

## NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES – PART TWENTYFIVE – CHAPTERS 24 & 25

The last seven chapters of Acts, a quarter of the book, are concerned with the period of 4 years which Paul spent in Roman custody. At first sight it seems strange that so much attention is given to years of forced inactivity in prison when the space might have been used to tell us more about his missionary work. In chapter 24 the story of his various trials continues. So far he has defended his ministry before the Jewish mob in Jerusalem who tried to kill him, (22) and the Jewish Council who, he recognised, had no legal authority to try him. (23) He divided them and so ended any attempt by them to control his destiny. With help from his nephew and the Roman commander, he got himself removed entirely from Jewish jurisdiction to Caesarea to face trial before the Roman governor, Felix. Each of these occasions and the ones to come represented unique opportunities to address audiences he would never otherwise have been able to meet. As he did so, his one concern was not his own safety but their need, as much as that of the ordinary people among whom his earlier ministry had been spent, to hear the gospel of Christ. To reach government officials he had to enter their world. The only way to do that was as a prisoner.

Ananias, the high priest, having lost his temper at the previous hearing, realised he would better be able to retain his dignity in Felix's court if he was represented by a lawyer, a shrewd character named Tertullus. (24:1) After a bit of diplomatic flattery, utterly hypocritical because the Jews deeply resented Roman rule, he tried to have the case quickly dealt with without a proper hearing by some outrageous false accusations. He neatly reversed the truth about who was violent at the time of Paul's arrest. A Jewish chorus joined in hoping to push the governor into a quick decision in their favour. (24:2-9)

Paul was also respectful, but without exaggeration. (24:10) Briefly he denied the charges against his ministry taking, as always, the opportunity to present the gospel of resurrection life in Christ. (24:11-21) Felix was not taken in by the Jews and adjourned the case. He ensured that Paul was treated fairly and humanely. (24:22,23) There now began a period of 2 years of close contact between Paul and Felix in which Felix struggled with his conscience. On the one hand he was deeply impressed by Paul's message and wanted to hear more. On the other hand he was corrupted by greed and hoped for a bribe to set Paul free. In the end he hesitated so long he was unable to make up his mind and passed the buck to his successor, Festus. Paul's choice of how to present the gospel to Felix is interesting. He emphasised 'righteousness, justice and the judgement to come'. (24:24-27) Rule without a moral basis of righteousness is an arbitrary tyranny. Justice should be the very reason for existence for a judge like Felix. The judgement to come when the governor one day faced God in a higher court should always be present in a judge's thinking. All three are powerful reasons for listening to the gospel of forgiveness and life in Christ.

In chapter 25 the Roman legal process enters its next phase.

25:1-5 Q.1 Why do you suppose the Jews were so quick to ask for Paul to be brought to Jerusalem for trial? What was their real purpose? How did Festus demonstrate his style of leadership? How can we as Christian leaders learn from his example even as an unbeliever?

25:6-8 Q.2 With remarkable speed Paul's case was re-opened. Why do you imagine Festus was so keen to get the matter of Paul settled? What was the case for the prosecution? How would you have felt if you were Paul hearing such unfair accusations? What was his plea, guilty or not guilty? Why did he not go into detail this time?

25:9-12 Q.3 How did Festus then attempt to turn the situation to his own advantage? Was he changing his mind about where the trial should be held? What was Paul's response? Why did he no longer seem interested in prolonging the legal process before the new governor? How can we learn from this about when to stop witnessing to a particular individual? (Matt.7:6; 10:14) Why did Paul appeal to the Supreme Court in Rome? Did he think he would get off the charges? (19:21) Why did Festus agree to Paul's request?

25:13-22 Q.4 What difficulty has Festus' haste to have the case settled and to please the Jews at the same time got him into? How was his approach to his job exactly opposite to Felix's? How does this give us a glimpse of their very different personalities?

25:13-22 Q.5 How did Festus hope King Herod Agrippa II would help him out of a tight spot with the Emperor? Was he really interested in Agrippa's opinion? How did he sum up his understanding of the case so far? Was it accurate? What does it indicate he should have done about Paul?

25:23-27 Q.6 Festus as governor of Judea and Agrippa as king of Galilee were equals in the Roman system. Why did Festus make such a fuss of the visiting king and queen? How was Paul once again about to turn scheming officials' manoeuvring to God's purpose? What can we learn from his example about the possibility of working within the system?