

PAUL'S IMPRISONMENT IN CAESAREA

Acts 24:1-26:32

Key Verse: 26:6

“And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today.”

As we studied in the last lesson, Paul visited Jerusalem to help his poverty-stricken people with the offering he collected from the Gentile churches. Also, through his testimony he wanted to help his people open their spiritual eyes to see God's great purpose for them to be a priestly nation and a light for the Gentiles. But some Jews who were prejudiced toward Gentiles stirred up the people until the whole city was aroused. Because of this, the commander of the Roman army came and arrested Paul and kept him in custody in the army barracks. In this way, Paul became a prisoner without any clear charges being brought against him. Today's passage is the story of Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea. During his imprisonment, Paul stands trial before the Roman governors Felix and Festus and before King Agrippa. In these trials Paul does not defend himself; rather, he is eager to explain his hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I. Paul's trial before Felix (24:1-27)

Paul was transferred from Jerusalem to Caesarea by the commander of the Roman army because a homicide squad plotted to kill Paul. Caesarea was the headquarters of the Roman army in that province, and it was the place where, 20 years before, Peter had a vision telling him to accept the first Gentile believer, Cornelius, an officer in the Roman army. After Paul was transferred to Caesarea, the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some elders and a lawyer named Tertullus and brought charges against Paul before Felix the Roman governor. Tertullus began his speech with a passage of almost nauseating flattery, with which even he himself was disgusted. His charge was that Paul was a troublemaker--a pestilence, a ringleader of the Nazarene sect, in contemporary terms, a cult leader--who desecrated the temple by bringing Trophimus into it. The charge was not because he had broken any law, Roman or Jewish, but because Paul had a personal commitment to Jesus, not to Judaism. Paul could have defended himself in order to preserve his own life. But he did not. Rather, Paul did not fail to explain his faith in the resurrection. Look at verse 15. "...and I have

PAUL'S IMPRISONMENT IN CAESAREA

the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked." Paul had hope in eternal life and the kingdom of God; he also proclaimed God's judgment.

Governor Felix, who had married a Jewess, was impressed by Paul and later sent for him to explain the gospel more fully (24). What did Paul say to him? Look at verse 25. "As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, 'That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.'" Obviously, Felix was an unrighteous man, a man of loose life. He had the desire to do what was good, but he could not carry it out because he was a slave of sinful desires. His agony of soul must have been indeed great, crying out, "What a wretched man I am!" (Ro 7:14-24) According to Romans 2:8, he was a man fit for God's righteous judgment. He knew he should turn to God. But in his covetousness he called Paul frequently, hoping that Paul would bribe him. He was a man of split personality, a mental patient. Felix was succeeded by Festus.

II. Paul's trial before Festus (25:1-12)

Festus was a typical bureaucrat. As soon as he came to his position as the Roman governor of the province, he made a plan to ingratiate himself to the Jewish leaders. So he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem. There the chief priests and Jewish leaders appeared before him and presented their charges against Paul. In their plot to kill Paul, they requested Festus to transfer him from Caesarea to Jerusalem. But Festus told them to come to Caesarea to press charges against Paul, since he was in Caesarea.

When Festus came back to Caesarea, he convened the court and ordered that Paul be brought before him. The Jews who had come from Jerusalem inveighed against and besmirched Paul, bringing groundless charges against him. Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?" Paul answered, "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried" (10). Finally Paul said, "I appeal to Caesar!" (11) Paul knew that appealing to Caesar was endangering his life. When he lived for Jesus' name's sake, he became like a criminal. Humanly speaking, he was a victim of Jewish pride and Roman rule. But

PAUL'S IMPRISONMENT IN CAESAREA

from God's point of view his suffering was not in vain. His appeal to Caesar was not an act of betrayal of his people. In 19:21 he said, "I must visit Rome also." Paul's plan to visit Rome was not based on his selfish ambition; it was from the Lord Jesus. Actually, Paul wanted to remain in Jerusalem and help his people open their spiritual eyes to see God's high calling for them to be a priestly nation and a light for the Gentiles. But the Lord Jesus had a plan to send him far away to the Gentiles. 22:21 says, "Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" Again, 23:11 says, "The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, 'Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.'" This was the reason Paul appealed to Caesar. At his appeal, Festus was powerless to do anything but grant his request. God was with Paul and delivered him from the hands of his people. They say that at that time the Caesar was Nero, an inhumane brute. But Paul did not mind to appear before such a person in order to obey the world mission command of the Lord Jesus.

III. Paul before King Agrippa (25:13-26:32)

A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. Festus discussed Paul's case with the king. Festus said, "When Paul's accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive....When Paul made his appeal to be held over for the Emperor's decision, I ordered him held until I could send him to Caesar" (25:18,19,21). King Agrippa wanted to hear Paul. So Festus convened an assembly and Paul was brought before Festus, King Agrippa and his officials (25:23-27). Festus confessed his dilemma: "I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome. But I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. For I think it is unreasonable to send on a prisoner without specifying the charges against him" (25:25-27).

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself" (26:1). At this time also, Paul did not try to defend himself. Rather, he wanted to evangelize these dignitaries. So he gave

PAUL'S IMPRISONMENT IN CAESAREA

his life testimony once more. This time in his testimony Paul explains God's world salvation plan based on the Scriptures, especially through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

First, "I, Paul, was a Pharisee." In 26:4,5 Paul said that he was a Pharisee of all Pharisees. As a Pharisee he had hope in God's promise. Look at verses 6,7. "And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me." The key point of God's promise was that he would send a Savior from the stump of Jesse (Isa 11:1). He was Jesus, who would die for man's sins and rise again on the third day so as to bring all men back to God's kingdom. Paul said he had the same hope and faith as his people. Unfortunately, his people were not interested in history study but only in Judaism, which was the short-cut in getting a good job. As a result they forgot God's promise and were blinded by Judaistic thinking. Paul said in verse 6, "And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today." Paul claims that they had no reason to try him. Paul who knew the king's background well said in verse 8, "Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?"

Second, Paul met the Risen Jesus (26:9-14). In this part Paul boldly confesses the sins he had committed against God. He had tortured, punished and killed the early Christians. It was out of his self-righteousness based on Judaism. In verses 9-11 he confessed as follows: "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them."

In verses 13,14 Paul tells how he met the Risen Jesus and what happened to him after meeting the Risen Jesus. "About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you

PAUL'S IMPRISONMENT IN CAESAREA

persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." When Paul persecuted the church of God, he thought he was serving God. But he was not serving God; he was murdering the children of God, especially a righteous man of God, Stephen. But when he met the Risen Jesus, his eyes were blinded by the blazing light of the Risen Jesus. When he met the Risen Jesus, he realized he was kicking against the goads. When he met the Risen Jesus, he realized that he was a spiritually blind man and a sinner, who was only hurting himself in his rebellion against God.

Third, Paul received grace and apostleship (15-18). At the moment Paul met the Risen Jesus, he asked, "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. Then what happened? The Risen Jesus gave him apostleship. Look at verse 16. "Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you." Paul was an unforgivable sinner. But the Risen Jesus did not talk about his past sins. Paul was greatly moved by Jesus' way of dealing with him. Jesus washed away all his sins through Ananias' help (22:16). Moreover, the Risen Christ clothed him with God's grace. It was God's one-sided love and forgiving love. So Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:10a, "But by the grace of God I am what I am." Sometimes we want to forgive someone who wronged us if he repents. This is not grace. Grace is to forgive others' sins unconditionally.

When God clothed him with his grace, it was to use him as an instrument of righteousness. It was to proclaim God's grace through his Son's death and resurrection. As verse 16 says, "I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you."

Fourth, Paul's task. Look at 26:17,18. The Risen Jesus said to Paul, "I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." His specific task was to evangelize the Gentiles (17). His specific task was to lead the Gentiles from darkness to the light. Generally, people think they are happy if they have some achievements, their own house, enough money to live on, or if they can give a good

PAUL'S IMPRISONMENT IN CAESAREA

education to their children. But Biblically speaking, they are living in darkness. They are hopeless because they live under the power of sin and death. One girl student had a hope of becoming a world famous pianist. So she invested her youth in piano practice. She married a medical doctor. She was happy for some time. But she got breast cancer and suffered from it for seven years. After getting breast cancer she realized her hope in the piano was useless. She began to put her hope in the resurrection of Jesus. In the hope of the resurrection of Jesus she overcame pain and death and gave a good influence to her children, as well as to her one-to-one Bible students. Those who do not have hope in the resurrection of Jesus live under the power and sting of death. Godless people may look easygoing and prosperous. But they are not. Those who have hope in the resurrection of Jesus labor in Jesus. Sometimes it seems to be in vain, but their labor in the Lord is not in vain. To those who have hope in the resurrection of Jesus, death is like a catnap; it is only stepping through the pearly gates into the kingdom of God. Paul again affirmed that he was saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen, that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles (23).

What was their response? Look at verse 24. "At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane." His problem was that he did not know the spiritual world. What was King Agrippa's response? Look at verse 28. "Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?'" His problem was his unrepentant heart. Agrippa and Festus became helpless and said in verse 32, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar." Their conclusion was indeed tragic. If they knew that Paul had not committed any crime, they should have set him free. But they ignored the truth that Paul was innocent. Though they were pompous in their fashionable clothing, they were rotten men in the sight of God because they had no truth of God in their hearts.

In this passage we learn that living without the hope of the glorious resurrection of Jesus is living under the power of sin and death. On the other hand, those who believe in the resurrection of Jesus have a living hope in the kingdom of God. We also learn that Paul was in chains to defend and confirm the gospel of Jesus (Php 1:7). We

PAUL'S IMPRISONMENT IN CAESAREA

realize that all of us also must share God's grace with Paul to defend and confirm the gospel of Jesus. Christians must be defenders of the gospel. May God bless you with the same hope in God as St. Paul.