

# I APPEAL TO CAESAR!

Acts 25:1-27

Key Verse: 25:11

*If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!"*

In today's passage, Paul stands trial before a new governor after spending two years in prison. Once again, he is accused by the Jewish leaders and he is alone to defend himself. But he did not give in. With the help of the Spirit, Paul makes a decision that would change the course of history. May God help us learn his secret of courage in the midst of adversity!

## I. PAUL BEFORE FESTUS (1-9)

Paul was tried first in Jerusalem by the Sanhedrin. Then he was tried in Caesarea before Felix the Roman governor. Felix knew that Paul was innocent. He had a letter from his commander that told him so. But he did not release Paul. He wanted to grant a favor to the Jews. He was also hoping to get some bribe money from Paul (24:27). Calculating this and that, Felix let Paul sit in the prison for two years. He was a corrupt politician. He postponed important decisions for financial gain and political favor. Perhaps he was indecisive in other matters, always looking for something for himself. Worst of all, he postponed a decision that involved his life and death. In a private Bible study session, Paul talked to him about the judgment to come. Felix became afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you" (24:25). He postponed his repentance. He missed the opportunity to receive the gift of eternal life. May God help each of us and our Bible students to make decisions on the spot when we are convicted by the word of God!

Look at verse 1. *Three days after arriving in the province, Festus went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem.* Felix was replaced by a new governor named Festus. The first business that the new governor had to take care of was the unresolved matter of a prisoner. Just three days after arriving in the region, he went up to Jerusalem, where the chief priests and the Jewish leaders appeared before him and presented the charges against Paul (3). Compared to Felix who had ruled Judea for several years, Festus was a rookie governor. He did not know the society very well. But he quickly found out one thing—that he had to work with the Jewish leaders to govern. And he figured out why Felix dragged his feet in dealing with Paul the prisoner.

The Jewish leaders were ready to exploit the inexperience of the new governor. Look at verse 3. *"They requested Festus, as a favor to them, to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way."* This tells us how evil the religious leaders had become. Two years earlier, a Jewish death squad of 40-men tried to kill Paul. The plot was foiled only because Paul's nephew got hold of the information and called 911. Now the Jewish leaders adopted the scheme as their own.

They wanted to kill Paul in ambush. They were supposed to be shepherds of God's flock. They were to administer justice before God over all aspects of Jewish religious and political life. But they were not at all interested in the truth. They used all means to advance their political agenda, that is, to kill a servant of God.

In the trial before Festus, they stood around Paul and brought many serious charges against him, which they could not prove (7). The religious leaders did not hesitate to give false testimony against Paul. They violated the 9<sup>th</sup> of the 10 commandments. Time and again, Paul testified that he served the Lord with a clear conscience. But the religious leaders had no problem with telling the lies. It was because they did not live before the eyes of God. They did not care about God and about what he wanted them to do. They were after their own glory. They loved praise from men (Jn 5:44). They were also too proud to repent their sins and ask God's mercy (Lk 7:30). To lie and murder is the act of the devil (Jn 8:44). When they did not have God in their hearts, they became the instrument of Satan by default.

The Jewish leaders were preparing an ambush to kill Paul. But Festus did not get suckered into their plan. Look at verses 4-5. *Festus answered, "Paul is being held at Caesarea, and I myself am going there soon. Let some of your leaders come with me, and if the man has done anything wrong, they can press charges against him there."* In the Roman law, the accused had to be given the opportunity to face his accusers and defend himself against their charges (16). Festus knew that Paul could not get a fair trial in Jerusalem. So he did not send Paul to Jerusalem as the Jews requested. But he did spend time with the Jewish leaders, and then invited them to Caesarea. About 10 days later, the court was convened in Caesarea (7). So the trial began. It was déjà vu all over again. A new governor and a new trial, but the situation remained the same for Paul. The Jewish leaders brought bogus charges against him.

But Paul remained calm. He was not frustrated. What was his opening statement in his defense? He said, "I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar" (8). Paul was innocent. There was no basis for the charges. The burden of proof was on the Jews and they had no evidence. Festus should have declared, "There is no merit. Case dismissed!" Instead, Festus said something to please the Jewish leaders. Look at verse 9. *Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?"* He knew that a fair trial was impossible in Jerusalem. Yet he asked the question. He wanted to please the Jews. Festus was a consummate politician. He became a man of compromise who was willing to send an innocent man to his enemies. He reminds us of another Roman governor who, after washing his hands, sentenced an innocent man to death by crucifixion.

## II. I APPEAL TO CAESAR! (10-27)

Festus ignored the facts. He ignored Paul's testimony. He chose to side with the Jews. No one was on Paul's side. No one seemed to care about his life and future. He had spent two years in prison. A new governor came, but the situation did not change at

all. What did Paul decide to do at this point? Look at verses 10-11. *Paul answered: "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!"* Paul made an important decision on the spot. He appealed to Caesar. What can we learn from Paul?

**First, Paul's courage.** Paul was standing before the hostile Jews who wanted to kill him and a governor who was not interested in administering justice. No one was on Paul's side. He did not even have a public defender. No church leaders were in the courtroom for some reason. No single person stood up to support Paul. There was no hope for justice. Yet Paul kept his head. His mind was free from fear and anxiety. His mind was focused. He knew where he was and what he was doing. Paul had received a strong punch. But he was not knocked off balance, because he kept his head. This was possible because of the help of the Holy Spirit. In Mark 13:11, Jesus promised his people, "Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit."

With a strong voice, Paul said to Festus, "I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well." How could Paul maintain such an extraordinary courage? The Holy Spirit was with him. The Roman governor, with all his power, could not break Paul's spirit because Paul stood before God. Paul did not have a lawyer defending him, but he knew that the Risen Christ was standing by him.

St. Polycarp (70-155 AD) was about to be burned at stake for being a Christian during the period of severe persecutions by the Roman Empire. The Roman proconsul had pity on the gentle old man and offered to spare his life if he simply denounced Jesus and confessed Caesar as Lord. But Polycarp replied, "Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" His courageous voice still resonates in the minds of believers today.

Living in America today, we don't have this kind of persecution. But if you did, how would you personally react? Would you have the courage like Paul and Polycarp? We know that this is possible only if we have resurrection faith. Jesus said, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt 10:28).

**Second, Paul's vision for world mission.** Paul decided to appeal to Caesar. He had a mission vision in a time of trial. In that difficult situation, Paul remembered the words of Christ, "... you must also testify in Rome" (Ac 23:11). It was God's will for him to go to Rome and testify about Jesus. When Paul remembered God's purpose for world mission and for his own life, he knew he must go to Rome. The Jewish leaders had an evil scheme to kill him. But Paul did not consider himself a victim of their scheme. He saw God's good purpose in it. He knew that God was in control of his life and future. Paul

wrote in Romans 8:28, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” When Paul decided to obey God’s will by using his Roman citizenship. He remembered Roman law. Every Roman citizen had the right to appeal to Caesar from anywhere in the Roman Empire. Based on this appeal, the Roman citizen would be brought to Rome for trial. Paul saw clearly how this appeal would get him to Rome. He didn’t even have to buy his ticket for the trip. Rome would pay his travel expenses. Paul began to see what God was doing. He committed his life and future into the hand of God.

In terms of trial strategy, was appealing to Caesar a good idea? Perhaps it was, but there were many uncertainties in standing before Caesar’s court in a foreign country. The real reason he appealed to Caesar, of course, was to preach the gospel of Jesus in Rome. Why was it important to preach the gospel in Rome? Rome was the center of the (Western) world at that time. God wanted all peoples of the world to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ for salvation of the dying souls. God wanted Paul to preach the gospel there. It was becoming clear to him that he had to go to Rome as a prisoner in chains. God was working behind the scenes in his mysterious ways.

The trial ended when Paul appealed to Caesar. After conferring with his council, Festus declared: “You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!” (12). Festus was happy to get rid of the case that gave him headache. But he had a big problem. What was his problem? He had nothing definite to write to the Emperor about Paul (26). To send a prisoner to Caesar without a valid charge was political suicide for the governor. He needed a help in filing proper paperwork. Then he found someone he thought could help him. Look at verses 13-14. *A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. Since they were spending many days there, Festus discussed Paul’s case with the king. He said: “There is a man here whom Felix left as a prisoner.”* Festus shared details of the case with the Jewish king, hoping to get some help. He said to Agrippa, *“When his accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive. I was at a loss how to investigate such matters; so I asked if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges. But when Paul made his appeal to be held over for the Emperor’s decision, I ordered him held until I could send him to Caesar”* (18-21). The Jews had brought many charges against Paul. But even Festus recognized that the focal point of their dispute was the resurrection of Jesus. He said it was “about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive.”

Let us think about why the Jews became furious when Paul talked about the resurrection of Jesus and his hope in the resurrection. Out of their jealousy, the Jewish leaders had handed Jesus over to the Romans to be crucified. They thought all their problems would be gone if they removed Jesus from their society. But now Paul preached that Jesus came back to life. And many Jews in Jerusalem became Christians, meaning they believed in the resurrection of Jesus. This was a big problem for the

Jewish leaders. They were guilty of killing Jesus. Now his resurrection would mean their problem was not gone.

King Agrippa was intrigued by the case. He wanted to hear from Paul himself (22). The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high-ranking military officers and the prominent men of the city (23). This Agrippa was only 17 years old when his father Agrippa I was eaten by worms for claiming God's glory for himself (Ac 12:20-23). He was also a great grandson of Herod the Great who murdered the baby boys in Bethlehem when he learned about the birth of Jesus. This Agrippa was the last king of the Herod Dynasty. Who was Bernice who came to the meeting? She was his own sister along with Drusilla. But Bernice was also his mistress. They had incestuous relationship. This family's notoriety spanned several generations.

Picture this scene in your mind. Agrippa and his sister-cum-girl friend entered the room with great pomp. Agrippa was surrounded by people who treated him with great respect. Festus the Roman governor had the power to order Paul to be brought in. The audience room had been richly decorated with the finest ornaments. The atmosphere was solemn as the powerful people gathered in the room.

In this atmosphere, Paul was tried yet again by King Agrippa. We will think about Paul's testimony before the king in detail in Chapter 26. Before his defense, Festus introduced Paul to the king and dignitaries, giving them a summary of the case. He told them that the whole Jewish community petitioned him about Paul in Jerusalem and also in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer (24). However, he found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor he decided to send him to Rome (25). Then he added, "But I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. For I think it is unreasonable to send a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him" (26-27). Festus was desperate to find a valid charge to write for a court document. King Agrippa, Bernice, the high-ranking military officers and the prominent men of the city were curious about Paul's case. To them it was just a spectacle to watch. Paul, however, was there to testify about Jesus' death and resurrection.

In today's passage, we learn Paul's courage and mission vision in the time of trial. Surrounded by his enemies who wanted to kill him, Paul remembered God's purpose for his life. He made a decision to obey Jesus' will for him when he said, "I appeal to Caesar!" May God help us to learn his courage and mission vision!