

### THE BOOKS OF ACTS

#### Lesson 52, Chapters 24 and 25

Our last lesson dealt primarily with Paul's defense to the ludicrous legal charges made by the Sanhedrin, as the trial was being held in front of Governor Felix in the provincial seaside capital of Caesarea Maritima. What made the charges all the more farcical is that as yet it is nearly impossible to quite define what the charges are. The only discernable complaints were that Paul was a thorn in the side of the High Priest (head of the Sanhedrin), that he was disturbing the peace by his mere presence in Jerusalem, and that he attempted to defile the Holy Sanctuary.....but didn't succeed. And for this, the Sanhedrin wanted Paul dead.

Before we re-read a small part of Acts chapter 24 I want to reiterate that in reality the issues against Paul had little to do with anything theological, but rather that Paul appeared to be a traitor of sorts to some movable definition of what it meant to be a Jew. And (on the surface) this stemmed from his close contacts with gentiles in the foreign lands of the Diaspora. The hypocrisy of such a complaint, however, is nearly laughable; it was primarily the Sadducee party that was so upset with Paul and the Sadducees were Jewish aristocrats who maintained the coziest of relationships with the gentile Romans so as to attain and maintain their wealth, status and power. In fact, here we find the leader of the Sadducees, the High Priest, being an informant to the Romans that Paul was inciting revolt against them.

So what is causing this hatred of Paul if there is nothing concrete we can pin it on? We listed a few practical reasons last week, which included the fact that at one time Paul was either a junior member of the Sanhedrin or at least was in the employ of the Sanhedrin in some official capacity, and when he was sent to Damascus to arrest some members of The Way Paul not only didn't do it, he turned and became a member of The Way. The humiliation and shame of such a thing for the High Priest and the institution of the Sanhedrin had not been forgotten even though many years had passed since then. However the true, underlying reason for this hatred is hard to put your finger on because it is invisible; these corrupt leaders of the Jews were in a state of spiritual blindness. The proof is their incomprehensible charges against Paul, the lengths to which the Jewish High Court was willing to go to rid themselves of this "pest" (including outright murder, something for which, according to the Torah, there is no atonement possible), and the illogical nature of their grievances against Paul that befuddled both the Roman Commander Lysias and now Governor Felix.

This irrational hatred of Paul and what he stood for (that is rooted in spiritual blindness), has never ceased to this day; and it is present both within modern Judaism and within the enemies of the Jews. This spiritual blindness is actually a backlash to the reality and advent of Messiah Yeshua, and it was prophesied and spoken about in a number of passages in the Bible.

**2Corinthians 4:3-4 CJB <sup>3</sup> So if indeed our Good News is veiled, it is veiled only to those in the process of being lost. <sup>4</sup> They do not come to trust because the god of the 'olam hazeh (the present world) has blinded their minds, in order to prevent them from seeing**

***the light shining from the Good News about the glory of the Messiah, who is the image of God.***

Paul says that the god of the present world has done this act of blinding some peoples' minds to the truth of the Gospel. Who is the god of this present world? Satan. But we are also told by Paul that this spiritual blindness is the will of Yehoveh (Yeshua's Father) for those who reject His Son.

**Romans 11:7-8 CJB <sup>7</sup> *What follows is that Isra'el has not attained the goal for which she is striving. The ones chosen have obtained it, but the rest have been made stonelike,***

**<sup>8</sup> *just as the Tanakh says, "God has given them a spirit of dullness- eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear, right down to the present day."***

So spiritual blindness is not merely a catchy saying; it is a real condition and when we observe this irrational hatred against Paul here in Acts, and when we watch this same irrational hatred against Israel and the Jewish people in our time, just know that it is God-willed and Satan-led due to the rejection of God's Messiah. I think the Exodus story of Pharaoh and his hardened heart that was both a result of his rejection of the God of Israel and of God acting upon his unrepentant heart is the pattern for what happens to all who set their minds against Messiah Yeshua. Yet as frustrated as Paul would get, and I know many of us get, as we try to tell others about God's love for them and their need for Him, we need to keep in mind what Paul knew: each soul that is saved, Jew or gentile, is truly a miracle because the forces against such a thing ever occurring are so powerful and pervasive. That you are saved, that I am saved, is a miracle of the highest order and something we must never take for granted. That Israel has survived the irrational hatred of a billion or more sworn enemies (a number that grows daily) is also a miracle of the highest order. That you and I are hated for our faith, and that Israel is hated for their mere existence comes with the territory and we must be willing to accept that rather than fretting about it. The irony is that as Believers we are hated because of our acceptance of Christ, and Romans 11 tells us that Israel is hated because of their rejection of Him.

Paul continues his defense in verse 17. Let's re-read that section of Acts 24 now.

### **RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 24:17 – end**

Here Paul confirms what we have discussed in past lessons; it had been several years since he had been to Jerusalem. His journey there, currently, had to do with celebrating Shavuot and bringing charitable gifts to his people. And he came, appropriately, to sacrifice. Thus obviously he had every reason to be at the Temple; he didn't come to disturb the peace; he came in obedience to the Torah to sacrifice on the occasion of Shavuot.

Many commentators say that Paul brought these charitable gifts for Messianic Believers; no doubt they were some of the beneficiaries of these gifts. But un-Believers were benefited as well as the wording is clear that this was a general donation to his "nation" and not to a

specific group of Jews. Not all the funds that he brought were charitable gifts; a major portion (probably a completely separate portion) was the half-shekel Temple tax that every Jew, regardless of where they lived, was supposed to contribute annually for the operation and upkeep of the Temple.

In verse 18 ***Sha'ul*** points out that he didn't defile the Temple; he had purified himself before entering. While the crowd that wanted to kill Paul specifically mentioned him bringing a gentile into the prohibited areas of the Temple Mount, that charge seems to have evaporated (it was just an unsubstantiated rumor in the first place). So the accusation of the Sanhedrin that Paul was trying to defile the Temple seems to have changed from Paul intentionally bringing an unclean gentile into the Temple area and thus defiling it, to the only possibility that remained: Paul himself had to have been considered as unclean so Paul refutes that charge. We read earlier in Acts 21 how Paul had indeed paid to purify himself and 4 other Believing Jews as well. This issue of automatic uncleanness for Jews coming to Jerusalem from the Diaspora was a standard one as Jews believed that proximity to gentiles brought defilement upon them; and thus when they came to Jerusalem with their sacrifices they first had to be purified before they could enter the Temple Mount. And, by the way, this understanding needs to be carried over to every visit a Diaspora Jew made to the Temple. So, for instance, when they made a pilgrimage for Sukkot or Passover, they necessarily had to come a few days early so that they could purify, go through the waiting process, and have a priest certify that they were now clean. However this was NOT the case for Holyland Jews. Jews coming from the Galilee, for instance, did not face this same requirement.

In the next 2 verses Paul is essentially claiming that the reason he is on trial is because when he was in custody in Jerusalem and standing before the Sanhedrin that he shouted out that he believed in the resurrection of the dead. What is left unsaid is that the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection and so they vehemently disagreed with Paul. But honestly, I think Paul purposely laid out a red herring. That is, while what he says is true, that isn't the reason he's on trial. My goodness, the vast majority of Jews everywhere believed in resurrection of the dead because that's what the Pharisees taught and so did the synagogues. So Paul was in the majority; he wasn't being rebellious or heretical in what was actually a nearly universal belief about resurrection among Jews. But what this statement did do was to tell Felix that not only were whatever grievances the Sanhedrin might have against him in regard to some minor nuances of Jewish Law, but that all other charges had no basis whatsoever either. And Felix's ONLY interest would have been in assuring that Paul wasn't a political dissident who was fomenting trouble against Rome.

Felix, as judge, had now heard from accuser and defendant and it was time for him to make a ruling. His choice was to postpone a verdict. Instead he said he wanted to hear from Commander Lysias and get his opinion on the matter (an opinion which he has already stated in writing in the letter we read in chapter 23; and his opinion was that Paul had done nothing deserving of jail, let alone death). So Paul would continue to be under arrest although his conditions improved as he was allowed to have as many visitors as he wanted, and they would be allowed to provide him with food and creature comforts. We don't ever hear of Lysias coming to the hearing, which leads me to speculate that Felix was just buying time as he had a different agenda than meting out justice.

Some days passed and Felix again wanted to speak with Paul, but this time the governor was accompanied by his wife Drusilla. The Western Text of the New Testament tells us that it was Drusilla who wanted Paul held because Drusilla wanted to meet him and hear what he had to say. It might surprise some Bible students to learn that there wasn't just one version of the New Testament in circulation in ancient times. In other words, there is no officially recognized "original" version of the New Testament books (to this day). There are a number of ancient manuscripts, most of them Greek, and there are differences among them. Academics call these various sources Text-types and among them are the Alexandrian, the Western, and the Byzantine; there are others. Don't let these names scare or confuse you; these are but various early versions of the New Testament manuscripts that operate much like the various English translations that we have today (such as the KJV, the NAS, the RSV, and the CJB). They each have their advocates, and they each have their strengths and weaknesses. Depending on where you were located in the ancient world, you might choose a version that was locally formulated. So, for instance, the so-called Western Text, which was widely circulated in Italy and Gaul as well as in North Africa and Egypt, can be traced back to the end of the 2nd century. It was used by some Early Church Fathers and notables such as Marcion, Tatian, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Cyprian. It was not a New Testament per se, but it did have some of the documents that were used to eventually form a NT.

Felix's wife Drusilla was the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa 1, and as of the time of this meeting with Paul she was in her late teens. Because her father Agrippa considered himself a Jew, then Drusilla was seen as a daughter of a Jew and therefore herself a Jew. In fact at an early age she was betrothed to a gentile crown prince, but because he refused to convert to Judaism the marriage was called off. Later her brother, Agrippa II, gave her in marriage to the King of Emesa, but when Drusilla was only 16 years old, Felix persuaded her to abandon the King and become Felix's 3<sup>rd</sup> wife. Interestingly she produced a son for Felix and named him Agrippa III but he died a premature death in the infamous eruption of Mt. Vesuvius.

So the so-called "Jewish" Drusilla sat with her husband Felix and Paul told them about Yeshua and why they should trust in Him. Why would Drusilla even want to hear about this? Because at this time, around 58 A.D., The Way was still seen by gentiles and Jews alike as but one sect of the many sects of Judaism. So this may have been little more than an information exchange for Drusilla.

When Paul's telling of the Gospel advanced to a discussion of its practical implications such as righteousness, self-control and the coming Judgment (meaning The End of Days), we are told that it frightened Felix and he didn't want to hear any more. This discussion had taken a turn that the cruel and greedy Felix found most uncomfortable. Is that not the way it is for us all? It is so easy to speak glowingly to one another of righteousness, holiness, and the End of Days **in theory**. But when it gets down to things that God says we must do; changes in our lives we must make; duties and obligations that God says we have as Believers; consequences for our faith that we must bear; unpleasant (even horrific) realities that we may be personally swept up into, we're not so sure we want to hear any more of it because it's getting a bit too personal. Those warm and fuzzy feelings turn to fear and apprehension. This is why most of today's mega-churches are built upon hearing only about God's love and mercy, His desire for you to attain your dreams and have prosperity, and only rarely will the

sermon turn to God's wrath, your sins that God hates, and your obligations to Him as a disciple of Yeshua. The idea that there are unchanging absolutes that we must follow in obedience (not at our option) and that those absolutes are found in the Torah; that God determines our righteousness based on His Law and the Prophets, and we can't define it on our own; and that never in history has God's people, Old or New Testaments, escaped persecution but rather God expects us, in faith, to go through persecution for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven and as an example to others.

But we also find in verse 26 that part of the ulterior motive that Felix had for hanging onto Paul was that he was hoping for a bribe. We tend to think of a bribe as an illegal or shady, under-the-table, transaction. Back then a bribe was usual and customary even if asking for one out loud wasn't considered polite or gracious. Felix was hoping Paul would raise a good amount of money and offer it as homage to Felix's greatness; and very likely Felix, in turn, would have found in Paul's favor. Paul knew this of course. And I suspect with all his contacts Paul could have done so; but he had bigger fish to fry. He wanted to be sent to Rome and stand before the Emperor even if prison was the price of the ticket to get there.

This chapter ends with the notice that after 2 more years of Paul's imprisonment, Festus replaced Felix. When leaving his office Felix had the authority to let Paul go; he didn't. It is clear that Felix had never found a single cause to convict Paul. Instead he apparently wanted to leave his office with the Judeans and the Sanhedrin seeing him in a favorable light, so he let Paul languish in prison as a favor to them.

It seems that Paul spent much time in prisons but he didn't let the time pass by in idleness. Many of his letters that form a major part of the New Testament are ascribed to his time behind bars: Colossians, Philippians, Timothy, and Philemon among them. So it is clear that he was given the materials and great latitude for the most part so that he could write these epistles, often with a scribe doing the actual writing as Paul dictated. And then those letters were allowed to go out of the prison and into circulation.

Let's move on to chapter 25.

### **READ ACTS CHAPTER 25 all**

Governor Festus was a different sort of fellow than Felix. He was known as a good and thoughtful administrator and so the first thing he did upon arriving in the area to take up his new assignment was to go to Jerusalem to meet the Jewish leadership. This would have him meeting mostly with the High Priest and his family, some of the most senior priests, and other wealthy aristocrats of the Sadducean party. After acquainting himself with the various issues of concern for those whom he'd rule, the Jewish leaders wasted no time in bringing up the matter of Paul. Even after 2 years in prison the Sanhedrin wasn't satisfied; they still wanted Paul eliminated. They asked Festus if perhaps Paul couldn't be brought to Jerusalem for trial. It seemed like an innocent enough request and essentially merely a formality; and no doubt the Jewish leaders counted on Festus not knowing the history behind this situation. Their goal was to have Paul assassinated before any trial could happen.

It is fascinating to me that this determination to kill ***Sha'ul*** continued on for so long; but spiritual blindness has no limits on time or extent. We know from other documents that Jerusalem was nearly in a state of anarchy at this time as the Zealots and the Sicarri were running rampant, murdering Jews who didn't meet their unwritten litmus test for proper Jewish loyalty and behavior. I have little doubt that it was the demands of the extremist Zealots and Sicarri that kept this issue alive (to deal with Paul) because since Paul's experience with Christ 20 years earlier a number of High Priests had come and gone, as on average High Priests only stayed in office for around 2 or 3 years. So anyone Paul had ever offended was no longer in office. The High Priest at this moment was ***Ishmael Ben Phiabi***. A very unpopular High Priest, he was an old man and this was actually his second term as High Priest, the first coming some 40 years earlier. Let me repeat something that I've said before, but it is important to know when understanding the times: Ben Phiabi was the current in a long succession of **illegitimate** High Priests according to the Law of Moses, even though these High Priests insisted that they upheld the Torah while refusing to recognize the Traditions of the Elders that the Pharisees honored. So the insistence of the Sanhedrin to continue prosecuting Paul (persecuting is more like it) was strictly a political accommodation by the High Priest to the most radical Jews in Judea.

Thankfully Festus saw no need to have to move Paul and the trial to Jerusalem. I imagine that Festus had a suspicion that something wasn't quite right in this case. And no doubt he used the request to establish his authority and make it clear just who was in charge, and who would bow down to whom. He told the Jewish leaders that they would have to come to Caesarea to continue their case against Paul. Since Felix had been removed from office because he was unable to control the violence of Jewish militants (mainly in Jerusalem), Festus would show these Jews a firm hand from the moment he began to rule by denying their request.

At the same time Festus showed respect to these Jewish leaders by staying on in Jerusalem for several more days, getting to know them and being available for discussions. He was showing himself to be a wise leader who knew that his success or failure would hinge on the level of quiet he could secure in Jerusalem. And this quiet began with the Jewish leadership seeing him as a reasonable man who wanted to understand Jewish politics and sensitivities so that there was peace. So when he returned to Caesarea the first thing on his agenda was to attend to this matter of Paul since it seemed quite urgent to the Jewish leadership of Jerusalem. The next day after his arrival in his provincial capital, the trial that Felix never concluded was again opened.

The scene unfolded very similarly to what had happened over 2 years earlier; many charges were brought against Paul but no evidence was presented. So Paul responded similarly to how he had responded 2 years ago: he denied all the charges. He was careful to deny them in an articulate and structured way that addressed each area of accusation. First, he says he did not do any wrong against the Law of the Jews. Next, he claims he committed no wrong against the Temple. And finally he says he did no wrong against Caesar. So what he claimed was that he had not violated ***Halakhah*** (Jewish Law). In other words his Jewishness remained intact. This was not about violating the actual Biblical Torah because essentially he was addressing any concerns of the Pharisees (who went by Oral Traditions, not so much by the written Torah). Then he addressed the concerns of the Sadducees whose headquarters and area of control

was the Temple, and says he did nothing wrong there. And lastly he said that he broke no Roman law and therefore had not challenged Caesar.

Paul knew what he was doing. He was in a Roman court of law, and so Roman case law ruled the day. Roman law operated much more objectively than Jewish Law. Roman law required credible witnesses to back up any charges. So since there were no witnesses against him all Paul had to do was deny the charges; the burden of proof was on those making the accusations. What is interesting is that apparently the Jewish leaders did not understand Roman law as well as Paul did. Since the first charge was about violating Jewish Law, and the second charge was about violating the sanctity of the Temple, had the list of charges stopped there Festus had every legal right (and considering the long messy ordeal this had become, he had every motivation) to simply turn Paul over to the Jews and let them take him back to Jerusalem to deal with him in their Sanhedrin because clearly this was a Jewish matter. But since the Jewish accusers' charge of conspiring to foment trouble against Rome was added, this became a matter that only a Roman court could decide. And this opened the door for Paul, as a Roman citizen, to appeal directly to Caesar.

Festus knew exactly what position he had been maneuvered into and so seeking an easy way out asked Paul if he would consent to go to Jerusalem to be tried there (fat chance). Essentially Festus was willing, on the spot, to dismiss any charges against Paul concerning violating Roman law by fomenting disturbances (that is how anxious he was to rid himself of this problem). But Paul was having none of it. God had told him that he was to go to Rome, and that he would go before the Emperor, and this was his ticket to get there. Besides, Paul fully knew he'd never make it to Jerusalem alive if he was turned over to the Jews. So he appealed to Caesar; game over. It was now out of Festus's hands. In a more few verses we'll hear the perplexed Festus wonder to King Agrippa II why in the world Paul would appeal to Caesar since Festus was ready to declare him innocent of any charges against Rome. Appeal what? Paul had won his case from Festus's viewpoint.

In truth Paul risked more prison time now than he had faced with Felix. Felix didn't formally acquit him, but on the other hand he had no grounds to convict him. Yet he still had to find a way to placate the Jewish leadership. So Felix just didn't do anything and Paul languished in jail for 2 years. Festus could have taken a cue from Felix and done the same. This would have at least partially appeased the Jews, and it would have saved him the embarrassment of sending Paul to the Emperor, having no idea what the charges against him ought to be or what he should tell the Emperor are the circumstances. Here's the rub: the Emperor at this time was the unstable and dangerous Nero.

Starting in verse 13 we are told that some days passed and Festus had taken no action; no doubt Festus was trying to figure out what to do about Paul. But perhaps not all was lost; by good fortune King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to visit and maybe they, much more familiar with Jewish problems than he, could find a way to proceed. Agrippa is Herod Agrippa II and Bernice is his biological sister, both claiming Jewish heritage. Recall that the former governor, Felix, was married to one of Agrippa and Bernice's sisters: Drusilla. Bernice was the eldest girl, while her brother Agrippa II was the only son born to Agrippa I. Currently Agrippa II was King over Lebanon and some territory to the east of it; interestingly even though

he was seen as a Jew, he had no authority over any of the Holy Land.

Agrippa had declared full, unequivocal loyalty to Rome; and this was not insincere. He loved the Roman lifestyle and owed his wealth and success to the Romans. He was never married and so left no children. There were always suspicions that he enjoyed an incestuous relationship with his sister Bernice, but there is no admission of that by either one, and no proof that this was true. Bernice played Queen to Agrippa's King. They were always in one another's company and frequently traveled together. At one point she began living with the famous Titus, the general who attacked and destroyed Jerusalem, but they never married and she finally separated from him so great was the public hatred of Titus.

Certainly Agrippa's visit to Festus was to show his approval of Festus's commission as governor and to renew his vow of loyalty to Rome. But, in God's providence, it would also afford Paul an opportunity to speak the Gospel to a King and Queen: Agrippa and Bernice. A Jewish King and Queen no less.

We'll stop here and take up next time with Paul's audience with Agrippa and Bernice.