

STANDING TALL IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

Acts 25:13-27

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The first time I ever heard of this happening, I lived in Arizona. A neighbor family who lived on the other side of our backyard fence, someone with whom we had become acquaintances, had had a complete stranger turn them in to Child Services for reckless endangerment of one of their children. Why? I never found out.

At the time, the neighbors had two early elementary school children about our children's age. Because our homes were built so close together, we could just about hear any conversation at each other's home that took place outdoors or indoors if the windows had been left open. Not once had we ever heard a harsh word or witnessed any kind of abuse, physical or emotional. Their children were always dressed well and were polite. Yet, that didn't matter. It's been thirty years now, so I don't remember too many details, except for the fact that the parents were later proven innocent of all charges.

But what was so shocking to me is that based on a complete stranger's simple, unverified statement, their child was immediately removed from the home and put in protective services without the parents ever being questioned or interviewed. In other words, based on the words of a complete stranger, the parents were presumed guilty until proven innocent. After a great deal of expense in hiring lawyers, almost a year of not having their child in the home, and wondering if they would ever see their child again, the child was returned. The whole event was traumatic for the entire family. And the accuser--nothing happened to the accuser who had raised the false alarm.

Throughout the ordeal the parents felt helpless. They learned the reality that oftentimes justice takes time to mature. And because it does take time, it often leaves unnecessary hurt in its wake.

Since I have lived in Oregon, I have heard of similar cases. I have also heard of family disputes where with much ease, the violent partner in a family, out of spite, puts a restraining order on the peaceful partner, preventing the peaceful partner from re-entering the home or being near the children until

things are worked out in court. Meanwhile, the peaceful partner has no money for a lawyer, no place to live, and soon discovers that their life is now controlled by the whims of authority figures who do not know the individual in question. Thus, the individual is presumed guilty until proven innocent.

It's times like these that it is really hard to stand tall and be hopeful, when complete strangers, people of influence, power and authority can determine the outcome of our lives.

How do we stand tall and hopeful, when the powerful, the influential, the rich, and the ones with authority over us often determine our immediate future? We have an excellent example of such a person in our passage of study for this morning, **Acts 25**. The historical drama that takes place in this chapter would be worthy of a great Hollywood epic. It's full of political intrigue, murder attempts, illicit relationships, and more. To appreciate what a difficult spot the lead character in the plot, the Apostle Paul, found himself in, we must understand the historical situation and know the key parties involved.

So let's begin our study this morning by looking at the three main characters around which our episode revolves. We will start with the Apostle Paul. This man was a Jew who formerly was a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest religious and political counsel that ruled over the Jews during the first century. In the beginning, Paul hated all Jews who had become followers of Jesus Christ. To Paul, Jesus was a fraud and had deserved to die because he had claimed to be the Son of God, and thus God Himself. It is quite probable that Paul had a role to play in the execution of Jesus Christ on the cross. Furthermore, Paul reasoned that any one who followed Jesus also deserved to die for having encouraged heretical beliefs among the Jews. And indeed, Paul did persecute to the point of death many Jews who had put their trust in Jesus as the Messiah.

But that all changed one day when Paul, on his way to persecuting more Jewish Christians, was visited by the resurrected Jesus Christ. Meeting Jesus as his Messiah forever changed Paul's life. Because of his previous persecution of the Jews, one of Paul's most important goals was to return to his people, even the Jewish leadership, to demonstrate to them from God's Word how wrong he and they were about Jesus. Ultimately, it was Paul's hope until the day he died that his fellow Jews would entrust their lives to

Jesus.

But Paul's fellow Jews would have nothing to do with him. In fact, they turned on Paul and sought to kill him. One day while he was in the midst of worship in the Temple in Jerusalem, they actually tried to kill him, but instead he was arrested by the Romans for being the instigator of a riot. In the days to follow, Paul was put on trial and had to defend himself four different times up to this point. Each time Paul proved his innocence. His accusers had no witnesses to support their false charges. Furthermore, they could not refute the truth about which Paul was preaching from the Old Testament concerning Jesus Christ. Hence, the Roman leadership found no grounds to do what the Jews wanted, to have Paul executed. Furthermore, once Paul had been proven innocent of any capital or religious crime, he should have been released from custody. But he was not. To this point, Paul had been kept under house arrest, because the Roman authority over Paul at the time was hoping to be paid a bribe by Paul for his release, which was totally illegal. But Paul would not pay the bribe, so he remained held against his will.

That is, until the next key player came to town. His name was Festus, and he replaced the previous Roman governor of the province of Judea. Festus knew nothing of the Jewish nuances of faith, lifestyle, and culture, but he greatly wanted to learn about the Jews as quickly as possible. Upon his arrival Festus immediately met with Jewish leadership. By this time in the story, Festus had only been in Palestine about two weeks, having just replaced the previous governor. Governor Festus knew of Paul's situation and that Paul was a political and religious hot potato to the Jews. By this time, Rome had discovered that trying to successfully bring the Jews under submission to Roman rule had been fraught with challenges. Previous to Festus' arrival, many a Roman ruler found his career as governor or leader cut short by failure to control the Jews. Obviously, Festus did not want to become another negative statistic in the list of failed rulers. So he wanted to win the favor of the Jews. In trying to do so, he offered the Apostle Paul the opportunity to be tried a fifth time, in Jerusalem before the Jews. Paul wisely refused on two accounts: First, he knew that he would never make it to Jerusalem alive due to the plots of the Jews to assassinate him on the way. But more importantly, he had already been tried several times and found innocent. He knew he should have been released, and so did Festus. But now, with Festus' arrival and suggestion that he go to Jerusalem for another trial, Paul, who was a

Roman citizen, refused to go and appealed to Caesar to settle his case.

This appeal was a legal Roman tool afforded all Roman citizens facing capital punishment if it was believed by the citizen that their case was being unfairly tried or if they were being wrongly held against their will. Once an appeal was made, the Roman authority, in this case Festus, had no recourse but to send Paul to Rome to be tried. But that posed a serious problem for the recently appointed Festus. Paul was clearly innocent, and Festus had no information to prove otherwise. Hence, he would have to explain to Caesar why Paul had not been released. So soon after his arrival to Palestine, Festus discovered that his position as a ruler was on the line, and he was not sure what he could do to save his job. The plot thickens.

Enter our third key player and his woman, King Agrippa II and Bernice. Bernice could not be technically called his queen because they were never legally married. Nevertheless, she took on the public stature of a queen.

Agrippa was of Jewish descent, had been educated in Rome, and was the ruler of the northern half of the kingdom. Being of Jewish descent, he tried to promote their cause. He was known as an expert in Jewish customs and conflicts. He was well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures. During these early days of Governor Festus' rule, King Agrippa made a point of coming to Caesarea where Festus was living to welcome him to Palestine and to pay his respects.

Festus was overjoyed to see King Agrippa, for he knew that his knowledge of the Jews and Roman law would prove to be of great help in resolving this issue with Paul. For at this point, Festus could not send Paul to Caesar without having written a coherent report explaining to the emperor why Festus had not been able to release Paul and resolve the issue.

So, as we come to our text for this morning, we are not reading about a trial per se. What we will be reading about is a special event which was to accomplish two things: First, Festus was going to honor the arrival of King Agrippa. Second, Festus would use this opportunity to have Paul present his case again, a fifth time, in King Agrippa's presence with the hope that the king would be able to come up with a solution to Festus' problem. As we will see in the weeks to come, Paul is only too happy to explain his story, because it

would give him another opportunity to speak to a man of influence about the love of Jesus Christ.

Having brought you up to speed, I will read to you the next episode in the saga of the Apostle Paul's life. I'm entitling it, "Let the celebration begin!" In **Acts 25:13** we read:

Now when several days had elapsed, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and paid their respects to Festus. ¹⁴While they were spending many days there, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, "There is a man who was left as a prisoner by Felix [that would be Festus' predecessor as governor who had lost the job]; ¹⁵and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews brought charges against him [Paul], asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. ¹⁶I answered them [these Jewish leaders] that it is not the custom of the Romans to hand over any man before the accused meets his accusers face to face and has an opportunity to make his defense against the charges. ¹⁷So after they [the Jewish leaders] had assembled here [in Caesarea], I did not delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man [Paul] to be brought before me. ¹⁸When the accusers stood up, they began bringing charges against him not of such crimes as I was expecting, ¹⁹but they simply had some points of disagreement with him about

their own religion and about a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive.²⁰ **Being at a loss how to investigate such matters, I asked [Paul] whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there stand trial on these matters.** [At this point Festus conveniently leaves out what we learned in **verse 9**, that his motive for encouraging Paul to be tried in Jerusalem was not for Paul's benefit but in order to win the favor of the Jews.] ²¹**But when Paul appealed to be held in custody for the emperor's decision, I ordered him to be kept in custody until I send him to Caesar."**

²²**Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I also would like to hear the man myself."**

By the way, in the original Greek language, the verb tense of "**would like to hear**" suggests that Agrippa had been waiting to hear Paul for a long time. He undoubtedly knew of him and looked forward to hearing the leading spokesman of Christianity in person. So Festus obliged King Agrippa and said, "Tomorrow, you shall hear him."

²³**So, on the next day when Agrippa came together with Bernice amid great pomp, and entered the auditorium accompanied by the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in.**

Key to understanding this scene is the Greek word translated here as "**pomp**." It means "fantasia," a word from which we get "fantasy" and "fantastic." It is

a term carefully chosen by Luke, the author of **Acts**, and is used nowhere else in the New Testament. It denotes a grand, showy pageant and at the same time highlights that this would be a fleeting, or passing event, something of momentary interest only. The word was probably chosen carefully to suggest that these seemingly important gatherings of the rich and powerful are only passing fantasies. Twenty-four hours later, the servants would have removed the flags, banners, and entertainers, and it would all be over. In time, the people would also pass away. Eventually, even the Roman Empire passed away. But the message Paul would later preach about Jesus Christ would last forever!

On the scene in the great hall of the governor's palace were King Agrippa and Bernice. They were accompanied by the commanders (five tribunes each commanding five hundred Roman soldiers stationed at Caesarea) as well as the prominent men of the city. Most likely, all the men would have been accompanied by their female significant others. The spectacle must have been breathtaking. King Agrippa would have been decked out in all of the trappings of royalty, including a purple robe, golden crown, rings, and perhaps a scepter. Bernice would have been similarly attired. The five tribunes would have been wearing their full dress uniforms, and the prominent men of the city would be wearing their finest clothes.

In contrast to all of these dignitaries was Paul. It could not have been more striking when he was ushered into the assembly hall crowded with the most important people in Caesarea. Paul has been described elsewhere as short, bald, and physically unimposing (**II Corinthians 10:10**). Murmurs of surprise must have greeted his appearance. Many in the crowd probably found it hard to believe that this seemingly unimpressive man was the cause of so much controversy. But appearances can be deceiving. History has judged Paul to be one of the most noble and powerful men who lived during the first century.

Once Paul was escorted to the center of the room, Festus stepped up, and while pointing to the Apostle Paul, he addressed King Agrippa.

²⁴King Agrippa and all you gentlemen here present with us, you see this man about whom all the people of the Jews appealed to me,

both at Jerusalem and here, loudly declaring that he ought not to live any longer. ²⁵But I found that he had committed nothing worthy of death; and since he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to send him. [This was a joke, because this pompous fool knew he had no choice!] ²⁶Yet I have nothing definite about him to write to my lord. Therefore I have brought him before you all [Festus is desperate; he'll take help from any corner.] and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the investigation has taken place, I may have something to write. ²⁷For it seems absurd to me in sending a prisoner, not to indicate also the charges against him.

In a moment, King Agrippa would signal Paul, giving him permission to present his testimony. Paul's testimony, powerfully given, comes in the next chapter. We will have to leave our close examination of Paul's defense for later. Suffice it to say for now, Paul's speech was stunning, captivating, and courageously and powerfully given. As a result of how Paul answered these wealthy political heavyweights, King Agrippa, in **26:28**, said to the Apostle Paul, **"In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian."** We will come back to that next time.

But for now, what I would have you to do is to put yourself in Paul's sandals. Imagine yourself a prisoner, like Paul, held against your will for simply telling others about Jesus Christ's love for them, that Jesus died in their place to forgive them of all their sin, and that He grants freedom from all of their shameful past and promises an eternity with the living God. He wasn't preaching "Down with the government!" or "Down with Caesar!" He wasn't being treasonous or a terrorist. He wasn't asking them for money so that he could go on preaching. He was sacrificially giving of his life to these people so that they might discover the life-transforming power of Jesus. He was

simply asking them to entrust their lives to Jesus. And for this, he is in prison. And like his savior Jesus Christ who did nothing but good to those around Him, Paul would die for preaching Jesus to these people. And one day, like Jesus, Paul would be resurrected to live forever with Jesus.

But in the meantime, you, having put on Paul's sandals, have been sequestered away in a jail of sorts for more than two years, being wrongly held against your will. You also know that there is a great celebration taking place in some great room nearby, being hosted by your captor, Festus, in honor of King Agrippa. You know that shortly you will be called to give an explanation for your actions as a follower of Jesus Christ. You also know that during these politically and religiously unstable days in Palestine, these powerful, wealthy people in the other room could suddenly turn on you and bring you great physical harm, totally ignoring Roman law.

So, here's my question: At such a time as this, what would enable you to stand tall in the face of these judges who could easily be swayed to continue to treat you unfairly? What would enable you to confidently and powerfully speak to them about your faith and actions of faith?

Ironically, I believe the answer to that which enabled Paul to stand tall at this time is something he believed and wrote in a letter to Christians in Rome in AD 58, one or two years earlier than this occasion. Having just written about how God promises to eternally forgive, save, and deliver us into his eternal presence, never to be rejected, Paul writes these words, beginning with **Romans 8:31**. Keep in mind, this is not addressed to the entire human race, but only to those who have sought after God and put their complete confidence in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. I will be reading this from the New Living Translation.

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he [God] did not spare even his own Son [Jesus] but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen

for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God’s right hand, pleading for us.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?

[Was this not the situation that Paul was presently in--persecuted, in danger, threatened with death?] **No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life,** [Paul could confidently speak the truth in love to these enemies, knowing that even if they killed him like they did Jesus, it would not be a problem. He knew it would not separate him from the love of God. In fact, it would immediately usher him into the presence of the One whom he loved with all of his heart, his Savior, Jesus Christ.] **neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. No power in the sky above or in the earth**

below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul knew what would happen to him when he died. He knew where he was going when he did. Hence, he had great confidence and was fearless in lovingly, not brashly like some evangelists and preachers today, and with great warmth and winsomeness sharing his faith.

Approximately two years after this, while Paul sat in prison in Rome, he again wrote about what gave him such courage in facing difficult times and injustices. He said in his letter to the church at Philippi:

²⁰For I fully expect and hope that I will never be ashamed, but that I will continue to be bold for Christ, as I have been in the past. And I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die.

²¹For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better.

²²But if I live, I can do more fruitful work for Christ. So I really don't know which is better. ²³I'm torn between two desires: I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me. ²⁴But for

your sakes, it is better that I continue to live. ²⁵Knowing this, I am convinced that I will remain alive so I can continue to help all of you grow and experience the joy of your faith. (Philippians 1:20-25 NLT)

Paul obviously knew the truth about his final destiny, the truth about his God of justice, and the truth of the promise of God as it concerned himself. He knew he was loved by God, in spite of the injustice he was facing. He knew that he could trust God with his present circumstances as well as with his eternal destiny.

The question is, do you? If you are facing an injustice, a challenge that is fearful, do you know you are in good hands no matter what happens? Do you know that you are deeply loved by God, so that if something heart-wrenching comes your way, He will not abandon you? He will care for you and meet you where you are?

If you are confused and would like to talk more about this, I would consider it a privilege to do so. But if you know right now that you want to know God in a more intimate and personal way, to experience his forgiveness and freedom from shame, and to experience his life-changing power in you, it is easy. Your new life in Christ begins by simply telling God, “I admit that I have ignored You. I have even violated my own conscience, the conscience that you gave me. I’m asking You to forgive me and to permanently cleanse me from all of my sin, based on the efforts of Jesus Christ dying on the cross for my sin. I’m asking you to come into my life and to reign as the boss of my life.” That’s all it takes. You may also want to thank God for hearing your prayer, and whether you feel anything at the moment or not, thank Him for coming into your life, beginning a new and wonderful relationship with you, and forgiving you once and for all for having held Him off from yourself. And He will. That’s simply where it begins. If you want to know more about how to grow in your relationship with Jesus Christ, please check with me or one of the staff or our elders, and we would be happy to come alongside to encourage you in your walk with Christ.

