

“THROUGH THE BIBLE”

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ACTS 25-26

I have tonight a famous political cartoon that was first published in 1889. Usually in football one team punts and the other team receives. But this cartoon shows both teams trying to punt the ball away at the same time. The caption read, “What can I do when both parties insist on kicking?” The cartoonist was satirizing the political landscape of his day. He depicts Congress, and then President Benjamin Harrison, both trying to kick the football simultaneously. The cartoon illustrates the chaos that occurs when neither side in a dispute is willing to take responsibility. Both parties blame the other. No one steps up to make the hard choices.

Apparently, the fiasco we’ve just witnessed involving the debt ceiling isn’t the first time America’s politicians have tried to skirt difficult decisions. You’ve heard the expression “political football?” Here’s its definition, “It’s a political issue that’s continually debated, but never resolved.” A political football is an unpopular topic on which neither side wants to take action. The decision ends up getting punted back and forth. No one is willing to take the ball and run with it... *And this was the case in Caesarea.* The Apostle Paul had become a *political football!*

Governor Felix had a prisoner who was a problem. Felix knew Paul was innocent of any wrong doing, but politically speaking what should he do? If he released Paul, it would upset the Jews who Felix wanted to placate. If he condemned Paul, Felix could get in trouble with his superiors in Rome. Paul was a Roman citizen which meant he had legal rights. So like any good politician, what did Felix do? *He punted!* For two years he kept Paul under house arrest; then left Paul’s fate to his successor, Festus. And that’s where we pick up the story tonight... in Acts 25:1...

“Now when Festus had come to the province, after three days he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem.” Porcius Festus was the eleventh Roman procurator of Judea. He ruled the region from around 59-62 AD. Governor Festus took over the post at age 70, and would ultimately die in office. Earlier in his life, Festus co-starred on the TV series, “Gunsmoke.” His predecessor, Felix, had been heavy-handed and corrupt. The Jews resented him. Festus was a better man than Felix, and knew his first priority should be smoothing out fractured relationships with the Jews in Jerusalem. That’s why three days after his arrival he goes up to the holy city...

“Then the high priest and the chief men of the Jews informed him against Paul; and they petitioned him, asking a favor against him, that he would summon him to Jerusalem - while they lay in ambush along the road to kill him.” Remember in Acts 23, forty men had taken a vow not to eat until Paul was dead meat. Two years later these guys must be getting real hungry! Once again they concoct a plot to assassinate Paul. By now two High Priests had come and gone. The old man, Ananias, had died. His successor, Jonathan, was murdered by Governor Felix. Priest Ishmael was now in power. But it doesn’t matter who the priest was the Jewish priority was the same. The Jews hated Paul and wanted him dead.

Verse 4, “But Festus answered that Paul should be kept at Caesarea, and that he himself was going there shortly.” Festus probably smelled a rat. “Therefore,” he said, “let those who have authority among you go down with me and accuse this man, to see if there is any fault in him.” Festus calls for another trial. “And when he had remained among them more than ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day, sitting on the judgment seat, he commanded Paul to be brought.” American justice has rules forbidding double jeopardy, but not so among the ancient Romans. Paul is back in court defending himself against the same charges.

Verse 7, “When he had come, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood about and laid many serious complaints against Paul, which they

could not prove, while he answered for himself, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all.” All the Jews could do was throw up lies and false accusations. They had no evidence. Paul maintained his innocence. “But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?” Paul was a smart guy. He knew the political situation, and understood that after the ruthlessness of Felix, Festus’ agenda was to do whatever necessary to win back the favor of the Jews. Festus may’ve thought Paul could get a fair trial in Jerusalem, but Paul knew better. If he’s taken back to the Sanhedrin it’s over. He’ll be murdered. Paul decides to throw down the trump card he’s been holding. Paul was a Roman and it was every citizen’s right to appeal his case to the Caesar.

Verse 10, “So Paul said, “I stand at Caesar’s judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar.” Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, “You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!” He seals his appeal!

When Paul was first arrested in the Temple we’re told in Acts 23, “The Lord stood by him and said, ‘Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.’” As far back as Acts 19 Paul had purposed in the Spirit that he “must also see Rome.” Paul knew God was sending him to Rome, but never in his wildest imagination did he think it would happen in this manner. By appealing to Caesar he was getting the opportunity to preach the Gospel to the Emperor himself! In addition, the whole mission trip – food, travel, taxes, duties, tariffs, tips - will be paid for by the Roman government. It’s been said, “God works in mysterious ways.” Here’s a good example!

“And after some days King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus.” Two more characters make their debut in the story... King Agrippa II was the last of the Herods. By this time, he’d been stripped of most of his real power. He was a puppet - a mere figurehead. Bernice was Drusilla’s sister. Remember Drusilla was the wife of Felix. Drusilla and Bernice were both female members of the Herodian family. History tells us that appearance-wise Bernice was a *beauty*, but character-wise she was *bankrupt*. She was the half-sister of her lover, Agrippa II. The two never married, but lived together in an incestuous union. Later in life Bernice left Agrippa for the famous Roman general, “Titus Vespasian.” He was the man who conquered Jerusalem and burned the Temple to the ground. Eventually she left Titus, and returned to Agrippa. Obviously, Bernice was *fickle and flirtatious*. She and Agrippa were like a Hollywood couple... Here Governor Festus drags them into the picture...

“When they had been there many days, Festus laid Paul’s case before the king, saying: “There is a certain man left a prisoner by Felix, about whom the chief priests and the elders of the Jews informed me, when I was in Jerusalem, asking for a judgment against him. To them I answered, ‘It is not the custom of the Romans to deliver any man to destruction-before the accused meets the accusers face to face, and has opportunity to answer for himself concerning the charge against him.’ Therefore when they had come together, without any delay, the next day I sat on the judgment seat and commanded the man to be brought in. When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive.” What angered the Jews was Paul’s allegiance to Jesus. “And because I was uncertain of such questions, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there be judged concerning these matters. But when Paul appealed to be reserved for the decision of Augustus, I commanded him to be kept till I could send him to Caesar.” “Augustus” was one of the Emperor’s official titles. It meant “*revered or august one*.” It later became associated with Roman Emperor worship.

“Then Agrippa said to Festus, “I also would like to hear the man myself.” “Tomorrow,” he said, “you shall hear him.” So the next day, when Agrippa and Bernice had come with great pomp, and had entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at Festus’ command Paul was brought in.” The “*auditorium*” Luke mentions is a highlight of our trips to Israel. The Roman amphitheater in Caesarea is a magnificent venue. It’s situated on the beach where its 3000 spectators face seaward toward the bright blue Mediterranean. Its focal point is an enormous, marble stage. Stairs lead from the stage downward to dark, stone rooms situated below the flooring. About nine rows up in the seating, right in the middle of the bleachers is a platform for dignitaries. You could call it “*box seats*.” Even today you can sit where Festus and Agrippa heard Paul on-stage delivering his defense.

Imagine this stadium packed to the gills. Everybody who was anybody in Israel was there. Roman officials stationed in Caesarea - Jewish aristocrats

from Jerusalem – the Governor - the King and Queen were all present... The last to be seated was Festus – then Agrippa and Bernice. I'm sure they pranced into the amphitheater amidst great pomp and circumstance. They strutted down the red carpet into the theater like three peacocks. Finally, out of the dark recesses of the sub-stage, Paul was thrust into the blinding sunshine. *Center stage among a hostile crowd...* imagine the jeers, and insults, and scorn! Paul could barely see through squinted eyes.

Remember the physical description tradition gives us of Paul. He had a bald-head, bow-legs, a hunched-back, and runny-eyes. His nose was crooked. He had bushy eyebrows. On his tiptoes he was barely five feet tall. Paul was a pitiful human specimen to look at... weak, fragile, small... *Now compare him to the well-dressed, dignified crowd filling the theater.* Festus is clothed in his Roman armor and military splendor. Agrippa wears his royal robes. His gorgeous mistress, in an elegant gown, sits by his side... Most folks in Paul's shoes would be just a little intimidated - a bit threatened - but not Paul. Here he shows tremendous poise and courage...

Verse 24, "And Festus said: "King Agrippa and all the men who are here present with us, you see this man about whom the whole assembly of the Jews petitioned me, both at Jerusalem and here, crying out that he was not fit to live any longer. But when I found that he had committed nothing deserving of death and that he himself had appealed to Augustus, I decided to send him." Paul's appeal to Caesar had bought him a ticket to Rome. But Festus had a problem... "I have nothing certain to write to my lord (Caesar) concerning him. Therefore I have brought him out before you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the examination has taken place I may have something to write. For it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner and not to specify the charges against him." How can a prisoner be sent to Rome without being charged with a crime? Festus needs a reason to deport Paul, so he asks for Agrippa's help.

Chapter 26, "Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself: "I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews..." What an amazing introduction. Here's a man who's been under arrest for two years. He's been used by the Romans, and threatened by the Jews. Yet he stands before this huge crowd and declares himself, "*a happy man!*" Obviously, Paul took his joy not from circumstances, but from Jesus.

Verse 3, "Especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently." Agrippa was a Herod. He was from Jewish establishment. Agrippa grew up in Israel. He probably went to the Hebrew University. He was an expert in Israeli history and was familiar with current events. Paul assumes that Agrippa is the perfect person to issue a fair verdict.

In verse 4 Paul begins to share his testimony. "My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know." Saul had been a familiar face in the Temple. Everyone knew him. Before his conversion he was a leading rabbi. He says, "They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee." Saul was a loyal Jew and devout legalist. *Pharisees were legalistic about their legalism.* "And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews." Paul hoped for salvation, same as the Jews. He wanted to be right with God and live forever. This is every man's hope.

Thus Paul asks in verse 8, "Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?" The bottom line to Paul's belief and the core of Christianity is [the resurrection of Jesus](#). To Paul the resurrection made sense. *If God can provide eternal life to all men; then surely he can raise up His own Son from the dead.* If God is God, why doubt the resurrection? Sometimes we're slow to believe a miracle, because we forget who it is we're asking to perform the task... Ask me to lift a 300 pound barbell and you'll have your doubts, but ask a NFL lineman to do the same and you'll say "[Sure, no problem.](#)" Likewise, miracles are easy for an almighty God.

Isaiah 40:12 makes two astonishing statements... **First**, "(God) has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand..." The 21 major oceans on Earth cover a total area of 138 million square miles. The combined average depth of those oceans is 4,200 feet. That's a lot of water. Yet Isaiah says, *God holds the oceans in the cup of his hand.* And **second**, Isaiah says God has "measured heaven with a span..." An ancient "span" was the distance between the king's thumb and pinky. Now think of the 100 billion stars that dot our galaxy - and then a 100 million more galaxies. Our universe is enormous – yet it all

fits in God's palm. It's been said, "If you believe Genesis 1:1, '*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*', then you should have no problem believing the remaining 41,172 verses." If God created the universe He can do anything He pleases, including raising His Son from the dead. This is why Paul asks, "Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?"

"Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth." At one time "Saul" who later became "Paul" played on the opposing team. He was the leading antagonist opposing Christianity. "This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them." Paul was the official Jewish henchman. He rounded up Christians and threw them in prison - or worse. When Paul says, "*I cast my vote against them,*" many scholars believe this implies that Paul was once an official member of the Jewish Sanhedrin.

Verse 11, "And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities." Rabbi Saul was vicious. We forget just how evil and diabolical Paul was... We're not sure what gruesome horrors are behind the phrase, "*He compelled them to blaspheme...*" Did he ever put a knife to a child's throat, and give the dad the option - *renounce Jesus or he dies*? He obviously tortured the believers. Rabbi Saul was a first-century terrorist. But here's the provocative point, if God was willing to forgive Saul of such unspeakable crimes, don't you think He'll forgive us of our sin? Here's amazing grace in action. *If God can forgive a Saul, He can forgive us all!*

Verse 11 says an angry Saul was like a *hungry tiger after his prey*. He not only ran Christians out of Jerusalem, he tracked them to "*foreign cities.*" And it was on one such warpath to Damascus that Saul got intercepted. Verse 12, "*While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday, O king...*" Notice, like a western, God's showdown with Paul occurs at high noon. And "*along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language...*" The risen Lord spoke to Paul. And He spoke in Hebrew. Jesus is a Jew! He wasn't against Judaism. He was its fulfillment.

And the Lord spoke, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?*" I love the Lord's analysis. Saul was persecuting Christians, but Jesus took the attacks personally. He asks Saul, "*why are you persecuting Me?*" Rest assured, whenever the Church encounters persecution, Jesus takes it personally! And then the Lord says, "*It is hard for you to kick against the goads.*" Goads were sharp pointed sticks used to prod cattle. Today hi-tech cowboys use electric shockers to maneuver and *steer their steers*. The witness of Stephen had *prodded* Saul... The faithfulness of the saints had *shocked* his conscience... The growth of the Church despite his best efforts had forced him to consider... One commentator writes, "*The lightning of Damascus struck no empty void, but found plenty of flammable material in the soul of Paul.*" Even before this divine encounter on the Road to Damascus, *God had been prodding, but Saul had been bucking...*

And God continues to prod even today. We often call it *conviction*. God shines the light of His truth on our sin. He exposes our need for a Savior. Don't think the people you love who have yet to receive Christ are a lost cause. They're not! God is at work in them even as we speak. He's convicting and prodding and poking. They might never admit it, but through your witness God is pushing some of their buttons. On the Road to Damascus God finally ropes Saul, and takes him down. He humbles him with His glory, but He'd already been working on his heart.

Verse 15, "*So I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand on your feet...'*" I love this... God knocks him on his rear-end - forces him to his knees. Then the same God tells him to stand up and sets him back on his feet. This is how God treats us. He *knocks us down*, and then *lifts us up!* Jesus still turns Sauls into Pauls... The word "Saul" means "*requested one.*" The name "Paul" means "*little.*" Rabbi Saul thought he was big stuff - a religious celebrity - *the man in demand*. But Paul learned he was nothing but a little guy - *a simple servant* employed and empowered by a *big God*.

Jesus adds, "*For I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you.*" He's called "*a minister and a witness.*" The Greek word translated "*minister*" means "*under rower.*" It referred to the slaves who manned the oars in the belly of a Roman ship. Paul threw away his celebrity status to row on the Jesus' boat. He was a servant.

And Paul was also called a *"witness."* A witness is not a *judge* who renders verdicts... Nor is he a court *clerk* who interprets rules... Neither is a witness a *lawyer* who argues cases... *A witness simply tells his story.* All Christians have been called by our Lord Jesus to be *"a minister and a witness."* All of us should be willing to *grab an oar and share our story.*

The Lord Jesus also told Paul, verse 17, *"I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me."* Remember at that moment Paul is sitting on the curb as blind as a bat. Jesus blinded him with a bright light. Yet now He tells Paul he'll be used to open eyes, and turn folks from darkness to light. Soon Paul recovered his physical sight, but he spent the rest of his life helping people see spiritually. I believe there's no greater joy than *to help someone see.* To show them a Scripture, help them understand it, and apply it - watch them get it - see it really sink in. Spiritual ophthalmology is a fun and fulfilling vocation. What could be more thrilling than to lead someone out of darkness into the light?

Paul continues his address, verse 19, *"Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance."* Paul was knocked down and humbled as *an example.* Now all men need to *"Repent... turn to God... and not just make empty promises, but really show in their behavior that they're willing to change."* Paul was adamant we repent - *but he paid for his insistence.* He adds, *"For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me."*

Remember, Noah wasn't ridiculed and mocked for standing on the deck of the Ark, and saying, *"Something good is going to happen to you today..."* Jeremiah wasn't thrown in the dungeon for preaching *"Dare to Dream..."* Daniel wasn't heaved to the lions for chanting, *"Smile. God loves you."* Amos didn't confront the wicked priests with, *"I'm okay, you're okay..."* John the Baptist wasn't beheaded for having a *"Honk if you love Jesus"* bumper sticker on his Pinto. And Paul wasn't arrested by the Jews for encouraging them to think *"Power Thoughts."* They all preached *"repent!"*

In verse 22 Paul continues, *"Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come - that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."* Paul defends himself before the Jews by saying all he did was repeat what Moses and the prophets had said. The truth Paul believed and preached was all foretold in the OT. His accusers needed to read a Bible. Everything Jesus did and said was predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Verse 24, *"Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!"* Festus thought Paul had gone nuts. The idea of Jesus' resurrection was foreign to his Roman thinking... Yet Paul was the sanest person present.

Once an inspector was reviewing procedures at the State Insane Asylum. He asked how the hospital evaluated if a person should be institutionalized. The director of the asylum took him to a bathroom and pointed to the tub. He explained, *"We fill up this tub, and show the person a teaspoon, a teacup, and a bucket. Then we ask him or her to empty the tub."* The state inspector said, *"Oh, and if they don't ask for the bucket you admit them?"* The director replied, *"No, if the person doesn't pull the plug we admit him... Do you want your room on the first floor or the second floor?"*

Festus thought Paul needed to be institutionalized, but Paul was the only person in the arena with the courage and honesty to embrace the obvious. Paul replies to Festus, *"But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason."* Paul wasn't *crazy* and the truth isn't *hazy.* Paul points out that Christianity is a reasonable faith. It's based on rational, historical, verifiable facts! All Paul did was embrace the truth.

Verse 26, *"For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner."*

Suddenly, Paul turns from *the Roman* to *the Jew* sitting next to him. He puts King Agrippa on the spot. Festus was the new kid on the block, but Agrippa and Bernice were Israelis. They were alive, living in the land, 27 years earlier when a carpenter from Nazareth preached in their streets and worked miracles. They read the headlines. They knew the stunning evidence for the resurrection. As Paul says to the king, *"This thing was not done in a corner."*

In 1 Corinthians 15:5-8 Paul reels off a list of eyewitnesses who saw firsthand the risen Christ. He challenges all doubters to visit them and verify their stories. He wasn't afraid to put the truth of the resurrection to the test. It's vital to realize, Christianity is not a philosophy or dogma – it's more than an abstract idea. Christianity is truth based on falsifiable facts. If the Jews had only produced Jesus' corpse, Christianity would've been dead before it launched. A body would've *shot it down* before it *started up*. Paul reminds Agrippa that the foundation of Christianity is not some clandestine, mystical act performed in a secluded room in a secret location. No, God invaded time and space - and on a hill outside of Jerusalem - in full view of the entire world - His only Son was nailed to a cross. To this day, 2000 years later, you can go to the land where His body laid, and discover for yourself that the tomb is empty! *"This thing was not done in a corner."*

Agrippa knew Paul was telling the truth. The Apostle grows bolder in the next verse... *"King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe."* Paul doesn't even give him time to answer. He knows the answer. All Jews believed the prophets! Paul refuses to let Agrippa off the hook.

"Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." Here's one of the saddest, most pathetic verses in all Scripture. Agrippa was *almost* persuaded to believe. Yet as the old saying goes, *"Almost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades."* Not salvation. *Felix* looked for a more *"convenient time."* *Agrippa* was *"almost persuaded."* God tugged on both men's hearts, but they failed to take advantage of His tug. And there's no evidence either man got another opportunity. *And let me ask you, what have you done with God's tug?*

In verse 29 Paul responds to Agrippa, *"And Paul said, "I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains."* In his defense Paul zeroed in on Agrippa, but now he expands the invitation to all men. His goal was to persuade everyone in the theater to become a Christian. And you and I should have the same ambition. We can't force people to be Christians - nor would we want to - but we can try to *persuade* people to follow Jesus. I want to be persuasive. Folks need to see the *reality of the decision*. The *reasonableness of the decision*. The *immediacy of the decision*. The *dire consequences of the decision*. And they need to know that *no decision* is a *decision to say no*. Decide to follow Jesus and you'll never regret it. But decide *"no,"* or decide to *"put off deciding"* and you may regret it for the rest of eternity.

Verse 30, *"When he had said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them; and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, "This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains." Then Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."* It's interesting, when these proceedings started it was Paul who was on trial before King Agrippa. But in the course of events the tables were turned. In the end it was Agrippa who was on trial before Paul... and His Lord...