

Paul and the Governor Acts 25

Hebrews 4

Thessalonians 5

Responsive Psalm 71:1-8

This morning we are picking back up in chapter 25, continuing this account of Paul and his trial and imprisonment. By way of a bit of a refresher, last week in chapter 24 is the account of Paul being brought before the governor of the region. Felix was a ruler who was known for his cruelty, and corruption, but in the case of Paul, he finds no fault yet, keeps him imprisoned for the entirety of his 2 years serving as the Governor over Judea. At which time at the end of chapter 24, we see that he visits quite often and talks with Paul, but as we see in verse 26, his purpose of these visitations was not to learn more of what Paul believes, but rather it was to give Paul opportunity to buy his freedom from Felix. Verse 27 says that Festus succeeded Felix, and Felix wanting to do the Jews a favor kept Paul in chains.

Up to this point there was no fault found in Paul worthy of death, but also in order to keep peace among the Jews whom was his jurisdiction of rule, he kept Paul imprisoned, not wanting to give them any reason to cause turmoil or strife in that region. As I had mentioned last week, this actually worked for two purposes, not only did it at one level appease the Jewish leaders for it took the problem that they perceived in Paul away, but it also protected Paul from them as well, for as we will see when we get into chapter 25 here, that even though it has been 2 years, the high priest and the chief elders were still seeking to have Paul killed, which is something that they may have even succeeded in if he had not been kept under Roman guard. This plays in again into what I was saying last week about God's sovereignty, it would seem that imprisonment would be the last thing that would be good for anyone, but in Paul's case it very well likely saved his life.

The last few chapters in this book lay out a very detailed account of Paul and his journey to Rome to be tried before Caesar. As I was saying last week as well, finding some application and lesson's within this book can at times be difficult for it is a historical book giving accounts of events, and people and not so much steeped in deep theological concepts, or lessons. So I think that the biggest lesson that we can learn, especially in these last few chapters, is to just see God's sovereign hand in the orchestration of these last years of Paul. Seeing that even the tiniest of detail does not slip outside of God's hands, and the protection that he provides for Paul despite seemingly dire situations, all so that the gospel may be shared throughout the ranks within Rome, allowing Paul to give an account and confession to his faith before Caesar, showing that Christianity is not the rebellious threat that the Jewish leaders want to make it out to be. So before we get to far into it, let us read chapter 25, and we will see early on that this hatred for Paul still burns as hot as it did even 2 years before, and yet there can be no fault, especially any worthy of death found in Paul.

(read chapter 25) Both Festus and the Jews waste no time in dealing with Paul. On Part I think Festus is looking to close up some issues that Felix left unfinished, and on the other hand it is very apparent that the elimination of Paul is the High priest and his fellow leaders number 1 goal. We also see that these Jewish leaders had little hope that the Roman justice system would rule in their favor, they were not seeking an audience with Festus in a sort of rehash of a trial against Paul. The realized that they clearly lost that one, having not true provable accusations to levy against Paul.

Having already brought with them a lawyer to present their case and use rhetorical arguments in an attempt to persuade Felix as we saw in the last chapter. Their hopes were not high that they could likely convince Festus either. Paul being a Roman has likely played a large role in his treatment by the Romans, if he was a Jew without bring a Roman citizen its highly unlikely that either of these 2 governors would have given him such protections.

Having no real hope of using the Roman justice system to rid themselves of Paul, once again there is a plan put into place to have Paul ambushed and killed, but this time it is the leadership themselves who devise it and not some unnamed group of men. Again this shows their hatred of Paul, their desperation to be rid of him for good, even though he has been removed form them, is no imprisoned and in another city, and not only that 2 years have gone by, they still desire his death. This brings to mind the sermon on the mount, Matthew 5, verse 20 Jesus says, “for I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and pharisees you will be no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Even those who spend their lives adhering to the Mosaic law are not righteous enough..then in verse 21 begins to break down certain aspects of the law and points to the fact that it is not even possible for man to uphold it, for though one may outwardly appear to do so, inwardly in their heart they are full of sin and rebellion. Verse 21 he says, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment. But I say to you that who ever is angry with his brothers without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.”

And that brings up the High Priest, and his fellow leaders, these upkeepers and authorities of God's law, have been plotting and scheming with murderous intent in their hearts. Jesus' accusation against them, calling the white washed tombs could not have been more accurate. Having an empty meaningless appearance of beauty and holiness outside, but inside are full of rot and decay, sin and death. The death of Paul had become an obsession to these men, their hatred of him knew no bounds, these men who were leaders, authorities, and examples of the Jewish people were so singularly minded, so obsessed that it was barely 3 days since Festus took over for Felix and they had already made a request for Paul so that they may lie in ambush and kill him. But we see in verse 4 that Festus informs them, that Paul shall be kept in Caesarea, and he invites them to come and make their accusations known again in proper order and in adherence to Roman law. He was doubtlessly aware of the previous plot on Paul life and had heard how Lysias had sent Paul to Caesarea under guard of half of his garrison.

But as we see a bit later in this chapter even Festus gives in to a degree, not ruling in this case against Paul, leaving him in chains though by Felix and Festus own admission could find no fault in Paul. But luke records, in the case of both governors he says, “in wanting to do the Jews a favor he kept paul in chains.” While there is a desire to adhere to Roman law, there is also the necessity of keeping the peace within the province. It was important to Roman rule to keep the peace with the powerful Jewish leadership, lose favor with them, give them a cause to uprise and they would have to deal with the entirety of the Jewish nation. It seems that such a relationship was already on rocky grounds as it where, so there is a temptation to tread lightly when dealing with the high priest and fellow men of power in Jerusalem, even as much so as to drag on a resolution to a case that clearly by Roman law should have been resolved more then 2 years prior. But the reality is, that likely without being imprisoned and kept under constant Roman guard, they would have likely found a way to have killed Paul. We had already seen that there was a group of Jews who would follow Paul on his journey and would seek to cause dissension and unrest among the people so that Paul would be driven out of the cities. It isn't to far of a stretch to think that if Paul wasn't imprisoned they would have easily dispatched some men to hunt him down and have him killed.

Though Festus started out it would seem wanting to seek Justice, and do what was right with Paul, somewhere along the lines it changed. Some scholars suppose that this seeming change of heart was simply due to being naive as the new leader. Wanting to start out strong, wrap up issues that were left behind for him to deal with from Felix but upon his initial investigation into the issue with Paul he discovered that the Jews were a bit more powerful than he likely gave them credit. So what started out as a form of seeking justice, turned into a political affair having to be wary not to anger the wrong crowd. Paul recognizing this, for it says that Festus asked him if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem to be tried there, though he would himself be handling the case he was seeking to give a little to the Jews to help maintain the peace. Paul seeing this sort of change of events, knowing that if there had been a plot to ambush him before there likely would be again, he appealed to Caesar. Again as a Roman citizen he had rights, and it would seem that one of them was an access to the highest authority in difficult cases. Though it is likely that Festus had every intention to give Paul a fair trial, Paul saw the danger in returning to Jerusalem, but not only that he had been given a word from the Lord telling him that he will also be a witness in Rome just as he was in Jerusalem.

So again we are seeing this unfolding of God's plan in the life of Paul, the events, the people, who through their own thoughts and decisions can do nothing more than be tools to orchestrate God's will. It is a great mystery who we seemingly having full agency over our thoughts and intentions can by doing so fulfill what God has set before. In many ways this should be highly encouraging to us, just as I am sure the word from the Lord was to Paul in chapter 23, when he told Paul, to not be afraid, for he will also be sent to Rome to testify. Seeing God orchestrate this outcome through the actions of men, shows again as we have seen throughout this book, the sovereignty of God, his will, his desire, and his plan will not be thwarted, and indeed includes the sinful and rebellious acts of mankind to drive decisions, which ultimately result in God's purpose. As I have been reflecting upon this passage, thinking of Paul's plight, the hatred of the Jews toward him, these Roman leaders who seemingly desire to seek some sort of justice yet having their hands tied by political powers, I was thinking of how prayer works through all of this. For surely Paul was in prayer about his situation as was I am sure many across all of the churches whom he had visited and established.

I think at times we pray without conviction, without belief that God truly will answer. But even throughout this series of accounts surrounded around Paul we can see I am sure answers to prayers. Paul has been kept safe, through many plots on his life, even the corrupt Roman rulers to whom it would likely be favorable to hand Paul over to the Jews to gain favor with their subjects, refrain from doing so and in essence protect Paul from these murderous leaders. They show Paul mercy, not having him being held in a prison to rot awaiting a never arriving verdict, but rather have in under a house arrest where he is given relative freedom. Not being hindered in having friends and family members being able to attend to him, provide for him, and visit him. Not being hindered in his ministry or outreach, having the aforementioned visitors come to whom Paul could pray with, and discuss the things of God. These are all things that are answers to prayers. As we have seen week after week these accounts pointing to our sovereign and Holy God it should only encourage us more to bring all things to him in prayer. For it is he, and he alone who orchestrates the outcomes, and it is he alone who has the power and ability to effect the thoughts and actions of mankind.

One of the arguments against the doctrines of grace by our free will brothers and sisters is around the issue of prayer. Their argument is that, if all things are decreed and predetermined by God, then why pray. There is a bit of hypocrisy, albeit I think unintentionally when it comes to prayer for those of the free will persuasion. They will pray for the souls of their friends and family, that they would come to know Christ and believe.

But then also teach that man must by his own volition work up the faith to come to Christ and believe. Not seeing the issue here, they hold the 2 things to be true, that God is sovereign and works his will in mankind, and man is sovereign in their ability to make choices. The same question can be levied to them, if man ultimately is the one who must decide to follow Christ, if it is man who musters up enough faith to believe, then why pray that God would change them, for under that belief system though God maybe capable, he isn't willing to change the hearts and minds of mankind, mankind must do that. But thankfully, that is not the God of the bible, for if it were then there would be no reason to pray, if God was not a convictor of hearts, and a changer of minds. The act of prayer, puts us in tune with God, by that I mean that it aligns us with him. We have been studying God's sovereign work in the spread of the gospel, we have seen how he has hindered, and how he has opened doors for the apostles in their ministry, and all the while there has been prayer, and God is pleased to answer it, because in a mysterious way we pray seeking God's will, and it is his will that we come to him with such requests, and it is all apart of his sovereign weaving of our lives.

I think sometimes in prayer we forget who we are really praying to. Our God is not a God who is disconnected with this creation, no, in fact he is intrinsically involved, and if he wasn't this entire world would unravel in oblivion. Each atom, and molecule is exactly where they should be, doing exactly as God has intended. And we have access to this God, direct access through Jesus Christ that we may approach with our troubles, and our desires. Why pray unless you believe that this God that you are praying to has the ultimate power and ability to effect any changes. We pray even for the mundane, in recognition that God is not only in control of the mundane, but that he also cares about such things for us. Our God is a God who is about the business of changing the hearts of mankind. Why would you pray for a job that you have applied to, if God is indeed not able to effect the heart and mind of the one who may hire you? Jim in his serious of worship, and the attacks of Satan against the believer, he talked about this spiritual warfare that is waging all around us that we are not really even aware of. So to it is the same with prayer, God has so chosen to weave in the foolishness of our requests, and desires into his sovereign plans for us, because he is a just, and holy father from whom flows all good things.

Therefor we can go to him in confidence, that not only will he hear us, but that he will answer us. And though it may not be the answer that we are seeking at the time, but no matter the answer it is ultimately for our good. Those of us who have been in the faith awhile I am sure can all tell stories of how God didn't answer specific prayers, but in the end it was for the better. Just like Paul here, being imprisoned, I am sure that there were many who were praying for his release, yet God was not pleased to do so, and we can see some of the effect that God had worked through the imprisonment of Paul. The Gospel reaches the highest ranks within Rome, we know that there were guards who were around Paul each and every day who had come to believe. Paul wrote the letters to the churches that we have yet still today, which is still today effecting the hearts and minds of people across the world. Then there is the fact as I said earlier, it isn't to hard to believe that if Paul had been released he likely would have been hunted down and killed, in effect his arrest saved his life, and preserved it so that he could continue on in the ministry in a way which was even more far reaching then his journeys.

So my point in all this, is to say we serve an almighty sovereign God, who in his infinite wisdom and grace has instructed us through his word to pray and come to him, and to do so, so that he may bless us, for he is indeed a loving father who wants the best for his children. And through the answering of prayer, we get a sense of his sovereign grace toward us, even when those answers are no, sometimes he allows us to see that he was just keeping something better for us.

Just like a parent who tells their kid no, because they know the outcome of the request and it is not ultimately for the benefit of the child. So to it is with our heavenly father, whom we should not shy away from approaching. Who has already given us his Son who was sent to take on the punishment of the cross for our sins, the greatest gift of all is the ability to believe, and to walk with him. If he has given us his Son, won't he also bless us with smaller things? So we can approach him in confidence, knowing that our father is a loving father, who is willing, and able to answer our prayers.