

“A Reality Check for Believers”

Acts 25

If you and I reflect on the changes that have come in the last 10-20 years about lifestyles, about things that were rarely talked about and now practiced openly, about what was allowed in films and TV then and now, and of course about the general attitudes towards Jesus and His followers (you and me), we are shocked by the changes in society. While some argue whether Canada was ever a Christian nation at one time, at least we could agree that we were a very moral society. That religion in general was respected.

And living in rural eastern Ontario, its slightly less obvious here than in more populated parts. As believers who have had the blessing of growing up in a Christian home where the majority of our family and friends know the Lord, we can sometimes be a little naïve about the world in which we live. Which isn't all bad.

But every now and then we need a reality check. The Apostle Paul lived at the height of the Roman Empire. Paul experienced things we never would but when you look at the attitudes of society then and now, we see a lot of similarities. Here in Ch.'s 25-26 Paul has another trial. If you recall from last week Paul was charged by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem for defiling the temple, causing riots and being a public menace. Under a bad Governor, Felix, Paul was kept in prison for 2 years needlessly because Felix wanted a bribe. And he was afraid of upsetting the Jewish leaders.

Felix is removed from office and a new Governor or procurator, Festus, takes over. Festus was a fair-minded ruler for the most part but his tenure was very short; 2-3 years. Again, always interesting how the sovereignty of God is at work in the lives of God's people. God will use a fair-minded Festus to get Paul to Rome.

In this chapter we are going to be reminded of things that were true then are still true today. We need a reality check every now and then. So we have two negative truths we need to realize happen now but also two positive truths that Paul clung to and so we need to as well.

Remember, there were no original chapter divisions so the narrative continues without missing a beat.

Three days after arriving in the province, Festus went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem, ² where the chief priests and Jewish leaders appeared before him and presented the charges against Paul. ³ They urgently requested Festus, as a favor to them, to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way. ⁴ Festus answered, “Paul is being held at Caesarea, and I myself am going there soon. ⁵ Let some of your leaders come with me and press charges against the man there, if he has done anything wrong.”

⁶ After spending eight or ten days with them, he went down to Caesarea, and the next day he convened the court and ordered that Paul be brought before him. ⁷ When Paul appeared, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many serious charges against him, which they could not prove.

Festus was a no nonsense guy. He reviews what Felix had left for him to deal with and he sees this guy Paul has been in jail for 2 years without a formal judgment made about him. Within a few days of taking office he goes to Jerusalem and asked the Jewish leaders to come to him and explain this situation. You would think after 2 years things would have cooled down – but no! These guys are as upset at Paul now as much as they were 2 years ago. They still want Paul dead. But

that's crazy on their part because if they ambush Paul and kill him that means they will have to attack Roman soldiers to get at Paul.

Some Hate Jesus' Followers Enough to Risk Losing Their Own Life **(25:1-7)**

How does one have so much hate for so long? That's not hard to figure out.

- You stubbornly refuse to forgive.
- You are not willing to listen to reason.
- You keep feeding your hatred with vindictive thoughts.
- And you keep talking about it with anyone who will listen. To the point where your hatred blinds you.

We can all get on this 'treadmill' if we're not careful. We see that today with people who hate Jesus and the gospel and us. Some people devote their life to getting rid of God, Jesus and the Bible. A sad example is the late Madelaine Murray O'Hair. Born to Christian parents, Ms O'Hair rejected God and become an outspoken atheist. She became incensed when her son William went to school and was 'forced' to recite the Lord's prayer. She took the school boards to the Supreme Court and won a ruling that banned compulsory prayer and Bible reading in schools. Ironically, her son William got saved and became a pastor/evangelist. His mother disowned him as did his daughter. Today he is (or was until most recently) the Chairperson of the Religious Freedom Coalition that lobbies Congress to protect the religious rights of those in Islamic and Communist countries.

Jesus warned His followers in John 16:1

"All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. ² They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. ³ They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. ⁴ I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you.

These religious Jews thought they were serving God by seeking to kill Paul. Remember, back in Ch. 23 they originally swore an oath not to eat or drink (fasting for who? God) until Paul was dead. All of them broke their oath.

There are many today that are serving a false god thinking by killing Jesus' followers they will get special rewards in the afterlife. Those who have died with that dream wish they could tell their compatriots the real truth now.

We see and read in the media the hatred of some today in our own country of those opposed to the gospel. Some of them make this their life pursuit. What should we do? Jesus gave us that answer in Matt. 5:44

⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven

So, Festus listens to these charges of this entourage of Jewish leaders. Meanwhile, Paul (again) defends himself:

^{v.8} I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar."

Paul defended himself. No one else spoke for him. But here's a positive truth we need to remember:

When No One Defends Us We are Not Alone **(25:8-12)**

Paul writes in 2 Tim. 4 of another time he was on trial (or he's referring back to this trial)

¹⁶ At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. ¹⁷ But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth.

Jesus is our defender (1 John 2:1-2; 2 Tim. 4:16-18; Heb. 4:14-16)

"The Lord stood at my side". Paul knew Jesus was with Him even when no one physically was with him. John wrote in 1 John 2:1-2

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world

Jesus is able to speak to the Father in our defence when the enemy attacks us because He paid the price for our sins. Jesus understands our trials and attacks because He went through it Himself.

Heb. 4:14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Paul himself would write in Romans 8 (before this trial even happened),

³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

Paul tells Festus what he told Felix, that he was innocent of all these false charges the Jews had made. He was not willing to go to Jerusalem because that would most likely end in his death. As a Roman citizen he needed to be tried in Caesarea or Rome itself. Festus was bowing to Jewish pressure to take Paul back there, so Paul appeals to Caesar, which was a technical term that meant he wanted the Emperor to decide. Kind of like, take it to the Supreme Court.

Here again we see the hand of God using the nations and their judicial practices to work out His plan.

God sovereignly overrules rulers (vv.8-12)

Paul used the legal rights he had to his advantage – not that death may not await him in Rome; he admitted he was willing for them to put him to death – but he felt he could get a fairer trial by the Romans than the Jews.

Festus was fine with this because that meant it was out of his hands. The Jewish rulers wanted Paul dead. God overruled them. The Roman ruler just wanted Paul out of his responsibility and was willing to ship him back to Jerusalem but God overruled them also. Remember, back in 23:11 God encouraged Paul in his arrest

¹¹ *The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.”* So

¹² *After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: “You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!”*

But Festus realizes he still has a problem. You only send difficult or bad cases to Caesar; you don't want to waste his time. Festus really has nothing serious to charge Paul with. Along comes Herod Agrippa II, “King” a title only but the governor of Israel. Agrippa's great grandfather was the Herod who tried to kill Jesus. Herod's grandfather was the Herod who cut off John the Baptist's head. And Herod's father was the one who had James the apostle killed. A bad history but someone well acquainted with the Jews and their religion.

Festus tells him about Paul and the problem with the Jewish leaders. But in his sharing the problem to Herod we see another negative truth that was just as true then as it is now.

The World is Oblivious to Who Jesus is **(25:13-22)**

Let's pick up Festus description about Paul and Jesus in v.18,

¹⁸ *When his accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. ¹⁹ Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive. ²⁰ I was at a loss how to investigate such matters; so I asked if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges. ²¹ When Paul made his appeal to be held over for the Emperor's decision, I ordered him held until I could send him to Caesar.”*

Jesus was just some religious guy that people claimed came back to life. “A dead man named Jesus”. Wow, how sad to be so unaware of who Jesus is. But our culture is no different. Many people are oblivious to who Jesus is. Because for many

They think its just about religion (vv.13-19)

Mention Jesus and people just tune out because they are not interested in “religion”. Festus and Herod and so many others had no use for spiritual things, especially when it came to Jesus. They had their own gods they worshipped. Jesus was just another selection in the juke box menu of religion. Put your quarter in and you get another god. Jesus was just some dead guy whom some claimed came back to life.

And if they are clueless about Jesus then

They don't know what to think of us (vv.20-22)

They don't know what to make of Paul because they don't know who Jesus is. Agrippa wants to meet Paul too. So they make that arrangement. This is the problem in a nutshell. If you don't know who Jesus is you won't understand what makes His followers tick. Why we believe what we do, why we live the way we do, why are we're willing to even suffer for Christ. Festus said in v.20

²⁰ I was at a loss how to investigate such matters; so I asked if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges

And they won't understand us or Jesus until they come to accept Jesus themselves. Paul writes in 1 Cor. 2:14,

¹⁴ The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

So the next day Festus arranges for Agrippa and Bernice (his sister) to have a session with Paul. Listen to Luke describe their intro:

²³ The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high ranking officers and the leading men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. ²⁴ Festus said: "King Agrippa, and all who are present with us, you see this man! The whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. ²⁵ I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome. ²⁶ But I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. ²⁷ For I think it is unreasonable to send on a prisoner without specifying the charges against him."

So, here's the scene. You have all these important people dressed in their rich uniforms or robes, gathering together to give their opinion about one follower of Jesus. The scene is meant to impress with their position and authority and power over one follower of Jesus standing in chains. And here's another reality check we need to remind ourselves with when the important people in our world make decisions about what to do with followers of Jesus.

'Important' People are a Footnote to our Story **(25:23-27)**

Whose story are we reading about?

Paul's.

Whose story do people still read about 2000 years later and are still encouraged by?

Paul's.

Felix, Festus, Herod, Lysias, Ananias, Nero are all footnotes in history because we only know them about because of how they are connect to a believer in Jesus Christ who made a far greater impact – and continues to make a greater impact – than any of these so-called important people in history. But when the world ends who are the ones still standing strong in the presence of God? You and me. The important people in

history are a footnote to your story. Ten thousand years into eternity you'll be sitting down with a believer and you'll be talking about your life and they'll ask

'What was it like when and where you lived? Who were the world leaders at the time?'

And we'll scratch our heads trying to remember their names. 'There was this really bad guy named Poutine in charge of Russia. I think and our own leader was James Trumont; no Justin Trudeau and his father Peter, I think? I forget.'

I'm not really being disrespectful but that's reality. The important people of the world can make current life difficult for us but the reality check we need to be reminded of is that their season is short. And if they don't receive Christ themselves they will not live in God's presence forever but you and I will.

Acts 25 is a reality check. Our world doesn't know who Jesus is and doesn't understand His followers. Some of them hate Jesus and His followers with a great passion and their goal in life is to rid the world of us. However, God is with us. He is on our side. He'll get us through whatever we'll face, even if we're greatly outnumbered. Our story, because we know Jesus, will last forever, while the people that lord it over us will sadly be long forgotten and suffer forever. And whether that's a world leader or your boss, or a coach or a peer, the harm they try and cause us, will only seal their own Christless eternity. They need our prayers, our compassion and our love.

¹ Pet. 4:4 They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. ⁵ But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

That's a sobering reality they are unaware of. So let's pray for them and ask that God would open their eyes to the truth so that they would come to know who Jesus is. And encourage us as well and remember that greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world.

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