Agrippa because he was "*well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies.*" (26:3) Agrippa, obviously, was a person of influence, with a frame of reference to understand what Paul was about to present. In other words, Paul wasn't starting from scratch with this guy. (Remember the philosophers in Athens who really didn't have any frame of reference, so Paul resorted to starting with God as Creator—see 17:24ff.)

After his introductory comments (25:2-3), Paul shares about his life and experience, starting from when he was a child. He establishes that even his accusers can attest to the fact that he had a long history with the Jewish faith, even being a part of "*the strictest sect of our religion...a Pharisee*" (26:5) Notice how Paul frames his current situation as being due to his consistency with what the Jewish faith actually proclaims...that God makes and fulfills promises (26:6-7). Then he asks a leading question for all the hearers to consider, "*Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?*" (26:8)

Paul then launches into his own blindness (metaphorically) in seeing this truth, as he functioned as an enemy of the Jesus movement. His accusers can also attest to his zealousness and even violence against those who followed Jesus. The word Paul used to describe himself is only found here in the New Testament. It can be translated as “*exceedingly enraged*” or “*obsessed*”. We get the picture of a wild, out of control, animal...which is pretty accurate. Paul was completely consumed with putting an end to the Jesus movement, and he wants his present audience to understand this so they can appreciate what it must have taken for him to do a complete one-eighty.

He then goes into his conversion experience, which we are now well acquainted with as this is the third time we read about it in the book of Acts (see chapter 9 and chapter 22). This recounting differs from Paul’s retelling in chapter 22 in that he focuses more on what Jesus said to him, as opposed to what happened to him immediately following his Damascus road experience. Notice what Jesus said to Paul, “*I appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of Me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.*” (26:16-18...emphasis added). Paul was subtly implying that he was under a new authority...that of Jesus (i.e. no longer under the authority of the high priest, and though he never stated it as such, Paul was hinting to his listeners that there’s higher authority that he, and they, are answerable to).

Interestingly, this is only one of two times that the name “*Satan*” is used in Acts, and the only time it is mentioned by Paul (the other time is from the mouth of Peter in chapter 5 when confronting Ananias). Notice the phrase Paul used...“*the power of Satan*”...the word “*power*” here would more accurately be translated as “*authority*”. As we see Pauline theology develop in the letters of Paul we have preserved in the New Testament, what we see/learn is that people are either under the authority of Jesus (by their own choice) or they are under the authority of Satan (by default). There may be human institutions that have some level of authority in the lives of people (for instance in these chapters—the religious authority of the Jews and the political authority of the Romans) but Paul wants people to see/understand that there are really only two authorities at play that really matter...Christ’s and Satan’s. All other “authorities” fall into one of the two camps. This is why believers/followers of Jesus are to be very discerning when it comes to who we identify with, ally ourselves with, associate/partner with, when it comes to authorities/powers-that be in this world. We belong to Jesus, the ultimate authority, and we are His ambassadors/representatives in this world. Notice the confidence this gives Paul. He doesn’t pander to lesser authorities; he’s not intimidated by them. In fact, one way we could paraphrase the crux of this week’s reading is Paul basically saying, “*Get me in the room with the (supposedly) most powerful man in the world (Caesar). There’s Someone I’d like to introduce him to.*”

To paraphrase Paul's basic defense, "*I was obedient to the vision I received, and the authority that claimed me.*" Verse 20 is a (very) brief summary of how he went about being obedient. (How do you recap nearly 20 years of ministry and 3 missionary journeys?) While he doesn't put it in the form of a question, verse 21 has an implied question, "*Does this seem like something I, or anyone, should be arrested and killed over?*"

Paul then circles back to his accusers, with another assertion—see verse 22—that, again, holds an implied question, "*Who is actually being more faithful and consistent to our religion, to Moses and the prophets?*" Then, once again, Paul takes the focus off himself and places it squarely on Jesus and the essence of why the Jewish religion existed in the first place, "*that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to His people, and to the Gentiles.*" (26:23) From the book of Genesis onward, the entire Biblical story focus and follows the promise of God to bless ALL PEOPLES/NATIONS through the descendants (or more accurately, a descendant) of Abraham (see Genesis 12:3). There are many twists and turns to how God fulfilled that promise (see, well, the Bible), but the key/main thing no one saw coming was that the promise would be fulfilled through self-sacrifice and suffering (though there were hints along the way).

In I Corinthians 1:23 Paul writes, "*but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.*" I wonder if he had in mind Festus (a Gentile) and his interruption, "*Paul, you're out of your mind.*" (26:24) when he wrote that? Paul was politely dismissive of Festus' little outburst. It is interesting to note that while Paul was before a grand audience "*of small and great alike*" (26:22), he seems pretty focused on Agrippa. And it appears that Agrippa feels that focus, and with it, some pressure.

Please allow me to paraphrase the exchange between Agrippa and Paul...

- A: *Paul, are you trying to convert me?*
- P: *Yes, yes I am...you, and everybody else here.*

As we have come to expect from Paul by now, he was less concerned with getting out of custody, and more concerned with being faithful to his calling, to making sure people had an opportunity to hear and respond to the Gospel.

Let's pause for a moment and do a little self-examination. (These questions will be amongst the discussion questions below as well.)

How do you feel/what do you think about the whole idea of "converting" people?

In your understanding, are Christians (or should Christians be) about converting people?

I ask these questions with the realization that "converting" people is really not in vogue these days, and that people get rather squeamish about the whole idea/concept. If that's you, I would ask you why that is? Can you name/identify what, specifically, it is that makes you uncomfortable?

I also realize that history is filled with all kinds of bad examples of doing it the wrong way. BUT...with that caveat, it is hard to miss that throughout the entire book of Acts that we've been

in for months, that the early Christians (the leaders of the movement, and those whose names we don't know) all hoped to persuade people to become like them...followers of King Jesus.

I would be curious to know, from those of you who might not like the idea of "converting people", how you feel about the stated mission of our church, "*To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.*"? To become a disciple of Jesus means to convert from whatever we were before that. We could even call the entire Christian life a continual conversion process.

I bring this up because it does seem like we have some hang-ups about conversion. The best way to deal with hang-ups, I believe, is to talk about them. But please don't miss this...we've been studying a book together for several months now that is all about conversion...guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, motivated by Love for Jesus and Others.

Paul was unmistakably, unashamedly, unapologetically pro-conversion. And notice how this chapter concludes. To paraphrase Agrippa's, Bernice's, and Festus' assessment, "*This guy has done nothing wrong.*" (26:31-32)

Possible Discussion Questions

- Possible icebreaker: What's your favorite courtroom drama? (Movie, TV show, real life.) (Mine is from "A Few Good Men", with Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson. If you say "The People's Court" I will disavow ever knowing you.)
- Possible Icebreaker: If you could be king or queen, what new law would you create and why?
- As you read over Paul's message before Agripa in chapter 26, what is the main thing he was trying to get across?
- Can you share a time when you faced a situation where your faith was criticized or questioned?
- If someone wanted to prove that you were a Christian, what evidence could they use?
- Have you ever participated in a trial before (as jury, witness, attorney, etc.)? Please share about your experience. What did you think/feel/conclude about the person on trial, and why?
- How has your impression of Paul changed or developed over our study of Acts?
- What do people you know find hard to believe about the Christian faith?

- Paul describes himself almost animalistically in his zealousness against followers of Jesus before he became one. Have you ever been “exceedingly enraged”, “out of control”, “obsessed”? Care to share? (I realize it might be a little embarrassing, so no pressure.)
- As you consider your coming to faith experience, how does it compare to Jesus’ description in 26:18? Was it an “eye-opening” experience? Did it feel like turning from darkness to light? Did you sense a need for forgiveness? What has the process of sanctification (growing, maturing, developing in holiness) been like for you? What questions do these questions evoke in you?
- Describe Christ’s authority in your life as you understand it.
- What’s the biggest, and/or most intimidating audience you’ve ever spoken in front of?
- How do you feel/what do you think about the whole idea of “converting” people? In your understanding, are Christians (or should Christians be) about converting people? “Converting” people is really not in vogue these days, and people get rather squeamish about the whole idea/concept. If that’s you, why is that? Can you name/identify what, specifically, it is that makes you uncomfortable? How do you reckon with the fact that Jesus (the One in charge, with all the authority) told us to?

Soul Training Exercise ~ Lectio Divina

It is safe to say, from what we've seen of Paul in Acts, that he was enthralled, captivated, enraptured by Jesus. So much so that he gave his entire life to promoting and representing King Jesus.

So this week we are going to focus on some of Paul's own words about Jesus. And we'll do it Lectio Divina style.

Lectio Divina

Latin for Divine Reading. The desire is to encounter and surrender to the Living God by attending to Scripture. Lectio requires a humble, listening posture that is alert to the voice of God in Scripture.

Lectio

First you read the text (lectio). You give it a slow, focused and naive reading of the passage.

Meditatio

Then you re-read the same passage paying attention to what word or phrase stands out.

Oratio

Third, you offer a simple prayer in response to God.

Contemplatio

After prayer, the text is read for the third time with the focus on listening for the Voice of God (contemplatio). This is a gift of grace and cannot be forced. Here is where you are hoping to interact with God, listening for His voice. You can ask the question, "Lord, what do you want to do inside me?"

Actio

Finally you think on your response to God's Word and grace (actio). How can you make your life a gift to others in response to the Word?

Colossians 1:15-20; 2:6-10 & Ephesians 1:1-23