

UNSTOPPABLE

GOD'S WORK
IN THE WORLD

PERSECUTED PAUL - JUST THE BEGINNING

Lesson 22

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DEVOTIONAL

Let us ask some questions here about what you can imagine is the nature of Christian persecution around the world today.

About how many Christians are estimated to have lost their lives worldwide in 2016 because of their faith? A. 4,000 / B. 18,000 / C. 41,000 / D. 90,000

About how many Christians around the world face governmental opposition that to some extent inhibits their full exercise of faith? A. 140 million / B. 355 million / C. 490 million / D. 600 million.

The answer to both question is letter D – 90,000 killed and about 600,000,000 afflicted by authoritarian opposition (research done by The Center for New Religions). Christianity is now the most persecuted religion in the world.

The trend of anti-Christian hostility is growing. Certain stories make the news prominently, like the killing of 44 Coptic Christians on Palm Sunday. But this is just the surface; it is happening in all corners of the earth. “There are many places on Earth where being a Christian is the most dangerous thing you can be,” Robert Nicholson of the Philos Project has said.

But this is actually nothing new, as hostility toward the gospel existed from the very beginning. Paul himself was of course an early persecutor. And he was an early victim as well.

Even after two years of imprisonment in Caesarea—75 miles away from Jerusalem—the anger toward Paul had abated very little. In Acts 25 we read of the immediate raising of the issue of Paul the prisoner by the Jewish leadership as soon as a new governor (Festus) takes over power. There remains a plot to kill Paul. These are angry people. As Festus would like to please the Jews by getting Paul to Jerusalem, the Apostle knows that this would result in a loaded situation against him ... besides the fact that he is fully innocent. So he asserts his rights to appeal to Caesar, where he will ultimately be sent.¹

¹ Devotional by Randy Buchman found @ <https://devotionalstsf.org/2017/08/16/persecuted-paul-just-the-beginning-acts-251-22/>

OPEN IT

1. Name a well-known court case. What was it about and what was its outcome? What was the response to the final verdict?

READ IT

Acts 25:1–22

EXPLORE IT

2. Why did the chief priests want Paul to be summoned to Jerusalem?
3. What did Festus choose to do instead?
4. What three people or places did Paul say he had not committed any offenses against?
5. To whom did Paul appeal?
6. Upon hearing about the situation, what did Agrippa desire?

APPLY IT

THIS IS GOING TO BE A WHILE!!!

As Christians, we will often face circumstances that can either be frustrating or fruitful for the Lord, depending on how we handle it. If we see things only from a human perspective, we'll grow impatient and frustrated as we think, "What a waste of time!" But if we see God's sovereign hand orchestrating all of our circumstances according to His plan, then we can rest in Him, knowing that He will work it together for good according to His purpose.

Paul easily could have become frustrated while he waited in prison in Caesarea. Felix knew that Paul was innocent, but he kept him in prison, hoping for a bribe from Paul's wealthy friends. When that didn't come, and Felix was recalled to Rome because of the complaints of the Jews, to gain some political capital, he left Paul imprisoned.²

- 7. Two whole years would pass between Acts 24:27 and Acts 25:1. What thoughts and emotions might you have been feeling during those 730 long days?**

God's waiting room may be the most important space we encounter in life. It's where God tests our commitment and grows our faith. It's where we prepare for the next leg of the journey. As we wait on the Lord, we learn and experience trust.³

- 8. When have you been in God's waiting room? Why does God make his children wait and at times for such long times?**

Waiting on God requires us to put aside our way of doing things and trust His timing and plan.⁴

- 9. There is no mention of any additional charges of bad behavior against Paul while he was incarcerated. Why is it necessary for believers to wait obediently? Where are you tempted most in those times to rebel against God's timetable?**

² Sermon excerpt from Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-65-god-s-protective-hand-acts-251-12>

³ *God's Waiting Room* by Duane Durst <https://influencemagazine.com/practice/gods-waiting-room>

⁴ Ibid.

HERE I GO AGAIN!!

Knowing how important it was for him to get along well with the Jewish leaders, Festus lost no time in visiting the Holy City and paying his respects, and the leaders lost no time in bringing up Paul's case. The new high priest was Ishmael; he had replaced Jonathan, who had been killed by Felix. Ishmael wanted to resurrect the plot of two years before and remove Paul once and for all (Acts 23:12–15).

It is not likely that the new governor knew anything about the original plot or even suspected that the Jewish religious leaders were out for blood. Since a Roman court could meet in Jerusalem as well as in Caesarea, transferring Paul would be a normal procedure. Festus would probably not demand that a large retinue go with him, so an ambush would be easy.

Finally, since it was a matter involving a Jewish prisoner and the Jewish law, the logical place to meet would be Jerusalem. "Kill Paul!" had been the cry of the unbelieving Jews ever since Paul had arrived in Jerusalem (Acts 21:27–31; 22:22; 23:10–15; 25:3); however, Festus knew nothing of this. Paul had been warned of this danger, but he had also been assured that the Lord would protect him, use his witness, and then take him safely to Rome (Acts 23:11; 26:17). The situation was growing more serious, for now it was the council itself, and not a group of outsiders, that was plotting Paul's death. You would think that their anger would have subsided after two years, but it had not. Satan the murderer was hard at work (John 8:44).⁵

10. The religious leaders had held a grudge against Paul for two years. Why are grudges so tempting to keep? When have you held a grudge against another person, and how was your walk with God affected during this time?

11. The religious leaders' grudge led them to an even more diabolical plot—cold-blooded, premeditated murder. How could men who knew the Word of God and sought to live in accordance to the laws of God stoop to such ugly actions? What common excuses do religious people give for doing ungodly things?

I HAVE RIGHTS!!!

For the third time in the space of two chapters, the apostle Paul gives a defense (*apologia*). The first had been before Governor Felix over two years previously (Acts 24:1–27). Then, following Felix's recall to Rome, Paul made another defense before Governor Festus (Acts 25:1–12). The apostle had declined the governor's proposal that he be tried in Jerusalem, in all likelihood before a court of Jewish jurisdiction. The outcome of such a trial was a foregone conclusion: they would have found Paul guilty of blasphemy and exercised their right under Roman law to execute him.

Paul had appealed to Caesar, something he had not done before Felix, hoping that this appeal would ensure his transportation to Rome. Now that this possibility had been denied him, the only recourse left was to exercise his right as a Roman citizen to be heard by the emperor himself (or, since Nero had abdicated this responsibility, by his delegated official in Rome).⁶

⁵ Wiersbe, Warren W. *Be Daring (Acts 13–28): Put Your Faith Where the Action Is (The BE Series Commentary)* (p. 150). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Thomas, Derek W. H. *Acts (Reformed Expository Commentaries)* (p. 687). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

12. Paul seemed content to stay in prison for two years prior to our text and yet seeks to appeal the verdict here. How does a Christian know when to endure hardships for Christ and when to fight for his rights?

13. How much should Christians expect the government to uphold righteousness? How much effort should we make in legislating biblical standards in a secular and pluralistic culture?

“KEEPING THE MAIN THING THE MAIN THING”

About that time, Festus had a state visit from Herod Agrippa II and Herod’s sister, Bernice. This youthful king, the last of the Herodians to rule, was the great-grandson of the Herod who had killed the Bethlehem babes, and the son of the Herod who had killed the apostle James (Acts 12). The fact that his sister lived with him created a great deal of suspicion on the part of the Jewish people, for their law clearly condemned incest (Leviticus 18:1–18; 20:11–21).

Rome had given Herod Agrippa II legal jurisdiction over the temple in Jerusalem, so it was logical that Festus share Paul’s case with him. Festus was smart enough to understand that the Jewish case against Paul had nothing to do with civil law. It was purely a matter of “religious questions” (Acts 18:14–15; 23:29), which the Romans were unprepared to handle, especially the doctrine of the resurrection. Acts 25:19 proves that Paul was defending much more than the resurrection in general. He was declaring and defending the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we have noted in our studies, this is the key emphasis of the witness of the church in the book of Acts.⁷

14. Paul could have used his time before Festus to speak on all manner of things but chose instead to speak about the resurrection. Why would Paul choose such a tactic, and what is accomplished when we follow this model in our conversations with others?

⁷ Wiersbe, Warren W. *Be Daring (Acts 13-28): Put Your Faith Where the Action Is (The BE Series Commentary)* (pp. 151-152). David C Cook. Kindle Edition.

15. Paul sought to defend the resurrection of Jesus to Festus. Put yourself in Paul's place. How would you go about defending the veracity of the resurrection to an unbeliever?

The words “**a certain Jesus**” show that Festus didn't know much about Jesus. It is good to remember that the great and important people of Paul's day didn't know much about Jesus, and they had to be told. “Brethren, this is why we must keep on preaching Jesus Christ, because he is still so little known. The masses of this city are as ignorant of Jesus as Festus was” (Spurgeon).⁸

16. How much do the people around you know about Jesus? What is their opinion of Him, and what questions do they have about Jesus?

I also would like to hear the man myself: Agrippa's curiosity meant that Paul would have another opportunity to speak God's truth to a Gentile ruler. This would be the third such opportunity for Paul in Acts 24–26 (Agrippa, Festus, and now Agrippa).⁹

17. What about Paul was so intriguing to others? What about you causes people to be intrigued by your faith and life?

“MEMBERS ONLY” PARTY

When the beautiful, rich, and powerful had paraded in and assumed the places in the room demanded by the protocols of the day, Procurator Festus called for Paul to be brought in. The little tentmaker from Tarsus, hands in chains, stood before the king and the high muckety-mucks of Caesarea. It was high drama and great entertainment.¹⁰

⁸ *Commentary on Acts* by David Guzik found @ <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/acts-25/>

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Girard, Robert C. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series)* (Kindle Locations 5287–5289). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

18. We are told of the audience that were assembled to hear from Paul. What people were represented? Should our message remain constant no matter the audience, or should there be flexibility to modify it to appeal to varied groups of people? Explain.

19. Who are the people of authority in your life that are in need of hearing the gospel? How are you going about reaching them?

To understand the spiritual perspective of these events, you must read the story in the light of two texts. In Acts 9:15, the Lord had predicted of Paul, *“He is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.”* Here Paul bears witness before all three groups. And, in Acts 23:11, the Lord had told Paul, *“for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.”* God was at work behind these potentially frustrating circumstances and repeated false charges to fulfill His purpose for His servant, Paul.¹¹

20. Describe a time when you saw a promise of Scripture come to fruition in your life. How has that fulfilled promise grown your faith and trust in God?

¹¹ Sermon excerpt from Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-65-god-s-protective-hand-acts-251-12>

Note: This study was compiled, and questions were written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.church/smallgroups