



ACTS: ENDS OF THE EARTH ACTS 25-26

STUDY GUIDE
MICHAEL ROWNTREE

INTRODUCTION:

Since we are covering two full chapters, I will not reproduce them in full. Instead, I will summarize each section and its purpose. Underneath, I will comment on select verses.

STRUCTURE OF ACTS 25-26:

- I. **In Jerusalem:** Jewish leaders seek trial (and ambush) in Jerusalem—but are denied (25:1-6).
 - a. Jewish leaders request Paul be transferred to Jerusalem, planning an ambush (25:1-3).
 - b. Festus refuses the request, inviting them to Caesarea for a formal trial (25:4-5).
 - c. Festus delays only briefly before going to Caesarea, avoiding the trap (25:6).

Narrative Purpose: To show that the opposition to Paul remains relentless and murderous, yet God's providence continues to protect him (as promised in Acts 23:11).

Literary Role: This section sets the scene for the final chain of trials by introducing Festus as the new Judean governor and revealing the continued threats from Jewish authorities.

- II. **In Caesarea (formal trial):** Festus tries Paul—but Paul appeals to Caesar (25:7-12).
 - a. Jewish accusers bring many charges; Paul denies wrongdoing (25:7-8).
 - b. Festus, wishing to please the Jews, suggests moving the trial to Jerusalem (25:9)
 - c. Paul refuses and appeals to Caesar, asserting his right as a Roman citizen (25:10-11)
 - d. Festus consents to the appeal, but without understanding the charges (25:12)

Narrative Purpose: To highlight Paul's legal acumen and the failure of Roman justice under political pressure, which propels the story toward Rome—fulfilling God's plan.

Literary Role: This is the legal hinge of Acts: Paul's appeal secures his safety and moves the narrative decisively toward the imperial capital, aligning with Luke's theme of gospel advance to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

- III. **In Caesarea (informal hearing):** Agrippa hears Paul's defense to clarify charges—but finds no guilt in him (25:13-26:32)
 - a. *Setup:* King Agrippa and Bernice request and receive a hearing from Paul (25:13-27)
 - b. *Paul bears witness – chiastic structure (26:1-32):*
 - A Paul honors Agrippa and requests a hearing (26:1-3)
 - B Paul's background as a Pharisee and hope in resurrection (26:4-8)
 - C Paul's rebellious persecution of Christians (26:9-11)
 - D Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (26:12-18)
 - C' Paul's humble obedience to the heavenly vision (26:19-21)
 - B' Paul's message anchored in the OT: the hope of resurrection (26:22-23)
 - A' Reactions of the royal court to Paul's defense (26:24-32)

Narrative Purpose: To portray Paul as a faithful and rational witness to the gospel before the highest Jewish and Roman officials yet. It also showcases the gospel's power to transcend class, culture, and legal hostility.

Literary Role: This section serves as the climactic public defense of Paul in Acts, summing up his mission, theology, and personal transformation. The chiastic speech structure highlights Paul's conversion and commission as the heart of the gospel narrative. Luke uses this to underscore Paul's innocence, the legitimacy of the Christian message, and the transition toward Rome as the gospel's next frontier.

COMMENTARY ON SELECT VERSES:

25:3 asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way.. 9 But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?"

—"favor" appears in 25:3 and 9. In the first case, the Jews ask Festus for a favor against Paul, seeing that Festus is the new-guy-in-town. In the second case, Festus seeks to comply with the favor they seek. Festus is not as corrupt as Felix, but he's still a favor-seeker, not a truth-seeker.

—"planning an ambush":

- Paul has been rotting in Felix's prison for two years because of a prior conspiracy to ambush him, which failed (23:12ff). They've had two years to cool down, but their rage has simmered. Now they plan a fresh ambush, but God again protects Paul.
- Last time, God exposed the conspiracy through Paul's nephew (23:16); this time, Felix turns down their request, later stating it is because "it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face" (25:16). This seems like a lie, considering Paul had already met his accusers face to face, but we are not told of Felix's real motive. But it doesn't matter. Jesus "stood by" Paul in his jail cell, encouraging him that he will testify in Rome (23:11). The risen Lord knows how to expose evil, as he did with Paul's nephew, and He knows how to avert it by sovereignly turning Felix's heart. As we read in Proverbs 21:1: "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." In one way or another—through exposure of hearts and through turning of hearts—the sovereign Lord Jesus ensures the spread of His unstoppable gospel.

—"Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried": Not only is Festus seeking a favor from the Jews; he is avoiding justice. Paul has already been tried in Jerusalem. He has already faced his accusers. Festus must be aware of the sham trial Paul already faced there. Like Felix before him, Festus is portrayed as corrupt—more willing to risk an unjust trial and worse than seek justice. The fear of man is a snare.

25:8 Paul argued in his defense, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense."

—Having already argued his case in Jerusalem—first, as an informal response in the aftermath of a riot (ch. 22); then, in a formal trial before the Sanhedrin (23:1-10)—Paul was forced to testify again before Felix in Caesarea (ch. 24). Injustice has prevailed each time, so the apostle now testifies before Felix's successor, Festus (ch. 25). Festus lacks a spine, so he plays dumb, which leads to another trial in the next chapter. This context sets us up for Paul's defense in the present verse.

—Luke does not record the precise legal formulation of the Sanhedrin's charges, but their thrust is evident: they accuse Paul of opposing the Jewish law, desecrating the temple, and undermining Roman authority. The first charge would not have concerned Roman officials. The second charge—temple defilement—might have alarmed them if it threatened public order. But the third charge, implying political rebellion or claiming a rival king, would have been the most serious in Roman eyes, since it directly challenged Caesar's authority.

—The inclusion of rebellion against Caesar was strategic: if the Sanhedrin wanted Rome to suppress Christianity, they had to paint Paul as a political threat. How would they do it? By quoting Paul himself. His message—"Jesus is Lord"—directly challenged the imperial claim that "Caesar is Lord."

—Years earlier, this same Sanhedrin had demanded Jesus' death for claiming to be "King of the Jews." Now, they aimed to convince Rome that Paul preached the same rival King.

—Though Paul proclaimed Christ as King, he denied committing any offense against Caesar (Acts 25:8). How can both be true? Because while Christ's Lordship is absolute (Phil. 2:9-11), Paul submitted to Caesar's earthly authority—and taught believers to do the same (Rom. 13:1-7; cf. 1 Pet. 2:13-17). Luke is deliberate in showing that the Christian faith, though unwavering in allegiance to Jesus, is not politically subversive. We honor emperors and presidents—not because they are ultimate, but because our King commands it.

25:10 But Paul said, "I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. 11 If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar." 12 Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, "To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go."

—The Jews had to trump up charges against Paul of political sedition, so Paul turns their accusation on its head by appealing to the highest political office: that of Caesar. In other words, if the Jews are going to play

the “Rome card,” Paul counters with the “Rome Ace”—entrusting his case to the very authority they claim he’s undermining.

—Throughout these trial narratives, I continue to be reminded of Jesus’ exhortation to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” Each unjust trial confirms Paul’s innocence while also demonstrating his Spirit-inspired cleverness:

- In the informal response in Jerusalem (ch. 22), Paul shows cleverness by playing his “Roman citizen card”—stunning the Roman tribune by revealing his Roman citizenship just as they’re about to flog him (22:25–29).
- In the formal trial in Jerusalem (ch. 23), Paul shows cleverness by playing his “Pharisee card”—dividing his enemies and foregrounding the gospel hope of resurrection (23:6–10).
- In the trial with Felix (ch. 24), Paul shows cleverness by playing his “Conscience card”—emphasizing his clear conscience before God and man, highlighting the continuity of his faith with Judaism. This deflects legal suspicion and leaves Felix with no grounds for condemnation—only hesitation.
- In the trial with Festus (ch. 25), Paul shows cleverness by playing his “Rome Ace” card—appealing to the authority they claim he’s undermining.
- Later, in the informal hearing of Agrippa (ch. 26), Paul shows cleverness by playing his “Testimony card”—sharing his dramatic conversion story and turning the courtroom into a pulpit, proclaiming the gospel to the pompous elites.

—Following Christ means that the world will hate us. It is imperative that we maintain innocence, so they can’t condemn us. At the same time, we must trust the Spirit to deposit wisdom that turns the tables, protects where possible, and foregrounds the gospel.

—The wisdom Paul displays is not meant to show how smart he was but rather how generous God is to provide wisdom in our trials (cf. Jam. 1:5).

[Conversation between Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice]

25:17 *So when they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought. 18 When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. 19 Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.*

—In this section, Festus is briefing Agrippa and Bernice—who had come to pay respects to the new governor—about Paul’s case. Just as the sovereign Lord had guided Festus to deny a Jerusalem trial, sparing Paul from ambush (25:3–5), so now the Lord turns the governor’s conversation toward Paul. What begins as a routine political visit becomes the Spirit’s setup for yet another gospel proclamation before powerful elites. —“no such evils as I supposed”: The Jews’ attempt to portray Paul as an insurrectionist had failed to convince. Festus—unfamiliar with Jewish law and customs—is left puzzled about what charges, if any, he can send to Caesar. The Romans had no interest in religious disputes, yet that was essentially all the Sanhedrin offered. This confusion paves the way for the meeting with Agrippa, who, unlike Festus, is well-versed in Jewish matters (26:27). Festus hopes Agrippa’s insight will help him craft a coherent report to the emperor.

—“and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive”:

- Nobody disputed that Jesus died. Even modern historians don’t deny it (with the exception of a few biased ones who are criticized even by unbelievers). Therefore, the question has never been, “Did Jesus truly die?” In this way, the resurrection of Jesus is unlike modern speculations about whether Elvis or Tupac or Robin Williams faked their deaths to escape the public eye. Everyone accepts that Jesus died; the question is—did He rise again? The empty tomb demands an answer.
- Throughout the trial narratives, Paul has always returned to this one theme: the resurrection of Jesus. Our gospel centers upon it. Christ’s death means nothing if He never rose again. He could not have paid for sin if He had not risen above it. He could not have triumphed over sin’s consequence—death—if death had the last word. By rising again, Jesus affirms the victory of the cross.
- In evangelical circles, I find that we place most of the focus on the cross, with the resurrection seeming like a glorious afterthought—celebrated on Easter, but overlooked on the other 51 weeks of the year. In Acts, the resurrection is the beating heart of every sermon. It’s not just proof that Jesus died; it’s proof that He reigns.

—Agrippa:

- Herod Agrippa II, who appears in Acts 25–26, was the great-grandson of Herod the Great—the king who ordered the massacre of Bethlehem’s infants in an attempt to kill the newborn Messiah (Matt. 2:16). His grandfather, Herod Antipas, beheaded John the Baptist (Mark 6:14–29) and mocked Jesus during His trial (Luke 23:11). His father, Herod Agrippa I, persecuted the early church, executed James the brother of John, and was struck down by God for accepting worship as a god (Acts 12:1–23).
- Agrippa II inherited a smaller domain than his predecessors but held the prestigious title of “king”—a Roman-sanctioned position that echoed the biblical kings of Judea, yet was entirely illegitimate from a covenantal standpoint. He was not of Davidic lineage, and his appointment came through imperial favor, not divine calling. Though he presided over the temple and appointed high priests, his reign was a political and religious compromise—a counterfeit kingship that mimicked Israel’s ancient throne while serving Rome’s interests.
- Thus, when Paul later addresses Agrippa’s familiarity with “the prophets” and the “hope of Israel,” he is speaking to a man who bears the title of king but not the heart of one—a ruler standing in the shadow of David, yet aligned with Caesar.

—Bernice:

- Bernice was the sister of Herod Agrippa II and daughter of Herod Agrippa I (see Acts 12). She was born into the wicked Herodian dynasty. She had previously been married to her uncle, Herod of Chalcis, and later entered into various political alliances through marriage and relationships with Roman elites—including Emperor Titus. But by the time of Acts 25–26, she is living openly with her brother Agrippa, leading to widespread rumors of incestuous involvement, even among ancient historians like Josephus and Juvenal. The scandalous nature of their relationship would have been well known in the Roman world and would have cast a shadow over their appearance of royal dignity.
- Thus, when Paul delivers his testimony before Agrippa and Bernice (Acts 25:23), he is speaking not just to royalty, but to a morally compromised court, dripping with pomp yet hollow in virtue. Their presence evokes the contrast between earthly power cloaked in corruption and the gospel’s power shining through a chained but blameless apostle.

25:22 Then Agrippa said to Festus, “I would like to hear the man myself.” “Tomorrow,” said he, “you will hear him.”
23 So on the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in.

—“I would like to hear the man myself”: Paul’s forthcoming testimony has the feel of a courtroom, but it is informal. Its purpose is merely to help Festus clarify the charges against Paul to make an informed report to the emperor.

—“Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered... with military tribunes and the prominent men of the city”:

- Paul’s audience consists of Festus, the governor of Judea, responsible for deciding legal cases; Agrippa, the “king” of Judea, who held more of a symbolic/ceremonial role much like British royalty; Bernice, the sister-wife of Agrippa; “military tribunes” who were high ranking officials—above centurions but beneath generals; and “prominent men of the city”—the “Who’s Who” of Caesarea.
- They entered “with great pomp”:
 - The Greek word for “pomp” is φάντασμα (phantasia), which connotes splendor, pageantry, or theatrical display. It implies a showy, almost ostentatious entrance—full of visual spectacle but lacking substance. Luke uses it ironically, contrasting the external glory of Agrippa and Bernice with the internal authority and truth of Paul, a prisoner in chains yet proclaiming the risen Christ.
 - The Greek word for “pomp” resembles our English word, “fantasy.” They share the same root. The “high and mighty” of this world are living a fantasy.
 - Too often, we seek the “fantasy life” of pomp and circumstance. We want to be in the inner circle. We want to be esteemed and respected. Like the Jews and Romans of this story, we seek favor and acclaim, but it’s all a façade.

- True greatness is not found in earthly status but in submission to the King of Heaven. On earth, He wore a crown of thorns—so do His followers.
- We must be careful not to fall for worldly fantasies or be ensnared by the fear of man. The trap is all around us, but the gospel sets us free.

26:1 So Agrippa said to Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself.” Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense: 2 “I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews...

—The most amazing fact of this story, to me, is that the happiest person in the room is the one wearing chains. When Paul says, “I consider myself fortunate...” That word “fortunate,” is translated elsewhere as either “happy,” or, “blessed.” Paul is sharing his story with a descendant of ruthless Christ-killers, and he considers himself happy. Not only is he happy despite this; he’s happy because of it. God’s Messenger lives to tell his story.

—Just think about that: shouldn’t those prominent figures have been the happy ones? And yet they weren’t happy at all. If they were, they wouldn’t trade spouses every few years and murder every rival to their throne. They were restless tyrants and loveless lovers, chasing happiness at the end of a broken dream, somewhere over the rainbow. What really matters in life is not what appears to matter. And what doesn’t appear to matter, matters significantly. That’s why the happiest person in the room is the one wearing chains. And it’s why things didn’t end so well for the ones who “appeared to matter.”

—So what happened to the “Who’s Who” of ancient Palestine?

- Felix, the cruel and immoral murderer of thousands was recalled from his throne in disgrace. He was sentenced to death, but his brother Pallas used his favor with Caesar Nero to spare him at the last moment. Felix and Drusilla divorced, Felix married a third time, and then he died.
- Felix’s wife Drusilla had the misfortune of being in the city of Pompeii on November 23, 79 AD when Mount Vesuvius famously erupted. The volcano spewed 1.5 million tons of molten rock per second, blasting the city with thermal energy 100,000 times greater than the Hiroshima bomb. The temperature soared to 482 degrees Fahrenheit. Drusilla, the most beautiful woman in Palestine, and her only son were burned and buried alive, underneath 82 feet of volcanic ash. She was only 41 and still beautiful when she was incinerated.
- Festus died in office. How and when he died were not important enough to survive.
- King Agrippa died childless at the age of 64, and he was the last of the Herodian kings, having produced no heirs.
- Bernice had several more failed love affairs. Her last one was with the Roman general Titus. When he became emperor in 79 AD he dismissed her from the royal court, and she disappeared from history at 51 years of age.

— What appears to matter doesn’t really matter, and what doesn’t appear to matter, matters significantly. The status and significance we so often strive for is burned and buried beneath the volcanic ash of eternity. Pomp and circumstance tell a certain story, but eternity tells the truth about everyone’s story.

26:19 “Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. 21 For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 22 To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: 23 that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”

—In past sermons, I have commented extensively on Paul’s conversion story, which he shares for the third time here in Acts 26. I will not comment on it again here.

—“I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision”:

- Here, Paul calls his encounter on the Damascus road a “vision.” But was it merely an internal vision, or did Christ appear physically? I believe it was the latter. In all three conversion stories, Paul tells of a light so blinding that he literally lost his eyesight for three days. In 1 Corinthians 9:1, Paul appeals to this experience as evidence of apostleship: “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” In 1 Corinthians 15:8, Paul lists himself last among those to whom the risen Christ appeared—using the same verb (ōphthē)

used for the other post-resurrection appearances. Christ literally appeared to Paul. We should not be overly rigid in our interpretation of “vision” here.

- More importantly, Paul was “not disobedient” to Christ’s appearing. Our Lord rebuked him for “kicking against the goads”—opposing the Way. We cannot be saved without responding to Christ’s rebuke: we are all sinners. Here, Paul blends repentance (an inward work of heart-conversion) with the “deeds in keeping with... repentance” (Acts 26:20)—an obedient lifestyle. Having repented in his heart by turning away from sin and toward Christ, Paul lived it out with a transformed life.

—“To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand...”:

- How does one persevere in the midst of trial after trial after trial, each one characterized by political corruption? With “the help that comes from God”. For Paul, it began in the jail cell where Jesus appeared and encouraged him (23:11).
- Given that appearances of the Lord are incredibly rare, how does the Lord strengthen us to stand?
 - Paul offers his counsel in Ephesians 6 using the same Greek word as in Acts 25:22 for “stand”:
 - “Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to **stand** firm against the schemes of the devil” (Eph. 6:11).
 - “Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist on the evil day, and having done everything, to **stand** firm. **Stand** firm therefore...” (6:13-14).
 - In Ephesians 6, the image of standing comes by the Lord’s strength: “Finally, be **strong** in the Lord and in the **strength** of His **might**” (6:10). This could be rendered, “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his strength.”
 - It is not by our strength but God’s that we stand. Our strength is “in the Lord”—it comes by virtue of a friendship with Him. “Be strong” is passive—like “be filled.” When we walk in friendship with Jesus, He fills us with divine strength.
 - Furthermore, it is not our armor that we wear; it is “the armor of God.” When we apply God’s full armor—without gaps or holes—we stand.
 - I love the image of standing. Our commission is not to charge a hill for God. When you’re sapped of strength, all God requires is that you stand. Just hold your ground. Don’t give up. Stay in the fight by letting Christ strengthen you. Relate closely to Him. Fight spiritual enemies, not physical ones. Through prayer, apply each part of God’s armor, every day (Eph. 6:10-20). The enemy will assault us in “the evil day” (6:13), but remember—it’s not an evil week or year. Resist his waves of attack, and they will shortly subside.

—“testifying both to small and to great”: The gospel thrived on the margins of Empire, but it applied no less to the “great ones.” The sovereign Lord cares about everyone. Therefore, He sovereignly arranged for Paul to testify before these great ones.

—“saying nothing but what Moses and the prophets said would come to pass...”: Paul again affirms his alignment with the God of his fathers. Christianity is not a diseased branch of Judaism but the fulfillment of it. This includes the death and resurrection of Jesus as well as the opening of salvation to the Gentiles (26:23).

26:24 And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.” 25 But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. 26 For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” 28 And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” 29 And Paul said, “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.”

—“As he was saying these things... Festus said with a loud voice”: The Judean governor interrupted Paul’s sermon. This would have felt startling. Paul remains calm.

—“Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind”:

- Festus echoes the very accusation Paul embraces elsewhere. In 1 Corinthians 4:10, he writes, “We are fools for Christ’s sake,” showing that what the world sees as madness is often the mark of true spiritual insight. Festus cannot comprehend a man so convinced of a risen Messiah that he would

devote his life—even face death—to proclaiming it. But Paul has already accepted the cost of appearing foolish in the eyes of the world, because he knows it's wisdom in the eyes of God.

- The pompous Roman elites consider Paul out of his mind, but which of them is truly crazy? Paul's audience is living a fantasy. They thought their pomp made them significant, but the only reason anyone knows they existed is because they shared a few minutes in history with a handcuffed Jew.
- What really matters in life is not what appears to matter. And what doesn't appear to matter, matters significantly. If our defining reality is what our eyes see, and what our ears hear, we're living in a distorted reality and our lives will be distorted also.
- Which reality is shaping your life—earthly or heavenly realities? What feels more real to you right now: your problems, or the God who answers prayer? Shortages of time and money, or the God who lavishly provides? Your status on earth, or your status as a son or daughter of the Most High God?

—"King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do": Wow. Paul is not just trying to escape trial or be vindicated. His concern is with the king's eternal fate.

—"I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains."

- Don't you just love that a chained criminal is literally trying to convince an enthroned monarch that he's in a more desirable state? Paul's living by a different reality. Now that his eyes are opened, Paul's greatest happiness is in the opening of others' eyes.
- You won't be truly happy until you're deeply engaged in the mission of Jesus, because that's what Jesus made and saved you to do. Once God opens your eyes to what really matters, your calling in life is to open others' eyes to what really matters.
- We live in a world full of Felixes and Festuses and Drusillas and Herods. The most cruel thing we could do is let them tumble blindly into an eternal ditch without saying anything. God didn't just open your eyes so that you could enjoy the view; He opened your eyes so you can help others see. And the way you help them see is by telling them your story.

26:30 Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. 31 And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment." 32 And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

—The story ends without a conversion, or even curiosity. Despite Paul's compelling testimony and clear innocence, Agrippa, Festus, Bernice, and the others simply rise, withdraw, and comment on legal technicalities.

—As Paul later writes, "Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise" (1 Corinthians 1:26–27). The powerful and noble hear the truth—but walk away from it. Powerful people usually resist the gospel because power corrupts and puffs up. The "Who's Who" of Palestine—and this world—would rather walk away dignified than fall down and declare, "Christ is Lord."

—The resistance of the proud does not obstruct God's plan, however—it's part of the plan. God ordained that the lowly be saved to reverse the world's power structures and shed light on its pompous illusions. Or, as Paul put it, "to shame the wise."

—Jesus comments similarly: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will" (Matthew 11:25–26). God's resistance of the proud and grace offered to the lowly is not a reason to cringe—as if God didn't love proud people also (He does)—it is a reason to be grateful. We are grateful because of the grace we have received. We are also grateful because Jesus exposes and overturns a broken world system, embodied by these corrupt "trial stories." The gospel offers hope to all—the "small and great" (26:22)—but only those willing to become small "little children" receive it.