

Text: Ac 25.13-27

Again, we find very little new information coming our way in Acts 25. Luke introduces two new figures, who played prominent roles in 1st century history, but are largely forgotten except for this encounter with Paul.

Our focus today is not on them (Agrippa and Bernice), but on Festus. Festus is a perplexed man. He has on hand a prisoner who appealed to Caesar, and he granted the appeal.

Yet the appeal presents a dilemma — when such a prisoner is sent before the Emperor, the one sending must also send a report, explaining why he is taking up the emperor's valuable time.

Festus has no idea — the whole case baffles him.

When Herod Agrippa arrives on a "state visit," he presents an opportunity for help, so Festus brings up his difficult case.

Herod is the great-grandson of Herod the Great, the son of Herod Agrippa I, whose death we see in Ac 12. Raised as a Jew among the Jews (and as a Roman in Rome) he has a unique perspective, and might be of some assistance.

But more about him later. Today, we look at Festus.

We look at Festus and specifically, we look at his *confusion*.

Confused by the Cross

Why does Luke include this repetitive material?

Let's read from verse 13 and note repetitive material as we go.

Read Ac 25.13-27

- New: Agrippa and Bernice (13)
- Repeat: prisoner of Felix (14)
- Repeat: charges of Jews (15)

Note: "sentence of condemnation" = asking for death penalty

- Repeat: deferral to Caesarea (16)
- Repeat: trial the next day (17)
- Repeat: non-capital charges (18)
- Repeat: disagreement over religion (19)
- Repeat: offer of new trial in Jerusalem (20)

Note: Festus makes himself look good here, he is considering doing a favor for the Jews

- Repeat: appeal and grant of appeal (21)
- New: Agrippa's interest and the pageant-like beginning of the hearing (22-23)

Note: those present include

The governor

King Agrippa and his sister

The commanders (five tribunes stationed in Caesarea)

Prominent men of the city (unknown number, but important businessmen and officials, Jews and Gentiles, perhaps, but mostly Gentiles)

- Repeat: Festus introduces Paul as the man whom the leading Jews wanted dead (24)
- Repeat: Festus assessment, repeat of the appeal and granting of appeal
- New: Festus' perplexity, "What am I going to say to Caesar?"

"Such reports were not optional."¹

I'm belaboring the point, but we don't have much new material here. Why does Luke repeat so much?

It is precisely this section of acts, from about chapter 22 through at least 26 that is the most "apologetic" of the book of Acts.

An "apology" is a document meant as an exhibit of defense to persuade Roman officials.

Many early Christian writings come in this form, defending Christianity against the charges of enemies.

Some put the book of Acts in this category, especially because of this section.

¹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 496.

“Luke undoubtedly included Festus’ preamble in Acts because it was another testimony by a Roman official that Paul and Christianity were not threats to the empire.”²

In this sense, then, Acts is seen as an apology, an attempt to gain favor from the emperor so Christianity can gain certain freedoms and rights within the empire.

We, however, think that the book of Acts is much more than a mere apology to the emperor or other Roman officials.

One thing we see in this passage is the complete confusion of Festus. It is clear that he understands the facts of Paul’s message, look again at verse 19:

NAU Ac 25.19 but they *simply* had some points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive.

“That Jesus’ resurrection was the real point at issue had evidently been made clear enough in the hearing before Festus, although Festus did not realize its import.”³

This reminds me of a passage in 1 Corinthians 2:

1 Cor 2.14 ¶ But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

This brings me to the topic I want to preach on today. How much can lost people understand without believing the gospel?

Some will teach that a lost man can hardly understand anything about the Bible. I don’t think that’s true. But there is something he can’t understand.

Note: I’m going to use the term “natural man” and “lost man” as synonyms.

Proposition: The lost man can understand Bible facts, but without spiritual insight, Bible facts provide no benefit for him.

² Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ac 25.24.

³ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 458.

I. What the natural man can understand

A. The facts Festus clearly understood

1. He understood Paul had done nothing to cause any trouble with the Jews
2. He understood that Paul differed with the Jews about a man named Jesus (notice that he knows the name)
3. He understood that Paul claimed Jesus was alive

B. Facts Festus must have known

1. The fact that Pilate crucified Jesus
2. The fact that the Jews approved Pilate's action (how much he knew about their involvement isn't clear)
3. The fact that a whole movement of people, represented by Paul, claimed this Jesus was alive

C. Facts unbelieving men can understand

1. The narrative facts of the gospel story (death, burial, resurrection)
2. The theological import of the gospel story
 - a. We can explain "substitutionary atonement" (Jesus is our substitute)
 - b. A lost man can understand the theological importance of that doctrine
3. The doctrine of forgiveness of sin and eternal life

I submit that anyone who pays attention to gospel preaching can understand all these things in an intellectual sense.

Numerous writings by unbelieving liberal theologians demonstrate they understand the orthodox gospel of salvation by faith alone.

But something is missing...

II. What the natural man can't understand

A. The natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2.14)

1 Cor 2.14 ¶ But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

1. He cannot understand them (γινώσκω – knowledge of experience)
2. He has no Spirit to properly evaluate them (“spiritually appraised”)

B. The natural man sees the word of the cross as foolishness (1 Cor 1.18, 22-23)

1 Cor 1.18 ¶ For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

1 Cor 1.22-23 For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom;²³ but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness,

1. Crucifixion originally only used by the Romans against slaves
2. Later used against enemies of the state, but crucifixion of a citizen required direct command of Caesar
3. By the time of the Lord, used as a deterrent to criminal activity
4. Regarded with abhorrence by everyone
 - a. A man so killed considered “cursed of God” by Jews
 - b. To worship such a man considered laughable by Greeks (*i.e.* Gentiles)

C. Hear again the testimony of Festus

Ac 25.19 but they *simply* had some points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive.

1. Festus can't make it out
2. The Jewish religion is incomprehensible to him
3. The notion of resurrection beyond his understanding

“The Romans did not believe in resurrection, so this would be a foreign religious concept for them.”⁴

4. On top of this is the Roman view of the cross: why would you follow such a man?

The picture we have of Festus is of a man who has no spiritual insight. He cannot understand Paul’s message; the whole thing is a mystery to him.

III. What the natural man must understand

A. There is no other source of salvation

Ac 4.12 “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”

Ac 10.43 “Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.”

1 Tim 2.5 For there is one God, *and* one mediator also between God and men, *the* man Christ Jesus,

B. The natural man must receive this truth

1 Cor 2.14 ¶ But a natural man does not **accept** the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

1. Acceptance is equivalent to salvation

Ac 11.1 ¶ Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

Ac 17.11 Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 711.

^{1Th 1.6} You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,

^{1Th 2.13} ¶ For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted *it* not *as* the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.

2. The Holy Spirit must teach us so we can accept the truth

^{1 Cor 12.3} Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus is accursed”; and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

^{1 Cor 2.14} ¶ But a natural man does not **accept** the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

- a. Calvinism says a man must have regeneration before he can believe (he must be saved before he can be saved)
- b. A better statement:

“While there is a mystery in the interrelationship between the individual’s responsibility to believe and the Spirit’s enabling to make that faith response to the gospel, it is an enigma that Paul left unexplained in these letters.”⁵

- c. When we receive the teaching, we must **accept** it: yield, obey, believe

C. What to make of Festus?

1. He did not accept the gospel

⁵ David K. Lowery, “A Theology of Paul’s Missionary Epistles,” in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Roy B Zuck, electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 274.

2. He did not yield to the gospel
3. He did not obey the gospel
4. He did not believe.

Conclusion:

Proposition: The lost man can understand Bible facts, but without spiritual insight, Bible facts provide no benefit for him.

What to make of Festus?

What to make of you? Where are you? Do you accept, yield, obey, believe?