

Paul – A Legal Case Study
Chapter 10
Paul’s Motivation

One of the hardest conversations I often have with my clients seems simple enough. It centers on the question, “What do you want?” I need to know what my client expects out of the trial. If it’s a criminal case, my client might want to be vindicated by winning at trial. My client might be looking for a plea bargain to avoid the pressures and uncertainties of a trial.

Civil cases are often more complicated. I represented the parents of a young man who drove race cars. During a race in upstate New York, the young man was involved in a crash where another driver sent him up to the railing. A yellow caution flag went up warning all racers that the race was suspended until the wreck was cleared. The young man climbed out of his car and faced down the driver involved in causing the wreck. The video (this was happening live on television) seems to indicate that the driver didn’t slow down, but revved his engine and steered into the young man on the track. The driver ran over and killed the young man. The young man’s parents wanted me to sue the driver.

The hardest part of a case like this comes up in the area of my question, “What do you want?” I needed to know what the family was looking for. Was it an apology? Money? Publicity? The removal of the driver from the racing circuit? This was a tough, tough question, and I’m not sure the parents knew what they wanted. I think some of the reason they couldn’t answer the question fully was because *what they really wanted*, was their son back. Money wouldn’t restore that. Neither would an apology or publicity. I think they were also intent on seeing the other driver removed from the racing circuit.

Of course, I couldn’t get either of those through a lawsuit. With the right jury finding, I might be able to make it tough on the driver to get another racing opportunity, but I couldn’t guarantee that. It’s not what courts do.

With Paul, the question might seem a non-starter. Wouldn’t we just assume that Paul would say, “I want vindication and release! I want to hear the judge say, ‘Not guilty!’” That might be our inclination if we were in Paul’s shoes, but I’m not sure that would be Paul’s. I suspect that Paul’s ultimate goal was not release and a quiet enjoyable life. I think that Paul was bent on God’s mission, seeing the kingdom of God coming on earth as it is in heaven.

In this section of my legal study, I want to probe what we can determine as Paul’s motive. That will make a huge difference in what I would do and say as his lawyer. My goal must be his goal. No more, no less.

Possible Motivations

Motivations come in all shapes and sizes, but often boil down to one of the same few. People are motivated by what they want. Often the motivation in court is one of the three “F’s” – freedom, fame, or fortune. Those may seem selfish, and they generally are, but most motivation is selfish. More often than not, people are motivated by what gives them comfort, peace of mind, and an easy, productive life. A few are on self-destruct mode and are motivated by things that make life worse, but the few of those I’ve met seem to be doing so in order to generate pity from others, or to justify some deep emotional need.

The bottom line is that most motivations are selfish. In a way, that certainly makes my job as a lawyer easier. But for Paul, I’m not sure that selfish motives really answer the question of what he wants out of the case. Paul may be, more than any client I’ve actually had, an exception to the rule.

Freedom

In 21st century America, the question of what someone might want out of a criminal proceeding often begins with “freedom.” Who wants to be incarcerated? Most everyone wants the liberation and freedom that comes from a “not guilty” verdict. There are exceptions to every rule, and undoubtedly there are a few people who need a place to stay, a provision of meals, and a roof over their heads, but generally most don’t choose to be locked up. Most people want the freedom of pursuing what they want in life. What about Paul?

First, one should realize that a Roman imprisonment was not like an imprisonment in today’s criminal system. Roman jails were not for punishment. They were holding cells for the ultimate punishment that would be assessed following a verdict. That punishment might be restitution of what was taken, but generally was one of flogging, death, or exile.

Needless to say, most of the holding cells were not places of comfort. The Mamertine Prison in Rome, where history records Paul and Peter being held at the end of their lives, was a dank dark hole in the ground, with thick stone walls domed at the top with a slight opening for lowering and raising prisoners.

Prisons did not provide food for sustenance. While some crumbs might be provided, it was generally considered a half ration of what a slave would get. It was not enough to live on. People needed food and support from friends and families if they were going to survive imprisonment long enough to get to trial.

Knowing the conditions and terms of Roman imprisonment, one would think that Paul would certainly want his freedom. Maybe when I interviewed Paul and asked him,

“What do you want?” he would say, “Freedom!” But I doubt it. It doesn’t seem high on his list of priorities.

Paul found out something over the two years he was incarcerated in Caesarea after his arrest in Jerusalem. Paul found out that he was able to talk to Roman rulers about Jesus the Messiah. Paul was under the thumb of Felix, the Roman procurator for Judea. Felix was appointed to his job by Caesar Claudius. Paul was before a man on face-to-face terms with the emperor of Rome! Felix was no small magistrate; he was a big deal!

In the last lesson, I discussed how Felix got his job. A bit more information on Felix is helpful at this point. Governor Felix was an interesting man. He had three wives who were all better bred than he was. Felix was a freedman whom many Romans looked down upon. The Roman historian Tacitus, born about this time, would later write of Felix,

Antonius Felix, practiced every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of a king with all the instincts of a slave; he had married Drusilla, the granddaughter of Cleopatra and Antony, and so was Antony’s grandson-in-law.”¹

Tacitus missed a bit of his history here. Felix actually had three wives. The first of his wives was the granddaughter of Queen Cleopatra from Egypt, not Drusilla. Drusilla was his third wife, taken from another engagement when she was only 16. She was Jewish, and the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I. This made her the sister to King Agrippa II and Bernice who figured into Paul’s life a bit later, as discussed below.² Interestingly, Drusilla’s life ended in 79AD. She was killed in Pompeii at the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius.

Paul made his first defense before Felix, and while it seems that Paul was at first arguing for his release, it was a time where Paul was engaging Felix personally, not just as a defendant before a judge.

Consider Paul’s opening statement.

Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I *cheerfully* make my defense (Acts 24:10).

¹ Tacitus, *Histories*, Book 5.9. Loeb Classical Library (Harvard 1931) translated by John Jackson.

² Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* Ch. 4.132. See the analysis on Tacitus’s error in the notes of Maier on pages 651 and 652. *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, translated by Whiston, commentary by Maier (Kregel 1999).

Paul is making a pun off of Felix's name. Felix is Latin for "happy" or "cheerful." Paul reaches for a surprisingly intimate rapport with Felix by making a pun from his name. This is especially surprising when one remembers Felix's reputation for cruelty. While Paul likely wanted his release at this point, it must have moved back in his list of priorities because Paul had a chance at release. Felix did not release Paul because Felix was waiting for a payment. While modern thought would consider such a payment a "bribe," it was fairly common in Paul's day. One might even consider it "court costs."

Paul didn't pay the money and get his release. Instead he saw his incarceration as a chance to convert Felix and Drusilla! Paul was gunning for a relationship that would bring one of Rome's highest ranking government officials into the faith. Here is how Luke explained it:

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. 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." At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him (Acts 24:24-26).

This should not surprise anyone about Paul. He had boldly stepped into unusual arenas to explain what God had done in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

This is an appropriate time for a digression into how Paul handled another opportunity to speak with unique people about Jesus. Consider what happened when Paul went to Athens.

Paul in Athens

Paul had been arrested and had trouble while on one of his missionary journeys in Greece. After being released, Paul left his missionary team, boarding a boat to Athens. Upon arrival, Paul was alone in Athens. One can imagine what Paul was thinking. Athens was not just another town. It was one of the oldest cities of Paul's day. For nearly one thousand years, Athens had given the world culture and education. Athens was the birthplace of philosophy, theater, and democracy. In the 7th century B.C., while the rest of the world was ruled by kings and tyrants, Athens was at least ruled by an elected council (albeit elected by the rich and nobles from among their own ranks). They ruled from the Areopagus ("Mars Hill"). By 508 B.C. all citizens were given a voice in government. Democracy was born.

Athens also gave the world the Greek dialect that Paul and most everyone else spoke. There were many ancient Greek dialects including Doric in the west, Aeolic in central

Greece, and Attic (or “Ionic”) in the eastern area around Athens. This became the predominant tongue that preceded the koine dialect of Paul’s day.

In the 400’s, the famous Parthenon was built on the Acropolis in Athens. That same century, Socrates (c.471-399 B.C.) brought his voice to Athens teaching and questioning others as the gadfly of the city. Socrates had a number of students who took philosophy further. Plato (c.424-c.348 B.C.) and Xenophon (c.431-355 B.C.) were two of his more noteworthy followers. Plato laid foundations of the West that still undergird much of western culture and thought. Plato’s impact was strong both personally and through his student Aristotle (384-322 B.C.).

Aristotle wrote on physics, metaphysics, poetry, music, theater, logic, rhetoric, politics, government, ethics, theology, biology, and zoology – all from Athens, moving there when he was 18. Aristotle was tutor to Alexander the Great, one of history’s greatest military geniuses. To this day, Athens is referred to as the cradle of European civilization.

Athens was also a pagan city, its name coming from the goddess Athena, who also had a temple in her honor on the Acropolis. There were many temples set up in Athens, both on the Acropolis and in the agora (marketplace).

Paul must have had a myriad of thoughts, as he was alone in this historical mecca of philosophy and culture. It is apparent that Paul was well versed in writers of Athens because he was able to quote them as needed in his conversations.

Athens was a brand-new experience for Paul. First, it is the first recorded missionary account of him alone. The Bible references that Paul spent time in Cilicia and Syria after his conversion, but there is no record of what happened in those years.

In his other mission efforts, Paul and his companions would always start in synagogues or places of Jewish prayer, speaking to the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks. Paul would use Scriptures to teach Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Paul had just finished reasoning from the Scriptures with Jews and Greeks in Berea.

But now that Paul was in Athens, he did something different. Luke explained that Paul reasoned in the synagogues, but he also tells us that Paul went daily to the agora (marketplace) to reason with the pagans there. This was not a place where Paul could reason from the Scriptures that Jesus was the awaited and promised Messiah. The pagans in the market would not have had any regard for Jewish Scriptures. Paul had to use another approach in the agora.

The agora was a long area of shops, food stalls, schools, and councils. It was the center of the town’s life and the ruins can be found at the foot of the Acropolis. In the agora, Paul came across the leading philosophers of the day. These were “Epicureans” and “Stoics.” In a manner reminiscent of Socrates, Paul went about the market place and began to engage

the Epicureans and Stoics in discussion. To best understand Luke's details, one needs to know a bit about each of these philosophical schools.

Epicureans

Paul's speech was to "an educated and rather philosophical pagan [audience] without contacts with the synagogue."³ The Epicureans derived their name from the Athenian philosopher Epicurus (341-270 B.C.). Philosophers call Epicureans "materialists." By that term, philosophers are referring to the general Epicurean belief that matter (material) was necessary for existence. There was no real belief by the Epicureans in non-matter (or "incorporeal") entities.⁴ To the Epicureans, even the soul was formed of matter.

Not surprisingly, Epicureans believed that one could only accept truth that came from reasoning based solidly on what was evident. Since they perceived reason to be an inherent part of the material soul of man, it was deemed reliable if used properly. They believed that man's happiness or misery was based on the exercise of reason.⁵

In the area of ethics, reason again played a prominent role. A precise understanding of the nature of man was the key to "a true conception of the good life for man."⁶ Epicureans believed that pleasure or happiness was the highest goal of life. This gave birth to the modern usage of "epicurean" as a word expressing "pleasure-seeking, hedonistic...pampered, luxurious."⁷ But Epicureans were not so hedonistic themselves! Epicurus wrote that reasoning through the consequences helps one understand:

When we say, then, that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice, or willful misrepresentation. By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking-bouts and of revelry, not sexual love, not the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produces a pleasant life; it is sober reasoning, searching out the

³ Witherington at 511.

⁴ The exception to this was the Epicurean acceptance of "void" as a concept that existed, although not in a material form. For a good overview and selected source readings in Epicurean philosophy, see Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy – Introductory Readings* (Hackett Publishing Co. 2d Ed., 1997).

⁵ *Ibid.* at xviii.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus American Edition (Oxford 1996) at 484. It also is used in more than one grocery store chains!

grounds of every choice and avoidance, and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul.⁸

Epicurus taught that one should live simply without a great deal of expectation and one could then more readily enjoy whatever life threw at you.

Epicurus did believe in the existence of gods, but “not as the multitude believe.”⁹ Common sense taught of gods and their true nature, which Epicurus believed to be good. He also believed the gods were interested in their own good pleasure. The gods were not, however, interested or involved in humans. Epicurus also believed that death ended one’s existence. He taught that there was no afterlife with reward or punishment from the gods.

Stoics

The Stoics were also materialists like the Epicureans. In the matters set forth earlier under “Epicureans,” the Stoics held very similar views.¹⁰ Diogenes Laertius (whom most scholars place in the third century¹¹) wrote on the lives of key Stoic philosophers.

The father of the Stoic movement was the Greek Zeno (334-262 B.C.). Once Zeno moved to Athens, he paced on a covered walkway/colonnade at the northwest side of the agora, where he taught his philosophy. The Greek word for this colonnade was *Stoa Poikile* (στοά ποικιλή); hence the name for his followers, “Stoics.”

Zeno himself was “sour” and frowned a great deal. He was famous for his “one liners” that were supposed to make people think. For example, it was Zeno who said, “The reason why we have two ears and only one mouth is that we may listen the more and talk the less.”¹²

⁸ Letter to Menoecus contained in Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* at 10.131. Loeb Classical Library edition translated by R. D. Hicks.

⁹ *Ibid.* at 10.123.

¹⁰ Philosophy students will find certain distinctions that do not matter in our discussions here. For example, the Stoics believed in four kinds of “incorporeal” entities: void (like the Epicureans), place, time and “things said.” See Inwood at xvi.

¹¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Loeb Classical Library*, Vol. 1 at xvi.

¹² *Ibid.* Vol 2, VII.23.

Stoics tried to avoid being emotional. Passion and emotion were considered “an irrational and unnatural movement in the soul.”¹³ The emotions were divided into four groups: grief, fear, desire and pleasure. Stoics would have loved Star Trek’s Mr. Spock.

Stoics taught that god was “a living being, immortal, rational, perfect or intelligent in happiness, admitting nothing evil [into him], taking providential care of the world and all that therein is.” Their view was basically pantheistic as they saw god as the “world-soul.”¹⁴

Paul

Paul was discussing his faith with various philosophers of the Epicurean and Stoic schools. Paul provoked enough interest for some others to ask what he was talking about. While some responded with derogatory name-calling, others responded more substantively.¹⁵ They noted that Paul was “speaking of foreign divinities” (Acts 17:18). This perception of “foreign divinities” came about because Paul was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.

The Athenians took Paul to the Areopagus counsel for a hearing. Luke noted that the Athenians spent an inordinate amount of time “in nothing except telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17:21). Paul certainly had something new!

The council asked Paul to explain the “strange things” in his new teaching. That was the open-door Paul needed! Luke noted,

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus,¹⁶ said...

Before examining Paul’s speech, examine his stance! Paul assumed the orator’s position.¹⁷ Accomplished orators would strike a standing pose, typically holding out a hand as they gave their presentation. This is in contrast to Paul’s Jewish training. In the synagogue,

¹³ *Ibid.* at VII.110

¹⁴ *Ibid.* at VII.146; Bruce, at 377.

¹⁵ The ESV translates the name Paul was called as “babblers” (“What does this babblers wish to say?” Acts 17:18). The Greek is *spermologos* (σπερμολόγος), and it literally means a “seed-picker.” When used in this manner it conveyed an “imagery of persons whose communication lacks sophistication and seems to pick up scraps of information here and there” as a “scrapmonger” or, “scavenger.” “Σπερμολόγος,” Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (U. of Chi. 1979), 2d Ed.

¹⁶ Many consider Paul to be standing on the hill called the Areopagus. Other scholars point out that the ruling council of Athens was called by the name of the Areopagus because they originally met there. By the time of Paul, these scholars point out, the Areopagus council likely met in the *agora* (marketplace). See Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans 1998) at 515.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* at 517.

they would stand to read Scripture, but sit to teach (Luke 4:16-21). Paul was a Jew to Jews, but became a Greek to the Greeks, and a philosopher to the philosophers, so that he might win some to Christ. (“I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” 1 Cor. 9:22).

Paul began his explanation noting the devotion of the Greeks. Standing on the Areopagus commands great views of Athens. One view is down to the agora, where one would find idols galore. A second view is up towards the Acropolis with its temples to Athena and others. A huge temple to Zeus was also easily visible nearby. In the face of these temples, Paul began,

Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found an altar also with this inscription, “To the unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you (Acts 17:22-23).

Paul began with a point of familiarity and contact. Paul used the altar to an unknown god to position himself into that area where the Athenians had already admitted there were likely aspects of divinity beyond their own knowledge.

Paul then dove straight into the character and nature of God in a way that would not have caused alarm to the philosophers around him.¹⁸ Paul explained the divine power and nature of God.

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything (Acts 17:24).

This statement itself was not foreign to the Stoics. The Stoics believed that, “God is one and the same with Reason, Fate, and Zeus; he is also called by many other names. In the beginning he was by himself; he transformed the whole of substance... He created first of

¹⁸ Paul made points of contact in this speech, relating to the Greek philosophers in language and approach that would all seem familiar to them. That is not to say that Paul had abandoned scripture. While Paul never quoted scripture (which would have no impact on these philosophers), Paul’s speech was firmly rooted in Isaiah 42. In Isaiah 42 we read of God “who created the heavens ... gives breath to the people on it.” This same passage speaks of God making his people (which would include Paul) “a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind.” God also speaks in Isaiah 42 of his historic patience, “For a long time I have held my peace” which was coming to an end.

all the four elements, fire, water, air, earth.”¹⁹ Greek philosophers frequently taught that the gods did not live in man-made temples.²⁰

Paul made a very logical statement that more and more philosophers were coming to realize made sense (even apart from Paul’s argument). Namely, in spite of all the beautiful temples, anyone who created the world and everything in it did not really need man’s help. The rational approach Paul used in this argument was precisely what the Epicureans and Stoics believed was the proper way to consider such issues.

Paul then began to sharpen his focus on the relation between God and mankind. Indeed, a creator God is one thing, but what interaction with humanity is involved? Paul explained,

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place (Acts 17:25).

Paul then took it further, establishing the purpose for the Creator God’s work,

That they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him (Acts 17:27).

At this point, Paul has finally taken a sharp deviation from the Greek philosophers. Both Epicureans and Stoics alike taught that the chief goal of life was achieving happiness by moderating expectations. Paul proclaims the purpose of life is fulfilling the Creator’s design to know God. For Paul, it was simple logic. If God made man in his image, then surely man has the responsibility, over and against all other things, to understand God’s true nature.

To support his argument, Paul made an appeal to Greek poets. As Paul did so, he shifted from third person (“their dwelling place... they should seek... they might feel”) to first person plural (“us/we”). Paul urged the Athenians to accept that,

He is actually not far from each one of us, for, “In him we live and move and have our being;” as even some of your own poets have said, “For indeed we are his offspring” (Acts 17:28).

Paul was quoting from two different poets. We believe the first quote comes from Epimenides.²¹ The second quote is from a poem by Aratus named “Phaenomena.” (Aratus

¹⁹ *Ibid.* at VII.136-137.

²⁰ Euripides, *Fragments*, 968.

²¹ This original poem did not survive antiquity, so scholars cannot state for certain where it is from.

was from Cilicia, Paul's birthplace). The Aratus poem is a description of the stars and heavenly bodies, and it even included a bit of weather! The poem begins with a tribute to Zeus, "From Zeus let us begin; him do we mortals never leave unnamed; full of Zeus are all the streets and all the market-places of men; full is the sea and the havens thereof; always we have need of Zeus. For we also are his offspring..."²² Of course Paul left out Zeus as the beginning of humanity. Paul had already told the Athenians that a God they had never been able to name was the source of creation.

Paul drew the natural conclusion from these Greek thinkers asserting that if we are God's offspring then we need to quit thinking of God as some image formed by man's imagination and represented by gold, silver or stone. Paul said that while God may have overlooked such ignorance before, God now was commanding repentance. Paul explained that God has fixed a day for judging the world in righteousness by an appointed man (Jesus). God has given assurance on this judgment by raising Jesus from the dead.

Paul's proclamation on this matter brought snickering and mocking from some. Others expressed a desire to hear more. Even though many scholars equate this Athenian excursion as a "failure," it is certainly not fair to say so. Luke informed us that Paul went out from the Areopagus, but not alone!

Some men joined him and believed, among whom were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others" (Acts 17:34).

Church history records that Dionysius became the first bishop of Athens, later being martyred under the reign of Domitian (who reigned from 81-96).²³

Paul and King Agrippa

As further proof for Paul's motivation being a chance to preach the gospel, even to high officials, I find what happened to Paul *after* his two-year ongoing dialogue with Felix instructive. For two years, Felix continued to speak with Paul, but after that time, Felix was replaced.

The Jews had gone to Caesar Nero in Rome (the Caesar Claudius who had appointed Felix as the procurator for Judea had been replaced) to get Felix removed. Felix, likely to curry favor with the Jews, choose to leave Paul imprisoned rather than just release him. Luke doesn't note (and maybe didn't know) the inner workings of Rome, but simply states the results,

²² Aratus, *Phaenomena*, Loeb Classical Library, translation by G. R. Mair, lines 1-5.

²³ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, at 3.4.11, 4.23.3.

When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison (Acts 24:27).

The new procurator Festus had been on the job for three days when he ventured from Caesarea to Jerusalem, likely to get better acquainted with those over whom he held imperial power. Meanwhile in Jerusalem, the Jewish authorities who still burned over Paul's escape from their grip, hatched a plan to fix the Paul-problem. They figured if they could get the new proconsul to send Paul to Jerusalem for trial, they could ambush Paul on the four-day journey and kill him.

Festus was not persuaded and told the leaders they could make the trek to Caesarea and Paul would be tried there. A little over a week later, Festus headed back to Caesarea and many of the Jews came as well, seeking to testify against Paul. Festus took his seat on the platform in his role as judge and jury.

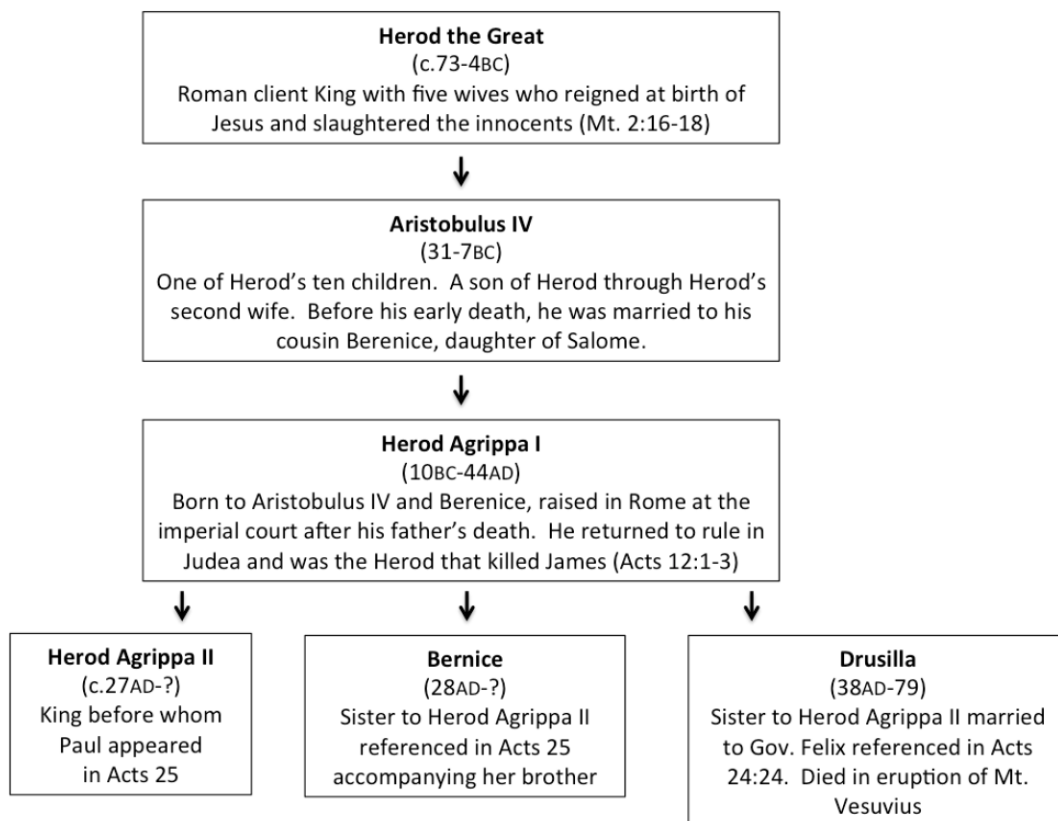
The Jews brought many charges against Paul, but were not able to prove any of them. Paul pointed out that he had done nothing wrong under the laws of Rome or Judaism, nor had he violated the specific rules associated with the Temple. Festus wanted to endear himself to the Jews (a principle reason Festus got his job was the Jews complaining to Caesar about Felix). So Festus asked Paul whether Paul might want to go to Jerusalem to be charged.

Paul didn't want to be tried in Jerusalem. Paul was looking to go deeper into Rome's hierarchy! Paul chose to exercise his right as a citizen of the city of Rome, and be tried before Rome's tribunal. Paul appealed to Caesar! After verifying Paul's rights, Festus agreed.

Festus wasn't able to send Paul to Rome immediately, so while Paul awaited transport, a notable encounter occurred. King Agrippa and his sister Bernice came to Caesarea to visit Festus. Festus laid the case of Paul before Agrippa for Agrippa's insight. Agrippa was intrigued, and said he would like to hear Paul's case personally. Festus set a hearing for the very next day. It is helpful to consider a few facts about King Agrippa and Bernice.

King Agrippa came from a family that had various roles of leadership in Judea for generations. King Agrippa's father was Herod Agrippa I, referenced in Acts 12:1 as simply "Herod the king" ("About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also." Acts 12:1-3). King Herod's grandfather had been Herod the Great who had rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem and had ordered the slaughter of the innocents out of fear of the birth of the

Messiah (Mat. 2:16-18).²⁴ King Agrippa had three sisters, two of which Luke writes about in the New Testament. The oldest sister was Bernice who lived with Agrippa and accompanied him on this visit to Festus.²⁵ Subsequent to this, history records Bernice came to live, for a time, in Rome as a wife to the Roman Emperor Titus.²⁶ Agrippa's youngest sister was Drusilla, the wife of the recently fired Governor Felix. Clearly this was a family with close and important ties to Imperial Rome.



²⁴ Josephus sets out the lineage of the Herodian dynasty in Jewish Antiquities Book 18 chapter 4.

²⁵ This sibling relationship was evidently subject of much gossip. A generation later, the satirist Juvenal wrote of Bernice as the “incestuous sister” to “the barbarian Agrippa.” *Satire 6* at lines 156-158.

²⁶ Evidently, Bernice never formally married Titus. Tacitus (c.55–120) wrote of Titus’s “passionate longing to see again Queen Bernice” (*Histories*, book 2.2). Suetonius would add that Titus had a “notorious passion for queen Bernice, to whom it was even said that he promised marriage.” *Lives of the Caesars*, book 8.7. Dio Cassius (c.150-235) recorded “Bernice was at the very height of her power and consequently came to Rome along with her brother Agrippa. The latter was given the rank of praetor, while she dwelt in the palace, cohabiting with Titus. She expected to marry him and was already behaving in every respect as if she were his wife; but when he perceived that the Romans were displeased with the situation, he sent her away.” *Roman History*, book 65 at 15.3ff.

It is worth noting that about 35 years later, King Agrippa wrote Josephus having read Josephus's history of this time and applauded the works and their accuracies. According to Josephus, Agrippa wrote:

King Agrippa to dearest Josephus, greeting. I have perused [meaning "read carefully" not "scanned!"] the book with greatest pleasure. You seem to me to have written with much greater care and accuracy than any who have dealt with the subject. Send me the remaining volumes. Farewell.²⁷

Looking through the lens of historical knowledge, it is amazing what was happening. Paul was wrongly held in Caesarea, but didn't pay to get his release. Instead, for two years, Paul continually testified about his faith to Felix. Felix then left Paul imprisoned as a favor to the Jews which resulted in Festus hearing Paul explain his faith. Then, because Paul appealed to Rome, Paul was still in Caesarea when King Agrippa and Bernice arrived. Paul then got to explain his faith to them.

On the day of Paul's defense, King Agrippa and Bernice entered the audience hall "with great pomp" along with the military tribunes and the prominent men of Caesarea. Festus then ordered the guard to bring in Paul. Upon Paul's arrival, Festus began the proceeding:

King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. But I found that he had done nothing deserving death. And as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him. But I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore, I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write. For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him (Acts 25:24-27).

With the agenda thus set, Agrippa instructed Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Paul struck the orator's pose, with hand extended, and made his defense. Of course, Paul knew who Agrippa was. Paul addressed him by his title, "King Agrippa," aware and affirming that Agrippa was "familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews" (Acts 26:3).

Paul chose this moment, before King Agrippa, Bernice, Festus, and all the pomp and importance of Caesarea to tell his story. Paul told his *whole* story, going back to the beginning. No one listening could be in doubt about Paul's message. Paul wasn't

²⁷ Josephus, The Life section 365 (Loeb Classical Library translation by H. J. Thackeray).

mounting a defense to the charges brought against him. He was preaching an evangelizing sermon!

Paul went back to his beginning, telling Agrippa of his life as a Pharisee. Paul kept his emphasis on this core issue: God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. Paul explained that Paul hadn't always believed that to be true, but on a trip to Damascus, something life changing happened. Paul's disbelief fled when the resurrected Jesus appeared and spoke to Paul personally. Paul explained that Jesus not only appeared to him, but also commissioned Paul to take the good news to the Jews and beyond. Jesus charged Paul with teaching Gentiles the forgiveness of sin and the way to live in the light instead of darkness. Paul had taken that message to the Gentiles. He taught them to live holy lives worthy of their calling, and for that, the Jews were after him. Paul knew and explained he was proclaiming the promise of Moses and the prophets; Jesus Christ was the first of many in resurrection for Jew and Gentile alike.

At this statement, the newcomer Governor Festus, a Gentile himself, interrupted loudly claiming, "Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind!" (Acts 26:24). Paul politely replied, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. 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" (Acts 26:26-27).

Having politely responded to Festus, Paul then returned his focus to Agrippa. "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe." Agrippa seemed a bit taken aback by how boldly Paul took an academic discussion into the king's personal zone. Agrippa answered Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" The import of what Paul was saying was not lost on Agrippa, the man who would one day be walking the halls of the Emperor of Rome.

Paul did not hedge. He spoke his heart: "Whether short or long, I would say to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains." This was Paul's goal. His purpose, what he wanted from his case was not freedom. It was an opportunity to give testimony to his beliefs. Paul was glad to be incarcerated if that enabled him to teach others about God's work in Jesus the Messiah. This goal trumped that of freedom.

After this King Agrippa, Bernice, and Governor Festus rose, along with those in their company and left together. Once they were alone, they said, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment." Agrippa then added, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

As a side note, Agrippa went on to become one of the “praetors” of Rome. Roman praetors were the judges for the courts in Rome, but that would be after Paul’s death under Emperor Nero.

Conclusion

Star Trek is famous for many things, including the pre-amble language, “to boldly go where no one has gone before.” Gene Roddenberry may have devised that clever line for the Starship Enterprise, but the idea is found back in Paul’s time. Paul was one who saw opportunities and had faith to venture forth into lands and ideas that no one had done before. Through the connections that Paul made in this time in Caesarea, Paul was testifying before people who would ultimately walk the highest walls of power in Rome.

Paul saw the chance to bring faith to the lost, whether they were sturdy philosophers from one of the most famous places on earth, or were appointed rulers just one touch away from the emperor of Rome. Paul’s mission in life was not his release from prison, unless that meant more of a chance to spread the gospel. Paul was happy to remain imprisoned if that meant sharing the gospel in unique places to unique people.

To be continued...

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense” (Acts 24:10).*

Often sharing faith is a matter of relationships. We listen to people we trust. We trust people we spend time with and like. I fear in the hustle and bustle of life, especially as we age and find ourselves in familiar ruts, that we forget to focus on other people. We need to show them love, friendship, and caring. It doesn’t matter their rank or prestige, their size or color, their political affiliation, or anything else divisive in our world today. God loves them, and we should, too.

2. *“At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him” (Acts 24:26).*

This is both sobering and humorous to me. Felix wanted money from Paul, so he kept calling Paul in for a visit. Actually, however, Paul offered Felix something much greater than money. He offered something money can’t buy. He offered Felix truth about life, about purpose, about God and reality. Paul offered Felix everything anyone could really want. Felix turned it away, seeking instead some metal. I want to pursue things that last, not metal (or paper, as our money is today).

3. *“He is actually not far from each one of us, for, “In him we live and move and have our being;” as even some of your own poets have said, “For indeed we are his offspring” (Acts 17:28).*

Our God speaks to everyone. Whether Jew or Greek, educated in schools or in life, high or low, God is speaking. I want to hear him. I also want to share him with others. There is no greater joy or accomplishment.