

PM Acts 26 Three Portraits: Which One is Yours?

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[0:00] Scriptures to the book of Acts in the New Testament. So this passage contains portraits of three men.

And if we read this latter half of chapter 25, we'll get a better picture of the first of the three. So Acts 25 and from verse 13.

Then at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in.

And Festus said,

[5:11] I am accused by Jews, O King. Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?

I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.

And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme. And in raging fury against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

In this connection, I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. At midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun that shone around me and those who journeyed with me.

And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

[6:30] It is hard for you to kick against the goads. And I said, who are you, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me. Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 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. For this reason, the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 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, 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. And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, you're out of your mind.

[8:32] Your great learning is driving you out of your mind. But Paul said, 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.

King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe. And Agrippa said to Paul, in a short time, would you persuade me to be a Christian?

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.

Then the king rose, and the governor, and Bernice, and those who were sitting with them. And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, this man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.

[9:55] And Agrippa said to Festus, this man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.

Amen. May God bless this reading of his word. The chapters that we've read together, chapter 25 and 26 of the book of Acts.

As we come to God's word, let us seek his help. O God, our Father, the psalmist prays, open my eyes that I may see wonderful things out of your law.

And we would say the same prayer. From the depths of our heart, we would pray, speak to us, Lord. Show us your truth. Reveal your truth to us.

And in a way that doesn't simply inform our minds, but in a way that really makes a deep and lasting impression upon our hearts.

[11:02] Spirit of God, our teacher be, show the things of Christ to me. We would pray that in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. This passage that we've read together has been described as a portrait gallery.

If you go to Edinburgh, down at the bottom of Queen Street, you can visit the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. But here is a portrait gallery in which we see the pictures, the portraits of three men.

Festus, who was the Roman governor of this province. We also see a portrait of Agrippa, who was the Jewish king at the time.

And we also see a portrait of Paul, the apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ. And this evening I want us to take a brief look at each of the three.

[12:13] Because these three men represent three types of person. And although time has passed since these events took place and we live in a different time, in a different age, different culture, the remarkable thing about the Bible is that it is always true and applicable because human nature hasn't changed.

the human predicament remains exactly the same and the only solution to the human predicament, the grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ remains unchanged.

So let's look at these three men, starting with Festus, the Roman governor. This is the man who interrupted the apostle Paul's speech and said with a loud voice, Paul, you're out of your mind. Your great learning is driving you out of your mind. Verse 24 of chapter 26. What kind of a man was Festus?

Festus was, we might call, a man of the world. He had no knowledge of any religion apart from the idolatrous temple worship of the ancient Roman Empire.

[13:40] From his earlier conversation with Agrippa, which we find in chapter 25 of the book of Acts, he seems to have had little to no knowledge of the religion of both the Jews and the Christians.

He speaks of certain points of dispute. He speaks about their own religion and about a certain Jesus who was dead but whom Paul asserted was alive.

Chapter 25 verse 19. It's probably the case that Festus, like most Romans at this period in the history of the Empire, was a man who regarded all religions with disdain.

They were all equally false or equally true. They were all unworthy of the attention of great and powerful and mighty men like him.

And as for a despised Jew like this Paul claiming to be a light to the Gentiles, the very notion that a Jew could be the light to the Gentiles which included the Romans was utterly ridiculous to him.

[15:05] The religion of Festus, if he had one, was probably something like this. to keep in with the world, to curry favour with men, to care for nothing but the material things of this present age and above everything else to do everything in his power to please the Roman Emperor Caesar.

So I hope I've said enough to make you see that Festus is the representative of so many people in our world today.

People like Festus are to be found everywhere. They walk in our streets, they sit with us on the bus, they meet us in business during the working week.

They may live respectably, they may be good businessmen and women, they may be held in honour and respect by those around them, they may become high ranking members of our society, they may leave a good name behind them when they leave the stage of human life but just like Festus they have no religion.

The problem with them is that they live as if they didn't possess a soul. From the beginning of the year to the end of the year, they don't appear to think or feel or see or know anything about a life to come.

[16:46] Eternity forms no part of their plans for the future. Instead, they live as if they had nothing more to focus on than the body.

What to eat, what to drink, what to wear, or how to make money and how to spend money as if there were no world to make provision for except the one that we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands.

So people like Festus are not truly religious. They seldom use the means of grace, they never pray, they don't open a Bible. Communion with God is something they know nothing about.

All these spiritual things are nothing and mean nothing to them. They regard the things that Christians are interested in and committed to such as church and gospel and mission at home and overseas with utter contempt and disdain.

They look coolly at them from a distance and they want nothing whatsoever to do with them. On the contrary, they make an idol of the human mind.

[18:07] The desire to think independently motivates them. They want to think for themselves. They want to make up their own mind about everything and to treat their own conclusions as always being infallibly right all the time.

They are disposed to worship their own private judgment and to exalt their own individual opinions. But as the Bible teaches us in Proverbs chapter 16 verse 25, there is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.

I wonder if there is a Festus in the church building this evening. Perhaps.

Perhaps not. Because coming to church is not usually part of Festus' weekly routine. He would rather be sitting at home and reading the Sunday papers or thinking about his business affairs and looking over his bank accounts or perhaps play sport or go for a walk or wash his car or watch TV or amuse himself in one of the many, many different ways that helps us to desecrate the Lord's day. As one old preacher put it, Festus lives like a butterfly, as thoughtless as if there were no such thing as death, judgment or eternity.

[19:51] But is a person like Festus in a hopeless condition, beyond the reach of God's mercy?

The answer, I'm glad to say to that question, is he is not.

He is not in a hopeless condition. He is not beyond the reach of mercy. Because made in the image of God, people like Festus have a conscience.

And though that conscience may be seared, it is not quite dead. Someone has described such a conscience like the bells of a great cathedral.

During the day, in the hustle and the bustle of daily business, the bells ring, but they can't be heard over the din of the busy city.

But after hours, when the din dies down, the bells ring, and the bells will be heard. Like Felix, Agrippa, Ahab, and Pharaoh, the followers of Festus will have their days when God visits them and speaks to them in clear and serious words.

[21:12] But unlike the men we have mentioned, they sometimes awake from their sleep and they repent of their sin before it is forever too late.

You see, friends, there are seasons in our lives when we are forced to look in upon ourselves and feel the powers of the age to come and to discover that weak, frail, mortal men and women like ourselves cannot get on in life or face death and what comes after death without the grace of the living God.

death. It might be sickness and solitude and disappointments and financial losses and the deaths of loved ones.

These can be the things that God sometimes uses to make the proudest hearts bow down before him and confess with Jacob, all these things are against me.

But they're not against you. They are like goads that Paul speaks about in his testimony that are pricking and prodding him forward in the direction of Jesus Christ, whom he meets and by God's grace receives the forgiveness of all his sins.

[22:45] Do you know in the Old Testament, there was perhaps no more wicked king of Judah, as Manasseh.

Yet even he, wicked king Manasseh, in a time of affliction, turned to the Lord and began to pray.

That's why we shouldn't despair of anyone. The day of spiritual mercies and spiritual miracles is not yet past. With Christ and the Holy Spirit, nothing is impossible.

The last day will show that there were some who began with Festus and were like him, but before it was too late, they turned and repented and ended with Paul.

So if by any chance there is a Festus among us, I say to you, in the name of God, turn, repent, and become such as Paul was.

[23 : 59] Isn't that what he says towards the end of his testimony? I would tell God that not only you, but all who hear me this day, which included Festus, the man of the world, might become such as I am, except for these chains.

Festus, the archetypal man of the world. Then secondly, we have a portrait of Agrippa, the Jewish king. Let's turn and look at this second portrait as painted in this passage.

This was a man who was so deeply impressed by Paul's defense that he said, in a short time, would you persuade me to be a Christian?

Or in the more familiar words of the authorised version, almost you persuade me to be a Christian. It seems that Agrippa was almost persuaded to become a Christian through the preaching and testimony of the apostle Paul.

In many ways, Agrippa was unlike Festus. For a start, he was of Jewish extraction and was brought up among the Jews, if not of pure Jewish blood.

[25 : 25] But he was thoroughly familiar with many of the things that the Roman governor had absolutely no knowledge of. Look at verses 26 and 27.

He knew and believed the prophets. He must have known many of the things of which Paul spoke in his defense. Things that were just words and names and the ravings of a madman to his fellow hearer, Festus.

I am sure that Agrippa had a secret inward conviction that the man standing before him had truth on his side.

After all, at the end of the passage, Agrippa said to Festus, this man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar. He was convinced that what Paul was speaking was the truth.

It's quite possible that Agrippa saw and felt and was moved and was deeply affected and was even conscience stricken and had inward wishes and longings and desires because of what Paul was saying.

[26 : 45] But here's the thing about Agrippa. He went so far but he didn't go any further. He could get no further than feelings even though those feelings were deep and real and powerful.

He saw but he didn't have the courage to act upon what he saw. He felt but he didn't have the will to move in the direction of what he felt.

He was not far from the kingdom but he was on the wrong side of the door through which we enter the kingdom. Unlike Festus he didn't condemn or ridicule or scorn Christianity but like a man who is paralyzed he could only look at it and examine it and didn't have the strength of mind to take hold of it and to receive it into his heart.

So who does Agrippa represent? What are these people like who are like Agrippa? What are their characteristics?

How can we know if we are the sons and daughters of Agrippa? Well the followers of Agrippa can be found in many of our churches today. Indeed they are regular church goers.

[28 : 26] Now such people have absolutely no doubt about the Bible. If you ask them what is the Bible they would tell you it is the word of God. And these people have absolutely no objections to the doctrines of the gospel and they know the difference between teaching that is sound and true and teaching that is false and unsound.

They also admire and respect the lives of holy Christian people. If you look at their libraries at home you see that there are good books sitting on their shelves.

If you were able to examine their bank accounts you would see that they give money to good causes. People but here is the sad thing about them. They never seem to get beyond a certain point in their religion.

They never seem to come out boldly for Christ Jesus and for his cause. They never take up the cross. They never confess Christ before others.

They never give up their little sins and inconsistencies. If you ask them they sometimes tell you that they hope one day to become out and out serious minded Christian people.

[29 : 50] And they know that they are not quite what they ought to be at present. But they really do sincerely hope that one day one day in the future they will be different.

But the trouble is the more opportune time doesn't come.

And so well-meaning and intending to do the right thing they live. And well-meaning and intending to do the right thing they die.

Kind good-natured respectable people not enemies but friends of the Apostle Paul but like Agrippa Agrippa the King they're almost but not quite a Christian.

And you might ask yourself well how is it that some people can go so far so far towards the kingdom of God but not actually enter into it.

[31 : 00] What stops them from going in through the narrow gate or what holds them back from coming to Christ? These are some of the most important questions we could ask.

But what is the answer to them? Well there are several answers. The fear of man prevents many from entering in to the kingdom of God.

and this is true and I remember back to my teenage years when I was wrestling with these issues the fear of man loomed large in my mind.

Some people have a dreadful fear of being laughed at, of being mocked, of being despised if they become out and out serious minded Christians.

The good opinions of others is what they value above everything else even more than the good opinion of God himself. They, like the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day, love the glory that comes from men more than the glory that comes from God, the fear of man.

[32 : 09] Second reason, the love of the world keeps back some. They know that to follow Jesus means separation from much that the world loves and values.

but they cannot make up their minds to renounce the world and its honors and pleasures as Moses did the honors and pleasures and riches of Egypt.

They are like Lot's wife. They want to be delivered from the wrath of God but like her they look back with a longing and loving look to Sodom.

The love of the world, the fear of man. third reason, a subtle form of self-righteousness keeps back many from entering through the narrow gate into the kingdom of God.

Here are people who take secret comfort in the thought that at least they are not as bad as Festus. They are not like some of the really wicked people they know.

[33 : 16] people. They don't despise religion as others do. They go to church after all and not to the dead church in town but to the living gospel preaching church where the Bible is faithfully taught.

They count the apostle Paul among their friends and they love to hear his teaching. Surely they will not be lost on the last day because of a few little sins and minor inconsistencies.

Self-righteousness. What a deadly sin that is. So deceptive. And then fourthly some secret sin may keep back others from coming to Christ and entering the kingdom of God.

People know in their hearts that they are clinging to something which is wrong in God's sight. There is an accursed thing like Achan.

The story of the wedge of gold, the bar of gold that he took from the accursed thing after the fall of Jericho and hid, buried in his tent.

[34 : 33] And there's an accursed thing as it were, like Achan's bar of gold hid somewhere or an immoral relationship with an Herodias in the private history of their lives which they will not expose to the light of the gospel.

And these are things that the apostle Paul describes in one of his letters as the shameful deeds of darkness. But like Agrippa, they will not cut off the right hand or pluck out the right eye.

And so cherishing this secret, what the old Puritans used to call bosom sins, they cannot be Christ's disciple.

So let me ask you, is there an Agrippa in the church this evening? Does this portrait resemble you? Is there a likeness between his life and your life? Well, if there is, let me warn you, warn you with great affection for the eternal well-being of your never-dying soul.

[35 : 47] If you're like Agrippa, you are in a dangerous place. Let me tell you why. You cannot be happy where you presently stand.

because on the one hand, you know too much about the gospel to be happy mixing and living in the world like a worldly person.

You know too much about the gospel to get the joy of the world. And on the other hand, you are too much mixed up with the world to get any real comfort and peace from your religion. you're in like no man's land. You must wake up to your sense of danger. You must resolve by God's help to become like the apostle Paul, an out and out serious, fully committed follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. You know, thinking back to the days of the flood, I'm sure there were many who admired Noah's ark, but who didn't enter into it.

[37 : 26] And I say to you, enter the ark of salvation while you may, before God rises up and shuts the door and you perish outside in the floodwaters of the judgment and wrath of God.

So we've seen Festus, the man of the world, we've seen Agrippa, this halfway house between the world and true religion.

now the third portrait, Paul, the apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the man whom Festus thought was mad and out of his mind and who almost persuaded Agrippa to become a Christian. this is the man who boldly said, I would to God that not only you but all who hear me this day might become such as I am except for these chains.

Here's a man who wished all his hearers no chains or imprisonment such as he was suffering from when he spoke, but he did wish them to be of one mind with him about the gospel of Jesus Christ and to share in his peace and to have the same solid hope for the future on which that peace was founded.

[38 : 58] Might become such as I am. What a remarkable statement that is. It's the language of full assurance.

The language of certainty. The language of being fully convinced of the truth. Here is a man who was persuaded that he was in the right.

He has no doubts. He's got no hesitations. He holds the truth with a firm hand. The statement reminds me of other sayings of the Apostle Paul, particularly what he says to Timothy in 2nd 1. verse 12. I know whom I have believed. I know. I know of a certainty.

I am fully assured. I am convinced. for I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[40 : 13] Those wonderful words from the end of Romans chapter 8. I am sure. I am sure. here is a man who was sure about the fact, the truth of Christianity.

He knew the gospel, the gospel story. He knew that it was true. He knew that it was true. Here is a man who was sure about the doctrines of the gospel that are based upon the facts of the gospel. Jesus Christ is the son of God who came into the world to save sinners. That by his death an atonement was made that covers all our sin and protects us from the wrath of God that has been turned away from us because it fell and was exhausted in the person of Jesus Christ who believes in the Holy Spirit.

The one that Jesus spoke about is being sent into the world to convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of the judgment to come. The spirit who convicts us and converts us through the gospel and then who indwells us and enables us to live for the glory of God of the resurrection the day of judgment and the rewards for the just in Christ and the punishment of the wicked forever in hell.

people. These were the doctrines of Christianity that he was absolutely convinced of and sure of. He spoke of them with great authority and isn't it interesting that he is the one who's on trial but his judges are the ones who feel the power of the conviction of sin.

[42 : 07] Festus the governor, you're mad. Agrippa, do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian? Their consciences were spoken to while Paul stands there in chains as the prisoner but yet really through the gospel he is their judge and that God is standing in judgment upon their lives.

This is what Paul meant when he said such as I am. He was thinking about the facts and the doctrines and the practice and the future rewards of Christianity.

He had a rooted settled firm conviction a conviction which he wished all men and women to share in. He was confident and he wanted others to share the same confidence because that's what faith is.

It's confidence confidence in the word that God has spoken. It is taking God at his word. It is resting our souls upon the truth revealed in the word.

And that truth centers in the one who is the way the truth and the life the Lord Jesus Christ. So Paul had no doubt or fear about the future state of his soul.

[43:37] He would gladly have seen Festus and Agrippa and Bernice and all around them in the same happy condition. That's why he said, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am, might be saved, might be a Christian.

Where are Festus and Agrippa now? we don't know. We don't know because a veil is drawn over their subsequent history.

Did they die as they lived? We cannot tell because we don't know, because we're not told.

But where is the Apostle Paul, the fully persuaded, the out and out serious minded confident Christian? We can answer that question with full assurance.

He is with Christ which is better by far. Words that he spoke in Philippians 1.23 He's in the presence of his Saviour waiting for the resurrection of the righteous and the just in that paradise of rest where sin and Satan and sorrow can trouble him no more.

[45:12] He has fought the good fight. He has finished his course. He has kept the faith. And a crown of righteousness is laid up for him which he will receive on the last great day when the Lord Jesus Christ will appear in all his glory.

So my friends though the Apostle Paul is dead and gone the Saviour who made the Apostle Paul what he was and preserved him to the very end still lives and he is the same yesterday today and forever.

And he's not only able to save he is ever willing to save all those who come to him for this very thing salvation.

So let me encourage you let me invite you let me plead with you let us all come to Jesus Christ if we have never done so before let me assure you that he will receive you for with the grace of God nothing is impossible for who would have thought that Saul the Pharisee and the persecutor of Christians of whom we read about in his opening testimony this persecutor of Christians this person who voted for the death sentence to be passed on innocent Christian believers who punished them who went to foreign lands to seek them out and to bring them to prison and even to death that this raging furious beast like person this violent insolent person would one day become a definite out and out Christian himself and more than that the great apostle to the Gentiles and who would be known as the man who turned the world upside down the followers of Festus and the followers of Agrippa may yet be converted and live for years and then lie down in the grave at last and out and out Christian just like the apostle Paul so let me leave these words with you I would to God that all who hear me this day might become such as I am will you become such as the apostle Paul was that's the question that you have to answer before God right now by God's grace may he enable you to do so and may you receive the salvation the peace the joy of belonging to God let us pray our heavenly father we thank you for the gospel and we thank you that it is free but that it was purchased at such great cost in order that it might be free and freely given to us we thank you for the

[48:57] Lord Jesus Christ and for his life and death and resurrection thank you that he is seated at your right hand and there your word teaches us that he is exalted as a prince and a savior to grant repentance and the remission of sins and Lord we pray that as we like Paul fall at his feet and cry unto him for mercy may we receive that forgiveness that we so desperately need what can wash away my sin nothing but the blood of Jesus what can make me whole again nothing but the blood of Jesus may we experience the power of his death and may it give us new life and all that comes with it we ask this for the glory of his name

Amen