LIFE BIBLE MINISTRY

Acts 25–26

"I stand here testifying both to small and great"

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SERMON TRANSCRIPT

You'll remember that for two years, Paul, the Apostle, has been in custody under Governor Felix. And now a new governor has taken his place. It's a man by the name of Festus. And we know what time frame we're dealing with here because we know that Porcius Festus was appointed by Nero, who had become Caesar, and that was in the year AD 60. Porcius Festus is now the governor over Syria, which is the political center of kind of that whole region encompassing Israel.

And that capital was in Caesarea. So we begin here in chapter 25, it says, Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. Caesarea. Let me show you on the map what it means to go up from Jerusalem to Caesarea. You might look at that map and you go, OK, that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard.

That's down. And it's exactly right. It is down. You go to Caesarea to Jerusalem and you go down in the sense of direction, but you go up in the sense of elevation. And that's why they called it going up to Jerusalem and then going down to Caesarea, because that was what was most important.

Verse two, it says, And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, asking as a favor against Paul, that he summon him to Jerusalem because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. And Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. So he said, let the men of authority among you go down with me. And if there's anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him. And I am assuming here that Festus had been made aware of the fact that they had attempted to assassinate Paul once already by asking him to be brought to meet with the Sanhedrin.

So he probably wasn't going to do that again. So it says, After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea, and the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. And when he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove. Paul argued in his defense,

Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense. But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, I don't know if that sounds familiar or not, said to Paul, Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?

But Paul said, I'm standing before Caesar's tribunal where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I've done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to these charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar.

And by the way, that was Paul's right. You'll remember he was a Roman citizen. And this is what any Roman citizen had the right to do if he felt like his case was not progressing as it should, or if he felt he was just being kind of mishandled as it relates to the way the lower courts were dealing with the issues. And this is very similar, I suppose, to appealing to the Supreme Court, which we have the right to do here in the United States of America, as kind of a final decision. And so Paul appeals to Caesar in that very way.

It says in verse 12, that then Festus, when he had conferred with his counsel, answered, to Caesar you have appealed, to Caesar you shall go. All right, so let's read on now and let's see how this appeal that Paul made ends up affecting his case. Verse 13. Now when some days had passed, Agrippa, the king, and Bernice arrived in Caesarea and greeted Festus. Pause there, please, with me for just a moment.

Let me explain to you who this is and why he is important. This is King Herod Agrippa II. And he has quite a history with his family line. I mean, you just kind of go back and look at his family line and you think, wow. His great-grandfather was the one who tried to kill Jesus and ended up killing most of the baby boys in the region of Bethlehem.

His grandfather had beheaded John the Baptist. His father had executed the apostle James and arrested Peter. You'll remember Peter escaped quite miraculously. And all of that, we read about that back in Acts 2. So this is kind of the history.

I don't know how you would feel standing next to this man. But the one thing about Herod that I think Paul appreciated was the fact that Herod knew and understood the ways of the Jews. In fact, he practiced Judaism himself. He was a practicing Jew. You'll remember that the Herods actually had an Edomite background.

It was called Idumean in the Greek. But he understood the Jews. The family had been living among the Jews for many, many, well, for generations. And he knew and understood. And Paul knew that as well.

Now, as far as the woman that he comes in with, Bernice, Bernice is his sister. And we don't really know a lot about Bernice from the Bible. History tells us some rather interesting things about her, but it's really kind of beside the point. We're told then, as we go on in verse 14, that as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, there's a man left prisoner by feelings. And when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him.

I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face-to-face and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him. So when they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought. When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. Rather, they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, rather, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them.

But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar. Then Agrippa said to Festus, I would like to hear the man myself. Tomorrow, said he, you will hear him. So on the next day, Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in.

And Festus said, King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. But I found that he had done nothing deserving death. And as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him. But I have nothing definite to write to my Lord about him. Therefore, I have brought him before you all and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after we have examined him, I may have something to write.

For it seems to me unreasonable in sending a prisoner not to indicate the charges against him. So Agrippa said to Paul, you have permission to speak for yourself. And then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense. And by the way, this is the longest of Paul's testimonies and Paul's defenses that we have a written account about. So here we go, verse two.

I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, that I'm going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, especially because you are familiar with all the customs and

controversies of the Jews. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently, all right? My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem is known by all the Jews. They've known for a long time, if they're willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion, I have lived as a Pharisee. Now, this is important.

You'll notice that the very first thing Paul tells the king and all who are there listening is that I was a Pharisee. Now, what I want you to kind of take note of as we finish reading Paul's testimony and his explanation of his defense, I want you to understand how Paul refers to his... faith in Jesus Christ as a natural progression of his faith in the Jewish Messiah. And this is an important thing for us to lay hold of as Christians. To understand that even though the history books essentially tell us that Christianity started like 2,000 years ago, it's really not true.

Paul wouldn't have agreed with that statement. To Paul, his faith was a natural progression of what he believed as a Jew. He was a Jew who believed in the God who created the heaven and the earth, who had prophesied through the Old Testament or the Jewish prophets that he would send an anointed one, a Messiah, who then appeared during Paul's lifetime, proved himself to be the Messiah, and went on to give his life on the cross for the sins of mankind. You see, so Paul's understanding of God's redemptive program begins with creation and goes up to the present time. It doesn't begin at a certain point in time necessarily.

It's like we tend to think of Christianity. Well, Christianity began when God sent his son and Jesus put together this group of guys called the disciples. No, no, no, no, no. When we begin as Christians, when we begin to think of ourselves as cut off and different from the Jews, from the standpoint that we have a different religion, Paul would not agree with that at all. This is all part of the same thing.

We have a connection to the Jews that goes back literally to creation, and we need to understand that, and that's what you're going to see here as Paul talks. Let's keep reading, verse six. And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made to our fathers. Notice that. I'm here because of the promise that was made to our Jewish forefathers, to which our 12 tribes hope to attain as they earnestly worship night and day.

And for this hope, I am accused by Jews, O king. Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and I did so in Jerusalem, and not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them, and I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against

them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities. In this connection, I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me.

And when we had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, and by the way, your Bible may say in Aramaic, and that's not a contradiction. The Hebrew, the Aramaic was considered to be a Hebrew dialect, all right? So it literally means in the Hebrew dialect, which can be translated Aramaic or Hebrew, all right? It says in the Hebrew language, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.

A goad is something that was used to prod an animal along, usually a sharp object, you know, to give him a good jab. And he said, or excuse me, and I said, who are you, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but rise, and by the way, verse 16 is a little bit challenging to understand in the ESV, but rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. That's kind of clumsy, isn't it? Actually, the NIV does a lot better job of this verse.

Let me show you on the screen. It says, now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. And that's actually a very clear rendering of that verse. Verse 17, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

Did you notice what the Lord told Paul about his calling there? Did you see what the Lord said to him? He told him that I'm gonna send you off to the Gentiles to do what? To turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to the power of God. Now, what's interesting about this is that this is very similar wording to how God the Father spoke concerning God the Son and his ministry that was prophesied back in Isaiah 42.

Let me show you this on the screen. The Lord speaking here says, I am Yahweh. I am the Lord. I have called you in righteousness. This is God the Father speaking to God the Son.

I will take you by the hand and keep you. I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison, those who sit in darkness. So this is what God prophesied that the Messiah would come and do. Now, isn't it

interesting that when Paul receives his commission from the Lord on the road to Damascus, it is an extension of the ministry of Messiah, but that shouldn't surprise us at all. We are the body of Christ.

People, this is our commission. This is our commission too. This is what we have been called to do. And Jesus does it through us. As Paul talks about in Colossians, let me show you this on the screen.

Colossians chapter one, I think it's there. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. So did Jesus deliver us from darkness and bring us into the light? Yes, he did. Is that what God prophesied he would do?

Yes, it is. Is that the ministry that God has given to all of us? Yes, it is. It's a wonderful thing. Verse 19, therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.

And that just really means, we wanna see that sincerity. Verse 21, for this reason, the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. To this day, I have had the help that comes from God. And so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass, that the Christ must suffer. And that by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.

And by the way, this is where Paul really speaks to his audience there about the prophetic certainty of the suffering of the Messiah. He says very clearly here that the prophets who came said that the Christ must suffer. And then you'll notice he went on to say, and being the first to rise from the dead. You stop, you read that and you kind of go, wait, hold the phone here for just a sec. Was Jesus the first to rise from the dead?

Because we have instances in the Old Testament where people were raised from the dead. Yeah, but you know what the difference was? They had to die all over again. Bummer, huh? Wouldn't that be something to go through death to get raised to life and then it's like, well, I gotta do that again.

I mean, maybe it's not a big deal after you've done it once. It's like, it wasn't so bad, sort of a thing. But Jesus is the only one to be raised from the dead, never to die again. To be raised. is incorruptible in that sense.

And so he in that sense is the first. So here they are talking about the resurrection. Now, notice verse 24. It says, and as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, you're out of your mind. Your great learning is driving you out of your mind.

Now, this is the response, by the way, of someone who's thoroughly Grecian, or Roman, if you will. He has a Grecian way of thinking. I mean, you remember back when Paul was in Athens and he was going around talking to people about the Lord and they invited him to come and speak at the Areopagus, remember? And Paul was talking about the gospel and everything was all great until he got to the resurrection. And that's, you'll remember when people began to mock.

Well, because that was a ridiculous thought to a Grecian mindset, right? And that's really exactly what Festus is doing right here. Verse 25, but Paul said, I'm not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I'm speaking true and rational words, for the king knows about these things. And to him, I speak boldly, for I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. In other words, none of this was done in private.

It was well-known. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe. And again, that's because Agrippa was a practicing Jew in that sense. And so he says, I know you believe what the prophets wrote.

And Agrippa said to Paul, in a short time, would you persuade me to be a Christian? Which of course means a follower of Christ. And Paul said, and I love this statement. I love this. Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am, except for these chains.

Isn't that great? What a great, what a great statement. What a beautiful sentiment. And then the king rose and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. And when they'd withdrawn, they said to one another, this man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.

And Agrippa said to Festus, listen to this. This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar. All right, we need to talk about that for just a moment because I got to tell you, this last statement of chapter 26 really troubles some people. Because there's, I'll just tell you, among students of the word of God, there are many who believe that, frankly, Paul blundered here, that this was a mistake on his part to appeal to Caesar. In fact, some have come out and said he should have appealed to God in prayer and left it at that, left his fate in the hands of God and not appealed to any sort of a human court and so forth.

Others, you know, just believe that Paul's appeal to the Roman emperor was just part of God's plan, you know, to ultimately get him to Rome. Well, it's interesting, it's hard to argue, frankly, with either one of those positions. Because, I mean, I can't really argue with the idea of leaving your fate in God's hands. That's always a good thing. And honestly, I can also understand that Paul's appeal was part of God's plan as well.

And the fact of the matter is, sometimes I think we give our opinions far too often. When they're just opinions, you know. But I tend to look at this a little bit of a different way. And what I'm gonna share with you is not an opinion. Because, I'll just tell you right now, I can't be sure, sitting here today, whether Paul made a mistake or not in appealing his case to Caesar.

Maybe he did, maybe he didn't, I don't know. But what I do believe is that God's sovereignty works in our lives even through our blunders. Did you hear me? And this is important that some of you, not everybody, but some of you in this room hear me. Because this is an important thing.

I believe that God's sovereignty works in our lives even through our blunders. And one of the benefits of studying through the Old Testament particularly, is that you get an opportunity to follow the narrative of the Old Testament, which includes a lot of very real people living very raw lives that are very prone to making some serious mistakes. When you're talking about blunders, I mean, you look at some of the people in the Old Testament, they made some spectacular blunders. And then these are people whom God called, promised, made promises to, and was gonna work in and through to accomplish his purpose, and yet these people messed up royally. And you see that when you study through the Old Testament.

You see it over and over and over again. But what you also find as you study through the Old Testament, is that God's plan just seems to keep going forward. God's plan, even despite the foibles and the shortcomings of the people that he's working through. Some of the people that you think are gonna be the most virtuous people in the Bible, end up being terrible. In the New Testament, we know that Jesus was from the tribe of Judah.

And we'll even sing songs, the lion of the tribe of Judah prevails. And then you read the Old Testament, you find out the kind of guy Judah was. You know? Wow. And you can kind of be a little disappointed reading through the Bible thinking, wow, Judah was kind of a piece of work.

I mean, you know, he had some good things that he did, particularly more toward the end of his life. But as a younger man, mercy, you know? But the reason I'm telling you all this is because I often come across believers who are literally tied up in emotional knots over the decisions that need to be made in

their lives. And they become so fearful that they're going to make a mistake. And in so doing somehow step outside of God's will to the point where God's not going to work in their lives any longer.

He's not gonna be able to do it. You know, it's like, well, I think you finally made the final blunder there, pal. That was, you just went past the point of no return. I don't think God can recover from this one. You know?

That's the way we kind of tend to think of God and so forth. But can I just tell you something? First of all, number one, here's the bad news, I guess. You will make mistakes. You're not gonna always hear God correctly, okay?

You're not gonna follow his will perfectly. You're going to make bad decisions. You're going to make blunders. And some of them are gonna be incredible. But here's the good news.

God is bigger than your mistakes. Bottom line. And that's something you need to hear. God is bigger than your ability to make a mistake. And that's frankly what we see when we study his word.

When you really get into the scriptures, you learn that God is bigger than me and my ability to mess up. And that there's this wonderful word that describes God in the Bible. A single word, and that word is sovereign. And if you really understand what the word sovereign means, you know, well, you know what Job said about the Lord. Let me put this on the screen for you from Job 42.

Then Job answered the Lord and said, I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. People, that's one of the most powerful, insightful definitions of sovereignty that you're ever gonna run across in the entirety of the Bible. That's one of the best right there, you know? And Job having this face-to-face conversation with God speaks this powerful statement. And you'll notice that he says there, I know.

That's a statement of definite, you know, declaration. I know this. I'm not guessing, I know it. And what do I know? I know that you can, first of all, do all things.

That speaks to the fact that he's all powerful. And then lastly, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. He thwarted. Nobody can get in your way and stop you from doing what you want to do. I know that.

Here's my question to you. Do you know that? Do you know that? Job said he knows it, but do you know it? Because sometimes we just, we need to go through the word and we need to be reminded of the immensity of God and his ability to carry out his plan.

You know what I mean? We just, we need that. I love this also from Jeremiah chapter 32. Look at this one. Ah, Lord God, it is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm, and nothing is too hard for you.

Nothing, Lord, is too hard for you. Jeremiah got a glimpse of the enormity. Actually, this is Baruch saying this, but it's recorded by Jeremiah. Beautiful, beautiful statement of the sovereignty and power of God. Nothing's too difficult for you, God.

I regularly come to the Lord and tell him that things are too difficult for me. As a practice, I say to him, Lord, this is too hard for me, but not for you. Nothing is too hard for you. And when I need to just be settled in my heart about matters that are too big for me, I always love to go to Romans chapter 11 and reread the apostle Paul's words where he said, oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God. How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out.

Who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

Amen? Amen. Amen.