

Acts 25:13-27

Introduction

Luke focuses on two addresses by Festus, the first in private conversation with King Agrippa and the second to open the public hearing in which the king would hear the notorious prisoner.

The procurator's purpose in both of these settings was to enhance his reputation as a competent and loyal official of the Empire, confronted with a frustratingly ambiguous case involving intractable Jewish opponents. By contrast, Luke desired to show that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not subversive of civil order, even when a judicial system is a confusing mixture of due process, political pressure, and corruption.

Summary

In Acts 25:13-25, Festus pronounces the verdict that he had sidestepped earlier, first in private and then in public, that none of the charges brought by Paul's accusers warranted the death penalty that they demanded.

1. Private Consultation vv. 13-22

A state visit from King Agrippa and Bernice, his sister, to welcome the new governor, gave Festus the opportunity to seek advice from a consultant well versed both in the pressures of imperial politics and in the nuances of Jewish controversies.

Agrippa's opinion concerning Paul's case would be well informed and persuasive to the Emperor, to whom Festus needed to write a report of the charges.

Festus described his dilemma in a way that made him appear competent and conscientious, while subtly shifting the blame to others.

Festus next blamed Paul's accusers for bringing charges that caught him off guard, inasmuch as they were utterly unrelated to serious crimes as Roman law defined them. Instead, Paul and his opponents seemed to be enmeshed in controversies about their own religion and a dispute over Paul's claim that a certain Jesus, who had died, was alive.

Finally, Festus seemed to blame Paul. The governor had made the reasonable request that the prisoner willingly stand trial in Jerusalem, where his alleged offenses, whatever they might be, apparently occurred. Instead Paul stubbornly appealed over Festus' head, demanding to be held in protective custody to await the Emperor's decision.

Festus had presented an intriguing legal problem, and Agrippa's curiosity was aroused. The king took the bait: 'I would like to hear this man myself.'

2. Public Hearing vv. 23-27

In spite of the short notice, Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice turned Paul's hearing into a lavish public event attended by an impressive list of dignitaries.

As the prisoner stood in chains, Festus presented the legal problem that Paul posed. The whole Jewish people had petitioned the governor both in Jerusalem and in Caesarea, demanding Paul's death.

Next Festus gave himself undeserved credit for reaching a just verdict, conveniently neglecting to mention that he had lacked the courage to announce it in the presence of Paul's accusers: 'I found that he had done nothing deserving death.'

If he had said as much when Paul completed his defense, Paul would have felt no need to appeal to Caesar.

Although Festus' declaration that Paul was not guilty of capital crime came too late to avert the apostle's arduous and life-threatening voyage to Rome, it reinforces a motif that Luke is weaving, strand by strand.

Genuine Christian faith, although it recognizes that only God has ultimate authority, it is also submissive to the governments that God has established for society's peace and order even when those who govern stray from their God-given calling (**Acts 18:14-15; 19:37, 22:25, 23:3-5; 23:29, 26:31-32**).

Festus' subtle self-justification continued with his implication that the case could have been closed with his 'not guilty' verdict, had Paul not appealed to Caesar.

Luke's readers know that Festus' refusal to declare this verdict, proposing instead a change of venue to Jerusalem, had provoked Paul's appeal in the first place.

The governor's political shrewdness had backfired, and now he found himself in an awkward place of his own making. Festus' investigation had shown that no such charges existed, yet he had not exonerated Paul and dismissed the case. He needed something to write that would not expose his cowardly act of political expediency. He turned to King Agrippa and his expertise in Jewish matters for help.

Festus' dilemma poignantly illustrates how seemingly prudent compromises in matters of truth and justice can ensnare us in unexpected ways

The governor's purpose in presenting Paul to King Agrippa would be frustrated.

No clear statement of serious charges would emerge from the hearing (**26:31-32**).

On the other hand, God's purpose for this convocation of Near-Eastern dignitaries would be achieved, for Paul must carry Jesus' Name before Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel (**Acts 9:15**).

God continues to display his glory and grace, even through the self-serving decisions of sinful people.

