

PAUL BEFORE FESTUS

Acts 25:1-27

Two years intervened between the incidents recorded in the previous chapter and the ones which are described here. During that interval Paul had been in prison. He had been kept in prison without a charge against him because the consul hoped to make money out of him. These were two years of waiting for something to happen.

In the meantime a new governor had been inaugurated. Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. His coming to this office afforded a new opportunity to the Jews to express again their murderous hatred of the Apostle. Mark the persistent hatred of the Jews. Nothing could alter or mollify their venom toward him. Ever since Paul's conversion they had worried him from place to place.

Three days after Festus had come to Caesarea as governor, he went from the legal, political capital up to Jerusalem, the sacred, religious capital, to meet the Jewish leaders. No sooner had Festus made his appearance in Jerusalem than he was besieged with requests to have Paul returned to Jerusalem for a retrial. The Jewish leaders made it clear to Festus that they would consider the granting of this request a special favor. As leading men of the nation they hoped to influence the governor in this regard. Paul was but one private individual; whereas, they were many. It would be far more convenient for him to come up to Jerusalem than for them to go down to Caesarea. They made their request because they wanted to have a chance to murder Paul en route.

Festus was new in his position, but he was not that easily influenced. In all probability he did not know anything about their murderous plot against Paul. Doubtless it was the Spirit of God Who kept him from granting their request. The Lord kept watch over Paul as He does every child of God. Festus told them that Paul was safely and legally under guard, and that he, himself, was going back to Caesarea very shortly, so the proper course would be for them to go along with him and establish their accusations against Paul.

More than ten days later Festus returned to Caesarea. The next day he summoned Paul before him and heard his accusers make their unproved charges. The complaints of the Jews were many and grievous. They were as numerous and black as so many lying tongues could make them, but not one of their charges could they prove. What these Jews lacked in integrity they made up for in imagination. Their imaginations were as fertile as they were false. In the main their charges against Paul were of heresy, sacrilege and treason. But, all the vile charges they brought against Paul could not bring the faintest tremor to his heart, or blush of shame to his cheek; for, as he said, he had not violated any law, Jewish or Roman. To each of their charges he gave a categorical denial. How wonderful it is to have a clean heart and a clear conscience. Paul's defense was simply that of definite and emphatic denial of every charge that they brought against him.

There was no case. Still Festus wished "to lay up favor with the Jews." Naturally he wanted to succeed as governor. His chances for future promotion depended upon it. In order to make good, he simply had to get along amicably with the Jewish leaders. He felt that he could never afford to take sides with any one man, and especially if that individual were the recognized enemy of the Jewish hierarchy. That would only lead to political suicide. So, Festus listened to the voice of the crowd, though in doing so he rejected the voice of conscience. He knew that Paul was right and that his accusers were wrong, but in his anxiety to please the Jews he asked Paul if he would be willing to stand trial before him at Jerusalem.

Paul realized that to return to Jerusalem would be folly to the nth degree, and knowing that it was the will of the Lord for him to witness in His name in Rome, he said, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged: to the Jews have I done no wrong, as thou very well knowest." Knowing that his enemies were only trying to bring about his death, Paul replied that he was being tried by Roman law, that he had not done

the Jews any wrong, as Festus could clearly see, and that being unworthy of death he was unwilling to be delivered into their murderous hands. When the wide-awake apostle saw that his judge was likely to be bribed over to the side of his bloodthirsty enemies, he unsheathed an unexpected, but mighty, weapon of defense by saying, "I appeal unto Caesar." To appeal to Caesar was the privilege of every Roman. In this respect Paul was merely asserting his political rights. After a brief conference with the Council, Festus declared their decision: "Hast thou appealed unto Caesar? unto Caesar shalt thou go."

Christ had already informed Paul that he was to go to Rome, and now a Roman authority joins in that decision. What a relief this must have been to the mind and heart of the Apostle! He would rather trust his case to pagan Romans than to religious Jews. In past experience, the pagan Romans never failed him in the time of difficulty and danger.

A few days later, King Agrippa II and his paramour sister, Bernice, paid a congratulatory visit to the governor. During the days of that visit Festus told Agrippa about Paul and the status of the case which embarrassed him, since he had no definite charges that would justify sending his prisoner to Rome. Agrippa's coming was very opportune for Festus. He understood Jewish law, customs and temper, and could give much needed advice in framing a statement to the emperor about Paul's case, when in reality there wasn't any case against him. So Festus laid the case before him and asked for his assistance.

When Agrippa heard the name, "Jesus," he expressed a strong desire to hear this exponent of His Way of Life. The Jews had quarreled with Festus, as well as among themselves, about certain things pertaining to their own religion. That was not primary, but secondary in importance. The really important thing pertained not to the Jews but to Jesus Christ.

Everywhere he went, Paul's one great message was the gospel of Christ, which was the story of His death, His burial and His resurrection. The resurrection of Christ is a historical fact. This fact is the battleground of Christianity. The resurrection of Christ substantiates every claim that He ever made. His resurrection is the central truth in the message of His churches today. And it is the thrill of the Christian hope and prospect.

I. Time Changes Some Things.

1. It changes rulers.

All earthly rulers are temporal. Their reigns come to an end, many times suddenly. It is a comfort to Christians to be reminded that they have a King who is eternal—the same yesterday, today and forever.

2. Time had changed Paul's audience.

His early ministry was given to the mob, to the rabble, to the people of the street, but now he is a minister to the court, to kings and queens. His misfortune had brought him a new audience. It is strange how God can take our misfortunes and overrule them for His glory and for our good.

3. Time had changed the methods of attack on Paul.

The murderous mob had changed its dress to the appearance of decency. It no longer met in dark corners to plot and plan the murder of Paul. It had come into the courtroom to seek vengeance at the bar of jurisdiction. But be not deceived, it is the same devil only in a new dress.

II. Time Does Not Change Some Things.

1. Two years in prison had not changed Paul's experience.

He was ready to tell that experience on the road to Damascus to everyone who would listen to it. He told it in jail, to the judge, to enemies as well as to

friends. It was an experience that never grew old. It would bear telling many times. Every Christian needs an unchangeable experience with God.

2. Two years in prison had not broken Paul's spirit. He had the same faith, same courage, same hope that he had the day they put him in jail. Time had not affected his spirit.
3. Two years of reflection in solitude had not changed Paul's message. He had been arrested for preaching the resurrection of Jesus. He still preached it. The passing of the years had only deepened and strengthened his convictions about it. Time and hardship had only ripened his message and made his soul more confirmed in its belief.
4. Time had not changed human nature. There was the same old hate on the part of the Jews. There was the same tendency on the part of the judge to seek popularity. There was the same regard for religion. Festus called it a superstition. He spoke as if Jesus being dead or alive was a thing of little importance. He boasted that he took no stock in such things.
5. Time has not changed the verdict of the ages about Jesus. Festus had nothing to write Caesar against Paul. The world can easily find fault with Christians, but no one has ever found a fault in Jesus.

III. Attitudes Toward Jesus Christ.

1. That of the Jews was one of hate. They were uncompromising antagonists of everything Paul was and did. They cried, "He ought not to live any longer."
2. That of Festus was one of evasiveness. He had Paul on his hands and did not know what to do with him. He could not answer his arguments, nor could he dismiss the case for fear of the Jews. He saw an opportunity to pass the matter to Agrippa.
3. That of Agrippa was one of curiosity. He had heard of Jesus and Paul, but had never had any contact with them.
4. That of Bernice was one of indifference. She sat in silence while the greatest man of all times reviewed his marvelous experience before her. If she had an opinion she did not express it. Paul's defense and plea were unimportant to her.
5. That of Paul was one of devotion. He was willing to go to jail for the cause he loved. He was willing to die for it.