

“PAUL BEFORE FESTUS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Texts for the Sermon: Acts 25:1-12

Introduction.

The Bible is truly the most remarkable book ever written. There is no other book like it, which stands to reason since it is written by God. As you know the Bible is actually a library of 66 books. Written over a period of 1600 years on two continents, in three languages, by 40 different authors from a wide range of backgrounds and educations, who wrote in a wide variety of genres. There are histories, prophecies, poetry, wisdom literature, apocalyptic literature, letters and a new genre called Gospels.

All of this makes preaching the Bible an interesting challenge as you try to navigate and interpret all these different styles of writing. The narrative or historical books have their own challenge. The temptation that is easy to fall into is to just preach the facts, the events. He did this and then this happened and then some more things happened.

When I come to a text like ours this morning I pray and I ask God to open His Word to me to understand not just what it meant then, but what it means now. I am asking “so what?” My concern is to get past just information to transformation, how does this speak to our consciences, how does this confront our sin, how does this strengthen our faith and encourage us in hope?

I will speak to each of those three things as we look at God’s Word given to us for our benefit.

Acts 25:1-5, Festus before the Jews in Jerusalem.

As we come to chapter 25 of Luke’s history of the beginning of the church and the spread of Gospel, we find Paul still in prison under false charges and accusations of heresy against the Law of God, profaning and polluting the holy temple, and treason and inciting trouble in the Roman Empire. He has already endured three trials, first, on the Temple stairs in Jerusalem, then the next day again before the chief priests, and later before Governor Felix. Now he has to start over with a new governor and the same old unproven charges. He has committed no crimes, he has done no wrong, and yet here he is languishing in prison on the receiving end of violent hatred.

First application, dealing with our past regrets.

Two years ago Paul stopped in Caesarea for many days and stayed at Philip’s house. A prophet by the name of Agabus had prophesied Paul would be bound by the Jews and delivered over to the Gentiles. The saints in the church in Caesarea tried to talk Paul out of going to Jerusalem.

Here is my question. Do you think Paul regretted not listening to them? Do you think Paul wishes he could have a do over? Is he thinking about all the places he could have traveled to preach the Gospel instead of being stuck in prison for two years? Seriously, what do you think?

Paul's unwavering confidence in the sovereignty and promises of God give him absolute assurance God is in control and working all events according to His divine will, down to the smallest details.

And this applies to us and those chapters in our lives we regret and would like to rewrite. Yes, we grieve over the sins we have committed, the mistakes made, the painful childhood memories, the undesired twists and turns, the scars and heartaches. But in Christ we can let go of regrets, remorse, and wishing things were different. Look back and say with Paul, "God is working all things together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose."

Nothing past can keep us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. God is using it all for His glory and our sanctification. Our past doesn't define us, our weaknesses, mistakes and sin don't define us. The consequences of all of that doesn't define us. Our unrighteousness doesn't define us, Satan's lies don't define us. Other people's opinions don't define us. We are defined by Jesus Christ, by His righteousness, by the truth of the Gospel. Washed in His blood we can boast in your weakness and glory in what Christ is doing with your weaknesses.

Second application, dealing with our sinful hearts.

I am sobered by the violent hatred of these men's two years after Paul's arrest. Two years and they are still breathing out fire and wanting him dead.

In the words of one commentator "you can always count on two things from religious frauds: persistence and deceit." As true today as then.

Festus is on the job only three days, and has just made his first official visit to Jerusalem. It was two years ago the Jews first brought their case against Paul, but for them it was like yesterday. They pounce immediately.

Sin and evil are so deeply entrenched in our world all around us. But then I was sobered by a deeper reality, the sin I see in the world is deeply entrenched in our own hearts.

We need to take some pause to consider the darkness the human heart is capable of and consider our own. We are capable of great anger, flashes of great temper, impatience, selfishness, pride, lust, greed. And how many of us have had a passing thought of wishing someone was dead, or at least out of our lives?

Evil, wickedness and sin are always ***crouching*** at the door to find any opportunity. Satan is always lurking in the shadows, always baiting the trap. And not just out there in the world, but here in each of our hearts.

Genesis 4:6-7 The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? 7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.”

What does crouching mean? It means a posture of readiness, ready to spring into action on a moment’s notice. This is aggressive posture. This is the posture of a wild animal watching its prey. Sin is personified as an animal. Like Satan said to be like a roaring lion.

I Peter 5:8-9 Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 9 Resist him, firm in your faith.

Luke 22:31-32 “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, 32 but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

While Satan preys on us, Jesus prays for us. We are weak and failing. Satan is powerful and devious. But he is under God’s authority, control and power, and Jesus is praying for us.

Mercy from above overrules all malice from below. Confident in the sovereignty of God.

The Jews make their case against Paul and then ask a favor of the new governor. On the face of it, it is a fair and reasonable request. Rather than try Paul in an alien court, let him be brought to Jerusalem since this is a religious matter and not a civil matter.

So if what they ask is fair and reasonable, why doesn’t Festus grant them their request? We don’t know his reason or motive. But this we do know.

The heart of a king is a stream of water in the Lord’s hand, he directs it wherever he will (Prov. 21:1).

This be credited to nothing else but the providence of God ruling and over ruling in the hearts and minds of kings and rulers, ordering all events according to the counsel of His perfect will.

God restrains the mind of Festus, and uses him as His means for protecting Paul from the hands of his enemies.

Acts 25:6-12, Jews before Festus in Caesarea.

Notice the change of mind Festus has when the Jews come to Caesarea to make their formal case against Paul and Paul defends himself. Now Festus is of a different mind, inclined to send Paul back to Jerusalem.

But again God is sovereign. God ties his hands so he can't carry out what he was willing to do. Paul being prompted by God to appeal to Rome and to Caesar derails Festus attempt to do the Jews a favor.

Paul uses the law to his own advantage. In this God is actively moving, working using all means for the sake of His will to deliver Paul from his enemies.

Paul before Festus, "I appeal to Caesar."

"I appeal to Caesar." Are you kidding me, Paul? You want go to Nero. Don't you know how wicked and ruthless he is, and what he does to Christians? Why are you appealing to Caesar? As Paul had no regrets over the past, so he has no fear of the future.

His confidence is in the sovereignty of God. God has been working through his whole life connecting the dots. No mistakes, no accidents, no regrets.

Acts 9:15-16 The Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Acts 19:21 Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."

Acts 23:11 The following night [in prison in Jerusalem] the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."

Romans 1:10-15 ... always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. 11 For I long to see you, ... 15 I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

Appealing to Caesar is the answer to Paul's constant prayers, "asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you." Paul is not fearful, worried or anxious or stressed. He is the one who taught us when we are anxious to remember the Lord is at hand, the Lord is with us, the Lord is in all things, so pray with thanksgiving and make your requests known to God, and He will give you His peace, and cause all things to work for His glory and our good.

Third application, patient confidence because of our sovereign God.

Are any of you feeling a bit impatient with Luke's seemingly painfully slow recounting Paul's trials? Or maybe you are feeling impatient with God's slow plans. Two years sitting in prison. The wheels of providence move so slow. We find ourselves again and again in situations of having to wait for God, to wait on God.

God is a God of incredible patience and in suffering and trials God teaches us His patience.

Romans 5:3-5 We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

James 1:2-4 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Christian patience is grounded in our belief in a sovereign and good God who we are confident is at work in all the affairs of man and in men's hearts. Christian patience grows from the belief that God is gracious and will not forget us or forsake us.

Christian patience is strengthened when we have a clear sense of eschatology, of the fast approaching end of time, either for ourselves or for the whole world. Be patient as you rest your hearts in the knowledge that this test we call life is short.

Think of some situations in which you have not been patient and ask the Lord to give you endurance. Strive to wait patiently on the Lord in all things.

We cannot, should not, must not judge God and God's ways and purposes. We must not put God on the witness stand and make Him answer our interrogation. We cannot question Him on where He has placed us, what He takes us through, why this path and not another.

The Bible is full of stories of accounts of God's actions or inactions that don't make sense, don't seem fair, are confusing to all of us who can't see the eternal perfect plan of God. Evil prospers, good is punished, the innocent are judged guilty, the guilty are set free.

We may never experience what Paul experienced or to this degree. We hear of stories of people falsely accused and unjustly imprisoned. We can't really imagine what that is like. But think about the countless thousands, even millions of Christians over the past two thousand years who have read of Paul's trials and have drawn great strength, courage, patience and hope from this.

William Tyndale imprisoned for the crime of translating the Bible into English. Corrie Ten Boom imprisoned for hiding Jews. Johanna Roosma's grandfather, Johannes Bogaard, after whom she was named, kept hiding Jews in Holland without fear even when his father, brother and son were killed. Our missionary friend David Brown unjustly imprisoned in Albania for 15 years. Countless pastors in China right now reading Paul and rejoicing in hope.

Romans 15:4 Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

I Corinthians 10:11 Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction.

Hebrews 6:12 Be imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Let this account given to us by Luke from the life of Paul, be an encouragement and blessing to you, strengthen your faith and increase your confidence in the sovereign goodness of God.

It is easy to fall into the trap of reading these events in the life of Paul as the actions of enemies and politicians directing the affairs, that somehow all of this is man's design. Nothing could be further from the truth. Everything here is the will of God carried out by the Holy Spirit. And here is the gloriously good news, because this is not by man's design but by God's design, nothing can hinder, sidetrack, or derail what God is doing. The very gates of hell cannot stand against the forward expansion of the church of Jesus Christ.

Let this story give you confidence in the face of all dangers.

Let this story calm your mind in the face of all uncertainties, all sources of fear, doubt, anxiety.

Let this story be lasting proof that God has all power and providence to protect His children.

Let this story give you increased patience in God's slow providence.

Let this story incite us to prayer and call on God in all danger and fear.

Let this story encourage us to gather with other Christians to encourage, build up, bless, pray.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come;

His grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home.