

“Paul Before Agrippa”

Acts 25:1-27

Recently we took an airplane flight and the stewardess announced that there would be two stops before the final destination. It reminded me of Paul. He boarded the first leg of his journey in Jerusalem under heavy guard and had a lengthy layover in Caesarea before heading to an appointment in Rome. The final destination was to see his Savior, Jesus Christ, once again face to face in heaven.

For chapters 23 and 24 Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea facing Governor Felix who couldn't find Paul guilty – obviously he should have been let go. To not make a decision is actually making a decision. But then sometimes people just won't face the obvious.

It's kind of like the man, John, who had two horses and couldn't tell them apart. A neighbor suggested that he cut the tail of one horse and that worked great until the other horse got his tail caught in a bush and tore just right so it looked exactly like the other horse's tail. Again the neighbor suggested that he notch the ear of one horse. Good idea until the other horse caught his ear on a barbed wire fence. Once again, the owner couldn't tell them apart. Finally the neighbor suggested that he

measure the horses for height. When he did, John was very pleased to find that the white horse was two inches taller than the black horse. Sometimes the obvious just escapes some people.

Felix was lacking the courage to do the obvious and release Paul; lacking in morality to respond to the clear presentation of the gospel by Paul; and lacking in political staying power. But we know that God was still in control of Paul's circumstances. Scripture doesn't tell us what happened to Felix and his wife, Drusilla, but historians relate that Felix lost his governorship because he violently put down a riot between Jew and Gentile in Caesarea, murdering many Jewish leaders. He was recalled to Rome in disgrace to give an account of himself. Perhaps he thought that by leaving Paul in prison he could soften the legal blows the Jews were preparing to aim against him in Rome. You may remember that Felix had a brother, Pallas, in the Roman court and it was through his influence that Felix was not executed; however, he was never again employed in public service.

Now the new governor of Judea, Porticus Festus, was made of sterner stuff than Felix. (By the way, he only served two years 59-61 A.D. and died in office.) It was only natural that as soon

as he settled in (and was probably informed about the problem of Paul he had inherited), he went to survey Jerusalem. It was noted for being turbulent city, violent, fanatical and virtually ungovernable. No doubt he'd been given advice about keeping the peace. Things like:

- *They're very touchy about religion; don't offend them on that score.

- *They're very proud, don't underestimate them.

- *They're influential and know how to use power in high places. (Festus had probably been told what a scoundrel the high priest, Ananais, was yet the Sanhedrin he met probably looked for the most part like men who were venerable, courtly and reasonable.)

Surely the removal of Felix seemed like a godsend to Ananais. Here was a new opportunity to get rid of Paul, so they urgently requested Festus to transfer Paul to them as a favor – planning to kill Paul in route.

We can assume that Festus knew something about Paul; most certainly that he was a Roman citizen. He couldn't see any point in bringing Paul to Jerusalem, especially since he had no intention of staying there. Perhaps it was intuitive caution . . . perhaps selfishness. Besides, if this was a test of strength, it was

as good a time as any to let the Jews know that he was not going to be manipulated. Request denied. The exercise of caution is always a good thing in any new situation. We need to make sure we have all the facts before we make any hasty judgment.

Verse 6 says Festus spent eight to ten days in Jerusalem . . . there was much to learn about Jewish nationalism and their religious fervor; he would see the world-famous Temple; inspect the garrison and have an inspection tour of the formidable walls and towers. Who could tell when these hotheaded Jews would revolt again? Festus needed to get his political feet on the ground. Like any good management technique . . . start by assessing what you have to work with.

This was going on in Jerusalem, but backstage, away from the spotlight of mainstream events, God's fingers were at work in the life of Paul. Were it not for the example of Paul's life, much of what we read on the subject of God's discipline would remain just theory. We're going to see how God used not only the discipline of delay for Paul, but also the disciplines of defamation, danger and decision.

For two years Paul, a man of goals and action and a passion for the gospel, was stopped with no hope of being freed – just the promise from Jesus that he would go to Rome. Dr. Arthur

Pierson once told of being alone in the study of that great man of faith and achievement, George Mueller. Remember him from last week – the man who ran an orphanage trusting daily on God to supply their needs? Thinking it would be a good time to look at the great man's Bible, Pierson opened it and was thumbing through its pages when he came to Psalm 37:23 that says, "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord." Opposite of it in the margin, Mueller had made this notation: "And also the stops."

We've talked about the discipline of delay and what you can do during those times – pray, read Scripture, meditate. I want to think about God's perspective of that discipline. V. Raymond Edman has a book titled The Disciplines of Life that suggests that you think about your life as a grammatical sentence.

- 1.) It should have a subject – if it's self, you have a narrow horizon, shallow objectives, in brief – a wasted life.
Like a simple sentence, "See Spot run."
If the subject of your life is Christ, it has a wide horizon, worthy aims, satisfactory accomplishments.
Like saying, "She has a servant's heart."
- 2) God also puts the punctuation marks into our life to make it comprehensible and complete.

A comma – represents a slight change of direction in the sentence. Things that happen to us that modify our lives or richly add to the value of it; like learning the value of prayer and Bible study.

A semicolon – indicates a more abrupt and basic change of direction. Some of you are going through that right now. It seems true in my life recently. But the change means God desires to enlarge its content, not that He has cut you off or forgotten to be gracious.

Parentheses are indicative of even deeper perplexities than a semicolon. The whole forward movement of the sentence is suspended and something that seems totally irrelevant is inserted.

Then there is the matter of how the sentence ends.

Sometimes with a period – a question mark – or an exclamation mark.

I have fought the good fight, finished the course. (period)

?Why did you call me Lord, Lord, and not obey Me?

(question mark)

Well done, good and faithful servant! (exclamation point)

Every detail of every sentence is designed for some purpose.

Paul seemed to be in one of those parentheses period of life.

Now he had to face an entirely new trial before Festus and face the discipline of defamation.

The Phillips version of the Bible translates James 1:2-4 this way: "When all kinds of trials crowd into you lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends. Realize that they come to test your faith, and to produce in you the quality of endurance. But let the process go on until that endurance is fully developed, and you will find that you have become men and women of mature character with the right sort of independence."

There was a sign in a chaplain's office that said, "If you have troubles, come in and tell us about them. If not, come in and tell us how you do it!" Paul still had his troubles.

Verse 7 tells us that the charges brought by the Jews were many, serious and unproven. The new governor was hearing them for the first time. Paul faced again these familiar attacks from the Jews of sedition and sacrilege . . . a dish of half-truths and lies served up with venom and spite and seasoned with the deadly poison that had festered in their ranks during the two year delay.

The Jews accused . . . Paul denied . . . his words against theirs. No doubt Festus must have thanked his gods a thousand times that he was a Roman and not a Jew.

Paul now found himself face to face with the discipline of danger. He knew of the plot to kill him and that it had not been forgotten. He knew the importance of that kind of vow to a Jew. It was also obvious that justice was again taking a back seat to politics and convenience by the suggestion that Paul be returned to Jerusalem.

But the Roman governor had misjudged this man. Beneath Paul's polite and polished exterior, his personal grace and charm all enabled by his vital Christianity, there was a strong vein of iron resolution and indomitable will. Festus had only seen a captive Jew. Now he saw the Roman . . . he was no ordinary pawn. Suddenly Festus found himself checked!

Very deliberately Paul answered Festus, "I am standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!"

Paul's appeal, though unexpected by Festus, was no sudden decision. In the past two years, as the case dragged on, Paul had prayed and thought out what would be his next step. He knew too that this course of action was not free from danger.

The emperor Nero in 59 A.D. still remained under the wise influence of Gallio's brother, Seneca, the greatest philosopher of the day. Neither Paul nor any provincial official could forecast the awful degeneration of Nero into the despot whose name has been a byword for lust, cruelty and bad government. After his first five years as emperor, the monster inside the man came out into full view. You've all heard how "Nero fiddled while Rome burned" and how he became a fierce persecutor of Christians.

Paul had suffered a great deal of injustice already, not only in his missionary travels, but in Jerusalem, and in the trials defending himself against the accusations of the Jews.

Remember what Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane in Matthew 26:39? "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Paul was also prepared to drink from the cup the Father gave him. There's a poem I'd like to share with you written by Mrs. Ray Mercer –

I will not take that bitter thrust / Which rent my heart today
As coming from an earthly soul – / Though it was meant that way.
But I will look beyond the tool, / Because my life is planned;

I take the cup My Father gives – / I take it from His hand.
He knows, and even thus allows, / These little things that irk.
I trust His wisdom and His love, / Let patience have her work.
Though human means have brought the sting, / I firmly take this stand:
My loving Father holds the cup, / I take it from His hand.
Now those who watch may wonder why / These things do not disturb.
I look right past the instrument / And see my Lord superb.
The trials that would now lay me low/ Must pass through His command;
He holds the outstretched cup to me / I take it from His hand.

If we can see the disciplines of delay in our life, or any defamation of character, or any danger as coming from God's hand, it gives us the submissive heart to learn from the experience and mature our faith. Has God asked you to taste of the cup of one of these disciplines in your life? Do you feel like you're on the sidelines of where you want to be right now – delayed in your goals? Have you endured defamation – your family thinking you're a religious fanatic? Or maybe you face the danger from the enemy of your soul with his constant temptations to "look out for number one" or compromise just a little here and there (stealing your integrity). Perhaps it's the discipline of living with the consequences of decisions you've made.

There's another thought to comfort us in the words of an old hymn.

He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater.
He sendeth more strength when the labor's increase.
To added affliction He addeth His mercy,
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.
When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving has only begun.
His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,
His power no boundary known unto men.
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth, again.

Paul was going to prove what he'd already written to the Romans (8:28) – "all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose."

Festus was now in a quandary. This first prisoner to be referred to Rome had no charges against him that would be clear to Caesar, especially since Festus himself didn't really understand them. But Herod Agrippa II was due immediately for a state visit.

Herod was well acquainted with the Jews and Festus was counting on the fact that perhaps Herod Agrippa II could advise him on the form of the indictment. Certainly Herod had a lot of power in Jewish religious life. He'd been given the right by Rome to appoint the high priest and have custodianship of the temple treasure and the high priest's vestments. It was no light thing to take up the time of Caesar with local trivialities. Festus needed help.

We're well acquainted with the name of Herod in Scripture. As Lin reminded us last week, Herod the Great killed the babies in Bethlehem; Herod Antipas beheaded John the Baptist; Herod the first had Peter imprisoned and James beheaded (and we remember from Acts 12 he met his end by being eaten with worms when he accepted the people's acclamation that he was a god). Now Herod the second, King Agrippa was to be the last of the Herods.

Agrippa, Bernice and Drusilla (the wife of Felix) were brother and sisters, so King Agrippa was married to his sister (an incestuous relationship). Wherever we see King Agrippa we see the words "and Bernice" . . . she wasn't left out of anything. She was attached to him like an ugly disease. They were both decadent and immoral, but right now Festus needed them.

Festus was playing the part of a fair and noble Roman anxious to get to the truth of the matter and wanting to give his prisoner a hearing before the court best qualified to weigh the pros and cons of the case. It wasn't the truth that perplexed Festus (he knew Paul should go free); it was how to cover up his own deceitfulness in wanting to play politics with the Jewish leaders.

So Festus laid the case before Agrippa and Bernice. The prisoner Paul was in protective custody. He's had a trial and the Jews wanted him handed over to their jurisdiction for summary execution; however, Festus determined Paul was not guilty of violating any of Caesar's decrees of creating disturbances in the Jewish community. The main point of the dispute was over a dead man named Jesus, whom Paul claimed was alive.

Festus continued, "When I asked if he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there be judged concerning these matters . . . he appealed to Caesar."

What a scene is set for the hearing we'll study in our next lesson. Agrippa and Bernice with their high-ranking officers and men of the city entered with great pomp and ceremony. Whatever we've witnessed in Hollywood movies was probably an

accurate portrayal of the gold, fine clothing, servants, flowing robes, and jewels that were a part of that scene.

In contrast, the prisoner Paul was brought in – very possibly in chains. Festus made the introduction reminding Agrippa the goal was to have something to write to Caesar.

Next lesson we'll again get to study his testimony and witness. One thing we already know . . . Paul was not defenseless. He had the full armor of God he wrote about in Ephesians 6, plus he had the self-discipline of consistency. He always told the truth.

He's told it before . . . and he'll share the gospel again. It's what has changed the world . . . changed your life and mine. I've read that a suspended five hundred pound bar of steel can be made to swing like a pendulum by repeatedly striking it with a suspended one-ounce cork. It takes time, but eventually the bar will swing in rhythm to the cork. That is the influence of consistency.

Remember, the disciplines of life are designed to make us better – not bitter. We are to continue to move relentlessly against whatever obstacles come before us until we get those we influence in step with the living Savior. Let's pray that one day at the end of the sentence of our life, God will put the exclamation

point . . . You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your Master's happiness!"

Let's pray.