

WORKING THROUGH UNFAIR TREATMENT

Acts 25:1-12

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How do you react when someone treats you unfairly? Let's say you are double crossed or cheated. Maybe someone lies about you and your reputation is damaged. Perhaps your boss chews you out for something you know you didn't do, or a teacher singles you out because he doesn't like what you stand for. What is your typical response? Do you:

Retreat into a depression?

Withdraw from human interaction?

Look for a way to get even?

Vow that you'll never do anything nice for anyone again?

Cheat the next guy down the line because you conclude that it's a dog-eat-dog world?

Become so cynical about the world that you no longer enjoy life?

Those responses are all too common, even for Christians. Upfront, let me just say this: The first thing to remember when you have been treated unfairly is that this life isn't fair.

I suppose some of you might think it is redundant for me to say that, but it never ceases to amaze me that so many Christians get upset when things don't come out evenly. Whoever said that this life was fair, anyway? Nowhere in the Bible do we find teaching that on this earth, in this present fallen world, we can expect fairness. The only place and time we will experience perfect justice is when the ultimate Judge, Jesus Christ, returns to this earth to set up His kingdom. As He is the all-knowing, perfect King, Messiah, who is just and good, He will bring true righteousness with His reign.

Having said that, how then do we work through the cruelty, injustice, and unfairness we experience in this life? This morning we are going to witness another example of an innocent godly man who unfairly spent more time in jail, under house arrest, or in someone else's custody than he did as a free

man. As best I can figure, Paul spent seven of his last nine years in custody, and unfairly so. How did he do it without becoming embittered? How did he do it and maintain his joy and hope? That's what we want to look at this morning.

If you have your Bibles with you, I invite you to turn in them to **Acts 25**. For those of you who may be new to our study of **Acts**, allow me to set the stage for what we are about to read.

Luke records that after Paul's three epic missionary journeys, he had to endure five trials between **verse 27 of Acts 21** and the end of **Acts 27**. We have covered three already in our study, and this morning and next week we will look at the fourth trial. If you are new to this section of Scripture, let me quickly mention the first three trials so that you don't miss the flavor of our scenario.

Four Unfair Trials of Paul **Acts 21:27-25:27**

Jerusalem	Roman Commander Lysias	21:27-22:30
Jerusalem	Lysias and Sanhedrin	23
Caesarea	Governor Felix	24
Caesarea	Governor Festus	25

The first is Paul's arrest on the Temple mount. In **Acts 21:27** through the end of **chapter 22**, Paul went by himself to the Temple to offer up a sacrifice to God as part of his Nazirite vow. While there, some Jews who lived in Corinth, not Israel, spread rumors about Paul that caused an outrage among the crowd to such an extent that other enraged Jews grabbed Paul, took him out of the Temple, and began beating him to death. Paul was unexpectedly rescued by the Roman commander Lysias, but promptly found himself under arrest and in prison. And when the Roman commander learned that Paul was a Roman citizen, he realized that Paul had the right to a trial.

The second trial came the next day when Paul had to stand before the Jewish Sanhedrin (the religious and political leaders of the Jews) and Lysias to present his case. Once again, Lysias had to rescue Paul from a small riot that broke out in the midst of the court. He realized that Paul had not done

anything worthy of capital punishment, even though the Jews want him dead. However, he didn't have the authority to grant permission for execution, so Lysias decided to bump Paul up the leadership chain of command to the governor of Judea, Felix, who lived in his palace by the sea at Caesarea.

The third trial for Paul to endure was before the governor Felix in Caesarea. Here Felix quickly deduced that Paul had done nothing wrong and was not worthy of execution. But because of his greed, and because he thought Paul a man of influence with rich friends, Felix held Paul under house arrest for two years, hoping to get paid for his release. After this time Felix, a very harsh and inexperienced ruler, ran into political trouble with the Jews, was recalled to Rome by Caesar, and was replaced by Festus.

Paul's fourth trial was before Festus. As we approach **Acts 25**, where Paul first meets Festus, we find Paul two years older than he was at the end of **chapter 24**, having spent that time in prison. Unlike Felix, a freed slave who had climbed the political ladder until he became governor, Festus was a member of one of the noble families in Rome. Whereas Felix had been greedy and evil, Festus was relatively wise and honorable. From Felix he inherited a nation that was marked by the absence of law and order. In an effort to restore a semblance of security and peace, Festus eliminated the Sicarii, Jewish terrorists who had become increasingly bold in the last years of Felix's administration. These dagger men were Jewish assassins who mingled among the crowds on festive days, and with daggers hidden in their cloaks, they would murder their political or religious opponents and then disappear.

Festus, as the new governor, lacked experience in Jewish religious matters. As a result, he wisely went straight to Jerusalem upon his arrival in Palestine to learn about Jewish law, worship, and customs. That's where we pick up our story, in **Acts 25:1**. If you have your Bibles with you, please follow along as I read our passage for this morning.

¹Festus then, having arrived in the province, three days later went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. ²And the chief priests and the leading men of the Jews brought charges against Paul, and they

were urging him [Festus], ³requesting a concession against Paul, that he might have him brought to Jerusalem (at the same time, setting an ambush to kill him on the way).

⁴Festus then answered that Paul was being kept in custody at Caesarea, and that he himself was about to leave shortly.

⁵“Therefore,” he said, “let the influential men among you go there with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them prosecute him.”

⁶After he had spent not more than eight or ten days among them, he went down to Caesarea, and on the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. ⁷After Paul arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him which they could not prove, ⁸while Paul said in his own defense, “I have committed no offense either against the Law of the Jews or against the Temple or against Caesar.”

⁹But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me on these charges?”

¹⁰But Paul said, “I am standing before Caesar’s tribunal, where I ought to be tried. I have done no wrong to the Jews, as you also very well know. ¹¹If, then, I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is true of which these men accuse me, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar.”

¹²Then when Festus had conferred with his council, he answered, “You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you shall go.”

In the first seven verses, we are reminded of how Paul was perceived by much of the Jewish leadership of the day. They saw him as a threat to the status quo of their religion. As a result, they wanted to get their hands on him to kill him. Seeing as he was twenty-five miles away at the seacoast palace of the governor, they requested that Festus transfer Paul back to Jerusalem to stand trial before Festus and the Jews in Jerusalem. However, this was a sham. They knew that they had no case against Paul, but merely wanted him out in the open on the road to Jerusalem, where their assassins could ambush the party and kill Paul before he ever arrived in Jerusalem.

Here were religious leaders, the heads of the most enlightened nation in the history of the human race, plotting murder. You would think that their knowledge of the Ten Commandments, especially, “**You shall not murder,**” would have kept them from it. But it didn’t. They were still violating their own criminal laws, which provided rigorous safeguards for anyone accused of a crime that required the death penalty. In effect, these who ironically were supposed to be upholders of the Law were doing everything possible to avoid due process of law. Furthermore in the Jewish system, these were not just secular leaders. They were also the religious leaders of the people. The secular law and the religious law were one. Hence, driven by jealousy and hatred, they were willing to turn their backs on their own laws in order to secure the death of one they obviously hated.

When Festus arrived, we can assume that the Roman commander Lysias was still in charge in Jerusalem. As a result, Festus would have received a full report on Paul's situation up to that point, including details of the earlier Jewish attempt to assassinate Paul, that Paul was innocent of breaking any Roman law that would require execution, and that Paul had not been convicted of any violation of Jewish law. In short, Paul was innocent and deserved to be released.

Hence, when the Jews requested that Festus transfer Paul to Jerusalem for trial, Festus reacted negatively to this encroachment on his power to hold court anywhere he wanted. Furthermore, as Roman governor, he had to guarantee safety in transport for Paul, a Roman citizen. Because he could not, he wisely and rightly refused their request. In his response to the request for a change in venue, Festus stated that Paul was under guard in Caesarea, that he himself would go there soon, and that it would be there they would hold the trial. In essence, God used Festus to save Paul's life.

Festus went on to say, in **verse 4**, that he was about to leave Jerusalem shortly, and once he got to Caesarea, he would hold court. According to **verse 6**, "**shortly**" meant approximately a week and a half later, for that is when Festus arrived in Caesarea and held court.

According to **verse 7**, the Jewish leadership repeated the same accusations they had leveled against Paul during his trial under Felix. And as before, under cross-examination, the Jews were unable to prove any of the charges.

Paul's defense was a very calm reply, reduced to nineteen English words in **verse 8**. In short, he said, "I'm not guilty." I like what Chuck Swindoll writes concerning this situation. He states:

Not a trace of anxiety can be found in his words. No impatience. No bitterness. Actually, it's what he doesn't say that's so remarkable. He could have made a case for his academic scholarship, or complained about being held in prison unfairly, or driven hard the point of his

blameless reputation among the Sanhedrin, but he didn't.

Yet, when Paul's response was challenged by Festus with a request to change the venue of the trial to Jerusalem, Paul's answer in **verses 10-11** was calm. Yet it suddenly exposed Festus' political weakness and put Festus into a horrible situation, legally speaking. Paul simply said, in **verse 10**, "**I have done no wrong to the Jews, as you also very well know. . . . I appeal to Caesar.**" In other words, Paul was making it very clear to Festus that his wanting Paul to accept the change of venue to Jerusalem was not because it was in Paul's best interest, but in Festus'.

On top of that, Luke makes it clear that Festus' motive for doing this was to show the Jews a favor so that he might not be seen as a harsh politician as their most recently ousted governor, Felix.

Now a person might say, "Well, that's just a part of what it means to rule well. When you're in charge of something you have to get along with those you govern. Handing out favors is politically a wise move." That's true, of course. But this was a legal matter. Paul was on trial. Any giving of political favors in this situation was in reality a perversion of justice and the abuse of an innocent man.

Paul knew this, and as a result, he had to pull out his ace in the hole and appeal to Caesar. By the way, an appeal is not the same thing as a request that can be denied. An appeal was a tool under Roman law to force a political ruler to do something he may not have wanted to do. Once that appeal was made, it was not up to Festus to give permission, but to follow through on the appeal. Once such an appeal was made, it couldn't be recanted and must be followed.

This turn of events was not calculated by Festus, which suddenly put him in the very unenviable political position of having to justify sending Paul to Nero without any specific charges. Nero, the ruling Caesar at the time, and his officials would not take kindly to a governor who showed incompetence in judging trivial matters easily resolved under Roman law. Festus knew that Felix's career as a governor ended for not properly applying Roman law to the case and releasing Paul as he should have, and now he had made the same career ending mistake. Ugh!

Some of you, who may be familiar with Nero's later persecution of the Christians in Rome might assume that this move of Paul's was akin to jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire. But not so. Paul's appeal took place in the earlier years of Nero's reign, years marked by general empire stability. It was only about five to seven years later that Nero's dark side surfaced and his persecution of Christians came into play.

At this point, let's hit the pause button. Let's consider two important questions relevant to our passage. The first is, "So what? Why is this Biblical history lesson important to us today? What's the point for us this morning?" Well, there could be several points of application here, but I choose to make just one. When I'm finished addressing the point, then we will attempt to answer the question, "Now what? What are we supposed to do with what we have learned?"

Let's begin by stepping back and trying to put this scene into everyday human life perspective. When I try to do this, I can't help but ask, "How many right actions in even our recent political history have been bartered away because those in positions of influence, who knew what was right to do, were instead moved to do that which would please someone else and thus better their own position?" How many different ways have we experienced unfair treatment by others in positions of authority? And how are we to respond to that?

How often have you been taken advantage of by one in a position of authority or been cheated or double crossed? Earlier, when we began this morning, I mentioned to you what oftentimes are the world's responses to unfairness. As I bring these before you, I ask you, "Is this a godly response? Is this what Paul did?"

Retreat into a depression?

Withdraw from human interaction?

Look for a way to get even?

Vow that he would never do anything nice for anyone again?

Cheat the next guy down the line because he concluded that it's a dog-eat-dog world?

Become so cynical about the world that he no longer enjoyed life?

No. He took a legal recourse that was legitimately open to him, which was right and acceptable. But, while he was still unsure of exactly what lay before him, he had to walk by faith, knowing that there was a good possibility of more unfairness ahead. So what could he do? What did he do? What should we do? I would like to suggest three things that, having studied Paul's life, I know he knew and demonstrated by his example. We should do likewise when we face unfairness and mistreatment. I wish we had the time to show you from Scripture proof that Paul applied each of these things, but we don't this morning. However, they are so obvious, that I think you won't have any problem finding examples that this was part of Paul's process of working through unfairness in his life. So, in answer to the question, "How do I work through unfair treatment in my life," here are three suggestions.

First, we have to remind ourselves that God is sovereign. Sovereignty means that the buck stops with God. In other words, nothing takes place in our lives without our all-knowing and never-surprised God's permission. He may not have orchestrated it, as in the case of Satan tempting Job. God allowed it for His purposes and glory and ultimately for Job's good, even though at the moment it seemed to have been completely unfair for such a righteous man. God permitted unfairness to happen in Job's life.

Knowing God is sovereign over your circumstances gives you great power, because it means that even if things don't go right for you from a human point of view, it will still be right, since God understood and ordained those hard circumstances from the beginning. God knew unfairness was going to happen in my life, but even that unfairness is part of his plan for my good. Do I dare quote these well-known verses? Yes. **Romans 8:28**, "**And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God [for those who have put their confidence in Christ], to those who are called according to His purpose.**"

Second, in order to work your way through unfair times, you must decide ahead of time, before unfairness happens, that you are willing to pay any price necessary to honor Jesus Christ. Any price? Yes. Any price. The history of the church is filled with stories of martyrs who paid the ultimate price of their lives to stay true to Jesus as ambassadors for the gospel of Christ. At other times, it is not death that is required but such things as inconveniences caused

by the selfishness of others or the loss of reputation, success, advancement, or the good opinion of our friends.

Only the person who has renounced everything so as to lift up Christ can gain victory over the bitterness that comes with being treated unfairly. You and I are servants of the Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of a hostile world, and the only way we are going to be able to stand against the world when it pressures us is if we are willing to give up everything to follow Him.

Isn't following Jesus supposed to grant us peace and freedom from turmoil and unfairness? No. After all, Jesus did say, **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."** (Luke 9:23) A cross is a symbol of death, the putting aside of every right and every fairness so as to trust Christ. This is the victory of faith that overcomes the world.

Knowing and believing that God is sovereign and being committed to pay whatever it costs to serve Christ including unfairness are necessary to find victory when working one's way through the swamp of injustice. But probably the most important tool for working through the hurt that comes with being treated unfairly and dealing with any painful challenges in life is God's Word, the Bible. The path is dark through this world because the world is dark. But the Bible illuminates the path and shows us where to go. **Psalm 119:105** says, **"Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path."** Hence studying the Bible, meditating on the Scriptures, and seeking to apply the Bible to present life situations lead to emotional stability, contentment, and peace in life which present circumstances can't shake. **Proverbs 3:5-6** says, **"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight."**

Allow me to illustrate how the Bible enables you to get through tough times from a present personal example. I know that this example does not fit the topic of unfairness that our passage deals with, but I think you may understand a little better how important it is to know your Bible in tough times.

My father's death nine days ago was not an unfair action against my dad or me in any way. In fact, my dad's salvation and his being in heaven right now

is purely a result of God’s mercy and love toward my father, for which I will be eternally grateful. So I don’t want that to be misunderstood.

But I want to give you just a brief glimpse of how God’s Word has brought me comfort during these early days of my new life, living for the first time without Dad. First, I have memorized numerous verses that deal with the death of the believer, such as **2 Corinthians 5:8**, which teaches that for the believer who dies and leaves this earth, “**to be absent from this body is to be present with the Lord.**” I have absolutely no question or concern about where my dad is or that he is doing far better now than he ever did on his best day here on earth. When I received the phone call early Friday morning before breakfast, my heart rejoiced that my dad is finally home.

Yet, to be totally transparent, the rest of that day and the next, I lived in sort of in a mental suspension. In fact, I’m not sure that the reality of my father’s passing has completely sunk in. Others who have lost a parent to whom they were close for so many years have told me it will take years for it to sink in.

Because the closing ceremonies of Joni and Friends camp took place just after I received the news, and then we started driving home, I didn’t have time to get alone with the Lord. Saturday, trying to physically recover from a week at camp, again I rested and fielded family phone calls, emails, texts, and so forth. I was simply trying to work my way through the fog of the initial stages of grief. But then Sunday morning in my devotions, God used his Word in a special way to bring comfort to my aching heart.

First, let me read to you four passages and then share with you a unique word of encouragement I received based on these verses.

In **Revelation 1:8**, Jesus is speaking and He says, “**I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’” Revelation 1:8 (ESV)**

Then, the writer of **Hebrews** declares, “**Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today and forever.**” **Hebrews 13:8 (ESV)**

The next two passages come from the **Psalms**. In the first, the psalmist is speaking of our Creator God. He declares, “**Of old You laid the foundation**

of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but You are the same, and Your years have no end.” Psalm 102:25-27 (ESV)

Finally, we read in Psalm 48, **“That this is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever.” Psalm 48:14 (ESV)**

Sunday morning I realized that I had missed reading the past few days from a devotional book called *Jesus Calling*, by Sarah Young. So, I decided to go back to read the one I missed on the day of my father’s passing. In it, she takes theological truth based on these verses and writes these Biblical truths in a fashion as though Jesus were saying them. It gives these truths a more personal touch. It reads:

I am yours for all eternity. I am the Alpha and the Omega: the One who is and was and is to come. The world you inhabit is a place of constant changes. [No kidding! Dad just blasted off to heaven!] It’s more than your mind can absorb without going into shock. [That was true for me. I couldn’t and still struggle with wrestling with Dad’s absence.] Even the body you inhabit is changing relentlessly in spite of modern science’s attempts to prolong youth and life indefinitely. [Once again, that is not only true for Dad’s new heavenly body, but so it is with my raggedy old earthly tent!] I, however, am the same yesterday and today and forever.

Because I never change, your relationship with Me provides a rock-solid foundation for your life. I will never leave your side. When you move

on from this life to the next, My Presence beside you will shine bright with each step. You have nothing to fear, because I am with you for all time and throughout eternity.

From my dad's point of view, he is enjoying being in Jesus' presence right this moment. Before he died, he had nothing to fear about death, and certainly with Jesus next to him, visibly seen, he has no fear.

The same is true for me. Jesus is my present solid rock foundation who will never leave me. Although I have always had the knowledge of my earthly father's physical presence, I don't anymore. That could cause me to be afraid of the future, but I am not fearful. Even through this sorrowful time and into the rest of my life here on earth, I have Jesus. And one day, like Dad, I will be in the presence of Jesus and Dad forever! How cool is that!

So, even though we face challenges such as death or unfairness, we can work our way through them if we have a personal relationship with Jesus, we remember God is in charge and is worthy of our trust, we remain committed to paying whatever price to remain true to Jesus, and we continue to fill our minds and hearts with the truth and light of God's Word as we travel the dark paths of this world.

“Now may the God of hope fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in Him. Then you will overflow with hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.” Romans 15:13 (NLT)

