

Derek French:

Sometimes the enemies of God's people prove to be very persistent in their opposition of the Lord's servants. Having had a scheme to murder Paul thoroughly frustrated when Paul's nephew discovered their plot, you would have thought the Jews would have learned their lesson, but alas not so! In fact they scheme again, this time with a new Roman governor, Festus. But their big mistake was to forget God in their plans, and as we'll see, Paul is kept alive and given permission to travel to Rome, as God had always said he would.

Gerard and Phillippa Chrispin are with us again, and Phillippa will read from Acts chapter 25, verses 1-12, and then Gerard will work through that passage with us.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*'Now when Festus had come to the province, after three days he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem. Then the high priest and the chief men of the Jews informed him against Paul; and they petitioned him, asking a favour against him, that he would summon him to Jerusalem—while they lay in ambush along the road to kill him. But Festus answered that Paul should be kept at Caesarea, and that he himself was going there shortly. "Therefore," he said, "let those who have authority among you go down with me and accuse this man, to see if there is any fault in him."*

*'And when he had remained among them more than ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day, sitting on the judgment seat, he commanded Paul to be brought. When he had come, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood about and laid many serious complaints against Paul, which they could not prove, while he answered for himself, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all."*

*'But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favour, answered Paul and said, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?"*

*'So Paul said, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar."*

*'Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, "You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!"'*

Gerard Chrispin:

Porcius Festus is the new Roman governor. Like his predecessor, Felix, he continues to reside in Caesarea and use it as his headquarters. But Jerusalem is a city honoured and revered by the Jews, whom he must govern, so three days into his new role he visits Jerusalem.

Felix's demise has not escaped the attention of the high priest and Jewish leaders. Here is their opportunity to reopen Paul's case, so they ask an opening favour from him: to summons Paul to appear in Jerusalem. They again plan to ambush him en route. Last time the Jewish leaders joined others in their plot. Now they forge the murder plot themselves. Will Festus curry favour and call Paul? Surely he's been briefed about the plan to kill Paul?

Festus shows that he is no weakling. He refuses the request, thereby following Felix's insistence that the matter must be heard in Caesarea, where Paul is being kept. He invites those in authority among the Jews to come there to accuse Paul. He will then determine if there is any fault in him. Is he aware of Claudius Lysias's letter to Felix stating that Paul deserves neither death nor chains, and advising of the ambush planned on the way to the hearing to kill him? No doubt he will be, when he researches the case before hearing it in Caesarea.

On his first visit to get to know the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, Festus stays over ten days. The day after his return to Caesarea, he sits in judgement and commands Paul's attendance. The accusing Jews lay many serious complaints against Paul. To accuse is easy. To prove those accusations is harder, and impossible without convincing evidence.

Paul's accusers have no evidence. Paul refutes their charges. He insists that he has neither offended against Jewish law, nor abused the temple in any way, nor done anything at all to offend Caesar by breaking the law of Israel's occupying power, Rome.

Festus knows that opposition from the Jewish leaders was behind the demise of governor Felix. Too late to avoid being removed by Nero, Felix tried to please the Jews who'd complained about him to the emperor. He hoped to do this by keeping Paul in custody, when he was removed to be replaced by Festus. Now the new governor wants to do the Jews a favour.

Does he fear that he might be the next one they complain about to Nero? Or does he recognise that in his new role he must work closely with them, and that a good relationship is therefore very important? Or does he want to show the Jews that he wants to please them, but cannot pervert the course of justice to do so? How big a role does politics play in this saga?

It is hard to answer these questions with certainty, but Festus does then ask Paul directly in court before the Jewish leaders, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?" The answer is immediate and clear.

It is no surprise that Paul's immediate and definite answer is negative. Consider why he refuses to agree to go to Jerusalem to be tried. He has done nothing wrong! Though had he done something demanding the death penalty, he would not object to dying.

He knows the high priest and Jewish elders are dishonest. If Paul did travel safely to Jerusalem, the high priest could easily manipulate a large pool of ready false witnesses against him, but he might never arrive there! He might fall to a murderous ambush planned en route.

Paul may also be concerned about Festus' weakening and warming towards his Jewish opponents. He may be concerned less he would not be as well guarded as he should be. He may fear that Festus might judge less fairly in Jerusalem than in Caesarea.

In any case, Paul has a burden from God to represent him and share his gospel and his word in Rome. As a Roman citizen, he can stand on his rights to ensure that he will reach Rome. This is a crucial time for Christianity's future in the world. A large gate swings on small hinges. The decision Paul will make will affect millions in the years to come, in Europe and beyond.

So the Jewish apostle to the gentiles reminds Roman governor Festus, who wants to please the Jews, that no one can insist that he is tried in Jerusalem. He declares, in accordance with his rights as a Roman citizen, "I appeal to Caesar."

Festus now confers with the council. Festus wants to make no mistakes. He wants all to see he is applying the law properly and objectively. In a sense, by taking a decision after taking advice, he distances himself from the decision and outcome in the eyes of the Jews he wishes to please. The two sentences he utters show both the legal basis for his decision and the decision itself. "You have appealed to Caesar?" This rhetorical question shows that Festus and his advisors have noted the absolute right of a Roman citizen, wherever they are, to appeal to Caesar. This is not something over which Festus or anyone else has any flexibility. An appeal to Caesar by a Roman must be honoured. The second sentence follows: "To Caesar you shall go."

Rome looms large in the mind of this brave servant of Jesus Christ. Relentlessly opposed by Judaism, abused by a howling and hostile mob, kept in custody by the Roman military, heard and then abandoned by one judge and then heard by another, he now sees the way ahead more clearly, "To Caesar you shall go."

This trip for Paul will not be as straightforward as flying on British Airways from London, Heathrow, to Rome. Paul has yet to appear before a king to press on him his need to come to Christ. He will encounter a long and horrific storm in his voyage to Rome, in which the Roman soldiers want to kill him and their other prisoners who try to escape. The apostle will then survive being shipwrecked off Malta, only to be bitten in the hand there by a poisonous viper. The people will first consider him to be a murderer, and then regard him as a god.

Romans 8, verses 35-39 later puts and answers these questions:

*'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*

*'As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter."*

*'Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'*

The apostle Paul clearly shows that it is in such situations that God enables Christians to conquer by grace through Jesus, through his Holy Spirit and through his word.

Life can be hard and testing, but we can say and prove, as Paul did from Rome during his later unjust imprisonment there, and as recorded in Philippians chapter 4 verse 13, *'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.'*

God is in control and he cares. He is on our side.

Derek French:

How reassuring it is to know that in the midst of life's many turmoil, the Lord is in sovereign control of everything, and well able to fulfil his promise to work all things together for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

If we are genuinely Christ's servants, then Paul's God is our God, and we too come under his special love and care right now, whatever we may be facing in our lives.

And on that precious note we must bring this edition of Serving Today to a close. Thank you for being with us and until next time, this is Derek French saying goodbye, and may the Lord graciously fill our hearts with his peace and love.