

# Paul Before Festus

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let us pray as we stand. Father, we ask that you will open the eyes of our hearts to your truth. Help us to understand your word this morning. And by your Holy Spirit, would you shape us and change us through this through this word that you have given to us. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

Amen. Well, we are right in the middle of the trials of Paul in Caesarea in more ways than one. So we've we've heard about Paul's time for the last two years and being really at the mercy of a very unjust governor named Felix.

And in our passage today, Paul is there's a glimmer of hope because there's a new governor whose name is Festus. And after this two years of waiting and uncertainty, here's a new governor. And the question is, will he be just? Will he do the right thing for Paul? And I have to say, I'll give it away right now. The answer is no.

So we have yet another unjust governor. But wonderfully, we see throughout this period of trial where you have Festus and and Felix before and Agrippa, who's a king next week. We see in all of these trials that God overrules injustice.

And in this chapter, God is going to fulfill promises he made to Paul and about Paul in this time where Paul is in prison and not free at all. The good news in this chapter of Jesus in this chapter goes into unexpected places very powerfully because of the difficult situation Paul finds himself in.

[ 1 : 58 ] And that's really what the whole book of Acts is about. It's a record of God fulfilling his promises of God working out his saving purposes through people, through the church in the face of great adversity, in the face of hardship as well.

There's nothing that can stop the gospel. It overcomes all of these situations. And in fact, it seems that the gospel spreads most powerfully when Christians are in a place where they are very, very weak.

And it would seem like the forces against the gospel are very, very strong. And God continues to work this way in our world today. And I think a wonderful example of this is the church in Cambodia. As many of you know, there were a number of people from our church who went to Cambodia as a team and they've just returned. And a week or so ago, we had a debrief with them as the missions team.

And one of the striking sort of reflections that one of the persons said was that in Cambodia, they saw the very, very worst, the depth of human darkness.

[ 3 : 10 ] But they also saw the very best side of humanity, humanity that is empowered by the gospel, that brings healing and transformation as well.

And you saw both of these things in the same place. So that the team saw in SPAPAC a place of child sexual slavery, the worst kind of darkness, where parents literally sell their small children into prostitution.

But in that same place, in that evil place, Jan and Chris and Carl and Graham saw the power of the gospel. So they visited a rehabilitation center called New Song that has 57 young girls living there. And they are being healed of all sorts of different things that have happened to them. But they also are being trained into this new life and the new life of Christ as well, a place of great hope.

The team also worshipped with 250 or more parishioners in a very, very crowded room in a place that used to be a brothel where people's lives, children's lives were being destroyed.

[ 4 : 25 ] And in that church, people were being transformed by Jesus. Great change in people's lives. Even people who were involved in trafficking were repenting and turning to Christ.

And that church also had a large kids club where there's a very gifted minister leading people, leading young children to Christ and away from this life of hopelessness.

And all of this, this hope and this power of the gospel taking place in the worst kind of sexual exploitation in a neighborhood around them.

So you see the light of this gospel, the power of this gospel in a place of great evil and sin. And in that place, you see intimidation.

You see obstacles to the gospel. There were ministers and missionaries that were sometimes physically threatened by people who were exploiting children. They experienced police corruption and other kinds of injustice.

[ 5 : 26 ] And they are confronted with deprivation and greed that would make parents sell their own children for money. And all of this is taking place, this work of the gospel, in the context of a country that has been horrifically scarred by genocide.

So humanly speaking, the Christians in Sveipak are in a weak position. But it is there that the power of the gospel is so great that God's power radiates through their weakness.

And God is transforming people by the risen Lord because he has defeated the power of sin and death. This is what has been happening in Acts.

It's continuing today in Cambodia and throughout the world. There is this relentless spread of the gospel in the face of very intimidating kinds of obstacles and powers in a dark and broken world. And it is the promise of Jesus that encourages and strengthens the church now and in the book of Acts. And I think particularly the promise that Jesus said that all authority has been given to me.

[ 6 : 34 ] And that we as Christians should go into the world with the gospel knowing that Christ is with us to the end of the age.

It is this promise that ministries and Christians stand on in this place of weakness. And Paul in chapter 25 is also standing on promises as well in a weak and vulnerable place.

If you look at verses 1 through 5 in Acts 26, you see there a time of great injustice. Festus has just arrived and one of the first places he goes is Jerusalem after just a few days.

And of course in Jerusalem, the first order of business is the Jewish leaders want to get Paul. They renew their attack on him. Their hatred of Paul hasn't dimmed at all in the past two years.

And at the end of verse 2, they urge Festus to get Paul down to Jerusalem so they can kill him on the way down again. And Festus, not knowing the lay of the land, just says, well, this is supposed to be done in Caesarea.

[ 7 : 41 ] Bring your charges up to us. And we see that they waste no time. By the time Festus gets to Caesarea again, they're there the next morning.

They have to set up a trial, a tribunal. And this is what Festus does. And it's a very intimidating situation again for Paul. You see in verse 7 that they stood around Paul bringing against him many serious charges.

But there's a big problem with the case. It goes on to say in verse 7 that they could not prove them. And then Paul gives his defense in verse 8.

And he argues very persuasively that he has not offended against any of the laws, whether it's against the Jews or against the law, against the temple or against Caesar. And he apparently is very able at doing this.

And it's a situation where the prosecutors have not proved anything. And the defense has been a very, very good defense, proving that there has been no offense committed.

[ 8 : 45 ] So any, at this point, any honest and honorable, reasonable judge would have had to acquit Paul. The case should have been thrown out at that point.

But here's where we see the injustice of Festus. Verse 9. Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor. And here's where his judgment is completely corrupted.

He says to Paul, do you wish to go up to Jerusalem? Do you want to go to the place of great danger? Do you want to go to the place where it's a debacle when you try to have justice made? Do you want that?

And be tried on these charges? Well, Festus is saying here, I am not willing to make a decision. Even though the evidence is all there, I am not willing to make a decision.

Even though I know Paul is innocent. So Paul doesn't trust Festus anymore. Clearly he's not going to apply the law anymore rightly. And that's why Paul says in verse 10, I am standing before Caesar's tribunal where I ought to be tried.

[ 9 : 47 ] To the Jews I've done no wrong as you know very well. And Paul's bold here, isn't he? There's no hint of feeling as though he will be defeated.

There's a no-lose situation in a sense because God has made a promise to him. And so he tells them, you know very well by Roman law that you have to make a decision. But you're being influenced.

And he says, I'm not saying this because I'm afraid of dying. That's what he says in verse 11. But because it is wrong. And I believe this is a very prayerful decision as well.

A decision that is wise. Paul has thought through how he would deal with the situation. And he is looking for the opportunities that God is giving to him.

It would be backwards to go back to Jerusalem. Away from Rome. And the other thing that would be happening is that injustice that could be avoided is going to take place.

[10:44] And I think we should see as Paul's standing on good law here that those kinds of laws are God's tools. Paul very clearly says in the Romans, in the letter to the Romans, that rulers are God's servants.

Who are there to punish evil doing and to protect the innocent. And I think this is a word for us. Often we hear jokes about lawyers or judges.

They get more than their fair share of them. But Paul teaches that good lawyers and judges are God's servants. And that it is a godly thing to pursue justice.

And it is important for us as Christians to be encouraged that it is right to work for what is good and just in our society.

This is God's working in our world. And certainly, God uses a good law for his purposes in our chapter. To override this powerful corruption and injustice around him.

[11:45] And the way God does this is that in his sovereignty, Paul was born a Roman citizen. And therefore, he's one of the very few peoples with this special citizenship in all of Palestine.

And so he's protected from the sentencing of a magistrate in the provinces. He is protected from any harm or arrest or torture or execution without a trial. And so that is why Paul takes this opportunity that God has given to him.

And he says in a very dramatic moment at the end of verse 11, I appeal to Caesar. Now, we don't know why, but Festus was completely unprepared for this.

And it was likely because Paul waited for the right moment, for the right time that God had for him to do it. But what happened is that Festus had to step back. And we see in verse 12, he conferred with his counsel, which is a very good thing to do if you don't know what to do.

So he goes behind closed doors. And probably what they were discussing was, look, it's going to look bad, Festus, if you send somebody to Rome who has no serious charges proved against him.

[12:57] And yet, if you release Paul, you've got the chief priests and Jewish leaders on your back. And you will not be popular with them.

So he had to go back and forth and think it through. And finally, he comes back to the court. And everybody's gathered there. You've got Romans and Jews, Gentiles, Jews together.

And this very famous statement, Festus says, You have appealed to Caesar, and to Caesar you shall go. Now, we don't have God mentioned up until this point at all.

And we don't see his mentioned at all much in this passage. But this is the clear hand of God working very, very powerfully. Because, as we've seen, there is all kinds of things surrounding Paul that are intimidating and very powerful.

There is hatred and corruption and injustice swirling around him. But here, suddenly you see God overruling all of it by using Festus as his servant.

[14:03] Because Festus is making an irrevocable decision. He is saying, Paul is going to Rome. And I will guarantee that it happens. And you see what's going on.

He is carrying out God's plan for Paul and for the gospel. And what you see here is an answer to a very specific promise to Paul. Do you remember two chapters ago, Jesus stood by Paul.

And what did he say to Paul in this very awful moment as well, where he was almost torn apart by Sadducees and Pharisees? That night, Jesus stands next to him and he speaks to him.

And he says, Take courage. Be strong. Be strong. For as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so must you also testify to me in Rome.

And suddenly, that decision of Festus makes that promise a certainty. It will be fulfilled. And Paul will testify in by far the most powerful and largest city in the world.

[15:07] And I believe that all through this time, the last two years, Paul was deeply encouraged by Jesus' promise. He stood on it. And I think that's why he was bold in his dealings with very

powerful and corrupt people.

And that really brings us to a second promise as well, because we have to think a little bit further back to the beginning of Paul's Christian life. Because in Acts 9.15, God spoke to Ananias.

He said, You've got to go to Paul, who's just been blinded and converted to Christianity, and you need to pray for his healing. And here's how he convinced Ananias.

Here's God's words. He said, And you see this all of a sudden making sense in Paul's life.

We might wonder why Paul was arrested, why he is in captivity for two years in Caesarea. Well, it's here that God fulfills his promise. It is here in the time of captivity in Paul's life that he sees the most powerful people in the world.

[16:17] And if you look at verses 13 through 22, King Herod Agrippa, who's a great friend of Caesar's, pays a state visit to Festus. And they didn't talk about the normal sort of political things of free trade or fish quotas or whatever it was that they would talk about.

They talked about Paul. And Festus says, I've got to lay out this case to you. And he recognizes in verse 19 that the point of the dispute was the fact there was one Jesus who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.

He heard about the resurrection. And Agrippa said in verse 22, I'd like to hear this man myself.

Tomorrow. For us, it's going to be next week. But in that trial, which is a show trial, Paul is going to use it to explain the gospel in a very powerful way.

And David Jackman, who's a great English preacher, is going to be preaching on that next week.

But what you see in the space of just a few days is that Paul is carrying Jesus' name to the Gentiles and to the kings and to the children of Israel, just as God promised when Paul was commissioned into this new life in Christ.

So in the midst of failure and darkness and human sin, what we have seen is that God brings the light of his gospel into the most unlikely people through Paul.

[17:41] And in Paul's very vulnerable and weak circumstances, he powerfully works out his purposes, God does, for the world and the spread of the gospel. And so we said that as we leave this passage, we need to ask ourselves, what does this mean for us?

How does it affect my life day to day here in Vancouver? Well, I'm pretty sure that most of you have times of weakness and failure in your lives as well.

There may be some of you who don't, but tell me if that's the case. It would be very interesting to hear. And also our church experiences times of weakness and vulnerability as well.

But this passage teaches us that God rules those times that we face. His power is so great that his saving purposes are worked out in them.

And we see this in Paul's life. His loss of freedom for the rest of Acts looks to the world like failure and a real blow to the gospel. But Paul says in reality it's much different than that.

[18:46] And he really explains it well in a letter to Philippians. And by the way, Philippians is written just a couple of years later in Rome, very likely, where he's going now. Although there are some commentators who have a very strong case that this might have been written in Caesarea right at this time as well.

But anyway, Paul in Philippians is ambitious for Christ in his suffering. He is joyful because he recognizes the power of God working in his very difficult circumstances.

And he says this. He says, I want you to know, brothers and sisters, as he's writing to a faraway church, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. So that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Well, who would have guessed that?

That through Paul's activity, the army would have been affected. The church would have been affected. The gospel would have gone forth very powerfully in these very different arenas. People became much more confident in Jesus.

[19:59] Clearly, what Paul did in this chapter and for the rest of his captivity was to look for opportunities for the gospel that God gave him in his weakness and trouble. And that's why he took the opportunity to be sent to Rome.

That's why he constantly spoke about Jesus risen from the dead to every unjust ruler that came his way. He didn't look at this time as simply something that God should take away from him.

He looked for it as the place of God's saving work. And so for us, I think that we are very tempted to think that God has failed us or that we have failed God in our hardship.

And so we want to use all our resources and our energy and our prayers to avoid these times and to tell God to take them away. We tend to think that God has accomplished his good purposes when we are happy and comfortable and well thought of again.

But God says here that is within our trouble and the weakness in our church life and our personal life that he is powerfully working out his saving purposes. And so even though it's good for us to ask God to deliver us from evil, from difficulty, it is also good for us to be ambitious for Jesus within those times, in those times of trouble or hardship.

[ 21 : 18 ] And so the question Paul would have us ask as a church and of ourselves individually is, how can I be ambitious for Jesus? How can I be faithful to him right now in this circumstance?

How can I see and take the opportunities that Jesus is giving and will give in that time of hardship? And does my example encourage other people?

Does it encourage other Christians to be confident in Jesus Christ? How is God's grace changing me? And wonderfully, the question is, how is the gospel powerfully shining in the darkness that is around me or in my life as well?

Those are questions of trust. Of trust in God who promises that the darkness cannot overcome the light of Jesus. And that promise is fulfilled over and over again in the experience of Christians throughout the world.

They are the kind of ambitious questions that Paul, the churches in Acts and in Cambodia would ask because they know God is faithful and that his power is made perfect in our weakness.

[ 22 : 28 ] And so our prayer is that God, that the risen Lord Jesus, might be our great ambition as well. And that we would stand very firm on the promise that the light of the gospel will go forth into the world through us as we are sent.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Let us unite our hearts in prayer.

God of all grace and mercy, in wonder and love we bow before you, praying that the eyes of our hearts may indeed be enlightened by the radiance of your Holy Spirit.

We confess that the world is too much with us. Its daily pressures weary us. Its conflicting voices confuse us.

Its crass materialism endangers our spiritual vision. Now in the stillness of this moment, quicken our hearts to love you more surely.

[ 23 : 46 ] Enlighten our minds to recognize your prompting more clearly, that being more sensitively attuned to your spirit, we may reflect your will and your purpose for us in all our thoughts and words and actions.

Lord, in your mercy. Amen. Amen. Eternal God, by whose providence we are daily blessed with myriad gifts, we come in praise and thanksgiving for all the mercies you shower upon us. for the beauty and bounty of the world in which we are set we give you thanks move our wills to be more worthy stewards of all that we have received from your hand for family relationships and bonds of friendship which bless and enrich our daily journey we lift our gratitude and praise increase in us that loving spirit which is ever patient and kind and keeps no score of wrongs which is rooted in and informed by that grace and mercy you have shown to us through Jesus our Lord and for that redemptive love in which you have reached out to us in Christ we magnify your name in glad adoration grant that we may so walk in commitment to him that our lives may be directed by his spirit in all our living Lord in your mercy almighty God whose redeeming love would seek to bring your whole creation into the knowledge and practice of your shalom hear now our petitions for all who live under the threatening shadow of strife and tumult for all who have suffered the ravages of natural disaster for all who are daily afflicted by hunger and poverty for those who know not the freedom we so easily take for granted who know injustice and suffering for all such we pray for the coming of that day when the things of your kingdom may overcome the injustices of this world Lord in your mercy all-powerful God you rule over your creation with a yearning love hear now our prayers for all to whom you have entrusted the guidance of human affairs for those who deliberate and influence the things of peace and justice and equality in the councils of the world for those who guided the affairs of this land this province and the cities in which we live hear our petition that they may be touched by your spirit and be guided in decision making which is in accord with your will and purpose Lord in your mercy all-gracious God you raised up Jesus Christ and made him head over the church his body hear now our prayers for the church universal that in all her branches the name

of jesus may be lifted up and his purposes diligently pursued we pray for the anglican network as she seeks that path in which your truth may be fully proclaimed and practiced with unshakable resolve and unfailing charity we pray for our congregation uphold and guide our clergy in all wisdom and faithfulness we pray especially for david's healing and restoration to his role of leadership we pray discernment and courage for all who bear decision making responsibilities grace and wisdom for all who teach and guide the young dedication and insight for those who hold forth your truth in music and clarity and perseverance for those who perform the daily tasks which undergird our fellowship we pray especially for keith and for aaron as they make ready for the great step of ordination in this coming week that your spirit and blessing may be upon them and for those whose mission endeavors in distant places are close to our heart we pray for katherine gwinnett and her work with the north american indigenous ministries for sharon thompson with wickliff bible translators for brian mcconochie and the work of ratanac for doug and annamaree graham in asia we lift our prayers in this time lord in your mercy

compassionate god the source of all comfort and healing we bring before you those of our number who have special need of your touch in these days for those who bear burdens of anxiety or ill health we pray especially naming before you ken and gail david rosemary marguerite rowena and for those who pass through the shadows of bereavement we pray a special measure of your strength and a deep sense of that hope which is offered us through jesus christ lord in your mercy gracious god as we have lifted our intercessions and petitions before you grant that these words we have spoken may inform all our living in the days before us that our lives may be lived in your service and to your glory this we ask in the name of jesus christ our lord and savior amen you