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Another Defense

Acts 25:1-12

Intro: Ch24 ended with a transition of governorship from Antonius Felix to that of Porcius Festus. Felix was, without question, a man of wretched character but history tells us and Luke alludes to the fact that Festus was basically a good man, a thoughtful and thorough administrator who took up his duties with the intention of doing what was right. However, he quickly learned that Jewish politics were not so easy to handle, especially in the 2-year-old case of the Apostle Paul, who was a prisoner with no official charges levied against him. “Paul was a Jew whose countrymen wanted to kill him and a Roman whose government didn’t know what to do with him” (Warren Wiersbe).

From a human perspective, Paul was in a terrible situation. He had been an uncharged prisoner of Rome for 2 years up to this point. Any normal person would begin to question both God’s providence and His provision, but not Paul. Yes, he was a prisoner but he wasn’t locked up in a dungeon or even in a cell. He was, more than likely, chained to a Roman soldier 24/7 but that was probably more punishment for the soldier than it was for Paul. He had also been granted certain liberties but Felix so that any and all of his friends could visit him and bring anything he might need.

But, God’s gracious provision for His faithful servant goes far beyond these immediate blessings. In fact, if we look at the bigger picture, we can see that Paul’s generous imprisonment in Caesarea was actually a providential provision of protective custody against the murderous intentions of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Paul was more likely to avoid a plot against his life chained to a Roman soldier in Caesarea than if he were hiding out in a private home in Jerusalem. Also, those 2 years were a season of rest and replenishment after his years of hard missionary service and travel. This time of rest prepared him for the difficult challenges that still lay ahead for him in the years to come.

Ch25 describes the trial of the Apostle Paul before Festus. Compared to the account of his trial before Felix (24) and the account of his hearing before king Agrippa (26), this particular story is rather short. This may be because

what happens here is of less importance to Paul, since it's just a repetition of the same baseless charges and intelligent responses given in [ch24](#), just played out before a different judge. Still, it's worth taking a closer look at the various characters that have roles in this legal drama. There are 3: the accusers – the Jewish religious leaders; the judge – Felix and the defendant – Paul.

1-12 – The first group in our cast of characters are the accusers – religious leaders. We've had to deal with this group for some time now, from the beginning of our study of John's gospel and all through our study of Acts. In all of our observations of this group, they have gotten a rather distasteful reputation, and it's been well earned! What we have in this group is a picture of the corrupting effects of religion when it is *not* properly connected with God.

Most people look on religion as a good thing, a positive influence. They contend that even if a person is not born again, it's still better for them to be religious than to not be. That's not necessarily true – it can be in some cases but religion – in and of itself – can be very corrupting. This is because if the worshiper has no real connection with God, if He's not present with them or they're not interested in His presence then their religion is just a veneer, a hypocrisy that can be used as an excuse for doing evil. History shows us that some of the worst things that have ever been done have been done by people who claimed they were doing the will of God—that is, by religious people. These evil acts are not confined to history books; they continue to be committed to this very day.

The Jewish leaders wanted Paul to be transferred to Jerusalem for trial because they were plotting to assassinate him. Understand what this means! Here were religious leaders, the heads of the most enlightened nation in the history of the human race, plotting to murder Paul. You'd think the 6th Commandment alone would have made them pause to consider their actions ([Ex 20:13](#)). Even if this was an unusual circumstance and Paul was really guilty of a crime requiring death and they had to act in an unorthodox way to secure it; even if this was accepted, they were still violating their own criminal laws, which provided meticulous safeguards for anyone accused of a capital crime. They were doing everything possible to avoid due process of law. Ironically, they were supposed to be upholding the law.

Sadly, over the last few chapters, we can see the gradual growth of corruption. In [ch23](#), when the plot to murder Paul was first proposed, it was the zealots who were responsible. They brought the idea and plan to the religious leaders. Now, in [ch25](#), it's the religious leaders themselves who are initiating the very plot they were only marginally involved in earlier. This is how wickedness spreads, and this is why we always have to be on guard against it. It's easy for religious people to go astray and then claim God's authority for their disobedience. If your religion turns you into a liar and a murderer then there is something wrong with your personal belief system!

This problem isn't relegated to religions or denominations we don't agree with. It can happen in any denomination, any church, any congregation of people who are more concerned with controlling outcomes and others than in allowing God's Holy Spirit to control them. We may one day be surprised at how many "good" ministers weren't so good and how many "heretics" were actually saved. Names and labels serve a purpose but too often we allow stereotypes to prejudice our opinions of other ministries. Granted, they are usually spot-on but not always.

The next character in our legal drama is Governor Porcius Festus – the judge. The most obvious characteristic of Festus that differentiates him from Felix is that he seems to be a man who was unwilling to delay his decisions. The first thing we notice about Festus is that he's a man of action. Only 3 days after his arrival in Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem to assess the "lay of the land." You'd think he would take some time to relax and get things squared away at home first but, no. Caesarea was the Roman capitol but Jerusalem was the center of the nation so he went there immediately to meet with the Jewish leadership. He wanted to know what he was facing. This man was trying to take charge right away. After spending some days in Jerusalem and hearing their beef against Paul, he returns to Caesarea and the very next day, convened his court and heard Paul's case.

While he was in Jerusalem, Festus learned of the situation with Paul. We don't know if this was his first clue of Paul's status and we don't know if he knew of the Jewish leaders plot to kill Paul but he did refuse to grant their request for a change of venue and this was yet another way that God protected Paul. Festus was smart not to cooperate with their assassination plot but he did invite these same leaders to come down to Caesarea and face Paul once again. This would give Festus an opportunity to review the

case and hopefully gather more facts, something that had been lacking from the very beginning.

The Jewish leadership agreed to appear but this hearing failed to bring out anything new. The Jewish delegation (without the fancy lawyer) only regurgitated the same unfounded and unproved accusations against Paul, hoping that Festus would agree with them and put Paul to death. Once again, Paul's on trial before a Gentile ruler, accused by religious leaders. Just like before, Paul's life was in real danger should he be found guilty.

What were their charges against Paul? Luke doesn't specify them here but judging from Paul's response in v8, these would've been charges of heresy (something contrary to God's law), sacrilege (action done against the temple), and treason (an act against Caesar). These are similar to charges that were brought against Jesus: He had violated the law by not observing the Sabbath correctly; He was guilty of sacrilege because He prophesied the destruction of the temple; and He made himself a king, setting Himself against Caesar. Ultimately, Pilate feared the Jews would tell Caesar he had released a rival to the imperial throne. That's why he finally consented to execute an innocent man.

These are the very accusations made against believers in virtually any country where people feel free to attack them.

1) They disregard the laws or customs of the nation. Christians don't have the same priorities as those around them. Christians are different, peculiar. They have another Lord. They obey their country's laws, but not when human law contradicts God's Law. 2) They don't hold to the religion of the people around them. In the 1st century, Christians were accused of being atheists because they denied the existence of the pagan gods. 3) They're guilty of treason. This hasn't been true in America (yet) but it happens in other areas. Christians won't acknowledge the ultimate sovereignty of any secular state. God is the only absolute for Christians.

In his defense Paul denied doing any of these things, at least not in ways that would put him in danger in a Roman court. In his trial before Felix Paul emphasized the connection of "the Way" with Judaism, but in this trial before Festus he stressed his loyalty to Caesar. Caesar is mentioned eight times in this chapter. Paul knew that he hadn't offended against Caesar (8) and that he was willing to stand in Caesar's court (10).

Luke says that although they brought many serious complaints against him they could not prove them (7). They had accused Paul of stirring up trouble all over the Roman Empire, but they didn't have any witnesses. They accused him of sacrilege, but they had brought no proof. They accused him of speaking against Caesar, and they couldn't prove that either. All Paul had to do in this situation was deny the charges. The burden of proof rested with his accusers, and Festus, being a perceptive judge, understood this and knew there were no grounds for condemning Paul.

Paul knew what was going down. That's why he declared in vs10, "to the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know." If Festus hadn't yet discovered this on his own, he certainly would've learned it from Felix, since he had examined Paul on more than one occasion and had concluded that he had done nothing wrong. Yet wanting to do the Jews a favor (9), Festus compromised. Festus was a good administrator. But he had his own serious flaw: like Felix, he wanted to please the people. It's true, compromise is part of effective politics but this was a legal matter. Paul was on trial for his life. Any giving of favors in this situation was a perversion of justice and abuse of an innocent man. Justice is supposed to be blind, but as we well know, when politics becomes ingrained in the legal process, justice becomes difficult – if not impossible – to find for the common man.

Festus, still unsure of what Paul was charged with, suggested that this religious question would best be settled in a religious setting. But, a Roman judge could not change the venue of a trial without the consent of the accused and Paul refused to go! Whether Festus knew it or not, Paul knew he would never get a fair trial in Jerusalem or even live long enough to stand trial there. Instead, he claimed the right of every Roman citizen – to appeal to Caesar's court. In doing so, Paul is effectively forcing the Romans to not only protect his life but also pay his way to Rome. But, it suits Festus just fine because it effectively removed this sticky situation out of his hands.

22-27 – The last character in this scene is the accused – Paul, and what a contrast! Here were the accusers trying to assassinate the prisoner out of hatred. Here was Festus, failing to do the right thing for the sake of popularity. Paul was the prisoner, the accused, the one in danger for his life, yet he's the only one who comes out of this victorious. He's victorious because 1) he was innocent of these false charges and 2) he depended on

God, whom he trusted in this as in all other circumstances.

Most of us have never faced circumstances where the accusations against us are as bad as these were against Paul though there are places in the world where they *are* severe and believers do suffer greatly. Still, we do face a world whose value system is hostile to the standards of Jesus and we're constantly pressured to compromise or deny our faith. How are we as weak and sinful human beings, able to stand against such pressure? How do we stand on our convictions and principles when the world's constantly screaming at us to give them up? There are 3 things needed.

1) We need to know God is Sovereign! Knowing God is sovereign over your circumstances gives you great power because it means that even if things don't go right for you from a human perspective, it will still be right, since God understood and ordained the hard circumstances from the very beginning. God knew they were going to come, and they are part of His plan for your life.

This knowledge is what gave power to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego when they stood against the most powerful monarch of their day, King Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar had set up a golden statue and commanded everyone to worship it. To refuse to bow was treason. These 3 young men wouldn't bow because to them it was an act of idolatry. Nebuchadnezzar was outraged and ordered them to be executed in a burning furnace, but they were utterly unafraid. How could that be? Nebuchadnezzar's threat of death was no joke. Where did their strength come from? It came from their knowledge of God's sovereignty. Their confident response is found in [Dan 3:17-18](#). They knew God was sovereign over even the most minute details of their lives, regardless of the outcome. Do we?

2) We need to know the Bible! This knowledge is necessary because the situations we face are not always black or white. If it is black and white, we know what to do. Most problems we face are usually gray. It seems like we ought to do one thing, but then there's another side to it. What to do? The only way to find your way through the gray areas is by studying, meditating on, and seeking to apply the Bible. There are things in it we don't fully understand, but the things we do understand are clear. The path is dark because the world is dark. But the Bible illuminates the path and shows us

where to go.

I've seen it all my life: Christians with limited knowledge of Scripture get caught up in the most ridiculous situations and excuse it by saying, "The Bible doesn't expressly forbid me to do this!" Well, maybe not precisely by name but the principle is clearly there. Too often, people like to use the silence of the Bible to excuse obvious bad behavior. I recall a speaker at a Pastors Conference relating a discussion between 2 students from his high school days. One was a Christian girl who was witnessing to a stoner. He tried to excuse his lifestyle by pointing out that since God created marijuana, he must've created it to be smoked. Her response was, "Well, God created cliffs too but I don't see you jumping off of one." Many biblical principles are not readily apparent but I believe they are like that because they are only meant to benefit those who truly desire to know them and apply them to their lives.

3) We must be willing to pay any price necessary! You must be determined to do this to stay true to Jesus Christ. Any price? Yes. There have been times in history when Christians were told, "Bow down or die," just like Daniel's 3 friends were. Many refused to bow and many have died. The history of the church is filled with the stories of martyrs. Other times it's not death that's required but maybe loss of reputation, success, advancement, or the good opinion of others. We're faced with compromising biblical principles and precepts or lose out on a promotion, or being included in the in crowd. We often fail to do what's right because we're not willing to pay that high price. We are not ready to surrender everything to follow Jesus.

This is probably the most difficult and the most necessary of the 3. You can know that God is sovereign. You can know what is right because you study the Bible. Yet you can still fail to do what's right because you value something else more than your obedience to Christ. It's this skewed value system that can trip up even mature believers.

We're servants of Jesus Christ in the middle of a hostile world and the only way we're able to stand against the world when it pressures us is if we are willing to give up everything to follow Him. Everything? Yes! Remember: He gave up everything for us, and the response He expects is in [Luke 9:23](#). A cross is a symbol of death. He was teaching that we must be willing to die to be His followers. That is the victory of faith that overcomes the world. 😊