Acts 25:13-27

As we return to our journey through Acts, Paul remains incarcerated in Caesarea. If you recall, Paul has already had two trials in Caesarea: one before the provincial governor named Felix, and then two years later he was tried under the Governor named Festus. In both cases Paul’s accusers failed to make a case against him; unfortunately, in both instances the Roman judges, desiring to make political inroads with the Jewish officials, also failed to render a verdict. Last week, when Festus failed to proclaim Paul’s innocence, Paul appealed to Caesar, and Festus agreed to send Paul to Caesar. Let’s pick up the story beginning with Acts 25:13 and read about what happens next:

Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus. And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul’s case before the king, saying, “There is a man left prisoner by Felix, and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him. So when they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought. When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar.” Then Agrippa said to Festus, “I would like to hear the man myself.” “Tomorrow,” said he, “you will hear him.”

Alright, let’s first make some introductions, and then we’ll get to the meat of the text. You might remember Festus, the Roman provincial governor of Palestine who has recently taken over for his predecessor, Felix. We learned about Festus last week. I will remind you that Festus offices at Herod’s palace on the Mediterranean Sea there in Caesarea, and today King Agrippa and Bernice have come for an extended stay.

King Agrippa was formerly known as Herod Agrippa II (AD 28-100). His birth name was Marcus Julius Agrippa, which is a pretty Roman name for a Jewish king, right? That’s because Agrippa is half Jewish and 90% Roman! Now, you may remember Agrippa’s father, who was famously known as Herod Agrippa I. This was the Herod who executed James and had Peter imprisoned. He is also the Herod who was struck down by God and eaten by worms for stealing God’s glory as we read about in Acts 12. Agrippa’s great-grandfather was Herod the Great who was in power when Jesus was born…and of course, he was so paranoid he had every child under the age of 2 murdered when he heard the Magi announce that that the Messiah had been born. Agrippa’s grand-uncle was the Herod who had John the Baptist executed. So…needless to say,
Agrippa comes from a very treacherous family line. As I mentioned previously Agrippa was half-Jewish/but mostly Roman, raised in the court of Emperor Claudius, so the Roman brass considered Agrippa II to be a perfect blend of a Roman patriot and an expert in Jewish issues. They entrusted Agrippa to serve as the curator of the Jewish Temple and he was granted the power to appoint the High Priest and to administer the temple treasury.

Now, it’s important to note that Agrippa had three sisters: Bernice, Mariamne, and Drusilla. We met Drusilla a few weeks ago. If you recall, the notoriously beautiful and sexually ambitious Drusilla was married (somewhat scandalously) to the former governor of Palestine, Felix.

Agrippa’s oldest sister, Berenice, who was a year younger than Agrippa, is the lady mentioned here in Acts 25 who now accompanies Agrippa on his visit to Caesarea. Now…in case you think it odd that the king is travelling around with his sister…you are in good company. Some ancient historians rumored that Agrippa may have had an incestuous relationship with his sister, Berenice. That’s hard to say…I think it’s unlikely. Berenice was given into marriage at a very early age to a man named Marcus Julius Alexander who died just a few years later. She was then married to her own uncle, Herod of Chalcis, with whom she had two sons. He also died just four years into their marriage, at which time Berenice moved with her two sons to reside with her brother, Agrippa. Joining her brother Agrippa kept Berenice in the power loop while providing a safe environment for her two sons. You see, Berenice was a very beautiful woman like her sister Drusilla, but unlike Drusilla who was motivated by sexual adventures, Berenice sought position and power. Her brother, King Agrippa, provided Berenice the opportunity to hold power and influence. It’s notable that Agrippa never took a wife…a very rare scenario for a man who could have any woman of his choosing. I think it’s likely that Agrippa was not attracted to women, which is why I think it’s unlikely that Agrippa was having an incestuous relationship with his sister. Nonetheless, rumors of incest were circulating, so to quell those rumors, Berenice negotiated a somewhat forced marriage with Polemon II of Pontus, King of Cilicia. That marriage didn’t last very long at all due to their mutual unhappiness. So Berenice left Polemon and returned to “co-reign” with her brother Agrippa (which was during the time of our text in Acts 25) until the war broke out between Rome and Judea in 66. By the way, when the war began, Both Agrippa (the king of the Jews) and Berenice sided with the Romans, and Berenice fell in love with the commander of the Roman army that destroyed Jerusalem, Titus Flavius Vespasianus. When Titus later became emperor, Berenice moved into his court and acted as though she was his wife, and it was well known that Titus wanted to take Berenice as his queen. Ironically, the moral outrage throughout the pagan empire that accompanied his wedding announcement led Titus to call off their engagement and send Berenice away…she was never heard from again.

So…that’s who has come to town: Herod Agrippa II, and his beautiful, powerful and somewhat intriguing sister, Berenice.

What follows next in vss. 14-17 is a summary from Festus to Agrippa regarding Paul’s case. Festus recaps the situation, explaining that Paul was a hold-over prisoner from Felix. He
acknowledges that the Jewish chief priests and elders had asked for Paul to be condemned to death. Festus then assures the king that he practiced good Roman law by insisting that Paul had the right to a fair trial where he could face his accusers and provide his defense. Notice what Festus states next in vs. 18, “When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.”

This is the second time that Paul has been pronounced innocent of any wrong-doing deserving imprisonment or death. The first came from the tribune in Jerusalem, Claudius Lysias, following the hearing before the council. Note also that the main point of contention is not Paul’s activity in the temple, nor is it the complaint that Paul is causing riots. The main complaint is Jesus…Paul is being persecuted due to his allegiance to Jesus who he claims is not dead, but alive.

As a pagan politician, governor, and judge, Festus has no idea how to manage the accusations of the Jews against Paul. Simply based upon Roman law, Festus should have pronounced Paul as innocent and sent him on his way. However, since Festus is eager to accommodate the Jews, he “asked whether Paul wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there…” regarding the religious charges. Festus reports that Paul declined his offer and instead appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor.

Now, what happens next is quite interesting. Agrippa immediately states, “I would like to hear the man myself.” The way this sentence is written in the Greek suggests that Agrippa has been wanting to hear Paul for some time. In other words, it’s likely that Agrippa got the download about Paul from his sister Drusilla before arriving in Caesarea. Remember, Felix and Drusilla had a private meeting with Paul two years ago, and so it’s likely that this is not the first time that Agrippa has heard about the man named Paul who preaches a gospel of hope in the name of Jesus Christ.

OK…so, let’s pick up the story beginning with vs. 23:

So on the next day Agrippa and Berenice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in.

Now, we will deal with Paul’s testimony next week. This morning I would like to simply dwell on the irony of this scene that we just read about, and I will invite you to consider what it points to.

Notice first the “pomp” that Luke refers to in vs. 23. Dr. Kent Hughes notes:

The phrase “with great pomp” comes from the Greek word phantasía, from which we derive our English word fantasy. Certainly, the event was something of a fantasy: Agrippa and Bernice
arrayed in purple, Festus in red, chiliarches (commanders of thousands), rigid legionnaires, manipulative politicians, and Paul…appearing smaller and more insignificant in his manacles and humble dress. The scene was carefully constructed to intimidate.

You see the irony, right? The condemned are serving as judges of the redeemed. And this is often the case that we find in our society today. In this age, those who serve the Prince of the Air are esteemed, they are lauded, they are given positions of honor, power, and influence. They revel in pomp, and they enjoy every indulgence of the flesh. They also feel entitled to judge the followers of Jesus. It would seem that in this age, the unfaithful enjoy “upward mobility;” while those who are faithful to God experience, “downward mobility.”

Consider this man in chains before us…the once great and mighty Saul…born of the tribe of Benjamin, classically educated in Tarsus, a child prodigy, taught by the very best teachers, one who achieved the status of Pharisee as a very young man. He was on his way up in the world in every sense of the word. He had power and authority, status and respect. He was feared by many…but then he met Jesus. Ever since, Paul has experienced increased levels of demotion. He has been beaten, stoned and left for dead, arrested, falsely accused, imprisoned, and an increasingly large number of people are trying to kill him.

Sound familiar? Who else do we know that fits this description? Jesus. This too, was the fate of our Lord. The perfect Prince of Peace, who lived the perfect human life, once followed and adored by thousands, found himself demoted to the place of a prisoner…mocked and judged by those who served a different king. He ended his life nailed to a Roman cross, utterly deserted by those who claimed to be his friends.

Church, consider the pathway of Christian demotion. Demotion was the pathway of Jesus, it was the pathway of Paul, and should we consider the lives of those who apprenticed under Jesus, I believe we will find a consistent pattern of demotion with them as well. Peter was arrested and eventually martyred. James was arrested and martyred. Paul has been arrested and will eventually be martyred as well. Did that pattern of demotion end with the disciples and the early church? I don’t think so.

Christian history is full of stories of Christian demotion. There is a long list of movie stars, famous rock stars, well known authors, poets, and philosophers…who when they came to know Christ, experienced a slow but certain path of demotion in their income, their status, their influence, and their standard of living. That is certainly not the case for everyone, at least not initially, but it’s more common than you might think.

To some degree…be it personally, vocationally, financially, or positionally…the path of Christian demotion is still a reality for all who would follow Jesus and surrender their lives to His agenda. Why do I say that? Well, for starters, Jesus actually said in Luke 9:23, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” A cross is never “upward mobility.” To carry a cross is to follow Jesus to a place where we give up our
lives…it is to surrender at a level that says in no uncertain terms, “I have been crucified in Christ; it is no longer EGO who lives, but Christ who lives in me.” The Greek word “ego” means “the I.” Paul is literally saying, “My ego…the “I” that once lived…has been crucified…my ego is dead. There is a new “something” at work here…it is Christ living in me.

The path of Christian demotion is counter-intuitive to say the least. Everything in our flesh desires upward mobility and self-promotion. We long to be recognized, we long to be in power, we long for comfort and ease and influence. We want to be appreciated, honored, and remembered.

And yet, when we study the lives of those who follow Jesus, what we often find is exactly the opposite of “upward mobility.” Instead of promotions, honor, comfort, and prestige, we find the greatest of Christian leaders in the most humble state of demotion…like Paul here in Acts 25. In many cases all throughout history, people who meet Jesus soon leave behind positions of power and influence…they leave behind comfort and security…and they willingly take on a lifestyle of obscurity, long-suffering, and demotion in every sense of the word.

Why is that? Well, it was the way of their Master. Consider the words of Paul in Philippians 2 when he writes, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Paul says…think this way…let the downward mobility of Jesus set the standard in your mind of what the Christian life will look like.

I know that sounds fairly unattractive…but that’s OK, because I’m not trying to sell you something. My job isn’t to sell Christianity as a “fuel additive” that will increase your mileage and give you a smoother ride. My job is to tell the truth, to point to the Truth, and to invite you to embrace the truth. And here’s the truth:

Love…the deepest kind of love…expresses itself in self-demotion, not self-promotion. Self-demotion is the very essence of incarnation…it is the humility of the most powerful taking on the skin of the weak to such a degree that power is surrendered…not taken…but surrendered. As Jesus said in John 10:18, “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

Christian demotion is the practice of willingly, joyfully laying down our power to the degree that the power of Jesus outshines our own. It is courageously going where compassion leads us, regardless of the cost.

Paul knowingly walked into Jerusalem as a marked man. The Lord had made it clear that he would experience suffering, and perhaps even death, should he accept the assignment of bearing
witness to his lost brothers…and Paul said, “Yes sir…understood. I will go.” Paul laid down his power, gave up his comfort and his status as a successful church planter, to walk into the lion’s den and bear witness. Why? Because he loved his lost brothers, and he could not stand the notion that they did not know Jesus. Paul accepted downward mobility in the hopes of saving some.

But here’s the irony of Paul’s downward mobility: he is now in a position to share the gospel with the current king of the Jewish people, his powerful sister, the provincial governor, military leaders, and influential politicians! Had Paul asked for an audience of this group of power brokers to lay out the Gospel, he would have been laughed out of the building. But by virtue of his downward mobility, Paul will now have the opportunity to share his story with the most powerful, influential people in his country…and his friend Luke will write about it so that people thousands of years later will understand how God works. Isn’t that ironic? Isn’t that the way that God works?

Church, resist the spirit of our age, and adjust your expectations to the witness of scripture. Faithfulness and fidelity to Jesus USUALLY leads to downward mobility! Demotion is the standard for those who are growing in Christ, not promotion. The irony is that the eternal impact of your life will likely increase as your power, position, comfort, and privilege decrease.

Now, here’s what I did NOT just say: I did not just say that you should feel bad about being the CEO of your company. I did not just say that God can’t make an eternal impact through your life because you are wealthy or because you are in a position of great influence. I did not just say that you are somehow blessed because you feel powerless or marginalized. Please…don’t misquote me; instead, please focus on what we have observed in scripture: to have the mind of Christ is to lay down our power as an act of love, compassion and incarnation. To pursue Christ is to deny ourselves…to deny our upward promotion…to deny our privilege…to deny our comfort…in order to take up the death of the “I” so that the Spirit of Christ might have rule and sway in our lives. In the eyes of the world, that will almost inevitably look like a demotion…but in the spiritual estimation of our Father in heaven, that will look like obedience…and it will make a mark for all eternity because people will see Jesus in us.

So, let me ask you a question: what is Jesus calling you to surrender, to deny, so that you might follow Him into the hard place where He is at work? What worldview are you operating on? The worldview that celebrates “upward mobility” and “self-promotion?” Or the biblical worldview that celebrates “downward mobility” and “incarnation?” What will make the greatest impact in the lives of the people you influence many years from now: will it be the power you accrued, or the power you set aside out of love and compassion? Will it be the money you amassed, or the money you surrendered to God’s purposes? Will it be the legacy of your greatness, or the legacy of God’s goodness when you set your greatness aside to become a servant?

I will close with the words of Paul, the one dressed in rags, shackled and falsely accused in Caesarea, surrounded by the pomp of royalty and wealth…these are the thoughts of that man: “So, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the
Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility, count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Church…deny yourselves, and follow Jesus…whatever the cost. Amen? Let’s pray