

Paul was still on hold in Roman custody. He had been under the civil authority of Felix and then his successor Festus, who were Gentiles. King Agrippa shared some authority in Judea with Festus, particularly regarding religious issues. Agrippa was a Jew, though he was a proselyte, not a natural born Jew. He was an Edomite (descended from Esau), long enemies of the Jews. In God's sovereign wisdom the dynasty of the Herod's had somehow ended up in authority over the natural born Israelites in the Land. They were accountable to the Emperor who had put them in power governing certain provinces in Palestine. The first, Herod the Great, was the one who had killed all of the boys under two years of age in Bethlehem. Three decades later his son had foolishly granted the head of John the Baptist to his wife's daughter as a reward for her sensuous dancing at his birthday party. The rest of the family were also ruthless murderers, even amongst themselves. They also had earned a sordid reputation for adultery, gross immorality and even incestuous relationships.

Despite all that was to be loathed in these rulers Paul does not even mention their sinful reputations. When a Pharisee, Paul would have chafed under the rule of such depraved characters. But Paul was now a Christian under the rule of a different King, the risen Christ in heaven. Now he had a heavenly hope and prospect and he had an earthly mission to win souls to Him. To Paul, any soul was a fair target to be led to the Christ. This, whether a wicked, depraved murderer confined with him in a dungeon or a wicked, depraved Emperor on the throne of Rome. Therefore Paul and the other Apostles took care not to personally attack the authorities. They urged respect for them, for God had set them there, Romans 13:1-7; 1Timothy 2:2, Titus 3:1; 1Peter 2:13-17. Meanwhile they had the assurance of reigning with Christ upon His return. Why meddle with the earthly governments now in power? Believers today have the same promises and assurance. Let all believers pray for the authorities and respect them accordingly.

Paul earnestly and respectfully sought to present Christ in such a way that would appeal most to the souls of the King and the Governor and their staffs present. Exposing accusations against him as false and unfounded, he took care to honestly clear himself of them thereby retaining his integrity. If allowed to remain unanswered, the charges would have compromised his witness for his Savior. But pride or self defense were not active motives on this occasion.

Some key points stand out in Paul's encounter with Agrippa. Paul stood in chains but in all the dignity of a prophet of God and declared he was not unwilling to die if he was guilty of a crime. (His judges couldn't say that!) But as he stood chained to a soldier he pled, not for his life, but for the soul of King Agrippa and others in the room. Despite all their regal grandeur and privileges Paul states

he yearned rather that they be as he was, have what he had, except for the chain. There are several possible readings of Agrippa's statement "in a little thou persuadest me" But whether he expressed his true state of soul or it was simply a mocking brush off, he remained lost. And Festus didn't get it at all. He just thought Paul was losing his mind and despised him for that. His response demonstrates the need to tailor an appeal to the hearer, or in the case of a tract, the reader. But Festus had squandered an opportunity to repent and had put the furtherance of his career before his eternal destiny. Felix before him had put his personal greed ahead of his career and his eternal destiny. Both selfish and unjust, these men cost Paul his personal freedom, and apparently remained lost for eternity. While none of them could come up with a valid reason to send Paul on to Rome, and the Emperor, they were unable or unwilling to reverse their decisions. It was they who had unjustly cornered Paul into his rightful appeal to Caesar. Behind the scenes, it was God's will that the Emperor, "The August One"* as he was titled, the infamous Nero, and his court would hear of the Man who died for men's sins and rose from the dead and was now in heaven.

When speaking, Paul referred Agrippa back to the Old Testament history of Israel, the patriarchs and prophets familiar to him. His message reminds one of the Epistle to the Hebrews, teaching Christ's suffering and resurrection from the Old Testament. Paul also honestly described his early, blind zeal based upon his incorrect understanding of those scriptures. It was a backdrop of stark utter contrast to the light in them as revealed in Christ. The huge and lasting change in Saul was a proof of the credibility of his story and the reality of the resurrection of Christ. His account of his conversion through the appearing of the risen glorified Christ in heaven never grew old, for it simply glorified Christ as Savior and Lord. Paul's witness to Jesus' bodily resurrection and ascension shattered all of the religious prejudices of his hearers. The One who they or their predecessors had unjustly crucified years before was indeed risen from the dead. He was alive and in heaven and appealing for their repentance. If they declined, would He not be their Judge? Paul's years of faithfully preaching Christ throughout the Gentile world was a telling witness of the reality of the One in heaven he had seen on the road to Damascus. How could they close their minds to that? But they did. Don't you!

By Ronald Canner, January 27, 2010

* The Roman Emperor insisted upon being revered as god, "The August One." Yet, in His grace, the true God Who had created them as men and raised them to power reached out to one of the most cruel and corrupt, Nero, through Paul His Apostle. God offered him the opportunity to repent and humble himself under His Christ His Anointed and be saved., 2Timothy 4. After an initial acquittal and release Nero had Paul executed a few years later. R. C.