

Paul in Prison



SABBATH—SEPTEMBER 15

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Acts 24; Acts 25; Acts 26; 1 Corinthians 1:23.

MEMORY VERSE: “Paul said, ‘My prayer to God is that you and all who hear me today would be a Christian as I am, only not have these chains!’ ” (Acts 26:29, NLV).

PAUL IS A PRISONER for two years in the city of Caesarea (Acts 24:27). Paul lives in a prison at King Herod's palace. Soldiers watch Paul (Acts 23:35). During those two years, Paul goes to court many times to stand in front of two Roman governors and one king. The governors are named Felix and Festus. The king is named Agrippa the Second. Yes, Paul is a prisoner. But Paul does God's work by sharing the Good News with these rulers (Acts 9:15).

Every time Paul speaks to these rulers he says he is innocent. Paul says there is no proof that he did anything wrong. Paul asks, Where are the witnesses that saw him break laws? This story shows us that Paul did nothing wrong and should not be in prison. He should be free. He is in prison only because he asked to stand in court before the King of Rome (Acts 26:32). As a prisoner, Paul has many chances to witness about Jesus. Paul also talks about his wonderful hope that God will bring the dead back to life.

But those two years in prison are hard for Paul. No one from the Jerusalem church gives Paul any support. Why? The church leaders feel it is Paul's fault that he is in prison. They believe that Paul “was to blame for the dislike against him.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [leaders and teachers]*, page 403, adapted.



As a prisoner, Paul has many chances to witness about Jesus.

FELIX JUDGES PAUL (Acts 24:10–19)

Paul is sent to Caesarea. Five days later, a group of important Jewish leaders comes to Caesarea from Jerusalem. This group includes the top Jewish religious leader, some members of the Jewish ruling group named the Sanhedrin, and a lawyer named Tertullus. These men come in front of Felix in court and complain about Paul (Acts 24:1–9).

This trial in Acts is the only time the Jewish leaders pay a lawyer to complain for them to a ruler. The lawyer Tertullus uses false praise to make Felix think the Jewish leaders are right. Tertullus says the Jews enjoyed peace for a long time under Felix. That is not true. The truth is Felix hurt more people than any other governor. Felix also took away people's freedom more than any other ruler. Felix's behavior filled many Jews with deep hate for Roman rulers. Tertullus is very smart and sneaky. He makes Governor Felix think that he needs to protect himself as a ruler. The best way to do that is to keep Paul in prison.

Then Tertullus blames Paul for three crimes: (1) Tertullus says Paul is a troublemaker. Tertullus says Paul wants the Jews everywhere to fight against Roman rule too (Acts 24:5). (2) Tertullus says Paul is the top leader of a religious group named the Christians, who are a danger to the Roman Kingdom. (3) Tertullus also says Paul showed no respect for the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 24:6).



A lawyer named Tertullus uses false praise to make Felix think the Jewish leaders are right.

Read Acts 24:10–19. In these verses, how does Paul answer each one of these “crimes” against him?

Two things show that the words of the Jewish leaders against Paul are not true. Paul tells Felix what these two things are: (1) There are no witnesses from Asia against him (Acts 24:18, 19). Felix may decide to throw out the whole trial against Paul because there are no witnesses. (2) The Sanhedrin cannot blame Paul for any crime except for his belief that Jesus will wake up the dead and bring them to life at His Second Coming (read also Acts 23:6).

Felix understands right away that Paul is correct. Felix knows a little bit about Christianity, maybe from his Jewish wife Drusilla. So, Felix decides to judge Paul at some other time. But Felix's decision shows us that a person can change his mind if other people offer him a good gift or enough money. Paul has no chance of a fair time in court with Felix as his judge.

FESTUS JUDGES PAUL (Acts 25:1–5)

Felix holds Paul in prison for two years. Why so long? So Felix can win the Jews' favor. Then Felix leaves. Porcius Festus is made the new governor of Judea (Acts 24:27). Festus ruled Judea from A.D. 60 to 62.

Read Acts 25:1–5. How does the Jewish leaders' behavior in these verses help us see how hate can grow in people who hear the truth but do not want to believe it?

The Jewish leaders do not want to fail again. They already failed before when they tried to make Felix believe he should punish Paul for crimes Paul did not do. So, the leaders ask Festus to help them during Festus's first visit to Jerusalem. They ask Festus to send Paul back to Jerusalem so that the Jewish religious leaders can judge Paul in court under Jewish law.

The Jewish leaders are careful to hide their real plan when they ask Festus for this favor. What is their plan? They want to kill Paul. Festus is ready for Paul to stand in court again. But Festus says that he will judge Paul in Caesarea, not in Jerusalem. That tells us that Paul will be judged under Roman law, not Jewish law.

When Festus goes back to Caesarea, he commands Paul to stand in court again. Paul's enemies start blaming Paul for crimes (Acts 25:7). Luke does not tell us what crimes they blame Paul for. But we can see from Paul's answer (Acts 25:8) that the list of crimes is the same list from two years ago. But there is one difference: Paul's accusers say that Paul himself is a danger to the Roman Kingdom.

Read about Paul's stand in court in front of Festus in Acts 25:9–12. Paul knows that Festus plans to use Paul to win support for his job as governor. What does Paul do when he sees what Festus is thinking?

In the end, Festus is not any better than Felix (Acts 24:27). Festus is not willing to lose Jewish support. So, Festus thinks about sending Paul back to Jerusalem to be judged by the Jews. But Paul does not accept this plan. So, Paul asks to go to Rome to be judged there because he is a citizen of Rome. He knows he will not be judged in a fair way under the Jewish leaders. Paul escapes this problem when he asks for the King of Rome to judge him.



Paul asks Festus to send him to Rome so that the King of Rome can judge him.

AGRIPPA COMES TO HEAR PAUL (Acts 25:13–22)

Festus agrees to allow Paul to go to Rome (Acts 25:12). At the same time, Festus talks about Paul with Herod Agrippa the Second, who is visiting Caesarea. Herod Agrippa the Second is the last member of the family of kings named Herod. Agrippa comes to Caesarea with his sister Bernice to meet the new governor, Festus.

Festus wants to ask Agrippa about what information he should put in his letter to the King of Rome. Festus does not know much about Jewish laws and ways of life. Agrippa can help Festus with any questions he has (Acts 25:23–27).

Read Acts 25:13–22. What does Festus tell King Agrippa about Paul? How does King Agrippa answer?

Festus tells King Agrippa that he is surprised that none of Paul’s “crimes” have anything to do with a crime against the Roman Kingdom. Paul’s “crimes” are about Jewish religion and about someone named Jesus who “died but Paul kept saying He was alive” (Acts 25:19, NLV). Paul already told the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem that he was on trial because he believed Jesus came back to life from the dead. Now Festus clearly says that the real reason Paul is on trial is because Paul believes Jesus is alive.

Read Acts 25:23–27. What does Luke say in these verses about Paul’s stand in front of Agrippa?

“Paul stood in chains in front of the people. There was a big difference between Paul and everyone else. Agrippa and Bernice had power and royalty. So, other people liked them. But they did not have the goodness that God likes. They broke God’s law. They lived lives that were evil. Their hearts were evil too. All of heaven hated their way of life and the things they did.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles [leaders and teachers]*, page 434, adapted.

People can look very good on the outside to our eyes. But the story about Agrippa and his sister shows us that how we look at people on the outside often fools us about what is really hidden inside their hearts. How different is the way something looks from how it is inside?



“Paul stood in chains in front of the people.”
—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of Apostles [leaders and teachers]*, page 434, adapted.

PAUL TELLS AGRIPPA WHY HE IS INNOCENT (Acts 26:1–23)

Paul is brought to the governor and his royal guests. Paul tells them the reasons why he is innocent of the crimes against him. Paul talks mostly to Agrippa, because Festus already heard what Paul said before (Acts 25:8–11).

Read Acts 26:1–23. As these verses show us, what does Paul tell Agrippa?

Paul tells Agrippa his life story, both before and after he gave his life to Jesus. This sermon is almost the same as the sermon in Acts 22:1–21 that Paul tells the crowd in Jerusalem. Paul starts by trying to get Agrippa's support. Paul says how thankful he is to Agrippa for letting him tell his story. After all, Agrippa is a very important person. Paul also says he is thankful that Agrippa knows a lot about the Jewish ways of life and the Jewish religion. Because of that, Agrippa can be a big help to the Roman governor. Agrippa can help Festus understand that the crimes against Paul are not true.

Paul's sermon can be divided into three parts. In part one (Acts 26:4–11), Paul talks about his old life as a Pharisee. Pharisees were a group of Jewish religious leaders who followed the law very carefully. Many people in Jerusalem know about Paul's past as a Pharisee. As a Pharisee, Paul believes God will wake up the dead and bring them back to life. This teaching is an important part of the Jewish religion. So, Paul says that the Jews do not make sense when they attack what Paul believes, because the Jews believe it too. But Paul understands why they are upset. In the past, Paul himself also had a hard time believing God woke up Jesus from the dead and brought Him back to life.

In part two (Acts 26:12–18), Paul talks about how his thinking changed after he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul tells how Jesus gave him his work to share the Good News with the non-Jews. In part three of his sermon, Paul ends his talk by saying that the only choice he had after he met Jesus was to obey Him. That is the only reason Paul is in court now. The reason Paul was arrested is not because he broke Jewish law or showed no respect to the Jewish temple. It is because of his message about Jesus' waking up from the dead. But this belief fits fully with what the Bible teaches. It also allows non-Jews to be saved too.



Paul ends his sermon by saying that the only choice he had after he met Jesus was to obey Him.

PAUL TALKS TO THE JEWISH LEADERS (Acts 26:27, 28)

Paul talks to Agrippa most of the time. But Festus is the first one to say something (Acts 26:24). Festus seems to have no problem with Paul's sermon until Paul says that God will wake up the dead. But Paul's belief that God will wake up the dead does not agree with the Roman belief that the soul does not die. The Greeks and Romans who lived many years before that time knew that these two beliefs did not agree. So, they threw out the truth that God will wake up the dead. They accepted the lie that the soul does not die. That is why Paul says in a letter that the Good News about Jesus sounds silly to non-Jews (1 Corinthians 1:23).

Paul shows Festus respect when he answers him. Then Paul turns to Agrippa to ask him a question. Agrippa is a Jew. A Jew can understand Paul. A Jew also can say that Paul's teaching about God waking up the dead matches the teaching in the Hebrew Bible (Acts 26:25, 26).

Read Acts 26:27, 28. As these verses show us, what is Agrippa's answer to Paul's question?

Paul's question puts Agrippa on the spot. As a Jew, Agrippa will never turn away from the Hebrew Bible. But if Agrippa says yes to Paul's question, then he will have to accept Jesus as the Savior. So, Agrippa gives Paul a smart and sneaky answer. It allows Agrippa to "escape" from Paul's "trap." "Then Agrippa spoke to Paul. 'Are you trying to talk me into becoming a Christian?' he said. 'Do you think you can do that in such a short time?'" (Acts 26:28, NIV).

Paul's answer shows us his amazing love for the Good News about Jesus and his deep love for serving God. "Paul said, 'My prayer to God is that you and all who hear me today would [will] be a Christian as I am, only not have these chains!'" (Acts 26:29, NIV). In his last words to everyone at court, Paul does not ask to go free. Paul wishes everyone there could be the same as he is, only not with the chains around his wrists. Paul cares about seeing other people accept Jesus more than he cares about being free!

Read Acts 26:30–32. As these verses show us, how does Agrippa's answer show that he believes Paul is innocent?

Festus needs Agrippa's help to write the letter about Paul (Acts 26:25–27). After that, Paul goes to Rome.



Paul says, "My prayer to God is that you and all who hear me today would [will] be a Christian as I am, only not have these chains!" (Acts 26:29, NIV).

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: “Did Paul’s words lead Agrippa to think about the history of his family and how they failed in the past in their fight against the same Jesus that Paul was talking about? Did Agrippa think about his great-grandfather Herod, who killed all those innocent children in Bethlehem? Did Agrippa think about his great-uncle Antipas who killed John the Baptist? Did Agrippa think about his own father, Agrippa the First, who put the church leader James to death? Did Agrippa understand that the awful things that happened to these kings were proof that God was not happy with their crimes against His servants? Agrippa’s father was a more powerful king than Agrippa was. Did Agrippa remember the day when his father stood in that same city, Caesarea, and wore his shining robes while the people named him a god? Did Agrippa forget what happened next? Before the crowd’s shouts stopped, God’s anger against Agrippa’s father was quick and awful. Yes, all these things went through Agrippa’s mind. But his proud heart loved the praise and beauty in front of him. His pride destroyed any holier thoughts about God.”—Ellen G. White Comments [thoughts], *The SDA Bible Commentary [explanation]*, volume 6, pages 1066, 1067, adapted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 In class, talk about Paul’s decision to be judged by the King of Rome. Was Paul’s decision right (also read Acts 25:25; Acts 26:31, 32)? How far should we go in making decisions to protect ourselves before we start trusting fully in God’s care?
- 2 Think about Paul’s words to Agrippa: “‘So then, King Agrippa, I obeyed the vision that appeared from heaven’” (Acts 26:19, NIV). What do Paul’s words tell us about Paul? How loyal are we to the work God gives to us Christians?
- 3 Paul loved people. In his last stand in court at Caesarea, Paul told the people at court that he wanted very much to see every one of them there become Christians. Paul wanted them to be saved by God’s loving-favor (Acts 26:29). Clearly, Paul wanted to save people with the Good News about Jesus more than he wanted to save himself from prison. How can we learn from Paul’s example?



“God’s anger against Agrippa’s father was quick and awful.”—Ellen G. White Comments [thoughts], *The SDA Bible Commentary [explanation]*, volume 6, page 1067, adapted.