

The Last Herod

Acts 25-26

Introduction

I want to give a list of names to you, and while you read through the names, I want you to try to figure out what these men had in common. The names are:

- Owen Young;
- James Byrnes;
- Pierre Laval;
- Hugh Johnson.

More than likely, you do not recognize the names of any of these men. You certainly could not tell me what they did or how they made the list. Yet each of these men was at some point in his life, *Time Magazine's* "Man of the Year". In other words, he was perceived to have had, in a given year, the greatest impact of any human being on the rest of humanity.

A Repeated Trial

As I have read and studied through the final chapters of the book of Acts, it has struck me that the apostle Paul is standing on trial before his civilization's greatest leaders. The men Paul addressed would have been *Time's* "Man of the Year". They were the "movers and shakers" in the Middle East; they were the power players.

Notice the subtle reference by Luke to this fact in verse 5 of chapter 25.

"Therefore," he [Festus] said, "let the influential men among you go there with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them prosecute him."

Basically, in Acts, chapter 25, Festus, the new Governor of Caesarea, does a repeat performance of Felix. He wanted to do the Jews a favor, so he left Paul hanging without ever rendering a final verdict. In verses 1 through 12, Paul repeats his defense before Festus that he had repeated for the previous two years under Felix.

When it seemed that Festus was, in fact, going to hand Paul back to the Sanhedrin and return him to Jerusalem for trial, verse 11 says that Paul appealed to Caesar. As a Roman citizen, Paul exercised the right to appeal to the emperor Nero himself. Festus has his hands tied now, but he is about to play host to a very important person – King Agrippa II.

The Royal Pomp and Prestige

So, understand that chapter 25 is simply an introduction, a warm up to the trial we are about to observe in chapter 26. Let us look at chapter 25 and set the stage with verses 13 through 22.

Now when several days had elapsed, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea, and paid their respects to Festus.

While they were spending many days there, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, "There is a man who was left as a prisoner by Felix;

"and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews brought charges against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him.

"I answered them that it is not the custom of the Romans to hand over any man before the accused meets his accusers face to

face and has an opportunity to make his defense against the charges.

“So after they had assembled here, I did not delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought before me.

“When the accusers stood up, they began bringing charges against him not of such crimes as I was expecting,

“but they simply had some points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive.

“Being at a loss how to investigate such matters, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there stand trial on these matters.

“But when Paul appealed to be held in custody for the Emperor’s decision, I ordered him to be kept in custody until I send him to Caesar.”

Then Agrippa said to Festus, “I also would like to hear the man myself.” “Tomorrow,” he said, “you shall hear him.”

Now understand that what begins in chapter 25 and ends in chapter 26 is nothing less than the collision of an ordinary Christian testimony with the “movers and shakers” of the Middle East.

Continue to verse 23.

So on the next day when Agrippa had come together with Bernice amid great pomp, and had entered the auditorium accompanied by the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in.

Before we go forward with the trial, I want you to understand the kind of crowd before which Paul stood. If you think you have tried to be a testimony before a tough audience, you will be greatly encouraged by this scene.

King Agrippa was none other than Herod Agrippa the Second. The text tells us in verse 23, that He arrived with great pomp and ceremony with Bernice. Bernice, by the way, was Agrippa’s full-blooded sister, and their incestuous relationship was the scandal of Rome.

It is interesting to know that Bernice had a sister named Drusilla, the equally immoral wife of Felix. We studied a little of their scandalous biography in our last discussion.

Herod Agrippa the Second was appointed by Rome as political leader to be the guardian of the Jewish faith. He had the power to appoint the high priest of Israel. He had the power to administrate the temple treasury. Yet, he was as corrupt as a man could be.

His father, Herod Agrippa the First, had executed James and imprisoned Peter. His great uncle was Herod Antipas who had stolen his sister-in-law away from his brother and then, later allowed John the Baptist to be beheaded for daring to preach against him and his wife (Luke 3 and Mark 6), and who also tried Jesus Christ, desiring to kill him (Luke 13:31). It was the great grandfather of Herod the Second who massacred the children of Bethlehem in an effort to kill the newborn King of the Jews.

This man before whom Paul now stands, came from a family that had been used by Satan in an attempt to not only stamp out the Messiah, but wipe out the church.

The family tree of Herod was covered with the blood of the early church. It is a family tree that will end its political power with the man before whom Paul now stands. Paul is on trial before the last Herod.

Do you not think Paul knew the history of the Herod’s? Do you not think Paul knew of their hatred for the church and for Christ? How could Paul stand before him with any courage at all? Because Paul knew that, while Herod ruled, God overruled. Paul knew that, while it may seem unfair to have been imprisoned though innocent, God was in control.

I re-read recently, the story of a young Bible college student who was tried for the murder of a young nursing student who had lived in his neighborhood. He was found guilty primarily because he had had a troubling dream about her murder and, on the advice of well meaning friends, had gone to police to tell them about it. They arrested him, interpreting his dream account as the roundabout confession of a psychopathic killer. He was sentenced to forty years in jail. There was just one problem – he was innocent. Often separated from his wife and children, it took twelve years of time in prison and numerous appeals before he was vindicated and set free. But twelve years were gone.

Looking back on those tough years, Steve Linscott wrote,

I have come to realize that we cannot judge God’s purposes, nor where He places us, nor why He chooses one path for our lives as

opposed to another. The Bible is replete with accounts of divine action (or inaction) that does not seem fair, that does not make sense, except when viewed in light of God's perfect plan. Thousands of children were massacred, while a baby named Moses was spared. Jacob was a thief; and yet it was he, not Esau, who received the blessing of their father Isaac. On one level it makes no sense that God would even allow His Son to die for the sins of humans . . . but God has a plan, a perfect plan.

For Paul, the years were passing. Two had already passed. Would he ever be free again? Would he ever get to Rome? What was the perfect plan of God? Let us find out.

A Remarkable Testimony

Look at verse 1 of chapter 26.

Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and proceeded to make his defense:

Paul does so, by the way, by giving his personal testimony. It is very similar to his testimony before the Jews in Acts, chapter 22.

Paul's testimony could be divided into three sections.

Paul's past

1. In the first section of his testimony, in verses 2 through 11, Paul tells of his past.

The key phrase, found in verse 5b, is,

. . . I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion.

In other words, "King, you need to understand that, when it came to religion, I was serious! I kept all the rules, prayed at all the right times, never missed a synagogue service, volunteered to teach, sang in the choir, and went to every kosher potluck."

If the king had asked Paul sometime during his past, "Paul, how do you stand with the God of Israel?" Paul would have answered without blinking an eye, "We're rock solid!"

The deception of religion is no different today. You can dot all the "i's" and cross all the "t's"; you can pray at all the right times and come to church every Sunday – as you speed on your way to hell.

How could that be?? Paul will explain, that every person must exchange the moldy crust of

religion for the fresh bread of heaven. Every person's path must at some point, intersect with the awesome revelation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul's conversion

2. That brings us to the second point of Paul's testimony – his conversion.

Look at verses 9 through 15, with the key verse being in verse 13, when Paul saw, "a light from heaven".

"So then, I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

"And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death I cast my vote against them.

"And as I punished them often in all the synagogues, I tried to force them to blaspheme; and being furiously enraged at them, I kept pursuing them even to foreign cities.

"While so engaged as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests,

"at midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining all around me and those who were journeying with me.

"And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads [or pricks].'

(Goads, or pricks, are pointed sticks to drive oxen. They are more troubling to the oxen when they do not obey, as they get pricked more often.),

"And I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.'"

In other words, the Lord says, "Paul, you've been kicking against the truth ever since you first felt it. Stephen, whom you helped to martyr, spoke of seeing Me resurrected. He was telling the truth – I am indeed the Lord of heaven and earth, the Son of Man, once crucified, now the King of Kings, exalted."

Between this verse and the next verse, as we have already studied from chapter 22, Paul submitted his life to Christ.

Liberal pseudo-scholars do not like to think that Paul actually had a vision of the resurrected Christ. Some have said that Paul had heat stroke. Others say that Paul had epilepsy, and his experience on the Damascus road was actually an epileptic fit.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, prince of English preachers, said a hundred years ago,

Would God that all who oppose the name of Jesus Christ might then become epileptics; for, oh blessed epilepsy, that made such a wonderful change in this man's life.

Continue to verses 16 and 17.

“But get up and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you a minister and a witness not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you;

“rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you,”

Now look at verse 18, which is, by the way, the sum and substance of the gospel message; the message that Paul wants King Agrippa to hear.

“to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.”

The Lord views us, prior to our salvation, as spiritually blind and Satanically bound.

Gospel at a glance – Open, Forgiven, Secure

- The gospel *opens* our eyes.

It brings us, according to I Peter, chapter 2, verse 9b,

. . . out of darkness and into His marvelous light

It delivers us, as Colossians, chapter 1, verse 12, tells us,

. . . from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son

- The gospel message, when believed, brings about a *forgiven* heart.

Paul would later write to the Romans, in chapter 4, verse 7,

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds [sins] have been forgiven . . .

- Finally, the gospel deliverance *secures* your future!

Peter wrote, in I Peter, chapter 1, verse 4, that there is for us who believe,

An inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you

How can all this belong to someone?? Paul ends his gospel at a glance by stating the words of Jesus Christ in verse 18 of Acts, chapter 26, that this is what happens,

. . . among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.

In other words, by, “Sola fide,” or “faith alone,” in Christ for salvation. Salvation is not a religion based upon works, but a relationship based upon faith in Christ.

Paul's commission

3. Paul moves on to the third point of his testimony, which is his commission.

Look at verses 19 through 24, with the key verse being verse 22, when Paul says, “I stand to this day testifying”.

“So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision,

“but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.

“For this reason some Jews seized me in the temple and tried to put me to death.

“So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place;

“that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.”

While Paul was saying this in his defense, Festus said in a loud voice, "Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad."

Now I have been interrupted while preaching by babies crying, children getting up and going out to the bathroom, and beepers going off, but I have never had anyone interrupt a sermon by hollering, "You're insane."

They are kind enough to tell me after the sermon, but never during!

"Paul, you are out of your mind!" The Greek word gives us the word "maniac". In other words, "Paul, this belief in the resurrection of a dead man proves you are a maniac."

Notice Paul's response in verses 25 through 27.

But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth.

"For the king knows about these matters, and I speak to him also with confidence, since I am persuaded that none of these things escape his notice; for this has not been done in a corner.

"King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do."

It is as if Paul says, "Listen, King Agrippa, I know that you respect the prophets – the prophets who spoke of this coming Messiah that I have introduced to you. He has changed my life, and He can change yours too."

Paul, in effect, says, "King Agrippa, would you now become a Christian too?!"

King Agrippa's response is in verses 28 and 29.

Agrippa replied to Paul, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian."

And Paul said, "I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains."

Some believe that Agrippa is jeering at Paul. They interpret the phrase to read something like, "Paul, do you really think that in such a short time, you can persuade me to become a Christian?!!!"

Others interpret it to mean something like, "Paul, in such a short time, you have almost persuaded me to become a Christian."

Almost . . . but not quite!

Continue to verses 30 through 32.

The king stood up and the governor and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them,

and when they had drawn aside, they began talking to one another, saying, "This man is not doing anything worthy of death or imprisonment."

And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

That was not exactly true. According to Roman law, an appeal to Caesar was only necessary if the lower court rendered a guilty verdict. In their private conversation, they actually reveal their belief that Paul was innocent – yet, they play a political move that keeps the Jewish leaders happy and keeps them from having to render a verdict. "If he wants to see Caesar, we'll just let him go see Caesar."

Application – Some Things Never Change

Let me point out two responses to the gospel, in application of this text.

The response of derision

1. The response of derision.

"Anybody who believes in Jesus Christ is a fool. Furthermore, anybody who would serve a dead man that they claim to be alive, is a bigger fool."

Paul would write to the Philippians, in chapter 1, verse 21, from his jail cell,

For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

The martyred missionary Jim Elliot wrote,

He is no fool to give up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

Do not expect the world to understand this.

The response of delay

2. Secondly, the response of delay.

"Almost . . . but not yet."

Hearing the truth of the gospel does not automatically bring about the conversion of the soul.

Swindoll writes,

The truths of Christ are like the rays of the sun; they can bring growth and life; they can also harden hearts made of clay.

King Agrippa the Second, the last of the Herod's, heard the gospel that had been ignored by his great grandfather on down to his father; and his heart was hardened in unbelief in this fateful hour.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote,

Almost persuaded to be a Christian is like the man who was almost pardoned, but he was hanged; like the man who was almost rescued, but he died in the fire. A man that is almost saved is lost.

There is an old hymn text based on this event – when Paul stood before King Agrippa, the man who almost believed. The words are:

*Almost persuaded, now to believe,
Almost persuaded, Christ to receive.
Seems now some soul to say,
Go, Spirit, go thy way;
Some more convenient day,
On Thee I'll call.*

The hymn ends with the words:

Sad . . . sad that bitter wail; almost but lost.

For this man, the last of the Herod's, "almost" would mean "never". For this man, who would have been featured as *Time's* "Man of the Year," the things that really mattered the most were missed.

Almost, but lost.

This is an incredibly challenging, yet inviting passage for anyone who has never invited Christ to become their personal Savior. I urge you to take that step today! However, it is a wonderful encouragement to those who have already believed in Christ and desire to stand for His cause.

Has it occurred to you that, if it were not for scripture, you would probably never think of or even read the names of Herod Agrippa and Bernice, Festus and Felix? In light of eternity, the real "mover and shaker" in this scene was not the king or queen, not the Governor of Caesarea, and not even the Jewish Sanhedrin; the real man worthy of being called "Man of the Year" was a former Pharisee, a rabbi named Paul. Paul stood before this audience in chains and simply told them, "This was who I used to be, but then I met Christ, and now I live for a much higher calling than the things of this world."

The truth is, you and I, like Paul, will probably never go down in secular history as *Time's* "Man (or Woman) of the Year". But in reality, *you* are the "mover and shaker" of your generation!

So, let us live in the light of our position in Christ, in the light of our power through Christ, and in the light of that higher calling. We will then, finally stand before Him, after the chains of mortality fall off, to hear the only words of commendation that really matter – "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/20/1998 by Stephen Davey.

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