

Agrippa II: A Questioning King

Herod Agrippa II, son of Agrippa I, ruled Galilee for 42 years, while Judea, in the south, continued to be administered



Michael K. Olmsted Agrippa II was loyal to Rome, which explains his long rule, and – unlike

his predecessors – avoided violence as a pattern for control. He is the sole reasonable Herod.

Our story begins in Acts 21, when Paul makes his final appearance in Jerusalem. Paul is hated by the priests and Sanhedrin (ruling Jewish council), who regard him as the enemy of God. When he appears in the Temple compound his enemies stir up a riot with the intention of killing Paul. The Roman garrison, stationed adjacent to the Temple complex, intervenes to assert control and arrest Paul until any charges can be determined (21:27-33). Marcus Antonius Felix was governor of Jerusalem at the time of Paul's arrest, holding Paul in the hope of receiving a bribe from Paul for his freedom. Luke explains that Felix left Paul in prison as a favor to the Jews and leaves the festering anger of the Jewish leaders unresolved.

Due to Felix's various indiscretions, the Romans replaced him with Porcius Festus. The new governor arranges a hearing to sort out this volatile situation. Jewish leaders repeat their original accusations and Paul insists that he did not violate the Temple or incite opposition to the emperor (25:6-8). Knowing that a fair trial and outcome will not be determined in Jerusalem, Paul, as a Roman citizen, invokes his right to a trial in the highest court of Caesar (22:25-29).

Festus faces a complex problem: the Jewish leaders want Paul's blood and Roman law protects its citizens. But how will the governor explain this case to Rome and how can he avoid a major riot in Jerusalem that could threaten Festus' position? Festus invites Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice to join in this preliminary hearing to hopefully clarify the problem and to word the indictment that must be sent to Rome. Paul appears before the Roman governor of Judea and the Jewish puppet king of Galilee to make his defense.

This is the third time in Acts that Paul tells the moving story of his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (26:13-18a). Two very different judges, one Jewish, the other Gentile, listen to this amazing story of a Pharisee committed to stamping out the Christian movement who then becomes a devoted follower of the risen Christ. Festus, faithful to his Roman culture and government, is convinced Paul is mentally unbalanced if he really believes Jesus came back from the dead. Curious how a devoted man of the superstitious Roman religious world sees Paul as "crazy"! But Paul is calm and assured in his defense.

Paul next appeals to Agrippa, whose Jewish background should have offered at least a sympathetic hearing, if not support. Paul asks Agrippa the loaded question: "Do you believe the prophets? I know you do" (26:27). Agrippa is in an awkward position: if he even appears to be sympathetic to Paul the Jewish authorities will threaten his political position with Rome. Siding with Paul could also suggest he is sympathetic to the Christian movement. Yes, he knows the prophets, but he does not want to become enmeshed in a religious/political controversy that could destroy his life of wealth and power. So Agrippa, instead of warning Felix that this whole situation is a black hole of disaster that should be quietly dismissed and Paul exiled from the region, chooses to deflect Paul's testimony. Agrippa says, "Paul, are you trying to convert me to your faith as a follower of this Christ?" (26:28). Paul's answer is powerful and clearly void of politics: "No matter how long it takes, I pray to God that you and everyone who hears me today in this courtroom will become a follower of Christ, without these chains" (26:29).

What do we learn from these men who examined the life of a Roman citizen and former Pharisee devoted to telling the Roman Empire about God's love made real in Jesus the Christ? Festus was a man of the world, valuing position and power above all else. He treated religion as a government-sponsored system that accepts anything and does not interfere with established authority. Agrippa accepted the traditional religion of his people, allowing its forms, but not its substance, to shape his power or position. His faith was familiar, but shallow.

Paul is a dramatic contrast to these two

Formations

November 26, 2017

Scripture: Acts 26:1-3, 13-18a, 24-29

men who controlled his fate in Rome. With the foundation of Judaism and the fulfillment of all it teaches in Jesus Christ, Paul found a new freedom and joy. He was willing to die for the Jesus who died for him. But Paul was not motivated by suffering or hardship. He was driven by a desire to help others find life and hope in Christ. Paul's devotion to Christ did result in his death after he was sent to Rome. Most of us will never face such a fate. But there are times when our faith may bring us to rejection, criticism, misunderstanding and difficult choices. Following Christ can be difficult, but it also means blessings.

Is it not amazing that God used a Jewish scholar of the Law, instead of a winsome Gentile convert, to spread the good news of Jesus across the empire? Paul gave up much that he treasured most of his life, as he states in Philippians 3:7-8: "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ" (NASV).

Our world confronts us with overwhelming needs daily. Listen to the news on your car radio, turn on the television at home, check Twitter and your emails – there is no end to tragedy and need. Is there a place, a need, a person whom you can help in the power of Christ? We all have abilities and resources that can make a difference. Invest yourself. Love, give away and allow yourself to be vulnerable.

Agrippa put up his religious barrier, Festus hid behind the self-serving empire, but Paul went on to the hardships of prison in Rome and more opportunities to share Christ in that world. It is obvious who lived the more meaningful life, made a lasting difference, and continues to bless God's people in this 21st Century. Faith in God comes when you move beyond the questions to trust in the loving Father who gave his only begotten Son as the gift of life everlasting.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.