

would be spared. Yet here, in this passage, we find Paul saying that unless the escape of the sailors was prevented, the passengers could not be saved. Then, the soldiers took action promptly to cut the ropes of the boat and let it go. How can we put these two things together? Had Paul been lying before? If the passengers were to be saved, why this warning? The answer is a simple one. When God gives a promise, it is not given to us to presume on, but to receive and claim through faithful obedience. God had promised that the passengers would be spared - and they were, when Paul and the soldiers acted wisely to keep the sailors on board. God used the means of Paul's alertness and the soldiers' quick response to deliver the promise which he had announced.

God's sovereignty and human actions may seem like a great mystery to us. How God can be in total control, and yet man can still genuinely choose what pleases him, seems like a great mystery. We are assured by the Bible though, that though it might be a puzzle to our minds, yet it is none the less true. We cannot use God's sovereignty as an excuse for laziness. Neither can we ignore it because of the genuine choices which people seem to make. We must rather use it as a spur to act. Being confident that God will keep his word, we must take every step we can in obedience to him, believing that our faithfulness is precisely what he will bless to deliver what he has promised.

Thirdly, let us see in this section an example of the great good which a Christian can bring to others around him. Paul's presence and actions on the boat saved the lives of a vast number of people. We are not told that they repented and were converted, but they did enjoy the blessing of continued life, and rescue from a tragic death. Through Paul's encouragement, they also ate again, and were revived (we suppose that the fear of death had taken away all appetite from them). And then, when the soldiers were willing to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them escaping, they were all spared for Paul's sake. Any soldier who let a prisoner escape under Roman law faced a death penalty. It seemed to many of the soldiers better not to run the risk. Yet, because of the respect the commander had for Paul, he forbade them to carry their desire out. The lives of the prisoners were saved by Paul for a second time.

Every Christian should be like this, whether they ever board a ship in their lives or not. The influence of the good we do should be felt and seen around us. Our families, our communities, our schools and our places of work should be better places because the Lord Jesus Christ himself has been amongst them through his servants. In short, we should be "salt and light" (Matthew 5:13-16), our good deeds seen by men so that they also might glorify our Father in heaven. The difference made by Christians in this way down the ages can hardly be calculated. We cannot imagine what a dreadful place our land would be if God removed this salt and light from it. We must pray and work that he may not do so.

A fruitless Christian, who is no different to those around him and who makes no difference to those around him, is a contradiction. Worse than that, he is a disgrace to his Master, who chose him and commanded him to bear fruit (John 15:16). We are saved, so that we might serve him. There is only one place where we can serve him - the situation where he has caused us to be. Let us seek to do so, not to draw attention to ourselves or our goodness, but as a testimony to the difference that he has made to us. Let us glorify him as our crucified and risen Lord, praying that others might come out of the darkness into his light also.

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

### ***Daily Bible Reading Notes***

### ***Week 18 (Chapter 25:13-27:44)***

**Grace Church Belper**

**<http://www.gracebelper.org.uk>**

(For previous weeks' notes, visit <http://www.gracebelper.org.uk/readingnotes.php>)

*(Reading omitted to keep with 16 page limit – please read from your Bible!).*

**Acts 25:13-27**

13 And after some days King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus. 14 When they had been there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying: "There is a certain man left a prisoner by Felix, 15 about whom the chief priests and the elders of the Jews informed me, when I was in Jerusalem, asking for a judgment against him. 16 To them I answered, 'It is not the custom of the Romans to deliver any man to destruction[a] before the accused meets the accusers face to face, and has opportunity to answer for himself concerning the charge against him.' 17 Therefore when they had come together, without any delay, the next day I sat on the judgment seat and commanded the man to be brought in. 18 When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, 19 but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive. 20 And because I was uncertain of such questions, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there be judged concerning these matters. 21 But when Paul appealed to be reserved for the decision of Augustus, I commanded him to be kept till I could send him to Caesar." 22 Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I also would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," he said, "you shall hear him." 23 So the next day, when Agrippa and Bernice had come with great pomp, and had entered the auditorium with the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at Festus' command Paul was brought in. 24 And Festus said: "King Agrippa and all the men who are here present with us, you see this man about whom the whole assembly of the Jews petitioned me, both at Jerusalem and here, crying out that he was not fit to live any longer. 25 But when I found that he had committed nothing deserving of death, and that he himself had appealed to Augustus, I decided to send him. 26 I have nothing certain to write to my lord concerning him. Therefore I have brought him out before you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the examination has taken place I may have something to write. 27 For it seems to me unreasonable to send a prisoner and not to specify the charges against him."

In this section of his record, Luke tells us about Paul's appearance before Festus and Agrippa. The story would be quite amusing if it did not involve such serious injustice! It is almost funny to see such a powerful man as Festus confessing time and again to Paul's innocence, but not then doing what was right and letting him go. Festus was a man-pleaser, and was torn between keeping the Jews happy and doing what was right (25:9). These verses also show us that he was quite cunning. He had no idea how to send Paul on to Rome with any kind of believable charge against him, and so he brought in Agrippa to do the job for him. He flattered and deceived Agrippa into hearing Paul, and drew him into the injustice. He tried to move his responsibility onto Agrippa and shift his own guilt, by holding a hearing before him.

What a sad and pathetic picture Festus is when we look at him! He had great power, as the ruler of the province. It was his responsibility to send a man to death, or to let him go free. He had friends and influence amongst other rulers, and could draw and influence them. He could hold courts and hearings, and send men up to Caesar himself. Yet, for all of this power, he was a man in chains and Paul was infinitely more free than he was. He was stuck between the clear emptiness of the Jews' complaints against Paul, and his own desire

An angel of God had appeared to Paul, and assured him that there would be no lives lost though the ship would be wrecked. Their deliverance, though, did not come straight away but another week and more passed whilst they drifted in unknown waters. Nearly three hundred men were on board this great ship, almost all in fear of their lives. At last, they began to detect land - the island of Malta. That in itself was a great providence, as a local map at a map of the area will tell you. God was keeping his promise, and keeping the lives of all those on board. Now Luke tells us about the events which took place as the ship began to be wrecked. Let us study them, seeking to know the purpose for which the Holy Spirit has placed them in the word of God.

One truth which we see in these verses is that *there is desperate evil hidden in men's hearts*. As the sailors of this ship took their soundings, they detected that they were beginning to approach land. They let down anchors, to steady the ship, and to wait for the wind to break. Then, whilst pretending that they were going to let down more anchors, they began to carry out a plan to abandon the ship and make off by launching a smaller boat. They calculated that their own chances of survival would be better if they left behind the passengers, and looked after themselves. Only so many would make it, they thought, and they decided to make sure it would be them. They threw off all of their concern for their fellow men, their responsibilities towards the passengers, the duties they owed to their masters and owners, and stopped caring whether any of the other more than two hundred on board lived or died - as long as they did. In short, they became virtual murderers - willing to deceive and cheat everyone else even if it meant their death, to save their own lives. Before, they were we suppose as pleasant, kind and generous as anyone else. Now, though, that the circumstances had changed and after two weeks of trial on the seas, other things started pouring out of their hearts.

It is a sad truth that very few men know themselves, or what they are capable of. No doubt whilst we are in comfort and safety we can easily imagine ourselves as heroes, giving ourselves without thought to our own well-being. We very little know what would actually come out of our hearts if it really came to it. How few people know what evil lurk inside of them! We dream that we are good and civil people, and wonder however those that we read about in the papers or see on the news could do such monstrous things. In short, we are deluded, never having discovered through the wrong circumstances what lusts and evil deeds we would actually be ready to indulge in.

The fact is, that we are far more evil than we ever imagine. It is only when we realise that we will see our need for the blood of Christ. Only then can we come to understand that God's love, mercy and grace are also far greater than we could ever conceive. Only when we see the true awfulness of the unconverted state, will we see and value the worth of Jesus in dying for sinners, and come to him.

A second lesson in this passage is to teach us that *God, whilst being completely sovereign, normally acts through normal events to carry out his plans*. That is, God uses means. He had promised Paul that though the ship would be wrecked, all the lives of those on board

through death-defying shipwrecks, Paul would make it. There was, though, no such pledge given about the rest of the crew. Yet the angel who was sent to speak to Paul, told him that God had given him also given him all who were travelling with him. For Paul the prisoner's sake, they would be spared from facing the consequences of their leaders' folly.

We ought to be often considering the great kindness which God is continually showing to the world. Undeserving people are continually receiving amazing gifts from him which they in no way deserve. After years of rebellion and sin, God continues to spare their lives and give them opportunity to seek and find him. Though the human race is wicked, yet God has given us so many daily pleasures to enjoy. There are countless proofs of his kindness to us. The sun shines; the rain falls; men and women have families, clothing, roofs over their heads, work to do and pleasures to enjoy. Above all, a Saviour has been given, who is preached to all, and God continually holds back his judgment, giving abundant opportunities to repent and live. God's kindness is beyond anything we can imagine or compare it to. For those who deserve everlasting judgment, he has given up his own Son to die in their place. He patiently pleads with sinners that they should turn to Christ. Let us, whatever good gifts we enjoy today, take care to remember that they come from his hand, and give the thanks to him.

Thirdly, we are taught in these verses that *God's promises and what he allows to happen might often seem to differ from each other, but are ultimately in complete agreement*. God had promised Paul that he would come to Rome (23:11). The course of this trip, though, seemed to indicate that God had purposed that they should die before coming near it. This was not a small storm, but a fierce tempest that went on for days, such that even the crew became sure that they would die. God, though, had purposed that not a single one of them would perish, and that they should indeed arrive at the empire's capital. His word came completely to pass, just as he had said.

God's providence and God's promises might often to seem to contradict each other. What he allows to take place, and what he has spoken, look very different. We must remember whenever we see such things, to entirely trust his word. There can, in the end, be no difference between the two. We must understand that when God promises a thing, he often leaves himself a great deal of freedom as to how he will carry it out. It will often not be done in anything like the way that we imagine would be best. God is sovereign, and reserves to himself the right to fulfil his own purposes. We cannot arrogantly say to him "what are you doing?" or "why have you made it so?" The way that God does something is always best. Through this shipwreck, Paul again proved the faithfulness of God, and his sufficiency for every trial. God was glorified through his servant and openly honoured as the one who was controlling all things, and graciously saving undeserving lives. This episode has taught the church lessons that a simple straightforward trip would never have given us. God brought a great deal of extra good out of it by doing it his way. Let us learn to bow to God and to trust him, whichever way the wind appears to be blowing. Has he promised that Jesus Christ shall be honoured the nations? Has he declared that every knee shall bow to him? Has he told us that every enemy is being made his Son's footstool? Then it is true. However much sin and Satan may seem to flourish, and however much God's word may seem to be trampled and despised, yet we can be sure of one thing: He will prevail.

to keep those Jews happy. Time and again he was forced to confess that there was no for Paul to answer, and yet he kept trying to come up with something so that a trial might be able to take place. On the other hand Paul, though a prisoner, had a clear and peaceful conscience before God and men. He could patiently wait for his Lord to do what was in his own eyes, without caring for the opinions of fallen men. If he lived, then he would serve his Saviour; if he died, he would go immediately into his presence. He was not caught between serving two masters, but had given himself wholly to just one.

Let us learn from this that *we must wait until the final judgment to see justice done*. Paul had been a prisoner for a long time under Felix, who could not find any reason to punish him. Festus confessed that there were no real crimes laid against him. His own testimony was that he had "done nothing worthy of death" (verse 25), and that he had no idea on what charges to send him to Caesar (verse 27). To any unprejudiced mind, the right thing to do was clear. Paul was an innocent man, and should go free. However, Festus' mind was not unprejudiced, and he remained a prisoner. Once more, in these verses, he was summoned to try to get him to accuse himself, so that some charge might be laid against him. Once again, a great injustice was done against one of the best men alive.

As Christians, we should not let such things cause us despair. There will be another day which every case will be heard before the judge who is infinitely just and who can never be swayed by the fear of men. On the great last day, Jesus Christ himself will put right every wrong. Before him, kings and peasants are just the same, and he shall show no favouritism to either. He will examine every matter according to truth and righteousness. Sometimes we speak of somebody "getting away" with wrongdoing. Such a thing is impossible, because the judge of all the earth will do right (Genesis 18:25). Nothing can escape from his all-seeing eyes or his holy justice. We must, then, be patient. We must fight against the sins of self-pity, grumbling and bitterness which so easily entangle us. Our eyes need to be lifted up from this fallen and corrupt world in which man is allowed to go astray, and to look to that eternal day when God himself will judge. Let us walk in all times in his fear, so that we need not be ashamed when that time comes. Let us not seek our own revenge either in thought, word or deed - but leave place for him to act, because he will.

Let us also notice also that *Paul submitted himself to the lawful authorities*. He might have come up with many excuses to allow himself to not do so. He was the apostle of Jesus Christ; sent to the nations by the Son of God. Who were these Romans to keep him a captive? He had done nothing wrong, either against them or the Jews that justified keeping him a prisoner. The time they had kept him without a verdict was beyond any standard of fairness or right. Yet, despite all this, he acknowledged that they were the lawful power, and had authority to examine matters of right and wrong. Paul put into practise what he had preached. Not too long before, he had written to the church at Rome commanding them to submit to the powers that exist (Romans 13:1-8). The authority of government is not man-made - it comes from God. They are charged by him to punish wickedness and to reward good that is done in the land. They are his servants, and when we despise and abuse them, we speak against God himself. It is true that they often abuse this power, and use it to do the opposite of what they ought. For all this, though, they remain appointed by God, and we remain accountable to them. The general rule for such cases is given by Peter; we ought to suffer patiently, knowing that such suffering is

acceptable to God (1 Peter 2:18-25, 3:13-22). In doing so, we follow the example of Jesus Christ, who suffered in our place, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God. We testify when we endure wrongdoing that we belong to him. Our grumbling and discontent is simply a sign that we do not yet understand the way of the master. Let us fix our eyes upon him, and strive after the mark that he has set us. We should remember that even if we are innocent in this or that case, yet overall we suffer far less than our sins deserve. We should humbly confess that we deserve sufferings beyond what we can imagine. We should ever remember that Jesus suffered for our sins, and then be willing to suffer as a testimony to his great name.

## Acts 26:1-11

*1 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." So Paul stretched out his hand and answered for himself: 2 "I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, 3 especially because you are expert in all customs and questions which have to do with the Jews. Therefore I beg you to hear me patiently. 4 "My manner of life from my youth, which was spent from the beginning among my own nation at Jerusalem, all the Jews know. 5 They knew me from the first, if they were willing to testify, that according to the strictest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee. 6 And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. 7 To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope's sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews. 8 Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead? 9 "Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. 11 And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.*

In these words, Luke begins recording the speech which Paul made for his defence before Agrippa. We suppose that Paul could have kept silent if he had wanted to. There were no charges against him, and nobody can be made to accuse themselves. Paul could have simply protested against the unfairness of his imprisonment, and kept silent. He did not do that though - because as God's spokesman, he saw an opportunity to witness to Jesus and to the gospel. He saw a fulfilment of God's promise that he would bear the Lord's name before Gentiles and kings (Acts 9:15). He could speak to a sinner and a dying man about the giver of eternal life and the Saviour. He welcomed the chance to do so, and was especially glad to speak to someone who already knew a good deal about Judaism.

One lesson which these words teach clearly is that *the reason why the gospel is hard to believe is not because of its contents, but because of the hard hearts of those who hear it.* Paul put a question to king Agrippa. The question was very fair, and deserves an answer from everyone who hears it. "Why", asked the apostle, "should it be thought a thing incredible with you, that God should raise the dead?" (verse 8). At the heart of the issue was this simple matter, as Festus had already confirmed (23:19). There was a man called Jesus, whom the Jews had crucified, but whom Paul affirmed to be alive. The great controversy was over the resurrection - and in particular over the resurrection of Jesus of

*said, "Men, you should have listened to me, and not have sailed from Crete and incurred this disaster and loss. 22 And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among but only of the ship. 23 For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong whom I serve, 24 saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and in God has granted you all those who sail with you.' 25 Therefore take heart, men, for I believe that it will be just as it was told me. 26 However, we must run aground on a certain island.*

Luke's record now turns to the journey by which the ship made its way towards Rome. Despite Paul's warnings to the crew, they decided to set sail, and at first they thought they had made the right decision (verse 13). It soon became clear, though, that they had not, and they ran into severe difficulties. Unless we have ever been in a similar situation it is hard to imagine the things described in these verses. The danger was so severe that the passengers had to join in with the crew to fight the conditions. The storm continued for so long, blocking out the sight of the sun and stars so that they lost all knowledge of where they were, and all hope that they would survive. Luke seems even to include himself, verse 20, in this. These words are rich in meaning and help for the trial of faith which Christians face day by day. Let us study them seeking encouragement for our souls.

One great lesson from this incident is that *God is with us in all our troubles.* Paul had already been in three ship-wrecks before this one (2 Corinthians 11:25), but only this one is recorded in Scripture for us. The ship was "exceedingly tossed" by a tempest that was on for three days, causing the whole crew of experienced sailors to lose heart. Hear, though, the words which Paul spoke when he stood in the midst of them. Listen to what he said about God. He called him "God, whose I am, and whom I serve". As Paul spoke about the great and eternal ruler of heaven and earth, the thing which came most forcefully into his mind was that he belonged to this God. This God had taken him, Paul, as one of his own, for time and for eternity. He belonged to God when the going was good and no dangers faced him, and he belonged to this God when tossed to and fro and lost at sea. The fact that they were going to be shipwrecked on an unknown island did not mean that God had abandoned him; whatever happened or did not happen, God's presence and care could never change.

It is not God's will to spare Christians from trouble in this world. Paul was not spared from trouble, but suffered it to the maximum extent. He did so because God was using him as an example to all afterwards who would believe (1 Timothy 1:16). Through his trial this great lesson would be taught: the presence or absence of trouble does not mean the presence or absence of God. God's plan is not to save us from the fires of trial, but to lead us through them and to purify us by them. His desire is to show us his sufficiency in all things, that his word can never be broken, and to lead us to rely upon him alone. This is a hard lesson, and our unbelieving hearts are reluctant to learn it. It takes many years and many trials to lead us away from trusting in ourselves and in the arm of flesh. It is not the work of a day, but of a lifetime. It is the lesson above all lessons, teaching us to say: "God's will be done: though he slay me, yet will I trust in him". Happy is that man who finds his delight in God whether in both hard times and in good.

We must also see in these verses *God's amazing kindness.* The master and owner of the ship was foolish to advise setting out on such a voyage. The centurion was foolish to ignore the advice of Paul in deciding to go (27:11). God had promised that Paul would arrive safely in Rome and testify there to him. Somehow, whether safely and calmly or

church, not to equip them to survive alone. As Paul travelled to Rome, he went with Luke and with Aristarchus too. When the ship harboured at Sidon, God blessed Paul with the opportunity to see some of his friends there too. This area had been reached by the gospel after Stephen's death (11:19), and visited by Paul and Barnabas before (15:3). Paul had previously stayed in nearby Tyre for a week (21:3-6). Through these things, Paul was not left alone, but God provided for his support and encouragement. As he travelled as the prisoner of Rome, there were friends along the way.

We live in an age in which every individual is supposed to be self-sufficient. More and more, our society is neglecting the ways in which God has provided for us. Homes, families and friends are all increasingly spurned, to our great loss. This spirit has come into the churches too, and believers think that they should be able to provide all their own needs, instead of relying upon the body of Christ. We ought to be convinced that this is a large mistake. God has not made us to survive alone, but to depend upon each other. We should not think that it is a sign of weakness to admit this. We should think it is a sign of folly to think otherwise.

Finally, this passage shows us an example of good advice being rejected. By this time, Paul was a very experienced traveller. He had criss-crossed the map more than once. He had already written to the church at Corinth, telling them how he had been ship-wrecked three times, and spent a day and a night in the deep (2 Corinthians 11:25-26). As someone who had been a prisoner for so long, and who so desired to preach in Rome, he had no motive to delay the trip for his own ends. When he advised that they should not move on (verse 10), it was advice that deserved to be taken seriously. When he warned of damage to the ship and danger to the crew's lives, he was speaking the truth, as the following passages show. His good advice, though, was ignored and set aside. As a result, the ship did come into much difficulty, and was eventually destroyed.

Christians must learn to be wise, and listen to sound advice. We will save ourselves a great deal of trouble and hurt if we do so. We must learn also to not be too surprised if worldly people give no weight to what we say. Such has always been the case. It is a difficult skill to know when to speak and offer advice, and when to be silent. For us to learn true wisdom is not the work of a single month or year. The word of God tells us to seek the company of the godly, and to learn from them. It teaches us to be quick to listen, and slow to speak. Let us seek the help and mercy of God, that we might grow in these graces.

## Acts 27:13-26

*13 When the south wind blew softly, supposing that they had obtained their desire, putting out to sea, they sailed close by Crete. 14 But not long after, a tempestuous head wind arose, called Euroclydon. 15 So when the ship was caught, and could not head into the wind, we let her drive. 16 And running under the shelter of an island called Claudia, we secured the skiff with difficulty. 17 When they had taken it on board, they used cables to undergird the ship; and fearing lest they should run aground on the Syrtis Sands, they struck sail and so were driven. 18 And because we were exceedingly tempest-tossed, the next day they lightened the ship. 19 On the third day we threw the ship's tackle overboard with our own hands. 20 Now when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us, all hope that we would be saved was finally given up. 21 But after long abstinence from food, then Paul stood in the midst of them and*

Nazareth. According to Paul, this event was right at the heart of God's purposes in his life. The tomb was empty, and Paul himself had met the risen Son of God. His rising from the dead proved him to be the Messiah promised to the Jews, and the Saviour for all mankind. His defeat of the grave marked him out as the judge of all who would one day summon men from their graves to his judgment seat. To refuse, to resist, or to fight against this Jesus is to embrace eternal death. No Jew and no Roman could deny this by producing a dead body of Jesus, because there was no such body. God had raised him from the dead, and give assurance of all these facts to all men.

As Paul declared these things, he asked Agrippa the question; what is so difficult to believe about any of these things? The whole world around us is made and upheld by the living God. His infinite and eternal power has brought the universe into being, and sustains it at every moment. He is the author of all life, and lends us every breath that we breathe. Man, with all of his study and all his intelligence, has not produced anything even approaches the simplest living thing. Man cannot make life, and he cannot keep himself alive beyond the time appointed for him. We only have to think about these things for a moment, and we are led to bow down before the vast mind and power of God. God does that God does all of these things, why is it then so hard to believe that he can raise the dead? If he spoke to create the whole universe, why can he not return life to a corpse? If he forms the baby within the womb, and out of the union of two human beings brings forth a child, three, what would prevent him from bringing one again out of the grave? The plain fact of the matter is that there is no reason at all. The reason why men and women find it so hard to believe that Jesus is alive is not because God could not do such a thing. It is because their own hearts are reluctant to believe. They do not like the implications of the gospel, and the claims of the Lord over their lives. They do not want to be disturbed, or yield their rule of their lives to another. Having enjoyed living without God for so long, the thought of repenting is unpleasant to them, and so they make one hundred reasons for not doing so.

Reader, how is it with you? Are you resisting the demands of Christ that you submit to him? Do you, like unconverted Paul, think that you "should do many things contrary to Jesus' name"? Why do you do so? The Lord is good, and nobody ever regretted yielding to him. His rule is gracious, and his commands are right, pure and true. His promises are faithful, and his power is used only to the good of those who belong to him. The gospel message is a great message - one worthy of so great a God. Do not stagger at it because of the enormous claims it makes. Consider that these great claims are in perfect harmony with the greatness of the God who makes them. Bow to his Son, and be embraced by him, receiving everlasting life.

A second thing to learn from these verses is that *even the most resistant of sinners can be brought to yield to Jesus Christ*. Paul always delighted in telling about how the Lord had overcome all of his opposition. His case had seemed the most impossible of any. He had been taught all the principles of the Pharisees from his youth. He had believed for some years that he ought to oppose Jesus and the church with all of his strength. He had done so in Jerusalem, putting them in prison and even voting for their deaths. His hardness and hatred were so great that they had driven him even to foreign cities to find believers so that he might punish them. Despite all this, though, he was easily converted when the Lord put forth his power. When on the Damascus road Christ decided that now was the

moment, Paul had to yield in a moment. His resistance ended, and he became the most hard-working servant of the Son of God.

We must never lose heart with any. If Paul could be converted, then so can any other. They might be apathetic, or they might be strongly opposed. Whatever they are, the Lord is well able to break their wills in the time of his choosing. Let us not be faithless, but believing. Let us speak of Paul to God in prayer, telling him that we well believe he can do the same again if it pleases him. In our day, believers and churches can go long periods without seeing any fruit from their witness. We begin to think that the case is impossible, and the unsaved cannot be reached. All such thoughts are contrary to Scripture. God has his reasons in sending lean times. He can judge a town or a nation for its rebellion. He can test a church, to prove the depths of their faith in him, and see whether they will lose heart or start trusting gimmicks and tricks instead. He may have another hundred sovereign reasons that his wisdom chooses to hide from us. Let us simply trust him - that he is bringing in each one of his elect, and the church shall one day be complete, not missing a single one. God shall conquer the hearts of every single one of his chosen people, and they will all gladly bow to him and praise him for ever that it was so.

## Acts 26:12-23

*12 "While thus occupied, as I journeyed to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, 13 at midday, O king, along the road I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me. 14 And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' 15 So I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 16 But rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and a witness both of the things which you have seen and of the things which I will yet reveal to you. 17 I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, 18 to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.' 19 "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance. 21 For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. 22 Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come— 23 that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."*

With these words, Paul continued his defence to king Agrippa, his sister Bernice (25:13), and the ruler Porcius Festus. With this speech, he fulfilled the prophecy of Christ, that he should bear his name "before the Gentiles, and kings" (9:15). Having told them about his complete opposition to Jesus and to the church, he now told them how it all changed. As we read these verses, we have a great privilege. We listen in, as the apostle to the nations addressed some of the rulers of the nations. The representatives of Augustus Caesar here

*winds were contrary. 5 And when we had sailed over the sea which is off Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra, a city of Lycia. 6 There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing to Italy, and he put us on board. 7 When we had sailed slowly many days, and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, the wind not permitting us to proceed, we sailed under shelter of Crete off Salmone. 8 Passing it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea. 9 Now when much time had been spent, and sailing was now dangerous because the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, 10 saying, "Men, perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also our lives." 11 Nevertheless the centurion was more persuaded by the helmsman and the owner of the ship than by the things spoken by Paul. 12 And because the harbour was not suitable to winter in, the majority advised to set sail from there also, if by any means they could reach Phoenix, a harbour of Crete opening toward the south-west and north-west, and winter there.*

The account now turns to the journey to Rome - which will take us to the end of the book. Luke now again resumes speaking of "we" and "us", showing that he joined with Paul once more for this journey. Aristarchus from Thessalonica (19:29, 20:4) was with them too - and Paul would later describe him as a fellow-prisoner (Colossians 4:10, Philemon 24). These verses contain lots of details of the route, and the only way to appreciate this is to use a map.

One lesson we can see in these verses is that *whoever we are, we are not exempt from the things of ordinary life*. In his account, Luke has normally passed over the routine things of life. Only the events that had significance for the advance of the gospel have been mentioned. Months and years have been passed by with just a few words. We can get the wrong impression from all of this. We might think that Acts tells us what happened in every church every week. We could think that it is a book far, far removed from our churches today. Here, though, Luke gives us quite a detailed account of the journey. In doing so, he shows us that Paul had to go through all the motions of ordinary life, just as we do. For these weeks and months, he journeyed through these places, and had to endure the frustration of delays and setbacks, all the time being without the freedom he once had. At times like these, he was not called upon to do great public things, but simply day by day to be a faithful servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was called upon to be trustworthy in the ordinary, repeated events, waiting on the Lord and trusting that all was in good hands. Paul and the other apostles were not men who were excused from the mundane things of life. Rather, Paul had to suffer more than his share of frustration and setbacks, that he might be an example of godly contentment in these things as well as in others. In such situations, we must learn, as every true Christian must, in whatever state he found himself, to find his contentment not in outward things but in Christ (Philippians 4:11-13). We must seek to be content with the same.

Secondly, these verses show us that no Christian is meant to survive alone. If we have learnt anything about Paul from the book of Acts, we must admit that he was a very remarkable man. He has been through riots, through prison, through being stoned, and through all kinds of events. He travelled through province after province, preaching Christ to Jews and Gentiles of every background and culture. But no matter how much experience of these things he gained, he never became self-sufficient. God never intended him to, and never intended anyone else to either. God's purpose is to build his people up together

about the prophets which he knew and believed, he could not respond as Festus did. He knew too much to claim that it was all insanity. His response was these strange words: "You almost persuade me to be a Christian". How were these words spoken? Were they said with irony and sarcasm, as if Agrippa wished to show his fellow ruler that he was in no danger of joining the man he had just labelled as mad? This is possible, but it is not the obvious meaning. Paul was confident that Agrippa was close to the kingdom. There is nothing that Luke says to indicate that Agrippa was not speaking words that he really meant. He was nearly persuaded - but not quite.

We must say that Agrippa's response was more tragic than Festus'. He was a man who knew far more, and had much less excuse for not believing. He was aware of the prophets, and the events surrounding Jesus, and Paul's words would have made a great deal of sense to him. For all this, though, he was not converted. He was "almost a Christian", which meant that he almost escaped being eternally damned.

It is certain that there have been vast multitudes who have followed in the way of Agrippa. They know too much to brush off the Christian message as madness. They see that it makes sense, and is a message fitting for a great and glorious God. They know of no other explanation for man's sin, and no other way that a holy God could forgive it, than that which is explained in the Bible. They see the lives of believers, and are struck by them. And yet, there are unwilling to take the step of trusting Christ for themselves, and never receive the gift of forgiveness or life.

What daggers Paul's words must have put through Agrippa's heart. Had he ever heard such things from a prisoner? Had the tables ever been turned between the judges and the accused like this? When had the court ever heard the prisoner say such things? Paul's words were not empty ones. We can well imagine Agrippa feeling deep pain inside as he heard them. His prisoner was a far happier man than he was. He was in terror and turmoil inside, but his prisoner had only a chain on his body.

If we know that the gospel is true, then we must make up our minds to be like Paul. We must be decided, fixed and firm, trusting in Christ and obeying him whatever it costs. We should be quite determined that we are going to be Christians, be Christians all the time, and be Christians in all things. We are assured by God's word that there is nobody so miserable as the undecided person. Such a person cannot rest in their sins, because their conscience speaks too clearly. Neither though can they rest in Christ, or enjoy his love and the assurance of sins forgiven, because they have not come to him. They must be miserable now, and miserable forever. Reader! Do not choose this foolish path. Yield to the Son of God, and become happy always, whether in a prison or in a palace.

## Acts 27:1-12

*1 And when it was decided that we should sail to Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to one named Julius, a centurion of the Augustan Regiment. 2 So, entering a ship of Adramyttium, we put to sea, meaning to sail along the coasts of Asia. Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica, was with us. 3 And the next day we landed at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him liberty to go to his friends and receive care. 4 When we had put to sea from there, we sailed under the shelter of Cyprus, because the*

heard the proclamation of the ambassador of the Son of God. What a book the Bible is! Let us read it with awe and thanks to God.

The first lesson from these words is that *our testimony should be a simple explanation of the gospel truths*. No doubt these Roman rulers were used to keeping the most exalted company. They would not be surprised to have in their presence the great artists, philosophers, orators and scholars of the day. They were used to being with men of power, influence and fame. What could Paul say to such people? What kind of speech would be suitable, and how could he rightly bring the gospel to them? As we read his words, the answer becomes clear. He simply sought to explain the good news as best he could, not worrying in the slightest whether they liked the way it was dressed up. He spoke respectfully, as was fitting for a subject speaking to a ruler. He did not, though, say a single word to flatter, or to impress. He had a plain word for their souls, and his responsibility before God was to pass it on, not to dress it up. He told them that Jesus, the Lord, had suffered for sins, had risen from the dead, and that all people must repent and believe in him. He told them the same message as he told all: Jesus' death, resurrection, and rule, and the summons to yield to and truth in him.

We must remember that simplicity is at the heart of faithful gospel witness. The master has given us a message and he requires us to be faithful - that is all. Our job is to make it known, not cover it over with our own ideas and dressings. We should not be afraid of man, and whether he will like what he hears. We should love our hearers, and tell it to them faithfully, knowing that only the gospel truth can save their souls. If we hide the truth for whatever reason, we might as well plunge daggers into them. To take the edge off the truth is to blunt it, and play a part in their everlasting ruin. Our friends can never believe the gospel until they understand it, and they cannot understand it until we tell them straight. Let us, for the love of God and their souls, always seek to do so as Paul

Secondly, we must take notice of God's *terrible description of the unsaved* in these verses. He describes them as blind, needing their eyes to be opened. He says that they live in darkness, requiring light to be shone upon them. They are said to be under the power of Satan, needing another to release them so that they might know God. Their sins are unforgiven, they have nothing to look forward to, and they are unsanctified and so unable to appear before God. These are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ himself, spoken from heaven.

This is a description which ought to cause alarm to any sensitive soul. There is nothing in it to flatter us, or make us think well of ourselves outside of Christ. These words reveal that the human race is almost entirely deceived as to its true condition, and going to face a very terrible awakening. They show that from the greatest to the least, men have greatly overestimated their own goodness and their hopes for when they shall stand before God. This description tells us plainly that without Christ, we shall be damned.

Much of man-made religion is designed to comfort him. Even when speaking about God and the life to come, it often assures him that his own efforts will help him a good deal, and that he is on the right path. True Christianity, though, says something quite different. It tells a man that he is lost and ruined, and has no hope at all through anything he can ever do. It explains that before God he is dead, blind, in chains and already condemned.

He cannot help himself, but needs a Saviour to rescue him else he must eternally perish.

Such words are the kindest words that can ever be spoken to a lost soul. They tell him the truth, and draw him away from any false remedy. They shut him up with Jesus Christ as the only hope for his soul. They forbid him to stop anywhere short of conversion, and require him to meet with Jesus alone. Friend, have you accepted this verdict against yourself? Have you had Christ and the saving power of his blood revealed to you in this condition? This is not a matter in which you can afford the slightest mistake.

Finally, we must see from Paul's example that *we are saved that we may serve*. No doubt there are many things in Paul's conversion and life since that were quite unique. He certainly had an experience that no-one else has had, and was given a task unlike any before or since. Some things, though, belong to every one of us. Once he was converted, he was given work to do by which to glorify his Lord. The very word "Lord" (verse 15) implies service. It speaks of a master, whose servants we become, and whose will we must then obey. Those who believe, said Paul, must "do works" - works in keeping with their repentance. We had no lack of works before we believed. Serving sin and Satan, we continually did unrighteous deeds as a testimony to the master to whom we belonged. Now, having turned back to God, the same is true. We must do works which speak of our redemption, or else we testify that we were never redeemed at all.

Whatever we might tell ourselves, the Bible speaks clearly. A fruitless Christian is no Christian at all. He that abides in Jesus, will bear much fruit (John 15:5). The branch which does not bear fruit, is taken away, and thrown into the fire (John 15:6). Faith without works is not faith; it is dead (James 2:17). The only way to show that our faith is faith at all, is by works (James 2:18). Such works are not what save us; but they are the evidence that we are indeed saved. If Christ works in a man's life, then that man is a new man, and such a change cannot be hidden.

Christian, what are you doing for the Lord? He has prepared good works for you to do (Ephesians 2:10). They might not be impressive works to other men, or seen by them at all - but they are works which Christ sees and approves. It is to be feared that too many excuse themselves in this day of riches and coldness towards God. One day this will be seen to be a terrible mistake; he who has eyes like fire will examine each one of us. Let us be sure of this: we are not saved so that we might go on in sin, but saved so that we might serve our master to whom we now belong.

## Acts 26:24-32

*24 Now as he thus made his defence, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!" 25 But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. 26 For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe." 28 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." 29 And Paul said, "I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains." 30 When he had said these things, the*

*king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them; 31 when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, "This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains." 32 Then Agrippa said to Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."*

Luke now tells us what the outcome of Paul's speech was. Once again, he was not able to bring his own speech to a conclusion, but was interrupted. Festus intervened, "with a loud voice". In these verses we are shown the response of Judea's most powerful men to the gospel. At the end of this passage, there is a question as to who is the prisoner and who is free! We see Paul, calm and confident, the chains on his body doing nothing to take away the peace and joy of his soul; and we see two rulers unable to overcome the shackles of their own spirits, unable to come to Christ - free in body, but miserable inside.

The response of Festus was to accuse Paul of being mad. He told him that too much study had caused him to lose his grip on reality. No doubt there have been plenty of men of whom this has been true. Shutting themselves off from the outside world, they have immersed themselves in another one, losing touch with the first one almost completely. No such thing, though, could have been said of Paul. The words which he had spoken were "words of truth and soberness". He had not said anything that had been invented on his own head. He was testifying only that God had kept the promises of which the prophets had been speaking for hundreds of years. He was claiming only that God, who gave life to everyone, had given life again to one from the grave. His words were about events that had been public and were known to anyone who had the slightest interest in the affairs of the Jews.

The clue as to what was really going on with Festus is given to us by Luke. The "loud voice" was a give-away. Festus spoke because he was provoked to - but not by Paul. His own conscience was prodding him and hurting him, and he could not contain his reaction. He could not contradict anything said by Paul, so accused him of being mad instead. The gap between the way he wanted to live, and the way that the gospel demanded of him, was too great - and he fled from it. As Paul reasoned about righteousness, judgment, and the salvation in Jesus Christ, Festus faced a reality that he did not want to exist. His worldly selfish pleasure was threatened, but he did not have the will to make the right choice.

There have been countless numbers like Festus since that day. They hear the gospel, and are troubled by it. They claim that it is all foolishness and stupidity, but the strength of their reaction denies their claims. There is a fight going on inside, and God is pleading with them for their souls - pleas which they are so reluctant to yield to. They cannot escape the witness of their consciences, that they are exposed to righteous judgment; and yet they cannot make themselves be willing to surrender to God. Is this you, reader? You are a miserable person you must be. You were made to know and be known by God, yet you are fighting against him. You cannot explain the world that you live in, but refuse to consider the only message that does. Why will you go this way? Can you not see that the believer is far happier than you are? Can you read this passage and not envy Paul rather than Festus? Turn your eyes to the Saviour, and let your cry be to him that he may melt all your resistance away.

The response of Agrippa was different. As Paul appealed to him, and reasoned with him