

## 36. Enduring Testimony

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Date: 07 March 2010

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'll turn with me, if you would, to Acts chapter 25 and the first part of it, which is all about enduring testimony.

I wonder if anyone's ever said to you, now don't be so defensive. I don't come across as defensive. That just invites hostility and questioning and a sense that you've got something to hide and so on. Of course, when we say that, and we're right to say that at times, we're using that word in the sense of being oversensitive to criticism or to perceived threats or to our own ego, whatever it is. And indeed, in our Christian testimony today, there is no need ever for us to be, as Christians, defensive in that sense, oversensitive.

Seeing things as a great threat to us. Defense, defensiveness in that sense, is never a good idea in our Christian testimony.

[ 1 : 08 ] But defense, sometimes of a very different kind, is necessary and is right. Defense in the sense of protecting something very precious that's under attack, that is being attacked, perhaps in an aggressive and even a violent way.

And because the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is often under aggressive attack in our world today, then sometimes it's right and good for us to be, as we just sung in that hymn, not ashamed to own our Lord or to defend his cause.

Not ashamed to maintain the honor of his word, the glory of his cross. And as we've begun to see in these later chapters of Acts, in the last movement of the book, most of it is taken up with exactly that, with Paul's defense of the gospel from the attack that it is under from every conceivable angle. Chapter 22, remember, began with Paul's defense against the mob in Jerusalem, where he stood up and said, Hear the defense that I make before you. And six times in these last few chapters of the book of Acts, we have a formal defense of the gospel and of his ministry from Paul.

Twice in Jerusalem, as we've already seen, and then three times here in Caesarea, and finally at last in Rome itself. And three of these occasions in Caesarea form these chapters, 24 to 26.

[ 2 : 42 ] And they take the form of quite formal trials, first against Felix, as we've seen, then against Festus, as we're looking at just now, and then before both Agrippa and Festus.

Although in a sense that's not quite such a formal trial, more an informal hearing and an explanation. Now why, here's the question, why does Luke give us so much detail, so much repetition in these defenses?

After all, we've seen through the book of Acts, that many times he gives us the detail just once, and then following that, he just abbreviates the same kind of events that happen.

So we don't get every single one of Paul's speeches, his sermons, laid out in great detail. We get one or two in great detail, and then afterwards we get just an abbreviated summary.

Why this great detail then, in these repeated defenses by Paul? Well, surely Luke is making an obvious point. For one thing, that apostolic testimony and defense was a matter of real endurance for the Apostle Paul.

[ 3 : 56 ] It wasn't easy. It was very hard to be continually opposed, and to keep on giving testimony. But endure it, Paul did.

And through it, God achieved all that he had planned to achieve, in just the way God planned it to happen. You see, Luke knows that we, as his readers, need that kind of encouragement too, if we also are going to follow in Paul's footsteps.

And he wants to encourage us. He wants to see how God is at work in the world, through his servants, despite all the opposition of the world. He wants us to see that that is how God is at work, to bring glory to Jesus Christ, in this world.

And he wants us to be clear, that just as in Paul's day, so also in our day and every day, the opposition of man, including the venal self-serving of politicians and secular politics, and the bitter prejudice of religious politics.

None of these things can ever silence the gospel, but in fact are the very things that God is using to progress his kingdom in just the way that he's planned it.

[ 5 : 13 ] And he wants to encourage us to know that, so that we also will persevere under trial, and never give up, and never doubt that God is in control. He wants to encourage us, just as the Apostle James does, when he says, Blessed is the man who stands steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to all who love him.

It seems that in these chapters, the many lessons are repeated. And that is because God knows that we are often very slow to learn our lessons. And we need to hear things again, and again, and again, if we're really going to learn them.

Just like we need to learn again, and again, tables of French verbs, or whatever it is that we learn at school. Except these things, really are useful for our lives. Unlike French verbs, which have never proved useful in my life, at all, whatsoever.

Sorry if you're studying for your higher French folks. Don't take that too seriously, however it is true. Well, and what is Luke telling us about genuine apostolic ministry here in chapter 25 of Acts, or as I said, chapter 25 and 26, which is really one story.

Well, he's encouraging us with realism, not fantasy. Realism about what we are to expect of genuine Christian ministry, and therefore, of genuine Christian discipleship.

[ 6 : 42 ] Because to be a true follower of Jesus Christ is always to be a true witness to Jesus Christ. Real ministry, that is fruitful, that endures, Luke reminds us, will mean being faithful in enduring much hardship, and much opposition, and even much direct attack.

It will be met with persistent opposition. And it will be done in the context of political opportunism. But nonetheless, it will always be met with promised opportunities, the opportunities foretold by Jesus himself for us to witness to the gospel.

And these are the marks of genuine apostolic witness, and therefore, of genuine Christian witness, which will always be of that same character. real testimony, Paul is telling us, Luke is telling us, is enduring testimony.

Let's look first at verses 1 to 3. They tell us that there will always be persistent opposition to the gospel, and to true gospel preachers.

[ 7 : 56 ] So we're told, two years has elapsed since Paul was imprisoned under Felix, and yet there was absolutely no let-off at all in the Jews' hatred of Paul. So the very first thing that's on their agenda when the new governor comes is not the economy, it's not the defense of the realm, it's not any of these things.

It's trying to get Festus to accede to their request so that they can have Paul assassinated. Verse 3. They ask Festus to summon Paul to Jerusalem so that on the way he can be ambushed and killed. Isn't that an extraordinary thing for them to suggest? Had they considered for a moment the possible diplomatic fallout from that kind of thing? How on earth would Festus react as the new governor if he discovered that immediately he had been used by the Jews to bring about a murder like that?

Governors don't like that kind of thing. Governments don't like that kind of thing. Look at the British government and the Australians. They're very cross, aren't they, at the modern state of Israel because of that assassination of the leader of Hamas and the fact that they used British passports or Australian passports it seems although nobody admits anything.

It's not really the way that you treat political allies, is it? It doesn't seem that the Jews here had thought of any of these sort of consequences. What on earth would be unleashed on them by Festus from this kind of action?

[ 9 : 23 ] So venomous was their hatred against Paul so determined were they to shut up his gospel that all that was brushed aside. It's extraordinary. We're not told if it's the same men who were going to kill Paul who back in chapter 23 had sworn an oath not to eat anything or drink anything until Paul was dead who were going to do this.

They'd be pretty skinny by now we'd thought two years later. Yes, the kill Paul diet would be even more effective than the Atkins diet but seriously either these men had died, hadn't they?

or else they'd broken that solemn vow and had eaten and drunk in which case they'd be even more furious and filled with rage and venom. But you see the point is that Luke is telling us here is that the enemies of the gospel will never give up not ever no matter what the consequences.

That's the message isn't it of the whole of the New Testament? It's the message of the book of Revelation so vividly and graphically that until the very end until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ to judge the world and to bring in his kingdom Satan and all of his servants will oppose bitterly every manifestation of the kingdom of God on this earth.

Just read Revelation chapter 12 it's a vivid picture isn't it of the dragon seeking to devour what it's saying is that everywhere where the life of Jesus is being born in communities in families in cities in countries anywhere in this world where that is happening the enemy is right there seeking to destroy and devour relentlessly and will go on doing so until the very end when Jesus comes.

[11:06] Persistent opposition to the gospel and to true gospel people. the enemies never gave up against Paul. Back in chapter 20 we read about plots that were constant against him and here's just one more and it seems that the only place that Paul the apostle is safe is in prison under the protection of the Roman authorities.

So it's facing plots outside or it's fettered in prison inside and that was the pattern of Paul's apostolic ministry. It was not a bed of roses it was not a ministry of prosperity and public acclaim it was a ministry of prison and public accusations.

And notice I'm sure you did that the worst the most vitriolic opposition was religious opposition verse 2. It was the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews who were at the heart of this anti-gospel movement.

Men of the cloth you would say in today's language. The bishops the moderators the deans of cathedrals the career ecclesiastics of the religious establishment.

People who claimed that they were on the side of God but they were the very ones determined to silence the gospel of Jesus. And of course that is the way it is today.

[12:29] We know very well don't we that in many parts of the world Christian people and Christian churches are under violent attack. From who? From religious zealots by and large. Whether it's Hindu extremists in Orissa or other states of India whether it's Muslim Islamists in Pakistan or Indonesia or Nigeria or the Middle East.

Yes it's true of course that our recent history has seen secular opposition in communist regimes and so on but really that is just another form of religion isn't it? A devotion to an ideology that is just as zealous as the devotion to any other of the man-made religions and false religions and false gods of this world.

We see it all over the world. We see it also though even in well what we still think of as the Christianized West like our nation here. Well of course we know that the West is now increasingly post-Christian but we see don't we bitter opposition to the evangelical gospel very often most bitter from ecclesiastics within the older denominations the state denominations like our own.

So we heard just recently didn't we about somebody we know who is planting a church a gospel church in a part of Edinburgh and received bitter opposition not from the secular people of that part of Edinburgh not from any other religions but who from?

From the clergy of the parishes of the established church. I guess they would never have ejected to a mosque being built or a synagogue being built or a Hindu temple being built they'd have rejoiced and wanted to have joint services with them probably but not the biblical gospel.

[14:17] Well Luke tells us learn well there will be persistent opposition everywhere where you remain faithful as Paul did to the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

It will never stop it doesn't stop from the beginning of Acts it doesn't stop at the end of Acts but we shouldn't be surprised because that is precisely what the Lord Jesus promised.

Remember in John 15 he said the world hates you why? Because you're not of this world and neither am I it hated me first and so it'll hate you it persecuted me it'll persecute you or in John 16 in this world you will have tribulation.

That's not what any of the evangelists that I looked at last week on American television were telling me. They were telling me if I send in my dollars the Lord would give me instant blessing.

But that's not what Luke is telling us is it? What will genuine Christian ministry look like today if it's true to the Apostle Paul?

[15:28] Will it be universally accepted by the world and by the religious establishment? No it will not if Luke is right. It'll be despised it'll always be in the doghouse with those people.

Will its exponents be prosperous successful in this world's terms sharply dressed fashion wise money wise dripping with jewellery and driving the fanciest cars?

Well not if they're in any way like the Apostle Paul. Because the true gospel enrages the unrepentant human hearts of this world and therefore it provokes bitter resentment because it dethrones this world's idols and it calls people to repent and therefore it will always be met with opposition always, always, always.

And that's why the great reformer John Calvin's words are so wise and true when he says this No man is fit to preach the gospel seeing the whole world is against it save only he which is ready to suffer.

There'll never be friends ideal circumstances for us to do our mission. No, God calls us to be witnesses in the midst of the reality of permanent opposition of all kinds especially from religious people who we might think ought to be our very allies in the work.

[17:05] And so that means that our prayers should perhaps not be for an end to opposition but rather as one Chinese Christian said of their prayers and their petitions we pray for stronger backs to endure the opposition not that the opposition would necessarily end.

Enduring witnesses endure persistent opposition. Secondly though there will always be political opportunism surrounding gospel mission in this world where vested interests have all kinds of influence over the church and her message.

Verses 4 to 12 show the apostle once again caught up in that kind of power struggle that kind of political jockeying for reputation among the great and the good. So the Jews wanted to exploit the governor and Felix of course you remember had been recalled to Rome in some disgrace he had badly handled the situation there had been a massacre of the Jews in Caesarea so of course the Jews were looking to exploit that for advantage over Festus.

They thought they had some political leverage over him and no doubt they did. So Festus is prevailed upon but verses 4 to 6 tell us that Festus was not about to be pushed around.

He's treading carefully yes but he must assert his authority. He's got to show them who's in charge. He wants them to see his own power. So no no I'm not coming down to you in Jerusalem with the prisoner you come to me at Caesarea he says.

[18:41] And yet of course Festus at the same time as wanting to show his power was also very keen to have popularity. He didn't want to be like Felix he wanted a good reputation to be filtering back to Rome about him.

So he did in verse 6 deal with Paul's case and he did it very speedily. But it was patently obvious to him that the charges were without foundation verse 7 the Jews could prove absolutely none of them and Festus knew it very well.

Paul says that to him in verse 10 you know it yourself and later on in the chapter he admits it three times to King Agrippa this man's done absolutely nothing worthy of death nothing worthy of going to the emperor but he wants to be popular as verse 9 says he wants to do the Jews a favour he's a politician of course he is he wants to polish his reputation that's what it's all about.

So he would have done what the Jews wanted sent Paul to Jerusalem now of course that he's established that he's in charge and he dictates the pace. You see his question to Paul there in verse 9 is really a rhetorical question when he says would you like to go to Jerusalem and be tried what he's really saying is I think that's what we'll do Paul that's a good idea isn't it you want to go to Jerusalem don't you that kind of question that's rather like you know when your wife asks you do you want to help with the dishes and you say no thanks not really that's not the answer because you see it's not a question is it it's a command it's help me with the washing up it's kind of how women speak it's part of their make up but that's how Festus spoke here too he was in charge now Festus knew perfectly well that Paul should be acquitted there was no charge of any of these evil things he says in verse 18 to

Agrippa he's done nothing deserving death but you see political opportunism wins out here as it always does the lure of favour of reputation in public life is a very very powerful lure isn't it and my goodness are we going to see that in these next weeks as we run up to a general election and of course Paul was expendable to Festus Festus was quite unsentimental about somebody like Paul and Paul knew that very well indeed and he sensed the danger and that's why in verse 10 he talks very straight to Festus he says you know this is quite out of order Festus this is the court I'm being tried in and if I'm really guilty well fine but you know and I know that I'm not guilty and we both know that if you send me to Jerusalem you're just sending me down the river so I'm not going to sit here

and be passive about it Festus I'm not going to sit under this manifest injustice I appeal to [ 21 : 39 ] Caesar as Howard Marshall puts it in his commentary there's no sense in Paul putting his head into a lion's mouth even if he was prepared to stand up to lions when the need arose and so you see in one fell swoop he lifted the matter completely out of the hands of Festus by appealing to Caesar he knew that Festus couldn't possibly refuse that request from a Roman citizen and no doubt the council in verse 12 when Festus discussed it with him confirmed that so to Caesar you must go now you see Felix Festus' political manoeuvring has left him with another dilemma a worse one really of his own making I wonder if you've noticed as you read through this chapter there are two words really that seem to dominate all through the story the word charges and the word Caesar charges against Paul or the case against Paul mentioned some eleven times in this chapter verse two the Jews laid out their case verse five let them bring charges verse seven many and serious charges verse nine these charges before me and so on but here the fact is that

Festus knows that there are empty charges they shouted says verse 24 for Paul's death but I find nothing deserving death he says to Agrippa empty charges but now a man accused of totally empty charges he's got to be sent before the emperor Caesar and again notice the repetition of that word in verses 10-12 I stand before Caesar's court I appeal to Caesar to Caesar you've appealed to Caesar you shall go what a quandary for Festus as the new governor what was he going to write to Caesar about why he was sending this man to bother his time he says that himself in verse 26 doesn't it if you look down at the end of the chapter what am I going to write I need something to write to Caesar well if Festus wrote to Caesar look here Caesar I'm sending you this man it's all a silly religious controversy there's nothing in these charges whatsoever except matters of Jewish law Caesar is going to say well what on earth are you wasting my time with man but if on the other hand he sent him to Caesar and said oh this man is accused of treason against you Caesar then most likely Caesar would say well what on earth are you sending him to me for why didn't you chop his head off right away are you plotting against me too Festus what on earth are you playing at Nero was the emperor not a man known for his sweet reason or his patience it's quite ironic really isn't it how this political opportunism backfired so badly Festus was out of his depth verse 20 says I'm at a loss to explain this matter he confesses to Agrippa and that's what led to the next part of the story and why he was so glad of King Agrippa's help as one who was very knowledgeable about Jewish matters but not as partisan as the priests and the Sadducees but before we move on just to look at that just notice two things two

I think very useful lessons for us by Paul's conduct here first of all notice that Paul did not hesitate to turn to the law for protection against injustice he saw that if he didn't do that he was going to be in danger he was before an unjust and a corrupt court and he felt no need to suffer that if he could do otherwise now if you read Paul's words in Romans chapter 13 you'll see why Paul acted that way he knows and he tells us that the government and the justice system and the courts are God's gift it's a gift of his common grace to the people of this world and we shouldn't hesitate to use it Paul certainly didn't and nor should we there are some Christians who are very pious about this kind of thing who say that a Christian should never ever take recourse to law never go to the courts of our land we should leave everything to God to intervene on our behalf and often in support of that they quote or really they misquote 1 Corinthians chapter 6 where of course

Paul admonishes the Corinthians for going to law against one another but of course the issue there is quite different there are trivial personal issues between one another and the church and instead of sorting them out between themselves and among the church they're rushing straight off to law suing one another that's quite different Paul is very plain in his words in Romans chapter 13 and he's very plain in his actions here he appeals to Caesar he's very happy to make use of state law and he's very happy it appears to be judged even by a pagan slightly mad emperor like Nero and he was prepared to do it because the cause of Christ and his gospel was at stake and surely that means that Christians today likewise shouldn't hesitate to use all legal means that are open to us to protect the cause of Christ to protect his church from injustice and from evil in various ways so the work of the Christian

[ 27 : 12 ] Institute for example in challenging bad and wrong and immoral legislation going through our parliament is something that we should surely support the Barnabas fund that is given to protecting Christians from persecution and from injustice all around the world is surely something that all Christians must support in prayer and in finance and just the same way if likewise for some reason we as a congregation had to go to law to protect our existence protect our properties for

example for the sake of the gospel of course that's the operative phrase always and we should not hesitate to do so as Paul tells us these are things given to us by God for our blessing God has given governments and courts and law for our good for our help it's God's servant for our good he says in Romans chapter 13 and just in the same way by the way he's given us doctors and lawyers and engineers and carpenters and nurses and everything else for our good for our blessing and we should recognize that we should use their expertise when we need it we shouldn't think that as Christians oh I would only go to a lawyer if they were a Christian lawyer there are Christian lawyers you know it's not impossible to be a lawyer and a Christian or Christian doctors or things like that or psychiatrists people get very confused about these things I've got a broken leg I want a good orthopedic surgeon to mend my leg not a Christian one if he's a Christian one and a good one that's terrific but I need a good surgeon to set my leg or if I've got mental troubles I need a good psychiatrist not necessarily a Christian one although of course I'm not against good Christian psychiatrists as you will know so that's the first thing Paul used the law of the land he recognised government and law and justice as a gift of God but the second thing and this is just as important is this he was also very realistic he knew that government is always corrupt and full of this kind of political opportunism so he also knew that governments and law and all of these things can never be fully trusted and that's why he hands over himself to Caesar right above the head of Festus and likewise we as Christians today must be just as realistic our lives and our life of witness will always be lived out in the midst of people and politics and powers of this world that don't understand the gospel and therefore can't properly understand us in the Christian church they'll be like Festus at a loss to really know how to deal with these kind of questions but what they will be very clear about all the time is that they want power and therefore they need to cultivate those who can give them power cultivate their reputations with the people who really matter their political masters the powerful and of course in a democracy like ours with the voters or perhaps more importantly the people who can really influence the voters that is the media and the PR people and all the powerful lobbies and so on so Christians although we should use the powers that be as a gift from God to us should never expect too much from the powers that be even though that we know that government and law and so on are part of God's servants for society's stability and it's good we should never expect too much remember the psalmist put not your faith in princes in a son of man in whom there is no salvation that means as Christians we should never ever invest too much of our trust or our hope for that matter in politicians or in political parties because in the end the heart of man is unchanged political opportunism will always trump all other considerations so if you think for example that this present government has been shockingly anti-Christian in so many of the laws it's passed and it certainly has been for all Mr. Blair's professed piety for all Mr. Brown's appeals to his upbringing in a man's that's what you think let me say this to you don't put too much hope in the next one even if we do get a change of government this year all the political parties in our country are wooing the same lobby groups the same vested interests they all want favor with the people who can make them powerful and popular so we mustn't be naive as Christians Paul certainly wasn't he wasn't slow to use state protection when it was available but he certainly didn't put his trust and his hope in Caesar's empire or in any of its representatives like Festus and nor should we but thirdly and briefly this passage also reminds us that there will always be Christ's promised opportunities for gospel witness indeed all this persistent opposition and political opportunism are exactly the things that serve the very purpose of God as Jesus explicitly promised verse 13 tells us of King Agrippa's visit to Festus he stayed many days says verse 14 rather seems like Festus got a bit fed up with him and was running out of things to talk about at any rate he brought up Paul and of course he quickly asserts Roman justice again he's giving a bit of one-up worship against the Jews and against Agrippa there but he confesses to Agrippa he's at a loss to understand how to deal with this case and he suddenly realizes Agrippa could be helpful to him under the Romans Agrippa was responsible for looking after the temple he was responsible for appointing the high priest so he stood a little bit above and apart from all these Sadducees and these Jewish men hooked to them so perhaps Festus thought he could have a slightly more balanced view so it's decided look at verse 22 I'd like to hear this man himself tomorrow he says you'll hear him both together the Roman governor the Jewish king what an opportunity for the apostle Paul to testify to his real message to a gentile ruler from Rome and to a king over the

[ 34 : 02 ] Jewish nation just as Jesus promised what were Paul's words from the risen Lord Jesus through Ananias after he'd had that great encounter on the Damascus road Acts chapter 9 verse 15 this man said the Lord Jesus is my chosen instrument to carry my name before Gentiles and kings and here he is before a gentile ruler and a king in effect he's before Caesar himself because what he says there to Festus is what Festus is going to send to Caesar as the charges and yes Paul will as we'll see next week defend his personal conduct but above all he declares the person of Jesus Christ he testifies about Jesus to these men it was his promised opportunity just as Jesus had said it was Paul's particular call but it was also a pattern for every single

Christian disciple we mentioned it before but it bears repeating remember Luke's words in his first volume in Luke's gospel chapter 21 where Jesus says these words to his disciples you will be persecuted and arrested delivered up to synagogues and powers brought before kings and governors for my name sake this will be your opportunity for witness and when you're there he went on to say fear not I'll be with you I'll give you words of wisdom that your adversaries will never be able to withstand the same thing earlier on in Luke chapter 12 you see this is not a calamity it's an opportunity a promised opportunity and a plan and all under the control of the risen Lord Jesus Christ isn't that encouraging to us surely it ought to be that in the face of persistent opposition that we will face in our

Christian lives whether it's at school or at college or in our workplace or in the government or from the religious establishment wherever it comes from and in the face of the political opportunism that we will always face where we can't really trust politicians and statesmen to put righteousness above their own personal gain where our society seems to be ever more self seeking and corrupted and corrupting yet in the midst of all of these things in fact through these things not just despite them the risen Lord Jesus is giving his people opportunities to testify about him wonderful gospel opportunities to reach people in every walk of life even those who are involved in the worst kind of opportunism and expediency and opposition to reach even them with the message of the Lord Jesus and surely friends that means we don't need to fear we don't need to despair ever at the state of our city or of our nation or of the whole world so easy for us as Christians to think like that isn't it to become moaners and grumblers and oh isn't everything terrible to think ourselves into such despair into defeat but no you see Luke is telling us that neither the fury nor the folly of man will ever stifle faith in the Lord Jesus Christ nor will it ever damage the future of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ Jesus went on in Luke chapter 21 you will be hated by all for my name's sake but not a hair of your head will perish by your endurance you will gain your lives we might add it's by our enduring testimony that we shall also gain the lives of many others for eternity too so friends this morning listen to what Luke is saying to us when these trials come very often it is the good hand of God himself giving us our very opportunities for testimony and in the gospel life it is enduring trials that leads to enduring testimony well let's pray together heavenly father when trials come so often our eyes go down and we allow ourselves to fall into despair turn our eyes rather we pray to the cross of our Lord

Jesus Christ where through the greatest trial in the history of this world came the greatest blessing for all eternity help us to rejoice in all that you're doing help us we pray to be a people of enduring testimony to Jesus for we ask it in his name amen