

# Trusting God's Ways

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] I'm going to start with what I think you will identify as a bit of a bugbear yourself, but we all dread the interaction over the telephone with the customer service of a company or a government agency whenever we need to raise an issue or complaint.

And not only are we put on hold for hours on end, and I'm not exaggerating, but what I find more frustrating is having to repeat my story each time I'm passed from one person to the next.

Now, why can't they just transfer me to the right person the first time who can deal with my issue? I'm not sure. But each time a new person handles my query, I have to start over again telling my story.

And the story gets longer, doesn't it? Because I need to also include the last conversation I just had with the person who just transferred me as to why they couldn't solve my problem.

And you know, I have to actually list all the things that we've tried, not just with the most recent, but all the way to the start, so that this latest person is not going to start suggesting it to me again.

[ 1 : 1 9 ] Like, no, don't tell me to turn off the device and turn it on again. I've already done that a hundred times, and it does not work.

Well, if that sounds frustrating, then you can imagine how Paul feels as he languishes in jail, because for two years now, he has been continually trying to explain himself to Felix.

And not only Felix, but if you've been with us over the last few weeks, there was Lysias, the Roman commander, who brought him from Jerusalem to Caesarea, and then before that, the Sanhedrin, and before that, the mob.

And now, another governor is appointed. Festus is taking over from Felix. And do you think there was a proper handover?

Not a chance. So Paul is really back at square one, it seems, doesn't it? It feels like *deja vu*. Oh, actually, we were talking, Rachel and Naomi.

[ 2 : 2 3 ] *Deja vu* is when something feels like it's happened, but it's not happened, right? For Paul, it actually has happened, and it's happening again, so it seems. But before Paul even gets a chance to explain his situation to the new governor, the Jews get to Festus first.

So we read in verse 1, Three days after arriving in the province, Festus went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem, where the chief priests and the Jewish leaders appeared before him and presented the charges against Paul.

They 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. So the Jews are still plotting to kill Paul.

Things are repeating itself, except this time it's not just the 40 men, if you remember, who are fasting and not willing to eat until they kill Paul. You wonder after two years whether they were still fasting.

But anyway, this time, however, it's the Jewish leaders who are thick in the midst of the plot. Now Festus hadn't had a chance by then to meet Paul yet, so he answers, Paul is being held at Caesarea, and I myself am going there soon.

[ 3 : 32 ] Let some of your leaders come with me, and if the man has done anything wrong, they can press charges against him there. So at least Festus is not going to say yes immediately, but this too sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Because just like Felix before, Paul is now going to have to again answer to the charges pressed by the Jewish leaders. Now I thought that Paul had already proven their charges, but apparently he has to do it again.

So verse 6, After spending eight or ten days with them, Festus went down to Caesarea. The next day he convened the court and ordered that Paul be brought before him. When Paul came in, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him.

They brought many serious charges against him, but again they could not prove them. Then Paul made his defense, I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law, against the temple, or against Caesar.

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? Now there's really no need for Festus to say that.

[ 4 : 37 ] Festus could have judged Paul there and then in Caesarea, just as Felix could have. Why the need to bring Paul to Jerusalem? Well, we know, don't we?

Just like Felix, Festus wanted to do the Jews a favor. And so again, it's repeating itself that we have a governor that's compromised, who is seeking political advantage instead of justice.

But this time, Paul is not going to fall for it. And besides, if we recall from last week in chapter 24, verse 16, Paul testified before Felix that he stood before both God and man, knowing where he stood.

That is, that he strived to keep his conscience clear before God and man. So, Paul knew that he was innocent before God. His conscience was clear.

And therefore, he was also innocent before man and before Festus. But second, Paul also knew his rights as a Roman citizen. So he goes on, I'm now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to have been tried.

[ 5 : 47 ] I've not done anything wrong to the Jews, as you yourselves know very well. If, however, I'm guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if I have, if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, then no one has the right to hand me over to them.

I appeal to Caesar. Now, here, it's pretty clear that Paul has not appealed to Caesar because he was afraid to go to Jerusalem in order that he did not die.

But he certainly knew that justice was not going to be found in Jerusalem. And now it seems he knows he's not going to get it in Caesarea as well.

And so, given an opportunity, Paul was not passive in trying to seek a resolution to his case. Paul sees the opportunity now to have the Lord's assurance that he would get to Rome come to pass, where he would be able to testify before kings.

So, this appeal then takes it out of Festus' hands because Roman citizens have a right, if they are not satisfied, to have their cases heard in Rome.

[ 6 : 59 ] And so, in verse 12, after Festus had conferred with his council, he declared, Now, you have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you will go. Now, you might think events would move swiftly from here and Paul would head to Rome without much delay.

But no, because we find out in verse 13 that a few days later, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. Since they were spending many days there, Festus discussed Paul's case with the king.

He said, There is a man here whom Felix left as a prisoner. When I went to Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews brought charges against him and asked that he be condemned. I told them that it is not the Roman custom to hand over anyone before they have faced their accusers and have had an opportunity to defend themselves against the charges.

When they came here with me, I did not delay the case, but convened the court the next day and ordered the man to be brought in. When his accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any 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. I was at a loss how to investigate such matters, so I asked if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial for these charges.

[ 8 : 21 ] But 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. Now, if you look at this, I think actually Festus has done quite a good summary of the events up to now, even though I think Festus does paint himself in a rather good light.

But we also know that whether it was Paul himself that spoke directly to Festus or Festus hears about what Paul is preaching from others, it's clear that Festus did hear the gospel because he could report to Agrippa that they were not arguing about the resurrection in general, but that Paul was claiming a man called Jesus had risen from the dead.

And so Festus was able to see that even though he did not know enough about the truth of Paul's claims, the debate between Paul and Jews was really a theological disagreement.

And so really, is not something that is punishable by death under Roman law. Paul, Festus knew, was actually not guilty of breaking Roman law.

Festus should have released Paul just as Felix should have. But given his appeal to Caesar, he now then has to prepare a brief to accompany Paul to Rome so that when he gets there, someone can read it and understand what Paul is doing there.

[ 9 : 52 ] And so that's why he thinks that King Agrippa may be of some value here because as the ruler over much of Palestine, that is where the Jews were living, Festus thinks that perhaps King Agrippa might have some insight or advice to offer as to how to frame this case.

And so in verse 22, when Agrippa said to Festus, I would like to hear this man myself, Festus replied, yep, tomorrow you will hear him.

And so guess what? Paul is going to have to testify again. Repeat himself and once more to yet another ruler.

Now next week we'll get a closer look at just how Paul testifies before King Agrippa. It is actually, I think, the longest and most complete testimony by him thus far.

But for this week, I just want to consider just why Luke has included these accounts here. Now firstly, you need to notice that God is actually not mentioned at all throughout the passage.

[ 11 : 00 ] Jesus is mentioned once, but only in the third person. in reference to Paul's claim that he is alive. And yet, even though there is no record explicitly of God working or being active, we can see God's promises still being fulfilled, can't we?

Just as the Lord Jesus had promised Paul, there is now almost a clear plan, a clear pathway for Paul to get to Rome. And in the meantime, just as God had promised, Paul gets ample opportunity to testify before multiple rulers and kings.

So, despite the many twists and turns, everything is happening according to God's plan. It's just not at the same pace that we might expect, or even that Paul may have wished.

But despite the absence of God's name in this passage, God is very much active in these events. And God is actually capable of working in and through the actions and decisions of ordinary humans.

There does not need to be supernatural intervention in order for God's will to be done. God can even use people that don't answer to him, that have no regard for his will to do his work, even when they themselves think that they are just acting in their own selfish interests.

[ 12 : 34 ] You know, there are times in our lives and in the church's history when we see God's hand clearly, when his providence is unmistakable, that we cannot deny it, that God is at work.

But more often than not, life just seems to go on as normal, as though God is not really actively at work.

We go from one week to another, we turn up at church, we go to work, we study for exams. It all seems rather ordinary, like, is God in and amongst all this?

And yet, we mustn't think that God is absent, that he's no longer at work. No, God is still very much bringing his purposes for our lives and for his people to pass.

Now, whether Paul was frustrated with God or doubted his promises, we don't know. But you, you know, imagine that if you are languishing in jail for two years, right, constantly appearing before one governor after another, without any apparent progress in your case, it can be very tempting, isn't it, to wonder if God knows what he's doing.

[ 13 : 53 ] And you know, Luke could have easily summarized these chapters as he has done before in, earlier in Acts with Paul's missionary journeys. He could have just summarized all these events into a few short paragraphs.

In fact, I've tried to do this. I've pretended to be the writer of the book of Acts. And so I imagine that if I got to this point, I might say something like this, which I've written. When Festus became governor, he visited Jerusalem, and the Jewish leaders attempted to bring Paul back to Jerusalem as they plotted to kill him on the way.

But Festus tries Paul in Caesarea, and even though Paul could not be found guilty, did not wish to release him. So Paul appealed to Caesar in Rome, but before he departs, King Agrippa arrives and agrees to hear what Paul has to say.

I don't know how many marks you might give me for that summary. But I think it's pretty good. If not perfect, maybe a sort of a grade A, maybe. Now if this was the New Testament reading for today, then the sermon would be very short, isn't it?

Ten minutes, two paragraphs. But instead, we have Luke's detailed account, 22 verses and counting. Now I think he's done this because he's trying to slow down the entire journey for Paul.

[ 15 : 15 ] so that when we read it, we get the same sense of how much time has indeed elapsed. We feel the setbacks, the waiting around, the need for Paul to just keep repeating himself.

You know, the one step forward and two step back. It's like when I bemoan my experience with that said company on the customer hotline. if I really wanted you to feel my pain, I would give you the blow by blow account, wouldn't I?

I would describe the music I listened to when I was put on hold. I would dramatize the ignorance of the person on the other side. I mentioned each time they asked me to turn off the device and turn it back on and off and on and off and on and then say how long, you know, and wait to tell you how long it took for the device to come back on, which is never instantaneous, only for the problem to still remain.

And did I tell you that halfway through that conversation the phone cut off and I had to call back again and get to the back of the queue to wait only for me to then get a totally new person to pick up the phone and start from scratch again explaining.

Now I wouldn't even mention which telco company this is, but you can imagine one of those. But you get the sense, don't you?

[16:53] I hope you do. It took me a lot of effort to try and explain this, just how torturous this whole experience was for me. And that's the same here with Luke. He's not really trying to get you to see how torturous it was for Paul, but we do get the sense of how frustrating it can be, isn't it, for Paul.

But at the same time, as we read it, there is no sense that Paul ever doubted God or got impatient or frustrated. Instead, Paul just kept testifying to the truth again and again, whether it's the same person or not.

And sometimes, you know, when we feel like we're stuck in life too like Paul, we may wonder what God has planned for us. Or, you know, how long, Lord, before things start moving forward again?

Why is nothing seeming to be working? And, you know, for many of us, having lived in Melbourne through the pandemic and the lockdowns, that was how we felt, isn't it?

Every week, we saw the numbers, the vaccination rates, and it just seemed like it was never going to end. And many of us struggled, didn't we, to cope with that?

[18:04] And sometimes church can feel a bit like that too. We gather faithfully, week in, week out, and we may feel a little let down that we haven't experienced exponential and explosive growth.

It's been three months since the plant has happened. Why are we back at 150, 160? There's no unveiling of some exciting and new vision or initiative from me.

Maybe that's what you're expecting, maybe that's not. And so we think, is God working? And that's the sense in which I call having the revival syndrome, isn't it?

Sometimes we go to a Christian conference or attend another church and we see God on fire somewhere else. And then we feel like, are we missing out? Is God not working? Now there are certainly times in church history where God does bring revival, so don't get me wrong.

But more often than not, God is still at work in what may seem very ordinary times, where sort of things are just ticking along, and yet it's still the same power of God's spirit at work.

[19:18] Now, I'm going to sort of do a little bit of a straw poll, but if you look at most of the people at church, most of us as believers are people who have actually grown up in the faith, right?

Just look around, how many of you have grown up in a Christian home, or at least have had a parent who was a Christian? Have a look around, it's most of us, actually, more than 50% in most churches.

And so for many of us, we don't have that dramatic intervention by God in our life that suddenly become Christians. Instead, it's through our parents' faithfulness that we grow in faith.

It's through them bringing us to church and we sitting under our kids' church leaders that God works among us. But let's not underestimate what God does with that.

That the faithfulness of this daily, weekly, yearly, by parents, by kids' leaders, by church leaders, let's not underestimate what God does that has this impact over many generations.

[ 20 : 35 ] Because when a parent is faithful and their children become Christians, and then their children's children become Christians, a whole generation, isn't it, more than just one or two people are impacted for God's kingdom.

And I'm not just talking about the children and the children's children, but I'm talking about the children growing up to then also minister to others. And so by the faithfulness of just one person or one couple, God works, but not in a space of two or three months or one year even, but over decades and centuries.

But we see the impact over time. But then often in the lull of those moments, in the months or years when nothing amazing seems to happen, those are the times when we actually still need to trust that God is still doing his work.

We need to trust God's way as the prophet Isaiah, or God used the prophet Isaiah to say to us in chapter 55. For God says, my thoughts are not your thoughts.

neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

[ 21 : 58 ] So God really does know what he's doing. We may not see it from week to week to week, but God's timing is perfect.

faith. And so we simply need to be faithful and patient and keep trusting in him. And then when we get to the very end and we look back when all is said and done, we will marvel and see just how God has brought his purposes to pass in each and every one of our lives.

So trusting that, we don't just praise God at the end, we can praise and trust God now. Let's pray. Father, we praise you for your ways.

We give glory to all your plans. Your ways are indeed higher than our ways, and your thoughts beyond our thoughts. And while we may not see or understand fully the finer details of your plan for our lives, help us to see that you have indeed poured out your spirit on all your church, disciples of Jesus Christ, that we may be witnesses to him to the ends of the world.

Help us to see that you are at work even in the midst of what appears to be setbacks and trials in our lives. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.