

# Paul Before Rulers

**THEOLOGICAL THEME:** Earthly kings will one day bow before the King of kings.

Identity—who you truly are—matters. But have you ever noticed how often we reduce our identities to *what we do*? “Hi, I’m Rachel, I’m an English major,” or “This is my friend Jerry; he works at the local gym.” Our identities and energies also tend to revolve around *what we own*, or what we’d like to own: a \$25,000 renovated kitchen, a new car, or a heavily stamped passport.



If you asked your best friend to identify you, what would he or she say?

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When the plot to kill Paul was uncovered, he was sneaked out of Jerusalem to Caesarea at night under guard (Acts 23:12-31). Paul was safe, for now, but he was still a prisoner, and he would soon stand trial before three rulers. Through his defense, Paul reveals how our identity as Christians has nothing to do with the size of our bank accounts, our marital status, how many children we have, or where we work. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are not defined by the mistakes of our past, the sins of our youth, or the skeletons in our closets. Our identity is found in Jesus Christ. Only when our lives fall into orbit around *His* person and *His* work will everything else find its proper place.

After Paul's dramatic rescue from Jerusalem, the apostle had to defend himself before the court in Caesarea. In this session, we will see God use Paul's courage, expertise in the law, and cleverness to expose the characters of three rulers—Felix the corrupt, Festus the wavering, and Agrippa the unpersuaded. Even though Paul was the defendant on trial, God turned the tables through Paul's witness and put the earthly leaders in the hot-seat. In the face of false accusation, unfair sentencing, and even death itself, Paul seized every opportunity to share the gospel with clarity, courage, and conviction.

## 1. Felix: The Corrupt Ruler Who Feared Judgment (Acts 24:22-27)

*<sup>22</sup> But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, "When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case."<sup>23</sup> Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs.*

*<sup>24</sup> After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, "Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you."*

*<sup>26</sup> At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him. <sup>27</sup> When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.*

Unlike the Jewish leaders, Felix did not feel threatened by Paul and his teachings, at least not at first. Felix decided to wait to hear more from Paul and extended some freedom to his prisoner. Then one day, Felix summoned Paul to hear more from him, and as the apostle spoke about righteousness, self-control, and judgment, something happened to Felix—he became afraid.




### Voices from Church History

"Hear, O king, and despise not the counsel of the poor, and let their complaints come before thee. The king is a mortal man and not God, therefore has no power over the immortal souls of his subjects, to make laws and ordinances for them, and to set spiritual lords over them...O king, be not seduced by deceivers to sin against God whom you ought to obey."<sup>1</sup>

—Thomas Helwys  
(1550-1616)

As Christians, we need not fear God's coming judgment. We are under His grace and mercy. We are God's adopted children, coheirs with Christ, recipients of Christ's righteousness, and objects of God's unfailing love. We are safe and secure from judgment. But at the same time, we should not take God's judgment lightly. It *should* concern us, not for ourselves but for others.

 Besides God's coming judgment, what do Christians often fear? What does the Bible say about these fears?

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Despite his fears of God's judgment and knowing Paul's innocence, Felix's greed led him to call for Paul often over the next two years, seeing each time as an opportunity for his prisoner to offer him a generous bribe. Greed is powerful, and as Christians, we are not exempt from its seductive temptations in our culture and even in our churches. Sometimes, as with Felix, greed is apparent. But there are other times when greed can be deeper, darker, and hidden.

 What are some ways you have seen or experienced greed in the local church?

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## 99 Essential Christian Doctrines

### 17. God Is Just

God establishes standards for His moral creatures that are in accordance with His righteousness, and His moral creatures will be judged according to those righteous standards (Lev. 11:44-45; Rom. 2:5-11; 2 Cor. 5:10). It would be an injustice if God were not to uphold His righteousness, for such a failure would require God to violate His own righteous character. Since humanity has sinned by failing to live up to God's righteous standards, God has taken it upon Himself to make provision by being both just and the justifier of those who place their faith in Christ (Rom. 3:25-26).

## 2. Festus: The Wavering Ruler Who Shifted Responsibility (Acts 25:1-12)

<sup>1</sup> Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. <sup>2</sup> And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, <sup>3</sup> asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way.

<sup>4</sup> Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. <sup>5</sup> “So,” said he, “let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him.”

<sup>6</sup> After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. <sup>7</sup> When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove. <sup>8</sup> Paul argued in his defense, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.” <sup>9</sup> 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?”

Paul stood before Festus and a collection of Jewish leaders in Caesarea and made his defense. He had not done anything wrong against the Jewish law, the temple, or Caesar. Neither Jerusalem nor Rome had grounds to condemn him.

Just like Felix, Festus now found himself at a critical juncture. What would he do? Festus knew Paul had committed no crime against Rome, and he could release him for lack of courtroom evidence. But he couldn't do that. The Jewish leaders would be incensed. But perhaps he could find a way to shift responsibility for the decision *and* curry favor with the Jews at the same time. If Festus took Paul to Jerusalem for trial as they had requested, they would owe him. So Festus wavered and asked Paul if he would be willing to go.



How can we be tempted to waver in our faith because of the pressures of the culture around us?

*<sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup> Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, "To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go."*

Paul never renounced his Jewish heritage or his Jewish education. He was merely a Jew who trusted in Jesus, as the rest of the Jewish people should. Paul's goal was not to *replace* Judaism with following Christ but to show how Judaism was *fulfilled* in following Christ. This is why Paul proclaimed he had done no wrong against the Jews (25:10). He was not trying to hurt the people he dearly loved but to help them (see Rom. 9:1-3).

God never wastes anything in our past. Christ can even turn our former sins into weapons of testimony, as He did with Paul. Paul never forgot his life as a persecutor of Christ and His church. He saw himself as the worst among sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). But it was by remembering those sins that Paul was able to grasp God's mercy, patience, and grace more fully (v. 16). What Paul had experienced became the cornerstone of the gospel he proclaimed. Likewise, we don't have to shift blame for our past because in Christ, it has been forgiven.



How should the gospel guide our thinking about the wrongs we have committed in the past?

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### Voices from the Church

"God ultimately raises up leaders for one primary reason: His glory. He shows His power in our weakness. He demonstrates His wisdom in our folly. We are like a turtle on a fence post. If you walk by a fence post and see a turtle on top of it, then you know someone came by and put it there."<sup>2</sup>

—Matt Chandler

### 3. Agrippa: The King Who Was Not Quite Persuaded (Acts 26:24-32)

Several days after Paul appealed to Caesar, he appeared before Festus and King Agrippa. The apostle shared at length about his Jewish heritage, his Damascus road conversion, and his hope in the resurrection. But when he connected Jesus' death and resurrection to the Old Testament and said this had eternal implications for both Jews *and* Gentiles, this was too much for Festus to bear.

*<sup>24</sup> 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."<sup>25</sup> But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe."*

Paul had been accused of many things, but this was perhaps the first time he had been called insane from excessive studying. The apostle denied the accusation but then quickly pivoted his attention to Agrippa. Paul clarified that what he had talked about—his life and more importantly the life and ministry of Jesus—had occurred in the open. All he had shared was verifiable and surely Agrippa had noticed it.

Paul then asked Agrippa a critical question, the answer to which could silence the leader once and for all. "Do you believe the prophets?" In other words, "Are you a good Jew?" Paul then answered for the king, saying he knew Agrippa believed the prophets. Agrippa apparently picked up on Paul's strategy because he deflected the question:

*<sup>28</sup> And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?"<sup>29</sup> 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."*

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

King Agrippa wasn't persuaded to become a Christian. While scholars disagree on what Agrippa meant in his statement—sarcasm, anger, or sincerity—Paul's boldness in declaring the gospel and driving his audience to respond to it is evident.

Evangelism is our business, but conversion is God's business. Like Paul, you and I are responsible for sharing the gospel with anyone and everyone God puts in our path. We share. We pray. We challenge. We encourage. But we do not regenerate. Only the Holy Spirit can take the gospel, pierce a hardened heart, and give new life.

Paul's courageous witness to Agrippa, who may have been an "almost" Christian, is a warning to us against being "almost" evangelists. Paul could have rationalized that it was more important that he stay alive to share the gospel with many people rather than share the gospel with three people and possibly be put to death. For us, it might be rationalizing that we cannot risk losing a job or a relationship. Paul shared the gospel without fear of death, convinced he would rather die proclaiming Christ than live because he forfeited an opportunity—any opportunity—to share the gospel. May that be our conviction as well.



When was the last time you *almost* shared your testimony or witnessed to a non-believer? What held you back?

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How can Paul's witness encourage us to seize every opportunity to spread the gospel?

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Here's the heartbreaking truth about "almost" Christianity. It's not Christianity at all. Hell will most certainly be full of all kinds of "almost" Christians—men and women who, like Agrippa, heard the gospel but who continued to reject Christ. It's one or the other. In or out. It's a binary decision in a world that denies binary choices.

Nevertheless, the hope of the gospel is that "almost" Christians can become *actual* Christians if they place their trust in Jesus Christ. As long as there is life, no one is beyond the reach of God's redemption.



How can we address the difficulties that would keep “almost Christians” from trusting in Jesus?

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## Conclusion

When Paul’s life was on the line, his greatest defense—his ultimate identity—was tethered to Jesus Christ. When others brought false accusations against him and impugned his reputation, Paul unashamedly declared allegiance to his King even if it led to imprisonment, torture, ridicule, and mockery. In the end, the apostle did not budge a single inch from his Christ-centered, gospel-driven identity.

May God crystalize our identities in Jesus Christ. May He give us renewed courage to confront corruption, steadfastness to stand firm in trials and temptations, and boldness to declare our identities before culture, kings, and rulers for His glory and their salvation.



### Voices from Church History

“The souls of the people.— These also are a part of the property committed to your trust, of which you must give an account...But the question which may be addressed to you is, Did you warn them? Did you deal faithfully with them? In a word, Did you discharge your trust?”<sup>3</sup>

—Andrew Fuller  
(1754-1815)

**CHRIST CONNECTION:** Paul was less concerned about his receiving favor from earthly kings and more concerned about their receiving salvation through Jesus Christ. His testimony in the face of false accusations, unjust sentencing, and possible torture and death is a shining example of confidence in the power of the gospel to save.



# HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

**MISSIONAL APPLICATION:** God calls us to be concerned more about others' salvation than about our own situation.

1. How should we respond to non-Christians who hear the truth about righteousness, self-control, and judgment and then become afraid?

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2. Looking back on your life, how can you use your past, even your sins, as part of your testimony for Jesus today?

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3. What opportunities do you have to share the gospel, and how can your group encourage you as you face the difficulties of each circumstance?

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