

“I APPEAL TO CAESAR!”

Acts 25:1-27

Key Verse: 25:11

“If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!”

In the last passage we learned Paul’s hope in the resurrection of the dead, which was based on his faith in the Bible and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul was sure that he would rise again with Jesus in eternal glory. Paul was also sure that the enemies of God would rise again to be judged and punished eternally. With resurrection hope, Paul lived before God every day and strove to keep his conscience clear. With resurrection hope, Paul was free, though he was bound in a Roman prison. With resurrection hope, Paul was free from anxiety and fear. With resurrection hope, Paul was free to preach the gospel, even to his captors. With resurrection hope, Paul was free to shepherd Governor Felix with God’s word. Likewise, when we have resurrection hope, we can do the work of God powerfully and joyfully in any situation.

Someone said that the dark background of space allows the stars to reveal their splendor to the fullest extent. In today’s passage Paul is in prison, surrounded by many evil men of the world. But the Holy Spirit is with him. By the Spirit, Paul shines brightly, like a star in the night sky. May God help us learn his secret of victory in the midst of adversity.

First, a new governor, an old problem, and the same old enemies (1-9).

As we studied last time, Governor Felix was indecisive. Felix knew that Paul was innocent, but he did not release him from prison. He was afraid of the pressure of the Jewish leaders. Indecision is not a light matter. Indecision stems from cowardice and moral corruption. Because Felix was indecisive, Paul remained in prison for two years without any charge. In this way, many unsolved problems must have accumulated during Felix’s administration. It is not surprising that he was removed as governor and replaced by Festus. Indecisive people are corrupted people. Indecisive people are useless to God and man.

Festus seems a little better. On arriving in the province, he did not celebrate his appointment as governor with inaugural balls. Just three days after arriving, he traveled to Jerusalem. He had carefully assessed the situation and found that the key to governing Israel well was to make friends with the Jewish leaders. For their part, the Jewish leaders also got right to the point. Look at verse 3. “They urgently requested Festus, as a favor to them, to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way.” This verse tells us that the Jewish religious leaders had become completely evil. They were not at all interested in the truth. They depended on political persuasion. What they really wanted was to kill God’s servant Paul by an ambush. In verse 7 they confronted Paul in Caesarea. They stood around him and brought many serious charges against him, which they could not prove. They bore the image of their father, the devil, who is a liar and murderer (Jn 8:44) and an accuser (Rev 12:10).

It is a terrible irony that the Jewish religious leaders became the instruments of the devil. They were chosen by God to be his people. God had a great hope for them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But they had become God’s enemies. It happened because they were self-glory seeking. They

loved praise from men instead of the glory of God (Jn 5:44). They were also too proud to simply repent their sins and ask God's mercy (Lk 7:30). When they did not have God in their hearts, they became instruments of Satan by default. Down through history it has been ungodly religious leaders who have caused the most trouble. Even today, many conflicts are due in large part to the evil acts of ungodly religious leaders, both "crusader" and "terrorist." There is no justification for killing in Jesus' name. To lie and murder is the act of the devil. When Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father" (Mt 6:9), he declared the universal brotherhood of all mankind. Muslim people are fellow human beings and our brothers and sisters.

Pastor Teddy Hembekides grew up in Lebanon, which he describes as "staunchly Arab." He said that in the living room of his parents' house—as was the case with many other Lebanese families—there was a table with two open books, side by side. One was the Bible. The other was the Koran. When he asked his mother why these two books were together like that, she said, "God sent Jesus with the message of love to restore people. When the message of love failed, God sent Mohammed with the sword to force everyone to return to God." Many Arabs think there is a close connection between Muslims and Christians. They are probably a lot more open to the gospel than we might expect. When Christians act like Christians, imitating Christ and revealing God's love, Muslim people may open their hearts and listen to the gospel message. It does not seem good to send bombs and soldiers to Muslim countries. We must definitely send Christian missionaries who can share the love of Christ with Muslims. We must support UBF missionaries who are already in Muslim countries with fervent prayer.

Look at verse 4. Festus wanted to uphold Roman law. In Roman law an accused man had to be given the opportunity to face his accusers and defend himself against their charges (16). Festus did not send Paul to Jerusalem as the Jews requested. But he did spend time with the Jewish leaders, and then invited them to Caesarea. Perhaps he thought he was strong enough to resist their persuasion and maintain his objectivity. But he was already beginning to side with them publicly. When the trial began, he allowed the Jews to accuse Paul vehemently without any proof. Then Paul made his defense, "I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar" (8). Paul was innocent. There was no basis for the false charges. The burden of proof was on the Jews and they had no evidence. However, as verse 9 says, Festus wanted to do a favor for the Jews. So he asked Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?" He must have known that Paul could not get a fair trial in Jerusalem. But he was no longer concerned with justice. He wanted to please the Jews. Festus seems a little better than Felix. He seems to be a hard worker and willing to make a decision. But he became a man of compromise who was ready to send an innocent man to death. All political systems and constitutions sound good. But unless leaders have the word of God and the Spirit of God, there is no true justice.

Second, "I appeal to Caesar!" (10-12).

Paul's defense was ignored by Festus. Festus had sided with the Jews. The situation seemed impossible. What did Paul do? Look at verses 10-11. "Paul answered, 'I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!'" Here we learn several things from Paul.

In the first place, Paul kept his head. In 2 Timothy 4:5a, Paul said, "But you, keep your head in all situations...." Before Governor Festus, Paul set an example of keeping his head. Paul was standing

among enemies who wanted to kill him. No one was on his side. There was no hope for justice. Yet Paul kept his head. His mind was free from fear and anxiety. His mind was focused. He knew where he was and what he was doing. In any kind of contest, be it a legal battle, a sporting event or whatever, the one who loses his head will be knocked down and defeated. Paul had received a strong punch. But he was not knocked off balance. Paul kept his head. This was not done by Paul's human strength, but by the help of the Holy Spirit. In Mark 13:11, Jesus promised his people, "Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit." In the time of trial, God gives us the Holy Spirit to help us. The Holy Spirit helps us keep our heads in all situations.

Last year, in order to obtain a building permit for a new Bible house at UIC, we had to appear before the zoning board of appeals downtown. The hearing was held in the City Council meeting room. Several opponents appeared to disrupt our building plan, including a trained lawyer. Trying to stir up trouble, he asked me, "Tell me about your parking problem." He hoped to point out that there was not enough space for parking and therefore, we should not build a Bible house in that neighborhood. Many of our coworkers were praying in the back of the room. Suddenly, the Spirit helped me to answer, "Yes, we have a parking problem. Many people park in our lot who do not belong to our ministry. That is our parking problem." The head of the zoning commission laughed. Later he told our opponent, "If you want to avoid parking problems, you must move outside of Chicago." When the zoning board voted, they approved our request unanimously.

We must pray for our coworkers in India. Since they began to evangelize Hindu people, persecution is inevitable. Recently, Missionary Jimmy Lee received a letter from a government office. It said that Korean missionaries who evangelize non-Christian Indian people must be expelled from the country. Missionary Jimmy Lee and our coworkers did not lose their heads. By the help of the Holy Spirit, they believe God is with them. They hold Matthew 5:11-12a, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven." May God give them victory.

In the second place, Paul had a challenging spirit. Paul said to Festus, "I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well." How could Paul have such a challenging spirit? It came from his clear conscience. In both of the previous chapters, Paul mentioned his conscience (23:1; 24:16). Paul's conscience was clear. This was possible because he depended on the blood of Jesus (Heb 9:14). A man with a clear conscience cannot be tried by a corrupted politician. Rather, a man with a clear conscience will rebuke a corrupted politician. Paul rebuked Festus for his compromising spirit. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:15, "The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment...."

In the third place, Paul committed himself to the goodness and sovereignty of God. In that difficult situation, Paul looked up at God. It was God's will for him to go to Rome and testify about Jesus (Ro 23:11). When Paul remembered God's purpose for world mission and for his own life, he knew he must go to Rome. Paul was not a victim in an evil scheme. He saw God's good purpose beyond all the evil of the world. He knew that God was in control of his life and future. Paul wrote in Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." When Paul decided to obey God's will, God gave him sparkling wisdom. He remembered his Roman citizenship. He remembered Roman law. Every Roman citizen had the right to appeal to Caesar from anywhere in the Roman Empire. Based on this appeal, the Roman citizen would be brought to Rome for trial. Paul saw God's opportunity in this situation to go to Rome. The Roman

government would even pay his travel expenses. Paul must have said to himself, "Yes! That's it!" Then he pronounced clearly, "I appeal to Caesar!" In doing so he committed his life and future into the hand of God. Look at verse 12. "After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: 'You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!'"

From Paul we learn that the time of adversity is the time to deepen our commitment to God. Recently, one shepherd faced a job problem. He was suddenly dismissed. Humanly speaking, it did not make sense. He was the best worker in the department. But he realized that it was God's training for him because he was unfaithful in offering a tithe and in testimony sharing. By the help of God's servant, he remembered Matthew 6:33. He began to look up at God. He decided to seek God's kingdom and righteousness first. He made a new decision to tithe regularly. He made a new decision to write his Bible testimony regularly and share it with his coworkers. Then, suddenly, he received a job offer with good benefits. God gave him victory. The time of adversity is the time to look up at God. When we commit our lives more deeply to God, he gives us wisdom and helps us win the victory.

Third, worldly glory is a fantasy, God's glory is eternal (13-27).

A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay respects to the new governor, Festus. King Agrippa was familiar with the Jewish customs and laws. Festus hoped that Agrippa could help him out. Actually, Festus had a big problem. He had to send Paul to Rome to appear before Caesar's court, but there was no charge against him. The only charge that Festus could find is stated in verses 19-20a. They say, "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. I was at a loss how to investigate such matters..." In fact, Paul was on trial because he believed in the resurrection of Christ. That was not a crime. To send him to Caesar in this way was political suicide for the new governor Festus.

Look at verse 23. "The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high ranking officers and the leading men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in." The word here translated "pomp" come from the Greek word "fantasia." It is the root for "fantasy." For a moment in time, Agrippa was king and Bernice was at his side. For a moment in time, Agrippa was surrounded by powerful people who treated him with great respect. For a moment in time, Festus had the power to order Paul to be brought in. The audience room had been richly decorated with the finest ornaments and powerful people. But where are they now? All of those powerful people are long since dead. Now it is they who must stand before the judgment seat of Christ. The audience room is no more. The glory of King Agrippa is gone. In fact, human glory in this world is very much like a fantasy. On the other hand, the Apostle Paul lives forever in the kingdom of God. The words he spoke remain immortal monuments to the glory and sovereign rule of God. This is why John said in 1 John 2:17. "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever." The glory of this world is only a fantasy. The glory of God's kingdom lasts forever.

In this passage we learn Paul's faith and wisdom in the time of trial. Although enemies wanted to destroy him, he saw God's good purpose. He boldly committed himself to God's mission, saying, "I appeal to Caesar!" May God help us to do the same. Then God will give us great victory to carry out his mission successfully for his glory.