

## Scripture Reading:

**Acts 25:10-27** “So Paul said, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. 11 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." 12 Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, "You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!"

13 And after some days King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus. 14 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, 15 about whom the chief priests and the elders of the Jews informed me, when I was in Jerusalem, asking for a judgment against him. 16 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.' 17 Therefore when they had come together, without any delay, the next day I sat on the judgment seat and commanded the man to be brought in. 18 When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, 19 but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive. 20 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. 21 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." 22 Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I also would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," he said, "you shall hear him." "

# 'Paul Before Kings'

It may seem like it has been a while since we last visited Luke's orderly account in the Book of Acts... because it has! For three weeks we focused on three important Sundays in our church calendar remembering Christ's ascension to the Father's right hand, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, and the nature of our Triune God. After that I was blessed to have time to relax in Oregon for the past two weeks. We enjoyed time with my oldest son and his wife, were blessed with a SUNNY family camp on the Oregon coast and had the privilege of bringing God's Word for the first time at our sponsoring church in Oregon City. As always, I appreciate Theron and Mark carrying the load here at Church of the King along with all those who helped and for Mike's willingness to fill the pulpit here in my absence.

So, as we move through the Book of Acts exegetically [which simply means working through the verses in order] it is very appropriate that we come to a section where Luke gives us a sort of review of what has just happened: We won't cover much new ground, but rather in a household sense I will reset the table for another sumptuous meal! As we review what has happened, we also want to remember the big pictures that we have often discussed.

- History has moved just where God said it would when He gave Daniel the interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

Babylon, the mighty head of gold on the statue that terrified the King, was conquered by the Persian Empire which in turn gave way to the Greeks representing the chest of silver and the thighs of bronze. Next came the legs of iron: The mighty Roman Empire.

But the once powerful Roman Empire had now been mixed with many surrounding Kingdoms and was divided, represented by the ten toes of iron mixed with ceramic clay on the statue in the King's dream.

Then came the stone cut without hands that would crush the statue and fill the whole earth.

- The Kingdoms of this world would give way to the Kingdom of Jesus!

Today, all of these ancient civilizations are often looked upon as the source of our modern wisdom and knowledge:

- Any educated person looks up to the Golden Age of Greece & Rome!

In reality, they were God's instruments that He used to protect His people and to prepare for the coming of Jesus, the stone cut without hands. At the same time, God was preparing to deal with the nation of Israel. They rejected His Messiah and crucified the Lord of glory and now their time of judgment was at hand as Jesus predicted to His disciples on the Mount of Olives just before He was sacrificed for our sins.

It is in light of these two great movements of history that we should consider Paul's appearance before Kings here in Acts chapter 25.

- I think you could make a strong case for this being God's final warning to both the Roman Empire and the Nation of Israel!

We also need to remember this from Paul's perspective, which can bring us great comfort as we face what often seem to be impossible or useless situations in our own lives... Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles was arrested in Jerusalem as he tried to show that he was not hostile to proper Jewish traditions.

- He has been subjected to three unfair trials where in each case he should have been declared innocent and set free.

He has now spent over two years in prison here in Caesarea because one corrupt Roman governor wanted bribes and the next wanted to curry favor with the Jews.

When we last visited the Book of Acts we had reached the point where Paul appealed to Caesar, exercising his right as a Roman citizen, and Governor Festus declaring, "to Caesar you will go!

But this governor now has a problem on his hands: He knows that he should have done his job and released Paul as an innocent man, but he tried to have his cake and eat it as well and now he has no real way to explain to Caesar why this obviously innocent man is being sent up on appeal. Luke tells us about some new characters that join the story and this gives the governor a way to try and find a reason and it gives Paul an opportunity to witness before Kings. Something Jesus promised would happen as we read in Matthew 10

"16 Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. 17 But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. 18 You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. 19 But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; 20 for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you."

At this point in time, both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Mark had been written and I am sure that Paul took great comfort from these words as we should as well.

So we pick up Luke's orderly account in verse 13 of chapter 25:

"And after some days King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus. 14 When they had been there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying:..."

- Let me pause there and make two points:

First, we see more time passing with Paul just sitting in prison. I don't want to make too big a deal out of this, but we need to remember that Paul had to sit there day after day and it should be a great lesson in patience!

The second point is to notice that Luke says that Festus laid his case before the King. We need to remember that the one with the real power was Festus as the Roman governor.

- This is why I can make the case that Paul appears before and witnesses to Kings or magistrates.

So the governor proceeds to explain what had happened to King Agrippa: “Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying: "There is a certain man left a prisoner by Felix, 15 about whom the chief priests and the elders of the Jews informed me, when I was in Jerusalem, asking for a judgment against him.”

- Even after two years the Jews are still after Paul, willing to commit murder to get him out of the way!
- The Governor wisely stood by the justice that was provided for citizens of Rome:

16 “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.'”

- Because we are made in the image of God, even pagan nations reflect God’s character as the Spirit restrains sin in the world.
- However, I think the case could be made that this governor should have reviewed Paul’s first trial and set him free, but in an effort to win favor with the Jews, Fetus begins to dig a hole: One he will find difficult to escape.

17 “Therefore when they had come together, without any delay, the next day I sat on the judgment seat and commanded the man to be brought in. 18 When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, 19 but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive.”

It sounds as if Governor Fetus hoped that there would be serious charges against Paul that he could deal with swiftly & thus win favor with the Jews.

- However, just as Governor Felix before him saw, there were no real charges against Paul and thus Paul should have been set free.

We must also notice that Paul’s testimony about Jesus comes through in all of these proceedings. Paul always preaches the Gospel as he presented it to the Saints at Corinth:

“ 3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. 6 After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.”

Governor Fetus had rightly discerned that the real disrupt was over “a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive.” This is the heart of the Christian Gospel that must be believed, but it is not believed with blind faith.

- We believe the witnesses!
- It is because of the hardness of men’s hearts that they refuse to believe if they have not been given the gift of faith.

An important lesson for all of us that we can take away from this account is the fact that it is NOT how well we make the case that determines whether someone will believe...

- We must not beat ourselves, thinking I should have said this or that and then perhaps he or she would have come to Jesus!

We must be sure we are presenting the Gospel, but it is not the quality of our presentation that brings results.

- Think for a moment about Governor Fetus who goes on to say, “20 And because I was uncertain of such questions,”

Paul had already written his letter to Corinth and we know he would have shared the same information many times during his stay here in Caesarea.

The governor or his various counselors could easily have called in Peter or John, any of the Apostles or some of the 500 witnesses to ascertain the truth of what Paul was saying!

- But in the hardness of their hearts they claim ignorance.
- The heart of unbelief must always hide from the truth because the truth brings conviction and thus we must always cover our evangelism with much prayer!

So Governor Fetus avoided the real truth about Jesus and tried to find a way to make everyone happy:

“20 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. 21 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.” 22 Then Agrippa said to Festus, “I also would like to hear the man myself.” “Tomorrow,” he said, “you shall hear him.” ”

- So the stage is set for Paul to stand before Kings and once again give a powerful testimony about Jesus.

In the coming weeks we will learn a bit more about these kings and how Paul presented his testimony.

- There will be many lessons for us to learn along the way!

But for this morning, I want to end where I began, considering the big picture. I may spoil the story by revealing that we have NO evidence of any conversion of Governor Fetus, King Agrippa or his wife Bernice, nor any of the others who were present... So, was Paul a failure?

- Absolutely not because Paul was a faithful witness, which is what we are all called upon to be.
- The results are in God’s hands!

So, was God a failure?

- In a moment we will sing a hymn of response based on Psalm 110 which confirms the obvious truth that God did not fail.

If none of these individuals turned to Jesus then they have been sent to hell and will spend all eternity in the Lake of Fire. God’s justice has been carried out for all to see: The wages of sin is death.

- The fact that they were not given the gift of faith is not a failure on the part of God but part of His mysterious sovereign plans.

The same is true with nations as we see in Psalm 110: “Jehovah said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”

- On Ascension Sunday we asked and answered the simple question, where is Jesus today?
- So, IF Jesus is still at the Father’s right hand, then we can know for certain that God is still making His enemies into His footstool...
- He is subjecting the nations of the earth to the rule of His Son!

The story of the Book of Acts is how the Spirit fills the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus and this is pictured for us in verse two and following: 2 “Jehovah shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of Your enemies! 3 Your people shall be volunteers in the day of Your power; In the beauties of holiness, from the womb of the morning, You have the dew of Your youth. 4 Jehovah has sworn and will not relent, “You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek.” 5 Jehovah is at Your right hand; He shall execute kings in the day of His wrath. 6 He shall judge among the nations, He shall fill the places with dead bodies, He shall execute the heads of many countries.”

- Both King Agrippa and Bernice lived well into old age and died quiet deaths...
- But they were executed by Jesus in His wrath because they refused to bow the knee when they had the opportunity here before Paul.

They may have been given a fullness of years in their individual lives, but by AD 70 the nation of Israel had been destroyed and the Roman Empire was beginning its long decline at the hands of Emperor Nero: Footstools for Jesus.

The Apostle Paul would not see much of the success of his work in his lifetime, but over the next thousand years the 'so-called' glory of Rome would be replaced by Christendom as Christ began to rule over more and more nations bringing blessings we enjoy down to our own day. Over the next thousand years many of those nations turned their backs on Jesus while others have come under His rule and advanced His Kingdom even further.

The final verse of Psalm 110 reminds us that this is a long battle and that God is very patient...

7 "He shall drink of the brook by the wayside; Therefore He shall lift up the head."

The picture here is of a tired soldier or general in a long campaign pausing at a stream to refresh himself and then lifting up his head to continue on.

- So what will the next thousand years bring as we ponder the advance of Christ's Kingdom?

Obviously we cannot know for sure just as the disciples probably did not sit around and plan all the details of the coming Christendom. In the same way, those in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century could not have imagined what God would do in the Western Hemisphere in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium.

I suspect those living a thousand years from now will know a much different southern hemisphere than we do today. Perhaps our once Christian North America will have been overrun by Hindus or Muslims the way the Middle East was in the 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

- All of that is in God's hands, as He brings the nations under the rule of His Son Jesus!

Let me close with this thought to ponder: Paul appeared before Kings and as we will see in the coming weeks he shared what was really important: Jesus and His resurrection. If we could have been around to hear some of the discussions regarding the future among these Roman and Jewish leaders gathered there at Caesarea, it would have all revolved around Rome and Jerusalem.

- The Jews would have insisted that they were God's people and Herod's Temple would stand for thousands of years!
- And of course the proud Romans were going to rule with their Caesars for thousands of years.

By their own admission, they knew nothing of Jesus and the power of His resurrection and yet THAT is what would shape and rule the future of western civilization for the next thousand years...

- NOT a Roman Caesar nor the Jewish Temple!

So while they debated who the next Caesar or the next High Priest would be, the real future lay in the hands of those who came to faith in Jesus and the covenant children they would bring to the Lord in baptism. It would not be those who killed and enslaved who prevailed in the end...

- But those who brought life and hope, compassion and caring as disciples of Jesus!

In a moment, we will be refreshed here at the Table of our Lord: Then we will lift up our heads and prepare to be commissioned as today's disciples who the Holy Spirit will use to fill the earth with the Kingdom of Jesus.

- So, let us now respond with some hearty singing as we remember that God keeps His promises!