

# INQUIRING MINDS WANT TO KNOW

ACTS 25:13-27 MARCH 3, 2021

Secretly listening in on the other team has a long history in sports. The Patriots have repeatedly been accused of spying of one sort or another. *Sports Illustrated* reported that “at least five teams have swept their hotels, locker rooms or coaches’ booths in New England for listening devices.”<sup>1</sup>

Baseball has a long history of trying to tap into the communication of the opposing team. It’s called sign stealing and there was quite a scandal surrounding the Houston Astros a few years ago. But the tradition dates back as far as 1899 when the Phillies utilized “a backup catcher named Morgan Murphy in an ‘observatory’ beyond the centerfield wall, where he stole signs with binoculars. Murphy rigged an underground wire from his perch to the third-base coaching box, where the coach kept his foot above a junction box that would signal the pitch by buzzing once or twice.”<sup>2</sup>

In our passage tonight we get an interesting glimpse into the private communication between two players on the *other* team. We have Festus, the new governor of Judea and King Agrippa. They’ll receive a powerful presentation of the Gospel, but first we get a look behind closed doors to see some of their discussion and mindset leading up to Paul’s message.

Isn’t it interesting that we’ve had no windows into Paul’s 2 years in Caesarea, none of his meetings or happenings. But now, we’re able to sit at the table with rulers and kings and hear them talk? Why would the Lord preserve this somewhat incidental conversation for us? When sports teams listen in on the other guys it’s so they can gain dominance over them. Not so with the Lord. His desire isn’t to *beat* them, but to *win* them for Himself.

That’s still His desire for the lost in our world today. And it can be helpful for us to examine their mindset. We find there’s a wide spectrum of attitudes when it comes to the people we’re sent to share the Gospel with. Having some insider information about the way unbelievers think can help us be ready and to stay warmhearted toward those God loves so much.

**Acts 25:13 - <sup>13</sup>Several days later, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived in Caesarea and paid a courtesy call on Festus.**

King Agrippa is *Herod* Agrippa. His dad was the one who had the Apostle James killed and was struck dead by God in Acts 12. His great uncle was the one who had John the Baptist beheaded. His great-grandfather was Herod the Great who slaughtered the babies in Bethlehem. He had been appointed by the Emperor and would need to keep friendly relations with as many Roman officials as he could, hence this protocol of coming and giving honor to Festus. You see, he may have been a ‘king,’ but the governor was the one in charge.

Bernice was Agrippa’s sister and, historians say, his mistress.<sup>3</sup> She had been married to her own uncle and would have a string of relationships with powerful men, including the future emperor Titus.

So, right off the bat we can pause and evaluate what we know about these people Paul is going to evangelize: They have a *lot* going on. They’ve got all these pressures and problems, both personal

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.si.com/nfl/2015/09/08/patriots-cheating-suspicious-bill-belichick-tom-brady>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.si.com/mlb/2020/01/23/sign-stealing-history-astros-red-sox>

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berenice\\_\(daughter\\_of\\_Herod\\_Agrippa\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berenice_(daughter_of_Herod_Agrippa))

and professional. Outwardly they have the trappings of wealth and influence, but their lives are a mess. And each of them have these different fears and failures that they have to keep putting off or trying to avoid, yet they just keep dogging them.

**Acts 25:14-15 - <sup>14</sup>Since they were staying there several days, Festus presented Paul's case to the king, saying, "There's a man who was left as a prisoner by Felix. <sup>15</sup>When I was in Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews presented their case and asked that he be condemned.**

Festus has a problem: When he sends Paul to Nero, he has to send an official report to detail the case and present charges. He'll admit he has nothing to write, which is not a good position for him to be in. While Agrippa was by no means a religious man, he was an expert in Jewish affairs. He would be a very helpful resource for Festus in this particular issue, not to mention he had a family history with Nero.<sup>4</sup> So, if you have to send this sketchy case to the emperor, why not get some help from a guy like this. And, Agrippa would be happy to do the new governor a favor.

It's a sad testimony that the Jewish religious leaders' greatest wish in this section is that Paul would be condemned to death. What a terrible legacy for this group. There's a devotional thought for us here: Condemnation isn't our job. Yes, we're to tell the truth that *sin* is condemned by God, but the job is for us to go and tell the world that there is an *escape* from our guilt through the blood of Jesus. Even when it comes to hard-hearted, despicable people, like those on display here, the goal is *rescue and redemption*. The goal is that people would be saved *out* of their sin and transformed by the power of God. We may be offended by the way people live their lives, but remember what God can do. Look at Paul! The chief enemy of Jesus Christ. A murderer. Ravager of the Church. Now transformed by God to be the greatest living example of Christianity the world has ever known.

Don't spend your life doling out condemnation or hoping for the destruction of your enemies. And don't spend your life becoming more and more wrapped up in temporal goals. That's what had happened to the Sanhedrin. They were focused on earthly things. Earthly numbers. Earthly success. When that happens to God's people, they inevitably become *antagonistic* to others. We're not called to antagonism but to evangelism. Why? Because salvation solves the problems of the world. Think about it: What would make Agrippa and Bernice "better" people? A law against incest? Those already existed. How about Festus? Would campaign finance reform make him a more impartial governor? No. But take these people and have their hearts washed by the blood of the Lamb and indwelt with the Holy Spirit of God? That solves everything! No more incest. No more pride. No more bribes and back room deals.

**Acts 25:16 - <sup>16</sup>I answered them that it is not the Roman custom to give someone up before the accused faces the accusers and has an opportunity for a defense against the charges.**

Festus paints himself in the most positive light. It reminds us that the average person we talk to thinks they're fine. "Sure there are some bad people out there, but *I'm* a good person. Good-ish." Festus was, naturally, trying to talk himself up to this new important friend. And, frankly, he was lying to himself. "I would never give up a Roman citizen!" In reality he was willing to give Paul up as a favor to the Jews, he just wasn't able to get it done.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/numismatics/entry/a\\_controversial\\_coronation/](https://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/numismatics/entry/a_controversial_coronation/)

His mention of the Roman custom gives us a chance for another quick devotional thought: What's *our* custom? We have a lot of them, but hopefully we can boil down our behavior to the word *grace*. We're saved by grace, enriched by grace and we're told in 2 Corinthians 6 that we're to *excel* in grace. That it's to overflow us. As we serve, as we speak, as we worship, is it full of God's grace?

**Acts 25:17 - <sup>17</sup>So when they had assembled here, I did not delay. The next day I took my seat at the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought in.**

"The man." Festus really had no idea who it was he had access to. At least Felix took a bunch of opportunities to talk to the Apostle. Festus was clueless.

When we share the Gospel with people, they're often coming into it with no idea who we really are. They may see us as an unwelcome salesman or some sort of downer sent to make them feel bad. In reality, we're the lifeguards who are swimming out to save them from drowning.

**Acts 25:18 - <sup>18</sup>The accusers stood up but brought no charge against him of the evils I was expecting.**

Festus had assumptions and none of them were right. He didn't really know about the case but thought, "Oh it must have to do with this and this."

What does the world assume about Christians today? No need to ask whether it's fair or not, but what is the general feeling out in the culture around us when it comes to Christianity? Generally speaking I'd say the assumptions aren't very good. We can't control what culture thinks about us. The enemy keeps people deceived in every era. But this is the important part: Paul *was not* what Festus was expecting. He wasn't a troublemaker. He wasn't a maniac. He wasn't violent.

The Bible says that we're to be known by our love for other Christians. That we're to be known not for things like litigation but our ability to solve conflicts together. We're never told to be known for our anger or our rivalries or politicization but for how we emulate the Savior.

**Acts 25:19 - <sup>19</sup>Instead they had some disagreements with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, a dead man Paul claimed to be alive.**

Here's an amazing discovery as we listen in on this conversation: *Festus didn't know who Jesus was!* True, it was around 30 years since the cross and the empty grave, but still it surprises us. The truth is, there are a lot of people in the world who haven't heard the Gospel and don't actually know who Jesus is. Not just far away in the 10/40 window, but even right here in our own community. And we see here that Festus didn't realize there was even a difference between Judaism and Christianity. Now, he was particularly uninformed, but so are some people you will encounter.

In addition, we notice that he didn't seem to care at all about the idea that this Jesus might *actually* be alive. It didn't register. Again, this is just giving us a window into the mentality of *one type* of unbeliever. He's not a militant atheist, but he also isn't really thoughtful about spiritual things.

But that disinterest didn't make Paul change his message. In fact, he's going to double down and talk about how the resurrection is true and it is the reason why he's where he is and that it is the hope of mankind. You see, the resurrection was always central and critical to the preaching of the Apostles. They didn't talk to people about living their best lives now, they always talked about how

Messiah is *alive now!* Because the resurrection not only validates everything Jesus said, it is the basis for our faith *AND* it changes everything! Because you and I are going to come out of the grave and step into eternity one day, everything about this life is different.

And this is not just one guy's irrational claim. That's kind of the way Festus was presenting it in verse 19. There are immense proofs for the resurrection. Paul references some of them in 1 Corinthians 15:6. As believers today we can look at wonderful books like *The Case For Christ*, or *Evidence That Demands A Verdict* and see just how reliable and provable the resurrection is. In the notes I've footnoted an article giving 23 different proofs.<sup>5</sup> It should be the centerpiece of our evangelism.

**Acts 25:20-21 - <sup>20</sup>Since I was at a loss in a dispute over such things, I asked him if he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding these matters. <sup>21</sup>But when Paul appealed to be held for trial by the Emperor, I ordered him to be kept in custody until I could send him to Caesar."**

Festus was completely uninterested in what Paul might have to say. And yet, God made sure that this man received the Gospel message. *Twice*. That demonstrates the incredible love of God, even for those who are *ignoring* Him. As we witness for Jesus, we can't *make* people care. But we can remember that *God* still cares for each of them and is not willing that any should perish.

Here we see Festus is still bending the truth. He didn't hold onto Paul because he was "at a loss," but because he had wanted to do the Jews a favor. He *could've* just thrown the case out. That had happened back in Acts 18:14-17 in the city of Corinth.

**Acts 25:22 - <sup>22</sup>Agrippa said to Festus, "I would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow you will hear him," he replied.**

So, Festus doesn't really care - he's involved in all of this by default - but *Agrippa* is very interested. He had probably heard a *lot* more about Paul and Jesus of Nazareth. We see him very curious here.

Acts shows us a wide spectrum when it comes to unbelievers. You have on one far end the Sadducees, who are full of hatred and violence toward the Gospel. You have people out in the Gentile world who are prejudiced against Christians. You have people like Festus: they couldn't care less. You have people like Agrippa: Very curious. Not really searching but interested. Then you have people like the Ethiopian Eunuch. They're desperately seeking for spiritual truth. And what do we see? The same message for all *and* God had a desire to *save* them all. He *had* a guy for the Ethiopian. He *had* a guy for Agrippa. He *had* a guy for Felix and Festus and Cornelius and the synagogue of the freedmen. And God *sent* these guys out to bring the message to those in need.

A few commentators pointed out that men like Festus and Agrippa would *never* step foot into a synagogue or upper room meeting of the Church. So the Lord sent the message to them! Because this Savior draws all people to Himself. And *you* are the magnet He has decided to use to be part of that work of drawing. What grace we see here! God drawing despicable people to give them an opportunity to be saved. Herod was the kind of man who turned his troops on the Jews during the first Jewish-Roman war. And yet God loved him!

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.truthortradition.com/articles/beyond-a-reasonable-doubt-23-arguments-for-the-historical-validity-of-the-resurrection-of-jesus-christ>

**Acts 25:23 - <sup>23</sup>So the next day, Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the auditorium with the military commanders and prominent men of the city. When Festus gave the command, Paul was brought in.**

This is a big deal, a huge event. Everyone is all decked out in their regalia and dress uniforms. They were all very impressed with themselves. Because unbelievers live for this world.

Such a flamboyant display reminds us as Christians that *our* splendor is found in the *next* world. In Ephesians we're told that we're going to be presented to the Lord in *splendor*. We need not chase this world's passing pomp. That's what the enemy offers. He even offered it to Christ Himself. But all the splendor of all the kingdoms of the world cannot compare to what is in store for those who will follow Christ to heaven. Don't be tricked and robbed of what could be yours.

The comparison in this verse couldn't be more dramatic. All the crowns and robes and fine attire and there's the hunched and shackled preacher, in some worn out tunic. But, of all the people in the scene *one* of them had an address in the New Jerusalem, where the streets are paved with gold.

**Acts 25:24-25 - <sup>24</sup>Then Festus said, "King Agrippa and all men present with us, you see this man. The whole Jewish community has appealed to me concerning him, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he should not live any longer. <sup>25</sup>I found that he had not done anything deserving of death, but when he himself appealed to the Emperor, I decided to send him.**

This isn't a trial. No, Paul is here on display for their entertainment. He's like one of PT Barnum's freaks. You are on display. Paul says as much in his letters to the Corinthians. You're a *Jesus* freak and people are looking at you, some with disdain, some with curiosity, some with total misunderstanding. But they're looking. And *when* they look you have the chance to reflect the confounding grace of Jesus Christ and reveal His truth to them.

Festus knew Paul was innocent, but he feared the crowd. He didn't want to make the hard decision. It's not always easy for those we talk to to forsake their old life, forsake what they thought they knew, maybe even forsake father and mother for Christ. As we preach we want to offer our assistance to help them and walk *with* them into a life of faith.

Before we move on to the closing verses one thought: They're essentially admitting here that Paul is being treated unfairly. The courts had completely let him down, despite his innocence, despite his rights, despite what *should've* been happening. Generally speaking, the Christian community feels that things are becoming more unfair, more unjust toward us. We feel like our rights are being violated and that may be true, but it's nothing new. We shouldn't be surprised. Nor should we count on courts to make things right. We can celebrate and be grateful when a case 'goes our way,' but we shouldn't *expect* it. Because, as Acts shows many times, we can't expect unsaved men to do what's right, no matter *what* the precedent or law on the books is.

**Acts 25:26-27 - <sup>26</sup>I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore, I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after this examination is over, I may have something to write. <sup>27</sup>For it seems unreasonable to me to send a prisoner without indicating the charges against him."**

Festus *had* to send a report so now he's in the uncomfortable position of having to justify his less-than-ethical handling of the case. Unbelievers around us often feel justified for their actions. Festus didn't want to hurt Paul, but he did want to help himself.

We see something else here: All these important people, all these great rulers, shouldn't they have been able to solve this little issue of a simple court case? And yet, they were paralyzed. Because everyone was seeking their own benefit. This is why there's gridlock in the government and never-ending lawsuits in every corner of society. All the might and wisdom of men can't actually fix the broken parts of the world. But Christ can! And *only* He can.

As you and I go out into the world where God has scattered us, you may find yourself taking to someone who has a Sadducee mentality, or a Festus mentality, or Agrippa or the Philippian Jailer or the Ethiopian Eunuch. You may find yourself interacting with someone honorable or someone despicable. Someone searching for God or someone who hates God.

Our Lord's desire for all of them is the same. It's the same desire He had for you and for me and for Saul of Tarsus. He's drawing all people to Himself. And so, whoever we encounter, our message is meant to be the same. Not that we never come at the truth from an angle that makes more sense to someone once we understand their perspective, but the message is that sin separates us from God, so God sent Jesus Christ to live, die and (most importantly) rise again. And that all who call on the name of the Lord in faith will be saved.

As we go about preaching some may see you as a curiosity or a complication. Some people will be full of conceit or corruption or they may just be clueless. They may think they're operating by some custom or code that makes them better than Ted Bundy or some other bogey man in their mind. But we can cut through all of that and present the truth, in love, knowing that God loves them and wants them to be saved.

One final thought as we close: This audience gathered to hear Paul was a big deal. A king. A governor. Military commanders and a bunch of prominent leaders. Quite an opportunity. We aren't told how many of them, ultimately, gave their lives to Christ. The question is: Was Paul's 2 year imprisonment worth it? As readers we think so. When we're called to *live* sacrifice, it can be harder to accept. But, sometimes, sacrifice puts us into a position to have incredible opportunities. Eric Liddell gave up running in his favored race in the 1924 Olympics because it was his conviction not to run on a Sunday. But that sacrifice led to great opportunity for God to speak through his life. Is his long testimony worth a gold medal? Absolutely! How about Bethany Hamilton? She has had great opportunities to proclaim the name of Jesus. Why? Because a shark bit off her arm. Was it worth her arm? We look and we say, "Yes."

It's not that we're looking for pomp or greatness for ourselves. The end goal isn't to be in the most impressive room. But, it's clear that *sometimes* a special work of God is accomplished after we follow Him through a path of sacrifice.