

PAUL, PROMISES AND PROBLEMS  
ACTS 25

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

In Romans #8 vv. 24 & 25 (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 8:24) the Bible tells us, “**For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? (ROMANS 8:25) But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.**” A couple of verses later (ROMANS 8:28) Paul adds, “**And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.**”

Foundational to the Christian life is the element of hope--- and its close ally, faith. (PROJECTOR OFF) The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls upon us to have faith in One whom we have never seen, to believe in a resurrection from the dead that has never happened before, and to hope in an eternal destiny in a place we have never visited.

But Christian hope is not mere wishful thinking. It is not some human invention. For it is based upon objective evidence. The Christian faith is based upon a historical event--- the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which happened two thousand years ago. It is also evidenced in the transformed lives of Christian men and women. The truth claims of Christianity are also supported by the testimony of the Bible.

The challenge to the people of God throughout history is to exercise hope and faith in God and His word to us. Are God and His word objects that are worthy of my hope? Can I trust God? Is He sovereign over my circumstances? Does He care about my situation? In the midst of my health difficulties, in the midst of my marriage problems, in the midst of the challenge of raising kids, in the midst of my financial issues, in the midst of my loneliness, can I trust God?

A couple of the propositions which the Bible would have us to believe are these: (PROPOSITION 1) **First, God always keeps His promises.** Second (PROPOSITION 2), **if we follow God, He will care for us and accomplish His purposes in us.** These two principles are demonstrated in the passage before us this morning. They can also be demonstrated in our lives--- if we will make these principles our own.

In our study of Acts we have reached the point where the Apostle Paul has begun his long journey to Rome. After his three missionary journeys Paul arrived in Jerusalem with a money gift from the western Gentile Christians for the famine-stricken Jewish Christians of Judea. While worshipping in the temple, Paul was attacked by a mob of Jewish pilgrims who resented his preaching about Christ. He was saved from death by the intervention of Roman soldiers stationed nearby. When they became aware of a further plot to kill Paul, he was sent off to the Roman provincial capital of Caesarea. (JERUSALEM TO CAESAREA)

Being a Roman citizen Paul had certain legal rights that protected him from being turned over to the Jewish leaders. But the Roman officials also felt pressure not to unnecessarily antagonize the Jewish leaders. (CAESAREA MARITIMA) So the Roman governor Felix kept Paul locked up in the provincial capital of Caesarea during the rest of his time in office. In 60 AD Felix was removed from office, and now Festus showed up on the scene.

I.

This is the setting for our story in Acts #25. In the first twelve verses of that chapter we are going to look at THE PROMISE OF GOD THREATENED. (I. THE PROMISE OF GOD THREATENED) The writer Luke in #25 begins talking about the new Roman governor Festus.

From records outside of the Bible we know that this guy Festus served as governor of Judea from 60 to 62 AD. He died in office after serving just a couple of years. So the time of our story is 60 AD. The last verse of #24 says that Paul was in prison for two years before that. Thus the arrest of Paul in Jerusalem and other events described in that chapter occurred in 58 AD.

History gives us little information about Festus. Our text implies that he was a more honorable and honest man than was Felix, whom Festus replaced. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus called him “a wise and just official.” The Jews were unhappy with most of the governors from Rome who ruled in Judea. But they seem to have tolerated Festus pretty well. There is evidence in our passage that he tried to rule wisely and well. But then he was around for only a couple of years.

Realizing the problems that arose from Felix’s mistreatment of the Jews, Festus wanted to get off to a good start with them. So three days after arriving in Caesarea he went up to Jerusalem to visit the religious and civil leaders of the province. Apparently one of the first priorities on the agenda of the Sanhedrin, the high council of the Jews, which exercised civil as well as religious authority, was the matter of punishing Paul.

Thus beginning in v. 2 we read, **“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.”** The evil high priest Ananias, whom we met earlier, had been removed from office. But he still seems to have been a dominant force on the Sanhedrin. That may explain why the writer Luke used the plural “chief priests” rather than referring to the high priest alone.

The Jewish leaders were apparently counting on the inexperience and newness of Governor Festus to pull off the assassination attempt that had failed two years earlier. The impression that this account gives us is that Festus was not aware of the details of that previous plot when Paul had been arrested and an attempt against his life had been discovered.

What we have here now is not only a threat against Paul's life but also a threat against the promises of God. At the time of Paul's conversion, which we examined back in #9, the Lord Jesus gave Paul several promises. (ACTS 9:15) In #9 v. 15 He said of Paul, **"Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel."** Paul had been a witness of Christ to the Gentiles and to the sons of Israel. But he had not yet been a witness to any kings. Will God keep His promise?

We then saw in #23, soon after Paul's arrest, that the Lord appeared to him in a vision and gave him another promise. (ACTS 23:11) He said to Paul in v. 11, **"Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."** If Paul is killed by an assassination plot of the Jews, that promise will have gone unfulfilled. Will God keep His promises?

(PROJECTOR OFF) Many of the classic stories of the Bible involve spiritual battles in which the promise of God is seemingly threatened by overwhelming circumstances. Abraham is promised a child, but his wife is barren, and she grows old. Will God keep His promise? God tells Joseph that some day his family will bow down to him in humility and respect, but Joseph is sold as a slave and ends up in a stinking Egyptian prison. Will God keep His promise? God reveals through the prophet Samuel that David is one day to be king of Israel. But a jealous, mad king by the name of Saul uses all of the resources at his disposal to have David killed. Will God keep His promise? God tells Paul that he will witness to kings and that he will go to Rome to preach the gospel. The Jewish leaders are out to kill him. Will God keep His promise?

So far we have seen that Roman soldiers intervened when the mob was about to kill Paul in the temple. When the Jews from Asia made a plot to kill Paul in Jerusalem, the apostle's nephew just happened to find out about it and get the information to Paul and the Roman commander. The Jewish leaders used political pressure to gain custody of Paul. But Paul is a Roman citizen, and the Roman authorities are obliged to follow legal procedures that have kept the Jewish leaders from getting their hands on him. Now there is another plan in the works to have Paul killed. Will God keep His promise?

According to vv. 4 & 5, **"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.'"** Festus was just making a brief visit to Jerusalem. It would have taken considerably longer to send for Paul and have him brought to Jerusalem and then to have a trial. Also Festus may have wanted to set a certain tone in his relationship with the Jewish leaders. He wanted to have a good relationship with them, but he didn't want to be manipulated by them either. He didn't want them to think that they could push him around and do whatever pleased them.

So the immediate danger to Paul is removed. But he is still in jail, and the Jews are still after him. We read in vv. 6-8, **"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.'**"

The Jews are hoping to have a better response from Festus than they had from Felix. The problem is that they have a weak case. They don't have any witnesses to any specific crime. They don't have any other credible proof of wrongdoing. What they do have going for them is a new governor on the scene who knows that the last governor of Judea got canned because the Jews were unhappy with him and sent a delegation to Rome to complain about him. The Jews realize that this Festus wants to have decent relations with them. This case presents him with an opportunity to get into their good graces. All that Festus needs to do is to hand Paul over to them.

But it is not quite that easy. Festus is obligated to follow Roman law. He must also answer to Rome for his legal conduct. Thus in v. 9 the text says, **"But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, 'Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?'"** It is difficult for us to understand in our modern day with advanced concepts of democracy, but back in that day there were rulers who would actually do favors to please powerful interest groups. The Jewish leaders were just such a powerful group. While Festus was obligated to follow Roman law, there was nothing in that law about the place that legal hearings had to occur. Also Festus still didn't quite understand what the basis for legal charges against Paul was. Perhaps by dealing more directly with all of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, there might be a good resolution to this situation.

Paul, however, was not happy about this scenario. Verses 10 & 11 tell us, **"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.'"**

There was a long tradition in Roman law that citizens of Rome had the right to appeal to the high court in Rome in serious cases. The Jews here clearly wanted Paul dead. So in a capital case like this a Roman citizen could appeal to Rome at any stage of the legal proceedings. When he made that appeal, the defendant had to be allowed to go to Rome to have his case heard there.

Why did Paul appeal to Rome at this point? Did Christ appear to him in a vision and tell him to do this? Was there a prophet who came along with a word of knowledge about what he should do? There is no indication of anything like this in the text, is there? There were a few instances in Paul's life where he received divine revelation about what

he was supposed to do. Most of the time it was his responsibility to obey God's revealed Word, exercise wisdom, and act in faith.

I suspect that the factors that entered into Paul's decision included the knowledge that the Jews had previously tried to ambush him on the road. Going back to Jerusalem presented such a danger. Then also Paul was aware that Festus was new on the job and wanted to have good relations with the Jewish authorities. Paul was concerned about what would happen to the governor's objectivity when he found himself in the religious capital of Judaism, being subjected to pressure to have him killed. Then also there was the fact that Paul had been in jail already for two years. Perhaps Festus would likewise just leave Paul in the slammer. By appealing to Rome there would be some definite resolution to his case.

You see, God always keeps His promises. He had promised Paul that he was going to preach to kings and that he was going to go to Rome. In the midst of threats to the fulfillment of that promise the Lord used the Roman government to protect Paul. He used a nephew who just happened, perhaps, to overhear a conversation about a plot to kill Paul. He used Paul's rights of Roman citizenship to protect him from harm.

At the same time Paul realized his responsibility to follow God--- to obey God's Word, to exercise wisdom, and to act in faith. Without any direct revelation from God, Paul made what seemed to be the best decision to appeal to Rome. To Rome he would go.

We may not have unconditional specific promises from God like those that Abraham and Joseph and David and Paul had. (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 8:28) If we love God, we can claim the promise of Romans 8:28: **"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."** As we exercise our responsibility to obey God's Word, use wisdom, and act in faith, great things will happen. God will fulfill his promises. In the midst of our seeming imprisonment in unemployment, in broken marriages, in difficult family circumstances, in loneliness, God will accomplish His purposes and cause good to come to us. God always keeps His promises. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Festus really had no choice to make once Paul had made his legal appeal to Rome. The request had to be granted. Thus v. 12 tells us, **"Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, 'To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.'"** The pressure of dealing with this politically difficult case was removed from Festus. Still there was the problem of sending a report along with Paul to Rome, explaining the charges against him. It was a weak case, and the Roman officials had consistently had difficulty in formulating charges against the defendant. Rome might wonder why the case had not simply been dismissed.

II.

Thus in vv. 13-27 we move from THE PROMISE OF GOD THREATENED to THE PROMISE OF GOD ESTABLISHED. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE PROMISE OF GOD ESTABLISHED) In v. 13 we read, **"Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the**

**king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus.”** King Agrippa is actually Agrippa II. He was the son of Herod Agrippa I (HEROD AGRIPPA I), who had ruled as a vassal king over Judea and who was responsible for having James the apostle executed. Herod Agrippa I was the son of Aristobulus, who was the son of Herod the Great, the king who tried to kill the baby Jesus. So this Herod is the great grandson of Herod the Great.

At the time of our story (HEROD AGRIPPA II REALM) Agrippa controlled the northeast part of what was once the Roman province of Judea. He was also given authority over the operation of the temple in Jerusalem, and He was allowed to appoint the high priest.

Without knowing the background of this story, we might assume that Bernice in v. 13 was Agrippa’s wife. Actually she was his sister. Agrippa II, Bernice, and Drusilla were all siblings. We saw last week that Drusilla was the wife of the Roman governor Felix, who preceded Festus. I also pointed out that she was a greedy, power hungry individual who was married and divorced several times. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Bernice seemed to have similar characteristics. She was married at an early age and got divorced. She stayed with her brother Agrippa II after that. Then she married the king of one of the small kingdoms in the area. Then she left him. At the time of our story she was back with her brother Agrippa. Later on she would become the mistress of the Roman general Titus who would lead the attack on Judea and Jerusalem that would destroy Judea as a national entity for almost 2000 years. It was widely rumored that at the time of our story Agrippa and Bernice had an incestuous relationship. They were ethnically Edomites, descendants of Esau, but they claimed to be worshippers of the God of Israel.

Since Festus was the new governor on the block, Agrippa and Bernice showed up to pay their respects to him. The first part of v. 14 adds, **“And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul’s case before the king...”** By virtue of Paul’s appeal Festus was relieved of the political pressure that was placed upon him by the Jews concerning this case. But he and all the Roman officials had a hard time figuring out exactly what the charges against Paul should be. Festus had to give some explanation to his Roman superiors for what the charges were and why the case had not simply been dismissed. Although Agrippa was an Edomite by ethnic background and a young man only in his early 30s, he had a reputation among the ruling class as being something of an expert on Jewish law. So Festus was hoping to get some help from Agrippa as he tried to formulate the charges against Paul.

Starting then in the middle of v. 14 Festus tells King Agrippa how Paul came to be in his custody. He expresses frustration in trying to figure out what problem the religious leaders have with him and how Rome should be involved in the matter. In v. 22 we read, **“Then Agrippa said to Festus, ‘I would like to hear the man myself.’ ‘Tomorrow,’ said he, ‘you will hear him.’”**

Luke, in v. 23, describes what happens next: **“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.”** This wasn’t some little private meeting that Paul was going to have with Agrippa and Bernice and Festus. This was a big meeting. It was a social occasion. Anybody who was anyone in Caesarea was there. There were military officials, the governor, the king, the mayor, probably other politicians, and probably businessmen and other movers and shakers of Caesarea.

The one group that wasn’t represented was the Jewish religious leadership. Until now Paul in his defense of his ministry in Judea had always been faced with Jewish detractors. This time they were not there. Paul was going to have the opportunity to present his message without interruption and distraction from them. In the process he was going to be fulfilling part of the promise that God had made to him about preaching before kings.

Luke, I suspect, saw a bit of humor in this situation. He stresses the fact that there was much pomp and ceremony involved in this meeting. Here are these supposedly important people, dressed accordingly, listening to this imprisoned Christian missionary. But who is really the prisoner? And who is really the judge? The more important issue was not Paul’s alleged violation of law but rather the claims of Jesus Christ. From an eternal perspective it was the audience that was on trial that day as they heard a clear explanation of the gospel of Christ. God was also the real judge that day as He watched to see what decisions would be made about His Son who had died on the cross so that they might have the opportunity to accept the gift of eternal life.

What was the outcome of that aspect of this hearing? We do not know. Some may have believed. Some may have begun a spiritual journey that was to eventually lead them into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The characters that day would probably have been shocked had they been able to realize that 2000 years later everyone would know about the prisoner in chains before them. Few would know anything about them. Those that would recognize their names would do so only because of their association with the Jewish Christian missionary in front of them.

Verses 24-27 describe what happened before Paul spoke: **“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.’”** Agrippa and Bernice may have an intellectual curiosity to find out about this Jewish Christian troublemaker. But Festus has a practical purpose in holding this meeting in that he needs to have some written explanation sent along with Paul to Rome. This is

apparently his first legal case in Judea, and the governor doesn't want to look foolish in his handling of the case.

So this chapter supports the notion that God always keeps His promises. The Lord had promised that Paul would preach in Rome one day and that he would preach before kings. From the human perspective the fulfillment of those promises seemed in doubt as Paul was sitting in prison in Caesarea. Life seemed to be unfair to Paul. He had gone to Jerusalem carrying money from Christians in the west to help poor Jewish Christians in the east who were suffering because of a famine. In the temple in Jerusalem Paul was trying to fulfill his obligations as a good Jew. The result was that an angry mob almost killed him. Saved from that situation the Jewish leaders exerted all kinds of political pressure to get custody of him and have him killed. They made plans to assassinate him. Then for two years Paul sat in prison.

But God had made a promise, and God always keeps His promises. He saw to it that there were Romans around who intervened and did what they were supposed to do. He saw to it that there was a relative who was at the right place and at the right time who reported the right thing to the right people about an assassination attempt. The Lord saw to it that there was the force of Roman law that kept Paul from being harmed and kept Roman officials from giving in to political and religious pressures.

It may seem that there might have been an easier way for Paul to speak to kings and to preach in Rome. But it is in the seemingly impossible and disastrous situations in life in which God often chooses to work. It is through a cross that Christ wins his greatest victory. It is through barrenness that a promised child is born to Abraham. It is through slavery and imprisonment that the family of Jacob is saved and protected in Egypt. It is through persecution and mistreatment that a godly king and psalm writer arises in Israel. It is through mistreatment and imprisonment that Paul is brought before kings and delivered to the city of Rome.

It is in the midst of apparent failures and seeming disasters that God often accomplishes His greatest works in you and I. It is in the marriage failures and family difficulties and unemployment situations and financial disasters and health crises and death of a mate that God often accomplishes His greatest works. The issue in these painful and difficult circumstances is: Will we believe that God keeps His promises, that the promise of God is always established?

In Massachusetts I had a friend named Ed. As a single person I had supper with Ed once a week for several years. For a year the two of us led a Bible study in jail. Don Mo had a longer relationship with him than I did. Ed developed a children's ministry in which he distributed over a million children's gospel tracts in New England. Thousands of boys and girls took Bible correspondence courses that he administered. Thousands more called in to his telephone ministry.

Ed's worthwhile ministry developed out of seeming disaster. His wife deserted him and left him with two small daughters. He lost his job. In the midst of these difficult

circumstances Ed turned to faith in Jesus. He decided that he would trust in the promises of God. Out of his growing commitment to the Lord this children's ministry resulted.

Many of the promises of the Bible have a certain condition attached. Romans 8:28 is a promise that applies to those who love God. We can't expect promises of God like this to be fulfilled if we are living life in pursuit of our own agenda and in independence from God's declared will. The responsibility that we as Christians do have is follow God--- to obey God's Word, exercise wisdom, and act in faith. The promises given to Paul were unique and specific to him. But if we are truly part of God's family by faith in Christ, we have promises like Romans 8:28 that we can claim.

We also need to keep in mind that even Paul didn't have all the details about God's plan for his life. He knew that he was supposed to go to Rome and that he was supposed to tell his story to kings. He didn't know exactly how that was supposed to happen or when it was supposed to happen. It is often those kinds of questions that we insist that the Lord answer for us. We want to know when and how.

The will of God, however, is more like a compass than like a map. Paul knew the general direction in which he was to head. He didn't know that prisons and angry mobs and assassination plots were going to be on the route. There were divine interventions along the way that he could not have specifically foreseen. His responsibility was simply to trust in God's promises, head in the right direction, obey God's Word, exercise wisdom, and act in faith.

When the situation arose where he was going to be taken to Jerusalem from Caesarea, Paul made a decision on the basis of wisdom and faith. As far as we know he had no direct guidance from God. He simply did what seemed to be best, within the parameters that His Lord had laid out for him. He appealed to Rome. Out of that came the opportunity to speak to King Agrippa and the other notables, and eventually would come the chance to preach in Rome.

In the midst of the situations of life in which we find ourselves we have a similar responsibility. We need to obey God's Word, exercise wisdom, and act in faith. Will we do that? Will we choose to believe the promises of God? (ROMANS 8:28) His Word says, **“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose .”**