

Acts 25-26 • "I stand here testifying both to small and great."

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You'll remember that for 2 years, Paul, the apostle has been in custody under governor Felix and now a new governor has taken his place. It's a man by the name of Festus. And we know what timeframe we're dealing with here because we know that Porcius Festus was appointed by Nero who had become Caesar and that was in the year, A.D. 60. Porcius Festus is now the governor over Syria, which is the political center of that whole region encompassing Israel and that capital was in Caesarea.

We begin here in chapter 25. It says, *"Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea."* (ESV)

Let me show you on the map what it means to go up from Jerusalem to Caesarea. You might look at that map and you go, okay, that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard, that's down, and it's exactly right, it is down.



You go to Caesarea to Jerusalem and you go down in the sense of direction, but you go up in the sense of elevation. And that's why they called it going up to Jerusalem and then in going down to Caesarea, because that was what was most important.

Verse 2, it says, *“And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, ³ asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. (and) ⁴ Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. ⁵ “So,” said he, “let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him.”*

And I'm assuming here that Festus had been made aware of the fact that they had attempted to assassinate Paul once already by asking him to be brought to meet with the Sanhedrin. And so he probably wasn't going to do that again.

It says, *“⁶ After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. ⁷ When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove. ⁸ Paul argued in his defense, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.” ⁹ But Festus, (listen to this) wishing to do the Jews a favor, (I don't know if that sounds familiar or not) said to Paul, “Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?” ¹⁰ But Paul said, “I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. ¹¹ If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar.””*

And by the way, that was Paul's right. You'll remember, he was a Roman citizen and this is what any Roman citizen had the right to do if he felt like his case was not progressing as it should, or if he felt he was just being mishandled as it relates to the way the lower courts were dealing with the issues. And this is very similar, I suppose, to appealing to the Supreme Court, which we have the right to do here in the United States of America as a final decision. And so Paul appeals to Caesar in that very way.

It says in verse 12, that *“Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.””*

All right. Let's read on now and let's see how this appeal that Paul made ends up affecting his case. Verse 13. *“Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus.”* Pause there, please with me for just a moment.

Let me explain to you who this is and why he is important. This is king Herod Agrippa the second, and he has quite a, he has quite a history with his family line. I mean, you just go back and look at his family line and you think, wow. His great grandfather was the one who tried to kill Jesus and ended up killing most of the baby boys in the region of Bethlehem.

His grandfather had beheaded John the Baptist. His father had executed the apostle James and arrested Peter. You'll remember Peter escaped quite miraculously and all of that, we read about that back in Acts chapter 2. This is the history.

I don't know how you would feel standing next to this man, but the one thing about Herod that I think Paul appreciated was the fact that Herod knew and understood the ways of the Jews. In fact, he practiced Judaism himself. He was a practicing Jew. You'll remember that the Herods actually had an Edomite background. It was called Idumean in the Greek but he understood the Jews. The family had been living among the Jews for many, many, well, for generations. And he knew and understood and Paul knew that as well.

Now, as far as the woman that he comes in with Bernice, Bernice is his sister. And we don't really know a lot about Bernice from the Bible. History tells us some rather interesting things about her, but it's really beside the point.

We're told then, as we go on in verse 14, that “...as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, “There is a man left prisoner by Felix,¹⁵ and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him.¹⁶ I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him.¹⁷ So when they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought.¹⁸ When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed.¹⁹ Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.²⁰ Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them.²¹ But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar.”²² Then Agrippa said to Festus, “I would like to hear the man myself.” “Tomorrow,” said he, “you will hear him.”

²³ So on the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. ²⁴ And Festus said, "King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. ²⁵ But I found that he had done nothing deserving death. And as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him. ²⁶ But I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write. ²⁷ For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him."

***26** So Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense:"*

And by the way, this is the longest of Paul's testimonies, and Paul's defenses that we have a written account about, so here we go. Verse 2. *"I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, ³ especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently. (all right)*

⁴ "My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. ⁵ They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee."

Now, this is important. You'll notice that the very first thing Paul tells the king and all who are there listening is that, I was a Pharisee. Now, what I want you to take note of as we finish reading Paul's testimony and his explanation of his defense, I want you to understand how Paul refers to his faith in Jesus Christ as a natural progression of his faith in the Jewish Messiah. And this is an important thing for us to lay hold of as Christians.

To understand that, that even though the history books essentially tell us that Christianity started like 2,000 years ago, that's really not true. Paul wouldn't have agreed with that statement. To Paul, his faith was a natural progression of what he believed is as a Jew.

He was a Jew who believed in the God who created the heaven and the earth, who had prophesied through the old Testament, or the Jewish prophets that He

would send an Anointed One, a Messiah. Who then appeared during Paul's lifetime, proved Himself to be the Messiah, and went on to give his life on the cross for the sins of mankind. You see.

Paul's understanding of God's redemptive program begins with creation and goes up to the present time. It doesn't begin at a certain point in time, necessarily. It's..., like we tend to think of, Christianity, well, Christianity began when God sent his son, and Jesus put together this group of guys called, the disciples, and no, no, no.

When we begin as Christians, when we begin to think of ourselves as cut off and different from the Jews, from the standpoint that we have a different religion, Paul would not agree with that at all. This is all part of the same thing. This is the, we have a connection to the Jews that goes back literally to creation and we need to understand that. And that's what you're going to see here as Paul talks.

Let's keep reading, verse 6. *“And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, (notice that he says I'm here because of the promise that was made to our Jewish forefathers) ⁷ to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! ⁸ Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?*

⁹ *“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.*

¹² *“In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³ At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. ¹⁴ And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ...”* And by the way, your Bible may say, in Aramaic and that's not a contradiction. The Hebrew, Aramaic was considered to be a Hebrew dialect, all right. So it literally means in the Hebrew dialect, which can be translated Aramaic or Hebrew. All right.

It says, *“...in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’* (A goad is something that was used

to prod an animal along, usually a sharp object, to give them a good jab) ¹⁵ *And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶ But rise (and by the way, verse 16 is a little bit challenging to understand in the ESV, But rise) and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you,...*

That's, it's clumsy, isn't it? Actually the NIV does a lot better job of this verse. Let me show you on the screen. This is how they, it says,

Acts 26:16 (NIV84)

Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you.

Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you.

And that's actually a very clear rendering of that verse.

Verse 17, *"delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you ¹⁸ to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."*

Did you notice what the Lord told Paul about his calling there? Did you see what the Lord said to him? He told him that I'm going to send you off to the Gentiles to do what? To turn them *from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to (the power of) God.*

Now, what's interesting about this, is that this is very similar wording to how God, the Father spoke of, spoke concerning God, the Son and His ministry to that was prophesied back in Isaiah chapter 42. Let me show you this on the screen. The Lord speaking here says,

Isaiah 42:6-7 (ESV)

"I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

“I am (YAHWEH, I am) the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; (this is God, the Father speaking to God, the Son) I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

This is what God prophesied that the Messiah would come and do. Now, isn't it interesting that when Paul receives his commission from the Lord on the road to Damascus? It is an extension of the ministry of Messiah, but that shouldn't surprise us at all. We are the body of Christ.

People, this is our commission, this is our commission too. This is what we have been called to do. And Jesus does it through us as Paul talks about in Colossians. Let me show you this on the screen, Colossians chapter 1. I think it's there.

Colossians 1:13-14 (ESV)

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Did Jesus deliver us from darkness and bring us into the light? Yes, He did. Is that what God prophesied He would do? Yes, it is. Is that the ministry that God has given to all of us? Yes, it is. It's a wonderful thing.

Verse 19, *“Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.”* And that just really means we want to see that sincerity

Verse 21. *“For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. ²² To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: ²³ that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”*

And by the way, this is where Paul really speaks to his audience there about the prophetic certainty of the suffering of the Messiah. He says very clearly here, that the prophets who came said *“that the Christ must suffer.”*

And then you'll notice he went on to say, and *“being the first to rise from the dead.”* You stop, you read that, you go wait, hold the phone here for just a sec. Was Jesus the first to rise from the dead? Because we have instances in the Old Testament where people were raised from the dead. Yeah, but you know what the difference was? They had to die all over again. Bummer, huh?

Wouldn't that be something to go through death to get raised to life, and then it's like, well, oh I got to do that again. Yeah. I mean, maybe it's not a big deal after you've done it once. It's like, it wasn't so bad, sort of a thing.

But Jesus is the only one to be raised from the dead, never to die again. To be raised incorruptible in that sense. And so He, in that sense is the first, so here they are talking about the resurrection.

Now notice verse 24, it says, *“And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.”*

Now this is the response, by the way, of someone who's thoroughly Grecian or Roman, if you will. He has a Grecian way of thinking. I mean, you remember back when Paul was in Athens and he was going around talking to people about the Lord, and they invited him to come and speak at the Areopagus, remember?

And Paul was talking about the Gospel and everything was all great until he got to the resurrection. And that's, you'll remember when people began to mock. Well, because that was a ridiculous thought to a Grecian mindset, right? And that's, is really exactly what Festus is doing right here.

Verse 25, *“But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. ²⁶ For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. (in other words, none of this was done in private, it was well known) ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? (and again, that's because Agrippa was a practicing Jew in that sense and so he says,) I know that you believe. (what the prophets wrote) ”*

²⁸ And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” (which of course means a follower of Christ) ²⁹ And Paul said, (and I love this statement, I love this) “Whether short or long, I would to God that

not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.” Isn’t that great, what a great statement. What a beautiful sentiment.

And “³⁰ Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. ³¹ And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, “This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.” ³² And Agrippa said to Festus, (listen to this) “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.””

All right, we need to talk about that for just a moment, because I got to tell you this last statement of chapter 26 really troubles some people. Because there's, I'll just tell you, there, among students of the Word of God, there are many who believe that frankly, Paul blundered here. That this was a mistake on his part to appeal to Caesar.

In fact, some have come out and said he should have appealed to God in prayer and left it at that. Left his fate in the hands of God and not appealed to any sort of a human court and so forth. Others, just believe that Paul's appeal to the Roman emperor was just part of God's plan to ultimately get him to Rome.

Well, it's interesting. It's hard to argue, frankly, with either one of those positions, because I mean, I can't really argue with the idea of leaving your fate in God's hands. That's always a good thing. And honestly, I can also understand that Paul's appeal was part of God's plan as well.

And the fact of the matter is, sometimes I think we give our opinions far too often, when they're just opinions. But I tend to look at this a little bit of a different way and what I'm going to share with you is not an opinion. Because I'll just tell you right now, I can't be sure sitting here today, whether Paul made a mistake or not in appealing his case to Caesar. Maybe he did, maybe he didn't, I don't know.

But what I do believe is that God's sovereignty works in our lives, even through our blunders. Did you hear me? And this is important that some of you, not everybody, but some of you in this room hear me, because this is an important thing. I believe that God's sovereignty works in our lives, even through our blunders.

And one of the benefits of studying through the Old Testament particularly is that you get an opportunity to follow the narrative of the Old Testament, which

includes a lot of very real people living very raw lives that are very prone to making some serious mistakes.

When you're talking about blunders, I mean, you look at some of the people in the Old Testament, they made some spectacular blunders. And then these are people whom God called, promised, made promises to, and was going to work in, and through to accomplish His purpose, and yet these people messed up royally.

And you see that when you study through the old Testament. You see it over and over again. But what you also find as you study through the old Testament is that God's plan just seems to keep going forward.

God's plan, even despite the foibles and the shortcomings of the people that he's working through. Some of the people that you think are going to be the most virtuous people in the Bible end up being terrible.

In the New Testament, we know that Jesus was from the tribe of Judah. And we'll even sing songs, the lion of the tribe of Judah prevails. And then you read the old Testament, you find out the kind of guy Judah was. Wow! And you can be a little disappointed reading through the Bible thinking, wow, Judah was a piece of work. I mean, he had some good things that he did, particularly more toward the end of his life, but as a younger man, mercy.

But the reason I'm telling you all this is because I often come across believers who are literally tied up in emotional knots over the decisions that need to be made in their lives. And they become so fearful that they're going to make a mistake, and in so doing, somehow step outside of God's will to the point where God's not going to work in their lives any longer. He's not going to be able to do it. It's like, well, I think you finally made the final blunder there, pal. That was, you just went past the point of no return. I don't think God can recover from this one. That's the way we tend to think of God and so forth.

But can I just tell you something? First of all, number 1, here's the bad news, I guess you will make mistakes. You're not going to always hear God correctly. Okay? You're not going to follow His will perfectly. You're going to make bad decisions. You're going to make blunders and some of them are going to be incredible.

But here's the good news. God is bigger than your mistakes. Bottom line. And that's something you need to hear. God is bigger than your ability to make a mistake. And that's frankly, what we see when we study His Word.

When you really get into the Scriptures, you learn that God is bigger than me and my ability to mess up and that... There's this wonderful word that describes God in the Bible, a single word, and that word is, Sovereign. And if you really understand what the word sovereign means, well, you know what Job said about the Lord. Let me put this on the screen for you. From Job 42.

Job 42:1-2 (ESV)

Then Job answered the LORD and said: "I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."

Then Job answered the LORD and said: "I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."

People, that's one of the most powerful, insightful definitions of sovereignty that you're ever going to run across in the entirety of the Bible. That's one of the best right there.

And Job having this face to face conversation with God, speaks this powerful statement. And you'll notice that he says there, *"I know."* That's a statement of definite declaration. I know this. I'm not guessing. I know it. And what do I know?

"I know that you can (first of all) do all things." That speaks to the fact that He's all powerful. And then lastly, *"and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."* Nobody can get in Your way and stop You from doing what you want to do. I know that.

Here's my question to you. Do you know that? Do you know that? Job said he knows it, but do you know it? Because sometimes we just, we need to go through the Word and we need to be reminded of the immensity of God and His ability to carry out His plan. You know what I mean? We just, we need that.

I love this also from Jeremiah chapter 32. Look at this one.

Jeremiah 32:17 (ESV)

"Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you."

"Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! (and) Nothing is too hard for you."

Nothing Lord is too hard for you. Jeremiah got a glimpse of the enormity. Actually, this is Baruch saying this, but it's recorded by Jeremiah. Beautiful statement of the sovereignty and power of God. Nothing's too difficult for you, God.

I regularly come to the Lord and tell him that things are too difficult for me. As a practice, I say to Him, Lord, this is too hard for me, but not for You. Nothing is too hard for You.

And when I need to just be settled in my heart about matters that are too big for me, I always love to go to Romans chapter 11 and reread the apostle Paul's words where he said,

Romans 11:33-36 (NIV84)

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

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Amen? Amen.