

OBEDIENCE TO THE HEAVENLY VISION (Acts 26:19)

Paul was arrested in Jerusalem in the year 58 AD. For his own safety, the Roman commander Claudius Lysias (a ‘chiliarch’ ... in charge of one thousand Roman soldiers) was ordered by Antonius Felix the governor/‘procurator’ in charge of administrative matters to ‘whisk’ Paul off to Caesarea as fast as he could (Acts 23). Felix had decided to conduct the case against Paul in front of a court attended by his accusers from Jerusalem.

So, five days later the high priest and his entourage arrived in Caesarea, and the charges against Paul were brought by their lawyer, Acts 24:5 we have found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes: 6 Who also hath gone about to profane the temple: whom we took, and would have judged according to our law. 7 But the chief captain Lysias came upon us, and with great violence took him away out of our hands, 8 Commanding his accusers to come unto thee: by examining of whom thyself mayest take knowledge of all these things, whereof we accuse him. 9 And the Jews also assented, saying that these things were so.

However, Paul responded in such a way as to fascinate Felix and, after the trial was over, 24 ... he [*Felix*] sent for Paul, and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. 25 And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee. Now, while Felix wanted to hear from Paul, his underlying reason for inviting him back time and again was because 26 He hoped also that money should have been given him of Paul, that he might loose him: wherefore he sent for him the oftener, and communed with him.

This went on for two years, but then Felix was recalled to Rome by the Emperor Nero in 60 AD and replaced by Porcius Festus (v.27). Whereas Felix would have defended the one who gave him the most money, Festus knew he had to favour the Jewish leaders, for the sake of ‘peace and quiet’. By the way, Felix means ‘happy’ and Festus means ‘festival’ ... so that was the measure of these leaders, - they were in it for what they could get out of it! ... Also, Porcius means ‘pig-like’, so the names of this over-inflated Roman official Porcius Festus means a ‘pig-like festival’!

Here is something else in the background ... The high priest Ananias ‘descended’ with the elders (Acts 24:1) from Jerusalem to Caesarea. When we look at the map we would say they *ascended* because they went *up*, north-westwards ... However, the Jews always say when they go anywhere from Jerusalem, they always ‘go down’, but when they are going *to* Jerusalem, they

are always going *up*. ... It would be like setting off from Inverness and saying, "I'm going up to Edinburgh" ... You're more likely to say, - if you are leaving from Inverness, - "I'm going *down* to Edinburgh" ... and *vice versa*.

We see this 'turn of phrase' again in Acts 25:1 when Festus was trying to impress the Jewish leaders, ¹ Now when Festus was come into the province, after three days he ascended [*went up*] from Caesarea to Jerusalem ... and again, ⁶ And when he had tarried among them more than ten days, he *went down* unto Caesarea; and the next day sitting on the judgment seat commanded Paul to be brought. ⁷ And when he was come, the Jews which *came down* from Jerusalem stood round about, and laid many and grievous complaints against Paul, which they could not prove.

Paul was causing big problems! All the powerful people were in confusion, running about all over the place! How true the words of Jesus, **Mk. 3:24** if a kingdom be divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand. ²⁶ And if Satan rise up against himself, and be divided, he cannot stand, but hath an end.

As Christians, we're wrong if we believe the devil is in control, for he is not! The gates of Hell will *never* prevail against Christ and His Church. We are part of **Eph. 2:21** the building ²⁰ ... built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone ... This week there was an article in *The Guardian* newspaper regarding figures from the Church of England. The Church of England reports it is facing a 'generational catastrophe' with only 2% of young adults identifying with it. It is at a record low among all age groups for the proportion of people identifying with the Church of England has fallen from 31% in 2002 to 14% in 2017. ... Now, is the devil not getting his own way? ... When we look at just about every aspect of society, has it not well-nigh abandoned Christianity in favour of secularism.

The removal of the Biblical restraints upon which our laws used to be founded undoubtedly lead to increasing chaos in the Parliaments, and around the nation for **Prov. 14:34** Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people. ... We cannot expect to flout God's laws and He will sit by and do nothing about it!

And that is what the people in Paul's day were doing, but *he* 'swam against the tide' and defended his Christian faith before the Jews who did not want to hear it and the Romans who didn't care about it. But do you notice ... while they were running all over the place, Paul was standing still ... and whether he was speaking to the Roman army commander in Jerusalem, or the high priest and

his cronies in Caesarea ... or whether it was the procurators Felix and then Festus or, as we shall see, King Agrippa, Paul's message remained the same.

Isaiah wrote great words of encouragement, **Is. 59:19** When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the LORD shall lift up a standard against him. ... The next verse promises, **20** And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the LORD. **21** As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the Lord. That is speaking about when a deluge of apostasy will sweep across the nations in the last days, prior to the return of Christ and the establishment of His earthly Kingdom. That is the confidence we enjoy.

We don't see Paul trembling in fear before these Roman dignitaries. Instead, we see one of them being recalled to Rome, and another so weak he curries favour with the Jewish leaders ... These officials were going back and forwards between Jerusalem and Caesarea to consult with their various parties as to what to do with Paul ... They were in disarray, while all the time Paul was standing firm and confident in his commitment and faith to the Lord.

And by this time Paul had become so much of an 'attraction' the highest authorities in the land could not keep away. King Herod Agrippa II, - one of the most powerful leaders in the area, - and his daughter Bernice arrived to listen to Paul and his message. Festus duly convened a special court in honour of Agrippa and Bernice for them to hear the apostle. God was using the opposition's antics to further the opportunities for the Gospel!

So, into the lavish throne room parades Agrippa and his daughter, **25:23** when Agrippa [*'hero-like'*] was come, and Bernice [*'bring victory'*], with great pomp, and was entered into the place of hearing, with the chief captains, and principal men of the city. And Festus begins the proceedings with ornate and sycophantic language ... at Festus' commandment Paul was brought forth.

Paul is now standing before the king, the princes, officers, the Jewish hierarchy ... all the enemies of the Gospel of Christ, ... and he is standing there testifying to the power of the Gospel! ... The Lord had orchestrated it all ... But listen to the vanity of King Agrippa, **Acts 26:1** Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Thou art permitted to speak for thyself. ... Agrippa thought *he* was in charge of the proceedings ... and Paul daren't open his mouth until *he* gave him permission! The world is in a deluded state for it thinks *it* is in control! It's not for if it was, it would be *out* of control! *It* thinks *it* can stifle the message of God and pollute and replace the law of God without repercussions ... But do

you notice the message Paul was committed to proclaim, **I Cor. 9:16** woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!

A few years earlier, he was taken to the house of Ananias, a Christian in Damascus. At first Ananias was extremely hesitant because of Paul's reputation against the Christians, but the Lord assured him, **Acts 9:15** he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: **16** For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake. ... And now when Paul was standing before King Agrippa he repeated his testimony, **Acts 26:16** But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; **17** Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, **18** To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me. **19** Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision. ... Paul was keeping his eyes *fixed* upon the calling he received that day.

His faithfulness had brought him all types of suffering ... persecution, incarceration, lashings, stonings, and more ... and yet, he kept preaching the message Christ saved and called him to preach, **20** But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance. **21** For these causes the Jews caught me in the temple, and went about to kill me. **22** Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: **23** That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles.

And as he was in 'full flow', - preaching Christ, - Festus interrupted him with a loud voice, **24** Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad. ... And that is how the Gospel sounds to so many. It's nonsense, foolishness, rubbish. But very calmly, solemnly, and in control, Paul replies, **25** I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness. **26** For the king knoweth of these things ... Everyone was listening for there was a 'holy hush' even in such an ungodly place as that. Festus said nothing more. ... God had taken over the proceedings ... and the Jewish leaders were silent, as was the pompous King Agrippa and his delinquent daughter. ... God controls every circumstance, even a whole audience of belligerent God-defying heathens!

King Agrippa, who had come along with his daughter Bernice, - with whom he was supposed to be having an incestuous affair, - and they were sitting with their pomp and finery ... they were all there, **25:23** ... Agrippa ... Bernice, ... the chief captains, and principal men of the city, - and Paul looked at the king, **26** For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner ... King Agrippa, you claim to be a Jew so you have heard this before, so **27** King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest.

Yes, Agrippa knew the Old Testament prophets spoke about the Messiah, and he also knew the followers of Jesus had preached He was the promised Messiah. ... Agrippa could not escape it, and he replied to Paul, **28** Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian. ... What kept him back from becoming a Christian? There is only the one thing that keeps everybody back and that is the sin of putting yourself in God's place. ... Paul had explained the Gospel, how Jesus died for sinners, **18** To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in *[Christ]*.

But almost persuaded as Agrippa was, "cannot avail" for "Almost is but to fail". Where did this leave Agrippa? It left him outside of Christ, and unsaved. ... He shut the door on God's offer of salvation ... He did himself no favours with the Jewish leaders for they never liked him, and he became *more* unpopular. He was expelled from Jerusalem six years after his meeting with Paul, exiled to foreign Rome where he died in a foreign country childless, and with him collapsed the House of Herod. ...

And Festus, how did he do? He got no further, and in fact, a short time later, he died a failure.

As we said at the beginning, Paul had been taken from Jerusalem to Caesarea in 58 AD, and appeared before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa during those next two years, - until 60 AD. Then he was sent to Rome and remained under house arrest until the Emperor Nero ordered his death, c. 67 AD. ... Just before he died, he wrote his final letter, to Timothy, and in it he said, **II Tim. 4:6** I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. **7** I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: **8** Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing. ... What a difference to those other pathetic individuals!

We meet many a situation on our Christian pathway, but one thing is for sure, when you 'put your hand to the plough' you don't look back, and you don't stop, and you don't give up. ... King Agrippa told Festus, ³² *Festus, This man [Paul] might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Caesar. ... No, Agrippa, Paul did not make a mistake because Paul knew *real* freedom ... Agrippa, Paul was freer than you ever were because **Jn. 8:36** *If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.* ... Paul was more a freeman than *any* of his accusers, because He was obedient to the Heavenly vision, and he knew true liberty in the Lord Jesus Christ ... as the hymn writer (Fanny Crosby) wrote,*

Take the world, but give me Jesus,
In His cross my trust shall be,
Till, with clearer, brighter vision,
Face to face my Lord I see.

We'll come back to these chapters and we shall follow up this study by looking closer at Paul's accusers ... and we'll see how the Lord contended with the enemies of the Gospel.