

Facing Times Of Stress: When God Is Silent (Part Two)

The Trials of the Apostle Paul

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Chapters 23-26 of the book of Acts is about hardships, about difficult times in life that come to everyone. Today we will continue to examine how the apostle Paul was able to successively face times of stress when his own people, the Jews, were determined to murder or imprison him.

Turn with me if you will, to Acts chapter 25 which tells of the trial of the apostle Paul before Festus. Remember, he had just come from Felix, and now he is appearing before Festus. Compared to the account of the trial before Felix, which is given in Acts 24, the account of the trial before King Agrippa, which follows this narrative, is relatively brief. So we have the trial of Felix, and now Paul appears before Festus and then after this, he is going to appear before King Agrippa.

No doubt what happened here was of less significance for Paul. In some ways, it is only a repetition of the charges and responses but before another judge, and now we come to Paul's trial before Festus. Then Paul appeals to Caesar.

Acts 25:1-12 Now when Festus had come to the province, after three days he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem. Then the high priest and the chief men of the Jews informed him against Paul; and they petitioned him, asking a favor against him, that he would summon him to Jerusalem—while they lay in ambush along the road to kill him. But Festus answered that Paul should be kept at Caesarea and that he himself was going there shortly. "Therefore," he said, "let those who have authority among you go down with me and accuse this man, to see if there is any fault in him." And when he had remained among them more than ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day, sitting on the judgment seat, he commanded Paul to be brought. When he had come, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood about and laid many serious

complaints against Paul, which they could not prove. While he answered for himself, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all." But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?" So Paul said, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. [He said this because he was a citizen of Rome and he had that protection under Rome.] To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar." Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, "You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar, you shall go!"

So although the situation is like that of Paul's trial before Felix, it is worth looking at the different characters in this trial with some care. There are three individuals or bodies of people. There is the accusers, that is, the Jews. There is the judge, that is Festus, who was quite different from Felix who preceded him, and there is the defender and victor, the apostle Paul.

Now the Jews used in this setting illustrate the corrupting effects of religion when it is not actually in contact with God. Generally, people used to look at religion as a good thing, and they would say such things as, "Even if a person doesn't really trust God, isn't it at least better to be religious than not to be religious?" We know better than that, but the world does not seem to. But false religion is very corrupting. It twists the mind and confuses thinking, sending the person in the wrong direction. In I Corinthians 14:33 the apostle Paul is very clear that "God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints." This is because if the life of God is not actually present in the worshipper, then his or her religion becomes a mere veneer and hypocrisy and can be used as an excuse for doing what is obviously evil. History teaches that some of the worst things that have ever been done have been done by people who claim they are doing the will of God, and that is, by religious persons.

These Jewish leaders wanted to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem for trial because they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way. Here were the religious leaders, the heads of the most enlightened nation in the history of humanity, plotting murder. You would think that the Ten Commandments with "you shall not murder" alone would have kept them from it. They might have pled that these were unusual circumstances, that Paul was guilty of a crime requiring death, and therefore that they had to act in an unorthodox manner to secure that penalty. But even if this reasoning could have been accepted, they were still violating their own criminal laws, which provided rigorous safeguards for anyone accused of a capital offense. They were throwing them out the window (just as the Deep State, so to speak, is doing in this nation today. It is ignoring the Constitution of the United States, and it is ignoring the law.)

They were doing everything possible to avoid what we call due process of law. The irony is that they were supposed to be the upholders of the law, and here they were the very opposite. You look at our Department of Justice in this nation and the attorneys, the lawyers, and those who are supposed to be defending the law and using it for justice. They use it *against* justice and they use it against the people. This is exactly what they were trying to do to Paul at this time.

In the Jewish system they were not just secular leaders, they were also the religious leaders of the people. The secular law and the religious law were one. Yet here they were willing to turn their backs on their own laws to secure the death of a guiltless one they obviously hated. Also, we see a growth of corruption. In Acts 23 where the plot to murder Paul was first launched, we see that it was the zealots who were responsible, and now in Acts 25 we find that the leaders are initiating the very thing they were only indirectly involved in earlier. Is that not also happening in our nation today? You look at the rioting and the the organizations of Soros who are paying people to go and riot and to demonstrate and to destroy while the left keeps arm's length from them. The day is coming where the leaders of the left will make their move. They will try anyway.

So we see this human nature carrying through history time and time again and here it is being used against Paul. This is how wickedness spreads, and it

is why we always have to be on guard against it. It is easy for religious people to go astray and then claim God's authority for their disobedience.

Now, the second party to these proceedings was Governor Porcius Festus. The most noticeable characteristic of this man is that, unlike Felix, he was unwilling to delay decisions. When Festus arrived in the province it was only three days before he went from Caesarea to Jerusalem. He would have arrived by ship, which would not have been an easy trip at all. One would have expected him to have taken time in his capital city of Caesarea to relax and perhaps get things in order first. But this was not his way. He launched right into his work.

Jerusalem was the center of the nation, though not the Roman capital, so Festus immediately went there to confer with the Jewish leaders. He wanted to know what he was facing before he actually faced Paul. And then, after spending 8-10 days with them, he made his way back down to Caesarea. This was a man who was trying to take charge right away and the next day, having brought with him those who were going to accuse Paul, he convened his court and heard Paul's case.

Before we go on with the story, please turn to James 2. Festus was a good administrator, yet he had his own serious flaw, and in this respect he was much like his predecessor. He wanted to please the people. He wanted to show the Jews favor, and a person might say, "Well, that's just a part of what it means to rule." or "When you're in charge of something, you have to get along with those you govern." That is true, of course, in one sense, but this was a legal matter. Paul was on trial. Any giving of favors in this situation was a perversion of justice and the abuse of an innocent man. And so James warns Christians not to fall into this weakness, not even in our own personal relationships with one another.

James 2:1 My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.

James 2:4 Have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

James 2:8-9 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors [that is, lawbreakers.].

So it is quite a serious thing to be ruling against someone or to be judging someone with partiality.

Paul knew what was happening, and that is why he exclaimed, "I have not done anything wrong to the Jews as you yourself know well." So Festus if had not been able to discover this on his own he certainly would have learned it from his predecessor, since Felix had examined Paul on more than one occasion and had concluded that he had done nothing wrong. Yet wishing to do the Jews a favor, Festus compromised.

How many right actions have been negotiated away because those who knew to do right wanted to please someone else, or at least not offend people they consider to be important to them? That is not just something that happens in the world, either. It is done by Christians and the church. Perhaps it has been done by you on occasion. If so, it is something of which we have to repent.

The trial itself is told in a very brief language.

Acts 25:7 When he had come, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood about and laid many serious complaints against Paul, which they could not prove.

It is interesting that Luke, the author of Acts, does not tell us what those charges were and neither does Paul mention them. But we can guess what they were because of what was said in Acts 24 and by the way Paul responds in verse 8.

Acts 25:8 While he answered for himself [that is, Paul speaking], "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all."

These would have been charges of heresy, something that was contrary to God's law. It would have been sacrilege, something done against the temple, and treason, an act against Caesar if he was guilty of any of these things.

Now these are similar to the false charges that were brought against Jesus Christ as well. It is interesting how the Jews kept bringing up the same charges to try to make them stick on the next person. For example, the three are that listed: He had violated the law by not observing the Sabbath correctly. He was guilty of sacrilege because He had prophesied the destruction of the Temple, and He had made himself a king, thus setting himself against Caesar. So there you have the heresy, the sacrilege, and the treason. The same criminal actions, or would have been criminal actions, were accused of Jesus Christ and Paul. So it was because Pilate feared the Jews would tell Caesar he had released a rival to the imperial throne that he finally consented to Christ's death. That is what happened with Christ, and now they were trying to do the same thing to Paul.

These accusations are made against believers in virtually any country where people feel free to attack them, and sadly, we are seeing it happening in this country. More and more of the Christians are being attacked. Just as Paul was accused of being guilty of not conforming to accepted customs, Christians down through history have had the same accusations as well. Here is an example of three:

1) They disregard the laws or customs of the nation. Christians do not see things as those about them do. They do not have the same priorities, believers are a breed apart. Christians have another Lord. They will try to obey their country's laws, but not when human law is contrary to God's law. God's law supersedes human law.

2) They do not adhere to the religion of the people among whom they live. In the early church Christians were accused of being atheists because they denied the existence of the pagan gods.

3) They are guilty of treason. This may not be true in America until the globalists gain absolute power, at least in an obvious way. But it has happened in other places in today's world, as in the communist countries.

Christians do not acknowledge the ultimate sovereignty of any secular state. Only God is absolute sovereign for Christians.

So in his defense, Paul said that he had not done any of these things, at least not in ways that would bring him into danger in a Roman court. In his former trial before Felix, Paul had emphasized the continuity of the way with Judaism. In this trial before Festus, he stressed his loyalty to Caesar. Caesar is mentioned eight times in chapter 25, five times as Kaiser, twice as Sebastos, that is a Greek equivalent of Augustus, and once as Kyrios, which means the Lord, and as you know, the Lord also means the master. Paul knew that he had not offended against Caesar and that he stood in Caesar's court.

In Acts 25:7 Luke says that although they brought many serious charges against him, they could not prove them. They had accused Paul of stirring up trouble over all over the Roman Empire, and they did not have any witnesses. They had accused him of sacrilege, but they could not prove it. They accused him of speaking against Caesar, and they could not prove that either. So all Paul had to do in these circumstances was deny the charges, the burden of proof rested with his accusers, and Festus, being a perceptive judge, at least in this respect, understood this and knew that there were no grounds for condemning the apostle Paul, which put Felix in a tough situation as it did Festus.

But Festus wanted to do the Jews a favor, and he said, "I don't know how to resolve this, Paul, but it might help the situation if we could transfer your case to Jerusalem and let you be tried there." It is hard to believe that Festus could have suggested this with pure motives knowing what the Jews wanted to do to Paul. For one thing, he must have known the case's previous history, and he must have known that Paul had been brought from Jerusalem to Caesarea precisely because of the danger there in Jerusalem.

Paul could never get a fair trial in Jerusalem. Apparently, that is what Festus was expecting. But even more than that, can we believe that Festus had not heard of the plot to have Paul assassinated? Had he not examined the records and had he not seen the letter written by Claudius Lucius? He had to have known what would happen to Paul. Now this shrewd Roman governor might have thought that he could solve the dilemma if he could get Paul to concede

to go to Jerusalem for trial. And if perhaps along the way Paul might be assassinated, then the governor could say, "Oh, no! That's too bad. But I didn't have anything to do with it. Paul went willingly, and this is really a very sad thing." It is sad, but that is the way the politicians think.

With the wisdom God had given him, Paul understood the situation well and knew that the only way he could hope to get his case resolved fairly was to exercise his right as a Roman citizen, to appeal from local jurisdiction to the court of Caesar in Rome, and that equally suited Festus. This is interesting here at this point where Paul says that he appeals to Caesar because, initially, what did God tell Paul as it began? He said that "you will go to Rome to witness." So Paul remembered that, and that was one of the few things that God said to him in this whole ordeal. So God, in one sense, was silent to him. But he had that knowledge knowing that God would protect him. And he also had the Scriptures to fall back on because they are the inspired written Word of God.

So it got the sticky matter out of Festus' hands, so he replied, "You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar, you will go!"

So we have looked at the accusers and the judge. We look finally at the accused, Paul himself.

What a contrast! Here were the accusers, who out of hatred were trying to assassinate the prisoner. And here was Festus who failed to do what he should have done because of his desire for popularity. He should have acquitted Paul. Paul was the prisoner, the accused, the one in danger of his life, yet he was the only one who emerged victorious out of this trial here. He was victorious because he was innocent of these false charges and because he depended on God whom he trusted in this, as in all other circumstances that Paul faced. You remember the list that Paul made in II Corinthians of all the things that he had endured. Thankfully, most of us do not live in circumstances where the world's accusations against us are as fierce as these were against Paul, though there are places in the world where they are harsh and Christians do suffer physically.

Nevertheless, you and I face a world whose value system is hostile to God's way of life and in which we are constantly pressured to compromise or deny

our faith. How are you and I, weak and sinful human beings as we are, to stand against such pressure? Thankfully, we have God's Holy Spirit that gives us the power to withstand these things, gives us the strength and wisdom that we need to weather through these things. Knowing God is sovereign over your circumstances gives you great power because it means that even if things do not go right for you from a human point of view, it will still be right and good since God understood and ordained those hard circumstances from the beginning that you are going through or will go through. God knew they were going to come and they are part of His plan for your life.

Please turn to a very familiar story in Daniel 3. It is always good to look back on familiar examples that we have embedded in our mind and be reminded of them even more. This knowledge is what gave power to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego when they stood against the most powerful monarch of their day, King Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar had decreed that everyone had to worship a golden statue he had set up on the plain of Dura. It represented the Babylonian Empire and to refuse to bow to it was treason, punishable by death. These three young men would not bow down to it, however, because to them such an act was idolatry. Nebuchadnezzar hauled them in, he was outraged, and he was about to execute them by throwing them into a burning furnace. But they were unafraid. How could that possibly be when you are about to be thrown into something that is red hot or maybe even white hot? Nebuchadnezzar was threatening them with death. Where did their strength come from? It came from their knowledge of God's sovereignty and faith in Him. And they, I am sure, had the Scriptures written by Moses and others to fall back on and to read and to be strengthened by.

Daniel 3:17-18 "If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace [so we see there that they had knowledge], and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. [there we see the faith] But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the golden image which you have set up." [there we see the acceptance of God's will and steadfastness]

So we see all three of those traits there: knowledge, faith, and acceptance of God's will.

This is the problem that confronts every follower of the true God when the requirements of serving Him come into conflict with the demands of a secular state. This is not merely a problem of when someone demands that we do an openly wicked thing or die for refusing to do it, like refusing to turn over or kill Jews in Nazi Germany. This is a problem of when any pressure, any pressure at all, is put upon us to disobey the teachings of the Bible. Whether by the peers in your school, by fellow employees, by employers, your next door neighbor, or whomever it may be. Whenever you are pressured to do something or not to do something that you know by the teachings of the Bible to be wrong or right, your situation is that of these three men and your responsibility before God is the same also. You must do the right thing. You must not bow to the world's demands, even if the consequences are terminally costly.

Daniel 3:23-25 And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego fell bound into the midst of the fiery furnace. And then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished, and he rose in haste and spoke, saying to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king." "Look!" he answered, "I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God."

God is sovereign over even the most minute details of our life. If He can protect His people in such a situation as this, we do not know even up to the time that the guillotine blade is about to drop or the trigger is about to be pulled on the gun or whatever it may be, whether God is going to save us out of that or that His will is to let us to be a martyr. We do not know that, but we can have faith right up to the end that He has total control of whatever happens to us, and He gives us the strength we need to bear up under it.

You must know your Bible because the situations we face are often not black and white. If the situation is black and white, we know what to do. But the problems we face are quite often or usually gray. It seems that we should do

one thing, but then again, there is another side to it. If the situation does not seem gray immediately, if you talk to your friends, it will become gray soon enough since everyone will see it from a different point of view.

There is only one way to find your way through the gray areas: by studying, meditating on, seeking to apply the biblical principles, because God's biblical principles cover all gray areas, every last one of them. It is when we do not pay attention to the principles, and that is the spirit of the law, that we end up in gray areas and make bad mistakes. We may not be breaking the letter of the law, but in that gray area we may be breaking the spirit of the law. We may not have killed somebody, but do we hate them? We just broke the law and so on down the Ten Commandments. There are things in it we may not fully understand, that is, the Scriptures, but when we do understand them, they are clear, and the path is dark because the world is dark, but the Bible illuminates the gate to the right path and shows us where to go.

Matthew 7:13-14 "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction [You could also say "gray is the gate and wide is the gray gate."], and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."

You must be willing to pay any price necessary to stay true to Jesus Christ—any price.

There are times when when Christians are told bow down or die as Daniel's three friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego were. Through the ages, followers of Christ have refused to bow down. Many have died. The history of the church is filled with the stories of the martyrs. At other times, it is not death that is required, but such things as loss of reputation, loss of a success or advancement, or the good opinion of our friends. We failed to do what is right because we are not willing to pay that high price. We were not ready to surrender everything to follow Jesus Christ. You can know that God is sovereign, and you can know what is right because you study the Bible, and yet you can still fail to do what is right, because you value something else more than your obedience to Christ.

In the Gulag Archipelago, the Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn reflects on why, in the notorious prison system of Russia, some prisoners seem to survive the interrogation and maintain their integrity, while others collapsed under it and lost their identity entirely. He says that it had to do with whether or not one was willing to pay the price for one's own integrity. Only the person who has renounced everything of the world can gain that victory.

You and I are servants of the sovereign God and our Savior Jesus Christ in the midst of a hostile world. The only way we are going to be able to stand against the world when it pressures us is if we are willing to give up everything to follow Christ. Jesus gave up everything for us. How much are we willing to give up for Him?

Luke 9:23-26 Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world [and all its riches and its treasures], and is himself destroyed or lost? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels."

Christians now, though not often subjected to open persecution, are frequently criticized by the world because of our association with Jesus Christ. And though the rack is not used and the fires of martyrdom are not kindled yet, it is often true that one who is a believer is called to suffer as a Christian.

We may be hated and despised. Our views may be regarded as narrow-minded and intolerant. Contemptuous nicknames because of our views are applied to us. Our former friends and acquaintances may leave us because we have become Christians. A wicked father or a frivolous worldly mother may oppose a child, or a husband may abuse a wife because of their beliefs. In all these cases, the same spirit essentially is required, which also attacked the earlier Christian martyrs. We must never be ashamed of God's way of life

that Jesus came to demonstrate how to live, regardless of whatever results may follow from our living it.

I Peter 4:16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.

We should praise God that we are deemed worthy to suffer in such a cause. It is a matter of thankfulness: 1) that we may have this evidence that we are true Christians and, 2) that we may desire the advantages which may result from suffering as Christ did, and in His work.

Nothing, to most people, would seem more disgraceful than a public whipping. It is a punishment inflicted, usually not so much because it gives pain, although that is true, as because it emphasizes the disgrace, the humiliation upon the person. No doubt the Jewish rulers wanted the apostles to be so emotionally affected with disgrace that they would be unwilling to appear again in public or to preach the gospel anymore. Yet in this way, the rulers were disappointed. The effect was just the reverse. Why did they rejoice in this way? Why did the apostles rejoice in such a way when they were constantly being attacked and even all of them were martyred except for John, as far as we know.

First, because it gave them the opportunity to imitate the example of Jesus Christ. He had been scourged and reviled, and they were glad that they were given the occasion to be treated as He was.

Second, because by this they had evidence that they were the friends and followers of Christ. It was clear that they were engaged in the same work that He was. They were enduring the same sufferings and striving to advance the same interest. As they love the work of God, they rejoiced, enduring even the shame and suffering which God's work of necessity involved. The Kingdom of the Father and of His Son Jesus Christ was that important to them. Is it that important to you?

Third, they had been told to expect this, that is, the apostles and their disciples and us, and they rejoiced that they had this evidence that they were engaged in the work of truth.

II Timothy 2:15 [Paul says] Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

Fourth, God's way of life is so exceptional in excellence and joy that they were willing for its sake to endure trial, persecution, and death. Even with all this, it is infinite gain, and we should be willing to endure these trials if by then we may gain a crown of glory as well.

Mark 10:28-30 Then Peter began to say to Him [that is, Jesus], "See, we have left all and followed You." So Jesus answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life."

We do gain brothers and sisters if we lost them. Each one of us is a brother and sister to one another.

Fifth, true Christians are the friends of Christ. We show our attachment and love for our friends by being willing to suffer for them, to bear dislike and criticism on their account, and to share their persecutions, their sorrows, and their tragedies.

Sixth, the apostles were engaged in the cause of innocence, truth, and benevolence. They had done nothing of which to be ashamed and they rejoiced, therefore, with a clear conscience of integrity and goodwill.

When worldly people disgrace themselves by harsh or revolting or contemptuous language or in conduct toward us, we should not feel that the disgrace belongs to us. It is to the world's shame. We certainly see this in the way that the Deep State is acting and pressuring and pushing and paying people to demonstrate today in this nation. That is the evil that is coming out in this nation that has been there underlying it all along. We should not be ashamed or distressed though their rage comes against us.

I Peter 4:14 If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified.

So we see the contrast between the world and God's people. Jesus Christ taught that we must be willing to die to be His followers, and that is the victory of faith that overcomes the world.

Please turn back to Acts 25 please, as we pick up the story again and continue on. The account of Paul's appearance before King Herod Agrippa II begins in verse 13 and continues to the end of Acts 26. Now, even if it is such a large section of the book, it is clearly a single story, which we can address in the time we have remaining. These verses recount the third of three formal defenses of the apostle Paul before the secular authorities after his arrest in Jerusalem.

Acts 25:13 And after some days King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus.

King Agrippa was the grandson of Herod the Great and the son of Herod Agrippa I who had arrested Peter and killed James. This was not an illustrious ancestry, but compared with his two immediate predecessors, he was a somewhat reasonable king. His family had been kings of Judea for several generations, three generations now. There is not much to say about him, though the fact that he was not guilty of the atrocities his father and grandfather had been guilty of is quite significant. True, he was living in an incestuous relationship with his sister, Bernice, which hardly commends him as a model of virtue. But as far as we know, he did not go around killing people on a whim, as his father and grandfather did, and there was at least this in his favor. He understood Paul's situation, which is how he got involved in this trial.

Acts 25:14-16 When they had been there many days. Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying: "There is a certain man left a prisoner by Felix [and they keep passing the buck back and back as far as whose fault it was in the first place], about whom the chief priests and the elders of the Jews informed me when I was in

Jerusalem, asking for a judgment against him. To them I answered, 'It is not the custom of the Romans to deliver any man to destruction before the accused meets the accusers face to face, and has opportunity to answer for himself concerning the charge against him.'

That is another thing that in this nation is not being allowed to happen. We are not being allowed to face our accusers, and the president is not and those others in the Cabinet and on and on and on are just being attacked and attacked with accusations and not being allowed to confront their accusers. So it is a shame, sad, but you see human nature and how it continues to do these evil things throughout history.

Acts 25:17-22 "Therefore when they had come together, without any delay, the next day I sat on the judgment seat and commanded the man be brought in. When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive. [See Paul was suffering for Jesus' sake, same as we do when we are persecuted. That was the real core of the issue.] And because I was uncertain of such questions, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there be judged concerning these matters. But when Paul appealed to be reserved for the decision of Augustus, I commanded him to be kept till I could send him to Caesar." Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I also would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," he said, "you shall hear him." [Festus speaking]

So Festus had inherited Paul from his predecessor, Felix. He did not understand the ways of the Jews very much and when the case involving Paul was handed over to him, he did not know how to evaluate it because the Jews had changed the issue from treason and all the rest of it to religious reasons. Festus could not understand what the trouble was about. Furthermore, as the trial had been drawing to a close, Paul appealed to Caesar, and Festus cunningly had seized upon this appeal and granted it. It got him out of the predicament. But now Festus had to send Paul to Rome, and he had to say in the formal documentation that would have to accompany Paul why he was sending him.

What was Paul accused of? Why should Festus be bothering the emperor with trivialities he could not understand himself? You see the confusion that has just surrounded this whole thing from the beginning. Furthermore, the testimony of Felix was that Paul had done nothing wrong, nothing that would merit his being put to death. It seemed to him that this was the case also. So what was he going to do? Did he dare send Paul to the emperor saying "there is no real accusation against him, at least none that we can understand? And as far as what we do understand, there is nothing that merits either your attention or his death." That was not a way to be popular with Caesar. But he had to send him because Paul was a citizen of Rome, guaranteed that right. So they had really dug a deep hole for themselves. Oh, would have tangled web.

So it was at this moment that King Agrippa and Bernice arrived from their capital north of Caesarea to pay respects to the new Roman governor, who was Festus. Festus, recognizing that here was a man who at least understood something about Jewish law and the customs and spirit of the Jews, recognized this as a significant opportunity. Agrippa said he would be glad to hear Paul so the scene was set for Paul's defense. There had been an initial defense before the Jews in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 22 couched in the Jewish language. There was also a second offense recorded in Acts 24 before Felix and a third much abbreviated defense before Festus recorded in Acts 25, both essentially Gentile in character.

The interesting thing to me in this is that God was involved all along. Who do you think had all this happen to Paul in this way, where he was repeatedly, just as Christ was repeatedly, found not guilty. Paul is repeatedly found not guilty, but also this enables Paul to be able to go to Rome. He goes in chains, but at least the trip was free, so to speak. I am sure he would rather pay for the trip. But God had a hand in this all the way through, even though He seems silent.

In Acts 25, we have a unique defense before a man who was on the side of the Jews and yet was obviously on very good terms with Rome. This may be why Luke records the trial so completely. We have already heard the

arguments. Besides, since Paul's defense was essentially his testimony, we have heard the parts that concern his early life and conversion, even more what is given in these formal defenses. This is what Luke records here.

So why are we getting this all over again? Well, apparently, Luke thought they were worth repeating. If he was right, and he must be, then the testimony that Paul gave on this occasion is something that we need to hear again, too. So it must be important. We are told that several very important people had gathered. They were important in terms of their position and power and they came together with great pomp and pageantry. Luke calls our attention to the people, to their positions, to the pomp, the power, and the pageantry.

Acts 25:23-27 So the next day, when Agrippa and Bernice had come with great pomp, and had entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at Festus' command Paul was brought in. [So Paul has another opportunity to witness to all of these leaders of this area of the Roman Empire.] And Festus said: "King Agrippa and all the men who are here present with us, you see this man about whom the whole assembly of the Jews petitioned me, both at Jerusalem and here, crying out that he was not fit to live any longer. But when I found that he had committed nothing deserving of death, and that he himself had appealed to Augustus, I decided to send him. I have nothing certain to write to my lord concerning him. Therefore I have brought him out before you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the examination has taken place, I may have something to write. For it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner and not to specify the charges against him."

You can see the frustration in his voice that he was presenting to the rest of the the body of leaders there. So Agrippa and Bernice, the Jewish king and his queen, were there. Festus, the governor, was there. The high ranking officers were present and these would be the commanders in charge of the Roman military division stationed in Caesarea. There were five of them at any given time, so there would have been at least five present. There were

also the leading men of the city. Perhaps some of them were retired military personnel, but most of them were merchants, those who would have money and be in positions of influence.

Here are the important people of this area of the world, with all their power and pageantry arrayed on one side, and here on the other side, brought out without even much warning or opportunity to prepare a special defense, is the spurned Jew from Tarsus, the apostle Paul. Talk about stacking the deck against someone! This is definitely the point of which he has reached. What a lopsided contest. All these great people with their positions, power, pomp, and pageantry on the one side, and on the other side, Paul, a degraded prisoner.

When we see the impressive things of this world, they usually seem to be what is lasting and stable. At least they are to people in the world. What could be more stable, more impressive, more weighty than the Roman Empire in the person of those who represented it? Caesar was thought of as God at that time. Nevertheless, everything secular and physical was in the process of passing away. In time the people also passed away, they died. Eventually, even the Roman Empire passed away. They keep trying to resurrect it, but it keeps passing away. But the words of Jesus Christ to which the apostle Paul was called to bear witness, prevailed.

We all need to be warned about forgetting. The account in Acts chapters 23-26 have been written to help keep us from forgetting these things we need to remember. Jesus Christ assures us that "heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away." The apostle Paul was not about to forget. He had been called by God and he knew it, and he had been given a commission and he understood his commission, and he was not about to be overpowered by the display of power.

Paul's story has generally been told in three parts. Paul's early life in Judaism, Paul's conversion and commission, and Paul's post-conversion life and witness. This is what Paul used to witness of the gospel. First, Paul's early life in Judaism.

Acts 26:1-3 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." So Paul stretched out his hand and answered

for himself: "I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently."

He did this out of respect for the positions that he was under. He respected the king, he honored the king, just as we are to do today.

Paul begins by talking about his life in Judaism, and what he stresses here is that he was a faithful Jew and he had been raised a Jew, having received the traditions of the Jews. From his fathers he knew the law so far as he knew and understood the law, he had lived by it.

Acts 26:4-7 "My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee. And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews."

He had lived according to the strictest sect of his day. He was a Pharisee. We have a negative view of the Pharisees because Jesus called them hypocrites and even worse.

Matthew 23:27-28 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

Truly, it is an accurate description of the entire human race. We are all hypocrites to some degree, yet in their day the Pharisees had a good reputation despite their deceptions. Paul's defense was that the only things he was proclaiming were what was in the law. Things well understood by the Jews, at least those who believed the Old Testament Scriptures, as the

Pharisees did. Paul's main point was the promise of the resurrection. He interrupted his address at this point to ask wisely,

Acts 26:8-11 "Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead? Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities."

That was a zealot, and it was a zealot against the Christians, against God's people.

We are going to see as the story continues that his Gentile hearers did consider the resurrection to be incredible, just as people consider it incredible today. But Paul was a Jew raised on the Scriptures, and the Jews as a whole, and the Pharisees in particular, believed in the supernatural resurrection, although the Sadducees did not.

Now we come to the second section of Paul's defense, and Paul's witness. The second part of Paul's address concerns his conversion and the commission God gave him. He describes that Jesus Christ, in person and risen from the dead, appeared to him.

Acts 26:12-18 "While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' So I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet

reveal to you. [The most persecuting terrible man in the entire world was just called by God. So there is hope for any one of us on this earth.] I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who were sanctified by faith in Me.'

So the apostle Paul was turned around 180 degrees in his thinking. He could testify to the grace of God in his transformation. If Jesus Christ has stopped you and turned you around, then you can testify too and if you are not testifying to God's grace or if you feel you cannot, you need to examine yourself to see whether you really are a follower of Jesus Christ by living His way of life. That is how we witness. We witness by the example that we set.

The third section of Paul's witness is verses 19-23. The third part of Paul's defense before King Agrippa had to do with Paul's post-conversion life and witness, his service for Christ following his initial conversion.

Acts 26:19-21 "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance. For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me."

So the first thing he stresses is his obedience in verse 19, though he expresses it in negative form. "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient."

Of the first marks of our conversion is that we obey Jesus Christ and we might even call it the first mark, except that faith itself is the first evidence. We must ask ourselves, "Am I obeying Jesus Christ's teaching? Am I obeying the inspired written Word of God?"

Luke 6:46-49 "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say? Whoever comes to Me, and hears My

sayings and does them, I will show you whom he is like: He is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently against that house, and could not shake it, for it was founded on the rock. But he who heard and did nothing is like a man who built a house on the earth without a foundation, against which the stream beat vehemently; and immediately it fell. And the ruin of that house was great."

If you are disobeying Jesus, you are not His disciple. If you are not His disciple, you are not being saved. People who truly hear the voice of Jesus Christ do not ignore it.

The second thing Paul stresses is the scope of his ministry, in verse 20, indicating that it widened more and more as God works through him to reach others.

Acts 26:20 "But declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance."

So it is truly amazing that after all that has transpired from beginning of the acts of the apostles, until Paul's trial, that we find the apostle Paul describing the sphere of his ministry in almost the same terms as Jesus Christ used when He gave his missionary charge to the disciples before Pentecost.

Acts 1:8 "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

We see there that Paul continually remembered that that was his commission, that was what he was told to do. He was told to witness and he was told by Jesus Christ exactly where to witness.

We have that same commission to witness. Some of us speak our witness, and we all have to live it. So if we are not speaking the witness, then we must be living the witness—living it, living God's way of life.

Paul had been doing what Jesus described. Why? Because he was obedient to the Lord. That is what Jesus had said His people were to do.

The third thing Paul stresses is that his service following his conversion is to preach the gospel.

Acts 26:22-23 "Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come—that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."

This is exactly what he was being accused of preaching, but yet it was exactly what the Jews own scriptures taught and said to them. They did not even recognize that they were so blind.

So what is the gospel? It is more than proclaiming the coming Kingdom of God. First, that Christ would suffer, that is, die. This was a testimony to the atonement and salvation. Second, that Jesus would rise from the dead. This was a testimony to the resurrection. Third, that being raised from the dead, He would proclaim light to His own people and to the Gentiles. Light here represents the gospel, which includes the truth, the Kingdom of God, and eternal life. This testimony happened through witnesses like Paul.

What should be our response to such a witness, such a gospel? Paul gives the example to this as well and no doubt for the explicit benefit of King Agrippa, Festus, and the others. He says that the Gentiles should repent, turn to God, and prove the repentance by their deeds. To repent means to turn around and if you are going in one direction and repent, you turn around and go in another direction. It is the equivalent of conversion, which means the same thing. It is what had happened to Paul on the road to Damascus. He was going one way, but God turned him around so that he went in a different way entirely. That must happen to everyone who would find salvation in Christ.

Turning from sin and going in another way also means turning to God. Because if you just turn and you do not go any specific way, then there is

something else that is going to fill that void. Christianity is not just negative. It is not just "sin not" or "abandon your worldly lifestyle." Christianity is mostly positive. It means finding righteousness and a new life in Christ, and this new life is not only different but better. It is a life lived in and with God.

So Paul also said that we need to prove our repentance by our deeds. We can fool ourselves into mouthing just about anything, and we know we are Christians when our lives are changed and we begin to do good works. That is the proof—when we begin to follow after Jesus Christ and obey Him.

If this is what the gospel really is, seeking first the way of life of the Kingdom of God, then it is the most radical thing that could possibly be proclaimed in the world. Obviously it will receive our resistance, to say the least.

If Paul had been speaking here merely of his own religious experience, Agrippa and Festus might have regarded Paul's views merely as religious ideas or as Festus did, say, philosophy. They would not have mattered much because who cares about philosophical opinions. No, Paul used his own example and historical examples to prove that to these secular people. Ah, but if you are talking about a gospel centered in a resurrected Christ, someone who lived in history, who was crucified, who rose from the dead, and now commands all people everywhere to turn from sin to God and to do works of righteousness, that is a radical message, and it cannot be ignored because it causes things to be turned upside down.

Paul's testimony stirred up opposition on this occasion, Paul did not even get to finish, though he seems to have been near the end of his address. No doubt God felt it was enough. Festus, who had been listening all this time, interrupted.

Acts 26:24 Now as he [Paul] thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning has driven you mad!"

Festus had never heard anything as crazy as the truth of God, the true gospel, in his life. He might have been willing to hear Paul talk about some future resurrection, particularly if it could be thought of metaphorically.

Most people are at least willing to consider the possibility of some future state in which we will all possibly have to answer for our wrongs. But that was not what Paul was talking about here. He was talking about a literal bodily resurrection that had happened in history that had made all the difference in his life and in the lives of others who had met Jesus Christ. It was this resurrection that was incredible and intolerable to Festus. "You must be crazy," was Festus' response. His intellectual pride would not let him grasp the truth. Paul, who all along had primarily been addressing Agrippa, turned to Festus making it a perceptive little transition, in which he began by replying to Festus but quickly switching over to Agrippa here.

Acts 26:25-28 But he [that is Paul, still remaining respectful] said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. For the king, before whom I speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe." Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian."

Agrippa was no Roman. He would have had some acquaintance with what Moses and the prophets had written. He may even have had considerable understanding of the Jewish religious books. Paul was accurate when he referred to the events surrounding the life of Jesus of Nazareth by saying that they were not done in a corner. The whole world at that time knew of those events, at least vaguely, if not in detail. Agrippa would have known something of these events, too, being the king of Judea. But Agrippa still had his position in life to think about, and he was not about to let Paul turn his life upside down with the truth.

This is the attitude of most people who come across God's truth, but it is so superior it almost persuades them. But not quite, does it? How many people have come across God's truth and just passed by? How many people have been called and actually come to the church and learned and then fallen away? They were almost persuaded, but not quite. Agrippa probably believed in the resurrection, but he had his position, and he just could not humble himself, acknowledging himself to be a sinner like anybody else and

receive Jesus Christ as his Savior. He was put on the spot, embarrassed no doubt before the governor, so he dodged the question, saying, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian."

Acts 26:29-32 And Paul said, "I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains." When he said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them; and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, "This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains." Then Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

So following this non-conclusive trial, it was decided that Paul, the Roman citizen, and some other prisoners should be sent to Rome, Italy. A centurion of the Augustine Regiment named Julius was ordered to set sail and deliver Paul and the others to Caesar. The apostle Paul's trip to Rome is a continuation of the saga, and it is for the next time that I speak.

Before we end this, please turn with me to Matthew 16 for the final scripture. Christians were being persecuted. Agrippa would be too ashamed to be called a Christian and this is precisely what people do today. When the true gospel of the resurrected Savior and of the coming Kingdom of God is proclaimed, a gospel that demands that we turn from sin and begin to show our conversion by good works, the world puts up barriers and rejects it for precisely these reasons: Pride of intellect, pride of recognition, pride of life—pride.

Matthew 16:25-27 "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works."

The words of Jesus to which the apostle Paul was called to bear witness triumphed. It prevailed not only during Paul's day because it was the truth, and it was spoken, but it also prevailed in the decade to come, and the decade after that, and the century after that, and the millennium after that.

It is that the gospel of Jesus Christ, God's truth, is with us in power, even today, when the Roman Empire is just a memory. So it is, in the words of of Christ, in the form of the Old and New Testaments, that we find comfort and encouragement to face times of stress, even when God is silent otherwise.