

confirm that he would indeed go to Caesar (verse 12). God keeps his promises! We may find ourselves puzzled by the timing. We may often think that the delay has been far too long, and be tempted to distrust God's word. We will find, though, that if we hold on to God's word, that not the tiniest letter or smallest stroke of the pen shall fail from it. Heaven and earth might pass away, but his word will remain.

Christian, what promises of God are you holding out for? Is the evil one managing to persuade you that you have been trusting in vain? Do not listen to him! God cannot lie, and he has no lack of power to perform all that he decrees. The question is not whether God is faithful. The question is whether we will trust him. How happy we will be if our faith is not weak, but strong, holding firmly to every word which he has spoken. Has he promised to bring us at last to glory, with his Son? Then he shall; let us wait upon him and we shall renew our strength (Isaiah 40:31).

## ***Expository thoughts on*** **The Acts Of The Apostles**

***Daily Bible Reading Notes***

***Week 17 (Chapter 22:30-25:12)***

**Grace Church Belper**

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## Acts 22:30-23:10

*30 The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them. 1 Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." 2 And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. 3 Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?" 4 And those who stood by said, "Do you revile God's high priest?" 5 Then Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'" 6 But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!" 7 And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. 8 For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection - and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both. 9 Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees' party arose and protested, saying, "We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God." 10 Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks.*

The Roman commander now had a problem which he needed to solve. He had taken Paul as a prisoner, but had no idea what crimes he was supposed to be guilty of. He had tried to find out by scourging him; but Paul was a Roman citizen, and this would have been illegal (22:24-). He had a difficult problem, because if he let Paul go it might lead to further trouble, and enrage the Jews; but he could not keep him without some reason. So, he decided to gather the Jews together to find out just what they were accusing him of. Like Jesus before him, like the Jewish apostles, and like the martyr Stephen, Paul would now appear before his fellow Jews to give an account of himself.

The first lesson which these verses teach us is that *we will be disappointed if we look to this world for justice*. Paul was an innocent man, and had not polluted the temple as he had been accused of doing. He was a servant of God, who had risked his life many times to bring people the good news about Israel's Saviour. As soon, though, as he opened his mouth before the council, it became clear that he had little chance of a fair hearing. He spoke respectfully, addressing them as "men and brethren" - even though many of them had fought against God for years. He testified that he was in submission to God, and was not an enemy but a friend of the law (verse 1). This simple opening, though, was too much for the high priest to bear - Ananias commanded that Paul should be struck upon his mouth for what he had said (verse 2). It was a hypocritical and wicked act; Paul had not been found guilty of anything - he had hardly even spoken! The priest was meant to see that God's law was honoured in the trial; but instead he boldly broke it. He clearly had no intention of giving the apostle a fair hearing. If Paul had hoped to be able to give a defence of the faith and be listened to, he could now see that it was not going to happen.

took Felix's place, and when he came to visit them, they wasted no time in speaking against Paul to him, and seeking a new trial. We read that after all those months, they were still plotting to murder him as he travelled to Jerusalem. Time had not taken away their envy and hatred of him; it remained in their hearts just the same. Whilst Paul was alive, they could not rest - and the passing of years would not lead them to repent over their anger and willingness to kill.

It is said that time is the great healer. This may be true for a number of things; but for others, it is not. Time does not take away sin, or change a heart for the better. Man's corruption is not a disease that will cure itself if just given a little rest. Its roots go far deeper than this. There has only ever been and will only ever be one way for sin to go away: it must be repented of. The death of the Lord Jesus must be relied upon, and the man must be named and confessed as sin to God. It must be mourned in sorrow before his throne, and sincerely rejected. God's grace must be asked for, to overcome its evil effects and temptations. The Saviour himself must be relied upon to supply all that we need. And this only, is the way to deal with sin.

Does not our experience prove that this is true? How many people do we know who have become bitter, because they did not deal with the unkindness that lurked in their hearts? How many people do we know who have issues which, if they are reminded of them, work them up into anger in no time at all? Years might pass - but just a word here or there, and it all comes flooding back, and nothing has changed. Time might have allowed them to put the matter to one side; but it is always there, ready to possess them once again if they should be reminded of it. What a tragedy! Let us make sure we are convinced of one thing. If we do not master and put to death our sin, it will master and put to death us. If we do not repent daily, then we are choosing the road to ruin. We must either deal with sin, or become quite useless for the Lord - there is no other choice.

Secondly, these verses show us that *the best of Christians can suffer continual injustice*. Paul was the great apostle, chosen by the Son of God, sent to the nations of the world. His life was exemplary, and his enemies had nothing that they could prove against him. Despite this, he spent years, beginning here, without his freedom. Fairness and justice were often lacking in this life - even to the very best of men. What we receive or do not receive in this life is no proof of how things really stand between us and God, or what we may expect at the final judgment. We should not look to this life for such things; we live in a day when man is given freedom to go his own way. The day when God will put all things right has not yet arrived. We must, rather, be determined that we shall not let such things make us bitter or cause us to lose heart. We must, like Paul, be patient, not lose heart, and trust that God is bringing his perfect plan to pass.

Finally, in this passage the journey to Rome begins. Paul knew that he had no hope of justice if he were to appear in Jerusalem, the home city of the Jews. If Festus was looking to please them here, he would certainly do so there. So, Paul stood upon his rights as a Roman citizen, and appealed to a hearing before Caesar. He protested his innocence, and testified that he recognised the right of the judge to even put him to death if he was indeed guilty, and appealed to the emperor's justice. It was some years since Paul had purposefully visited Rome. It was some years since the Lord Jesus had promised him that he would do so. But now, the wheels were set in motion, and he began on his way, as Festus answered

was worried about his status and reputation. What would people say? So he remained unsaved, and displeased his Creator and Judge, choosing to honour mere men in God's place. How many are like Felix here too! If they become Christians, they will shock their friends, and create problems in their families. If they repent of sin, they will have to change some of their ways and company - and so they do not. They reject God's offer of mercy, because they love to please men instead.

The Lord Jesus offers every one free forgiveness, and everlasting life. Reader, what is keeping you from coming to him? Whatever you might lose, you will gain something worth infinitely more - and you will gain your own soul. Weigh it in the balance; as you read, Paul is enjoying the presence of the Son of God; those who died like Felix will never know happiness again.

## Acts 25:1-12

*1 Now when Festus had come to the province, after three days he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem. 2 Then the high priest and the chief men of the Jews informed him against Paul; and they petitioned him, 3 asking a favour against him, that he would summon him to Jerusalem - while they lay in ambush along the road to kill him. 4 But Festus answered that Paul should be kept at Caesarea, and that he himself was going there shortly. 5 "Therefore," he said, "let those who have authority among you go down with me and accuse this man, to see if there is any fault in him." 6 And when he had remained among them more than ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day, sitting on the judgment seat, he commanded Paul to be brought. 7 When he had come down, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood about and laid many serious complaints against Paul, which they could not prove, 8 while he answered for himself, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all." 9 But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favour, answered Paul and said, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?" 10 So Paul said, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. 11 For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar." 12 Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, "You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go."*

As we read these words, we must remember that a good deal of time has passed. Luke's account has been brief, but he has told us that Paul has now been a prisoner for two years. How much have we done in the last two years? All that time, Paul was kept at Caesarea, waiting for a trial that did not arrive. Now, though, there was a new governor - Porcius Festus (24:27). With the new governor, came a new advance in Paul's case.

One great lesson from these words is to show us that *hatred, if it is not repented of, will never go away*. Two years had now passed, in which Paul had not shown his face in the temple, in Jerusalem, or anywhere outside of his captivity in Caesarea. Two years had gone, in which the religious leaders and other Jews could sit back and think about what had happened. That was a good deal of time to come to their senses, and admit that Paul was being imprisoned for no real cause. What, though, do we read? When a new governor

Christians need to be sure of something in their own minds. There will be a day when will hand out perfect justice; but that day has not come yet. In this life, men and women make up their own minds, often with a great deal of prejudice and selfishness. They do not look fairly at all the facts, but decide what they would like to be true and go with that instead. We live in a world which is fallen, and in which a great deal is unfair. There is no question about this. The only question is about what to do in response. We must not become bitter, but remember that our Lord received far harsher injustices than we shall ever know. We must not grumble, but remember that God is sovereign, and allows things to happen for our good. We should not become cynical, but pray to our Father whose concern for justice is infinitely more than we can ever imagine. We cannot lose heart, but must look and long for that day when he will right every wrong. There is one thing that we should hold on to very tightly: ultimately, there will be no injustice at all. It is impossible for any single sin or offence to be forgotten by God. His righteousness and holiness require him to deal perfectly with every evil thing. If people seem to "get away with something, it is only for a time. All sin must one day be accounted for - whether in the fires of punishment, or in the cross of Jesus Christ. God is just.

As Paul reacted to the evil treatment he received, he would have soon realised that there was no hope of a fair trial. There was no point in him making a long speech, or giving details about his life. He quickly saw that he must bring the matter to a head. So he, in a few words, drew their attention to the vital issue: the resurrection of the dead. Let us see in these words, this fact: *the resurrection of the dead is the greatest issue of all*. It was the resurrection which Peter had preached about in the first ever sermon of the Christian church (Acts 2:24). When Peter and John were first tried before the council, it was the resurrection that they drew attention to (Acts 3:15). Right throughout the book of Acts, and in Paul's imprisonment now, this great fact was preached and insisted upon, again and again. Jesus has been raised from the dead - the resurrection has already begun. There is a saviour at God's right hand - and a judge too. He will judge all people, from all places and all times. His own resurrection is the great proof of this fact. The righteous will be glorified and reign forever with him; the wicked shall be raised for everlasting torment and pain.

There was nothing more important that Paul could have drawn attention to. He knew that he would not get a fair hearing from the high priest, who was a Sadducee. His great gospel preaching was that Jesus was not dead, but alive - and would reign for evermore. Such preaching was completely unacceptable to any Sadducee; they did not believe in any such things (verse 8). Paul knew that he needed to draw attention to this fact. He was on trial because of the resurrection - supremely, that of Jesus Christ. The trial collapsed in chaos, but we suppose that this is the best that Paul could have hoped for. The Pharisees were willing to have Paul condemned for reasons that would condemn them too. In God's wonderful and sovereign control, their outcries saved him from the high priest.

How often do we think about the resurrection? Do we spend all of our time gloomy and depressed, as if there were no life to come? Are we using all of our energy and resources on ourselves, and on this life, as if we will never have to give an account? Do we think that the most important thing is our reputation with others, and getting on in this world? If we do, we have made a tragic mistake. The unseen world is no less real or important than

its being unseen. There will come a day when every wrong will be righted - and everything not done for the glory of God will be seen to have been worthless and wasted. On that day, the world will see that we have belonged to God, and loved by his Son. Let us live now, with a faith that sees that day coming. Let us throw off the sin that holds us back, and live for the life which is to come.

## Acts 23:11-24

*11 But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome." 12 And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves with an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. 13 Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy. 14 They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, "We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul. 15 Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near." 16 So when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. 17 Then Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him." 18 So he took him and brought him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you." 19 Then the commanders took him by the hand, went aside, and asked privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?" 20 And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him. 21 But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the promise from you." 22 So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded him, "Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me." 23 And he called for two centurions, saying, "Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at the third hour of the night; 24 and provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor."*

Paul had now appeared before the council - but as yet the commander did not know what charges were to be brought against him. He is Paul the prisoner, waiting to see what will happen next. He will be Paul the prisoner for the rest of the book. In these verses we are again made to think of Rome - and shown a little more about how he got there.

The first lesson to learn from these verses is that *the Lord is near, and sees all that we do for him*. We do not know what Paul was thinking about what had happened in the council the day before. Luke has not told us if he was happy or disappointed at what he had been able to say. It was his second public speech; but in both of them he had been cut short, and not said many things which he would have surely liked to explain. Yet, whilst we do not have Paul's thoughts, we do have something worth far more - we have the words of the Lord. We are told that the Lord appeared to Paul and spoke to him. His master spoke, encouraged him, assured him, and gave him confidence for the things that were still to come. Whatever Paul thought of it, his Lord had seen and heard a testimony to him. Paul

thought, every word and every deed are examined, and a verdict passed upon us. We might think we can live today as we please, and treat God's claims over us as we choose. There will come a day when all who think that way will find they were horribly mistaken. Paul's message to Felix was not a light and flimsy thing. It was not a man-pleasing message which aimed to leave Felix asleep in his sins. It was a bold confrontation of the man with the great realities of God. Anything less is not Christian witness. There might be many voices today telling us that we need to tone down our message, and make it less offensive to fallen man. Many nice and well-meaning men might explain that we must blunt off the gospel's sharp edges to make it easier to accept. The word of God, though, knows nothing about that way of thinking, and so neither should we.

We must secondly look at Felix, and see *the dangers which prevent many from coming to Christ*. Felix was not a man who brushed off the gospel, and paid no attention to it. Paul was his prisoner, but he sent for him and willingly listened. He was interested and desirous to learn more. He saw in Paul an upright, earnest and believable man who believed his message enough to suffer greatly for it. All of this, though, did not come to anything in Felix. He did not repent of his sins, or trust in Christ. Three things kept him from doing so.

The first was the sin of covetousness. He knew that Paul was a citizen, an educated man, and well travelled. He hoped that such a man might have some money which he would be willing to buy his freedom with. As he listened to Paul speaking, he could not listen honestly with a pure heart - because he loved riches. He was the ruler of the province and had power over life and death - but it was not enough; he wanted more. How many are the same like this? They cannot listen the gospel, because their hearts are elsewhere. Their businesses, their households, their salaries, are consuming their minds. They cannot yield their hearts to God, because they have given them to the god of worldly riches.

The second danger which Felix gave way to was that of delay. As he heard Paul speak his conscience witnessed strongly that the things being said were true. We are unrighteous before a holy God. We are accountable to him, and exposed to his judgment. Felix in his heart knew that he was a sinner, and needed forgiveness. We are told that he was afraid when he heard these things (verse 25). Yet, he did not come to Christ - because he delayed. When he became fearful, he did not seek the Lord for mercy, but sent away the one who brought him the unwelcome news. He did not yield to the voice of his conscience, but tried to send it away. He fooled himself that he would be more willing later. "Later" is an excuse which has deceived countless numbers. The fact is, if we do not yield to God when he speaks most clearly, we will certainly not yield when his voice is quieter. If we do not love the light when it is most clear, we will not love it when it is darker. Delay is the road to ruin.

Thirdly, Felix was overcome by a desire to please men. He knew that Paul was innocent and there was no reason for him to be kept as a prisoner. If he needed to hear from Lydia it could have been done in a few days. Felix, though, kept Paul for two years, and then failed to release him when his own time came to move on. The reason he did this, was because he was a man-pleaser. He wanted to keep favour with the Jews (verse 27). He would not pass a verdict for Paul after the trial because he was afraid of offending them. He failed to release him after that, for the same reason. He did not come to Christ, because

*about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, "Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you." 26 Meanwhile he also hoped that money would be given him by Paul, that he might release him. Therefore he sent for him more often and conversed with him. 27 But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favour, left Paul bound.*

In this passage, we learn what happened after Paul and his accusers had given their speeches. Felix, having heard, gave his decision. Felix's name means "happy", but these verses do not tell us about a happy man. In them, we see a man who was undecided, and therefore miserable. Let us look at the things which the Holy Spirit has to teach us in them.

Felix's verdict was that Paul should remain a prisoner until the commander came, with more information. Paul was allowed to have his freedom, because he had not been condemned. He could be visited by his friends, and do as he pleased whilst he was in their keeping. Felix, though, did not merely keep Paul as a prisoner. Because he knew some things about Christianity, and because his wife was Jewish, he wanted to hear more. He called for Paul, and listened to him speaking about the things of the Lord Jesus.

Let us notice the things which Paul preached about to Felix. God has particularly noted three things, which summarised his message. We are told that Paul reasoned "about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come". The spokesman of the living God spoke to the Roman ruler, and the things he talked about are summed up here. Firstly, he spoke about righteousness. The most important issue between us and our Maker is one of righteousness. God is righteous, and requires righteousness of us too. Our great problem is not that we are unhappy, or unfulfilled, but that we are unrighteous. Our problem is a legal one: we have broken the laws of the eternal God, and are exposed to his pure and holy anger. What people need to hear is not that their lives could be better with Jesus, but that they stand in a ruined and condemned condition, unsaved and heading to dreadful punishment. The Christian message is not something to make us happier, but to rescue us from hell. The wonderful good news is that God has satisfied his perfect righteousness, through the death of Jesus. The Son of God himself has paid the price which holy justice requires, and now God can be just as well as the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus (Romans 3:24-26).

Secondly, Paul reasoned about self-control. He talked about our personal responsibility. We are accountable to God, responsible for all of our words and actions, and every thought that we indulge. God has made us as moral beings, who know that right and wrong exist, and that we are required to do right. We are commanded to walk with integrity and honesty before God in all things. Our maker will certainly call us to account for it. Do we think about this great fact? Many, even claiming to be Christians, live each day as if they only had to answer to themselves. Paul insists that the truth is quite otherwise.

Thirdly, Paul preached about the judgment to come. If God is righteous, and if we are accountable to him, then there must be a day when the accounts will be settled. God cannot fail to do so - his perfect justice requires it. There will be a day when every

had done what the Lord asked of him.

There were only a few times that the Lord appeared in Acts. The times were unique, and the work of Paul was unlike that of any man before or since. The truths, though, of what he spoke, do not change. The Lord is always standing near, seeing all that we do, and noting what is done for his sake. He continues to have a purpose for each of his people. He can say to every one - "Be of good cheer".

This is one of the Bible's most encouraging truths, and one we should dwell upon often. The Lord is not far away - he is near. He is not uncaring about what his people do, but personally involved. Whatever we might feel from day to day, and whatever gloomy thoughts might cross our minds, it remains true: he is close at hand, and has work for us to do. He is near in all of his infinite love, power and wisdom. Let us do what we do remembering this: our labour in the Lord is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Secondly, these verses show us *what terrible wickedness can be done under the disguise of religious zeal*. It was not the pagan Romans who came together to kill Paul - in fact they were his protectors. It was the supposed people of God - the Jews. So full of hatred were they, that they did not keep it to themselves, but more than forty of them plotted it together and openly (verse 13). They took their plan to the chief priests, and instead of receiving a severe rebuke from those who should have been holy men, they received encouragement. Where were the voices who rose up to protest, and to insist on the law of God: "You shall not kill"? (Exodus 20:13). Apparently, there were none; not a single one amongst them who called for such wickedness to stop.

We should not find this very surprising. Who killed the prophets? Religious people. Who persecuted the Jewish apostles before Paul? Religious people. And who was it who murdered the Son of God himself? It was religious people. The plain fact is, that we cannot say that religion is good for the world. It is not, unless it is the true religion which comes from God, with power by the Holy Spirit, focusing on the Lord Jesus Christ. Otherwise, it will be a breeding ground for corruption and sin of every kind. There are areas of life which give so much opportunity for hypocrisy and calling evil good as religion.

Let us ask ourselves, then - what kind of religion do we have? Is it that of the Jews - which left them feeling so secure even when committing the worst of evils? Is that the kind of religion we have - one which leads us to think less of wickedness, and tells us we will be alright, whatever we do? Or do we have the true faith which comes from God which leads to repent and mourn over our sin? Do we have the faith of hypocrites, or of the true, broken-hearted child of God?

Finally, this passage shows us that *God brings about his purposes in mysterious and sovereign ways*. The Lord appeared to Paul and told him that he would testify to him in Rome. The way to Rome, though, was anything but straight forward! He would only be removed from Jerusalem for his own safety, because of this conspiracy of the Jews. This conspiracy was only found out, because a relative of Paul's - probably a child - "happened" to overhear something being said. By apparent chance, a small boy, unknown to the Jews but actually Paul's nephew, was in the right place at the right time - and was

able to pass the information on. Paul would indeed eventually arrive in Rome - but in God's way. How he must have marvelled as he saw it coming to pass! God's work is not always open and obvious - but it is his work all the same. His control is perfect, and all so-called "coincidences" are really from him.

This is not something that is only true in the times of the Bible. God is still on his throne today, and still working out his purposes. He is still using the supposed accidents of daily life to bring his plans to pass. When something goes wrong, let us pause and remember that we now have an opportunity to honour God with our response. When our plans go down the drain, let us rejoice that God is wise and is with us even now to bring about what he has desired. He will establish the kingdom of his Son - in his time, in his way. The Lord reigns; let the peoples rejoice!

## Acts 23:25-35

*25 He wrote a letter in the following manner: 26 Claudius Lysias, To the most excellent governor Felix: Greetings. 27 This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them. Coming with the troops I rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. 28 And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council. 29 I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains. 30 And when it was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him. Farewell. 31 Then the soldiers, as they were commanded, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. 32 The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him, and returned to the barracks. 33 When they came to Caesarea and had delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. 34 And when the governor had read it, he asked what province he was from. And when he understood that he was from Cilicia, 35 he said, "I will hear you when your accusers also have come." And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.*

Having heard of the plot against Paul's life, the commander arranged to have his prisoner sent to Caesarea. It would be a very serious matter if harm came to Paul whilst he was under his care. Paul was a Roman citizen, and if he was killed by the Jews, he could lose his own life. In this section, Luke tells us about the letter that the commander, now named as Claudius Lysias, sent with Paul. Caesarea was the political capital of the province, and from there the governor Felix did his work. Paul is now in the hands of the Roman politicians, to do with as they pleased. The servant of God is no longer free, but bound by the will of unconverted men.

These verses show us in many different ways *the sovereign over-ruling of God*. Their great lesson to us is a single one: God is in control of all things, and brings his purposes to pass through the deeds of unsaved men as much as through others. Nothing and nobody is outside of his control; he does as he pleases. He is not more active here and less active there; but all things everywhere are the outworking of his eternal will. He is not responsible for the sins of men: yet is in sovereign control of all that ever comes to pass. In this letter we do not have to read long before we learn one thing: Claudius Lysias was more than willing to bend the truth. He had not rescued Paul because he was a Roman;

In short, Paul was always seeking "to have a conscience without offence towards God and men" (verse 16). This is the standard which God asks of each of his children. He has given us a conscience, to help us do what is right. He has placed a voice in us which protests against evil, and speaks to us of our guilt when we do wrong. He constantly reminds us that one day we will have to give an account for our thoughts, words and deeds. He tells us hour by hour that we must answer to him, the one who is infinitely pure. What a great thing a conscience is! We must listen to it. It is sometimes mistaken, and we need always to be training it from the word of God. But it must never be ignored when it tells us that we are going astray. Down that path, lies great danger. Let us seek, like Paul, to so live that we are able to say such words - that we are not aware of any who could accuse us of doing them wrong. Those who live that way will live happily, die happily, and rise happily. Let us live with our eyes upon the judge and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Secondly, we see in Paul's words a clear and God-honouring testimony to the truth. As he stood before the most powerful man in Judea, he did not mince his words. He did not try to flatter Felix by telling him only the things he would like to hear. He sought to honour God, by speaking of the things that were true and that every soul needs to know about the Christian "way". The great apostle explained that the Christian "way" was the fulfilment of all of God's promises in the books of Moses and the prophets (verse 14). He insisted that there would be a resurrection of the dead, and that every person would have to give an account. He explained that his life was lived in the sight of God. He showed what the real controversy was about - the resurrection and judgment to come. He did not allow his accusers to turn the hearing into a discussion of vague and far-away things. He insisted on the real issues of God, sin and judgment to come.

We need to know what it is to give a testimony. The phrase is often used by Christians, but not to describe what Paul did. To give a testimony is not to talk about our past and a few nice things about the Lord. To give a testimony is to draw attention to God, and to great facts about sin and salvation. It is to point men to their accountability to him, and to the future judgment they will face. It is to show them their need of Jesus Christ, and explain that he is the fulfilment of all the kind and merciful purposes of God in the history of the world. These are the things that all fellow men and women need to hear about. These are the truths that the Holy Spirit can use to save their souls. The gospel is not helped forward by making a few protests about moral values, or insisting on our own rights to believe what we do. The truth is advanced when we make clear statements about God and about the Lord Jesus. The enemies of truth do not want us to do these things. They want to push us into a little corner where we are fighting for our right to be Christians at all. Let us be aware of what they are up to. Let us not flinch from declaring the gospel of God, with prayer that all our hearers might be saved.

## Acts 24:22-27

*22 But when Felix heard these things, having more accurate knowledge of the way, adjourned the proceedings and said, "When Lysias the commander comes down, I will make a decision on your case." 23 So he commanded the centurion to keep Paul and let him have liberty, and told him not to forbid any of his friends to provide for or visit him. 24 And after some days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. 25 Now as he reasoned*

*since I went up to Jerusalem to worship. 12 And they neither found me in the temple disputing with anyone nor inciting the crowd, either in the synagogues or in the city. 13 Nor can they prove the things of which they now accuse me. 14 But this I confess to you, that according to the way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the prophets. 15 I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust. 16 This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offence toward God and men, 17 Now after many years I came to bring alms and offerings to my nation, 18 in the midst of which some Jews from Asia found me purified in the temple, neither with a mob nor with tumult. 19 They ought to have been here before you to object if they had anything against me. 20 Or else let those who are here themselves say if they found any wrongdoing in me while I stood before the council, 21 unless it is for this one statement which I cried out, standing among them, 'Concerning the resurrection of the dead I am being judged by your this day.'"*

After Tertullus had accused Paul on behalf of the Jews, Paul was now able to speak for himself. This is the first time in Acts that he spoke before a Roman court. Felix was the first Roman official to hear the preaching of the great apostle of Jesus Christ. The representative of the great Rome now hears the words of the representative of the Son of God. Paul's speech did not begin like that of Tertullus. There was no flattery, or grovelling. Paul spoke respectfully, recognising Felix as the lawful authority, under God, who deserved respect. He did not spend his time in trying to please his judge though, but quickly moved on to give his defence. What did he say, now that he was before the most powerful man in Judea? Let us read these words with care.

The great thing that strikes us throughout Paul's speech is his blamelessness. He took great care, in all things, to do what was right both before God and before man. He sought to live a godly and pure life, so that there would be no reasonable grounds on which to accuse him. When he stood before Felix, it was not as a man who had lived on the edge between right and wrong. It was as a man who would have had no case to answer, were it not for the unreasonableness of the Jews.

Paul was blameless as a worshipper of God. He was purified in the temple, and had not brought any Gentiles into it. He had not been stirring up trouble or strife anywhere in Jerusalem. He was a true worshipper of his Creator. He was blameless in his faithfulness to what God had revealed, "believing all things which are written in the Law and the prophets" (verse 14). He could not be faulted in his hope concerning the future, looking for a resurrection of the dead and living in its light. He was not silent when such things needed to be spoken about - even before the rulers of the nation.

He was blameless too as a friend of his fellow Jews. He had come to them with gifts and offerings (verse 17), gathered in love. He respected all of their customs and laws, and did not disobey any one of them. He held on to what Israel had always believed - even more than his accusers did.

He was blameless too as far as being a good citizen went. He had not sought out or stirred up trouble, but gone quietly about his business. He respected true authority, and obeyed it.

rather, he had assumed that he was not, and illegally bound him. No doubt he wrote the words because he feared what might happen if the governor heard a different story first. He was looking out for himself; not for Paul, or for the rights of Rome. In all this, though, God was at work. Lysias now treated Paul with much care, and took many pains to make sure that he would arrive safely in Caesarea, protected from the hatred of the Jews. In that happened, unconverted men were doing what they pleased: and God was using it to protect his servant, to bring him to Rome, and to advance his own kingdom and glory.

Paul now travelled to Caesarea with a large Roman guard, and an official letter stating he needed careful protection. He was taken at night, before the Jews would have a chance to learn what had happened and respond. Though hated intensely and with more than 1000 men willing to either kill him or die themselves, he now became one of the safest men in the province. He travelled under the protection of the empire, and with a letter which secured his safety. When he arrived, the governor received the letter, verified Paul's status as a citizen, and took him into safe keeping.

In all of this we must admire the wisdom of God. It is not what we would have thought surely Paul cannot have imagined it either. God's wisdom is much greater than ours, and he sees far further than we do. Would Paul have chosen to lose his freedom and be taken prisoner? Whether so or not, it was God's way for the gospel to eventually come right to Caesar's household itself.

The lesson from all of this is that we must trust God. God's character never changes; he is ever full of love, kindness, wisdom and grace. His purposes never alter: his will is to advance the kingdom of his Son in the world, and the work of grace in each of his children. It is not possible for him to forget or to overlook, to be careless or to test us beyond what we can endure. Every unwelcome thing that comes into our lives comes as a loving and wise purpose for the advance of God's glory and our good.

If we trust God in difficult times, then we are walking in the path that the Lord Jesus first walked. Did he find it easy to be handed over to sinners, and cruelly mocked and beaten? Was it a little thing for him to face the trial of Gethsemane, and the agony of Calvary? He walked a lonely path to damnation, death and the grave. If ever there was one who received hard things from the hand of God, it was the Lord Jesus. How, though, did he handle all of this? Hebrews 12:2 tells us. He "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. He looked to what was ahead and beyond: and embraced the cross for the joy of that. He delighted in doing the will of God, and endured even the penalty of the sins of the whole people of God for it.

If this is what our Lord did, can we do any less? We are not required to be damned for others' sins. We do not have to face God's fierce wrath, only his fatherly training and rebukes. The Lord Jesus has won the victory for us; we must only follow down the path that he alone carved out. He is now sat down at the right hand of God; if we follow him we shall soon also sit down there with him.

## Acts 24:1-9

*1 Now after five days Ananias the high priest came down with the elders and a certain orator named Tertullus. These gave evidence to the governor against Paul. 2 And when he was called upon, Tertullus began his accusation, saying: "Seeing that through you we enjoy great peace, and prosperity is being brought to this nation by your foresight, 3 we accept it always and in all places, most noble Felix, with all thankfulness. 4 Nevertheless, not to be tedious to you any further, I beg you to hear, by your courtesy, a few words from us. 5 For we have found this man a plague, a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout all the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. 6 He even tried to profane the temple, and we seized him, and wanted to judge him according to our law. 7 But the commander Lysias came by and with great violence took him out of our hands, 8 commanding his accusers to come to you. By examining him yourself you may ascertain all these things of which we accuse him." 9 And the Jews also assented, maintaining that these things were so.*

Now Paul is on trial again - but not before a court of the Jews. He is now under the protection of Rome, and the Jews can only make their case, not decide the verdict or give out the punishment. In these verses, we read about the group that travelled from Jerusalem to put the case against Paul. They did not spare any effort; the high priest himself went there, and the other Jewish elders with him. In order to better make their case in a Roman court, they did not speak for themselves, but employed a speaker, called Tertullus, on their behalf. Tertullus himself spared no effort to flatter the governor and win his way into his favour. The message from the Jews was clear: they wanted to see Paul punished, and they were making every effort to see it happen. Let us read about what took place.

In Tertullus' words, we see *a notable example of apostasy from God*. No doubt speeches like his were common enough in the Roman court. Felix the governor was probably used to being flattered by those who wanted something from him, and to hearing fine words spoken about himself. On the lips of Jews, though, such words as these were nothing other than a rejection of God. The Jews' subjection to the Romans was nothing for them to be pleased about; it was a result of God's judgment upon them. God had never intended his people to be the servants of another nation. He had redeemed them out of Egypt that they might be a special and holy people, living directly under his rule. He had promised them that if they were faithful to him, then they would always be free, and prosper, and appointed them to be a light to the nations of the world. His word to them was that he himself would give them great peace and prosperity, and they would enjoy it by faithfulness to his covenant with them. The fact that they had their freedom taken away and to be ruled by Rome was a disaster for them. It was a clear sign of their own rebellion, and God's judgment. The fact that they now relied on another, pagan, nation for their protection and support was a disgrace to the name of the true God. That they could, through Tertullus, praise the governor for bringing them "great peace and prosperity" was a clear sign of their apostasy from God and his covenant.

Apostasy is a most dreadful and fearful thing. It is safe to say, from the word of God, that it is the most miserable and awful act that a human being can possibly commit. There are no such dreadful pictures and terrifying statements in the whole of the Bible, as those which are spoken about apostates. How shall we escape the terrible wrath of God, if we

neglect so great a salvation? (Hebrews 2:3). Who did God judge and destroy in the wilderness? Those who, after having seen his goodness, refused to believe (Hebrews 3:17). If we, after tasting the realities of the kingdom of God, fall away, then our end will be appalling; only cursing and destruction remain (Hebrews 6:1-8). Those who rebelled against the laws of Moses died without mercy; how much more worthy are we of damnation if we rebel against the Son of God? Vengeance belongs to the Lord; it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:28-31). We shall not escape, if we reject the one who is speaking to us from heaven itself; our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 11:25-29).

If such warnings as these do not shake us, what will? If we are not moved by these warnings to examine ourselves and renew our repentance, how can we be saved? Let us look also at those who have abandoned the faith. There are many of them, and they seemed so unlikely to do so. They seemed so strong and so steadfast - and yet they fell. The devil is far more subtle, and sin is far more deceitful, than we imagine: the danger is very real. We must take this to heart - and cling the more closely to the Lord Jesus. There is only one safe place to be - under his protection, trusting in his shed blood and turning from sin to him each day. If we are doing that each day, we can never fall.

The apostasy of the Jews was clearly testified to by Tertullus, as he called Christ's apostles a trouble-maker, "a plague" (verse 5), labelled the true church of God "a sect", and described the coming of the gospel to the world as unwelcome dissension. Luke has already shown us many times that this was all lies. Each time that Paul came into contact with the Roman authorities, one thing was clear: the fault for the trouble and rebellion belonged to the Jews, not to the gospel. Paul was not profaning the temple, but honouring it; but without evidence they accused him, dragged him out and stirred up a riot. Such a riot, though, will always be the lot of those who are faithful to God. When sinners are at rest in their sins, they will not thank the person who draws attention to them. When a stand is made for righteousness, those who love evil will not be pleased. Tertullus lied, because the Jews wished to be left alone in their unbelief.

We are in a bad state when we wish to be left alone in our sin. There is only one safe place to be in the war against sin: fighting it with all our strength. The place of peace is a place of compromise and danger. The only ones who enjoy rest in this life are those who are at the graveyard of spiritual death. Those who are alive to God must battle for truth and against sin. If we are not doing so, then sin is defeating us.

Do we regard the preachers of the gospel as trouble-makers, because they confront us with our sins? Do we wish that they would keep quiet, and not say anything that touches us too closely? Have we begun to close our ears against such things? Are we no longer bothered when the requirements of God's law are explained to us? If so, then we are on the fast track to spiritual ruin. This is the path of apostasy. Let us note it, and flee from it.

## Acts 24:10-21

*10 Then Paul, after the governor had nodded to him to speak, answered: "Inasmuch as you know that you have been for many years a judge of this nation, I do the more cheerfully answer for myself, 11 because you may ascertain that it is no more than twelve days*