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Series: The Cure Goes Viral

Title: *Felix, Agrippa, and Festus to Test Us*

Text: Acts 24-26

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You may remember that in January of 2020, a couple months before the pandemic hit, a group of Redlanders went to Puerto Rico on a mission trip. Things were going well until around 4AM on January 7 when we were literally shaken out of our beds by a 6.4 magnitude earthquake. We hurried out of our rooms for fear of the building collapsing and we gathered outside in the relative safety of the pool area as we watched the “storms” on the water every time an aftershock hit.

We circled up and prayed together, and then we took turns sharing our testimonies as to how we came to faith in Jesus. Those conversion stories brought us all amazing courage and peace, even as we endured that long dark night filled with aftershocks. It’s a reminder of the fact that the personal testimony of a Christ-follower is a powerful thing.

This morning we are continuing our study of the book of Acts---the history of when the Cure went viral---God’s story of how the Gospel spread. We are almost done, just a few more weeks.

One thing we’ve seen in our study over the past few months is that the Apostle Paul was always sharing HIS testimony, and today’s text includes the best known time when he did this. As we study this example of Paul’s Sharing the CURE, I want us to look for an answer to this question:

“What is it that gives a personal testimony it’s power? What makes it effective?”

Our text is long; three chapters, Acts 24-26 and of course we don’t have time to read it all so I’ll summarize the first two chapters and then we’ll zero in on Paul’s testimony in chapter 26.

Before we get to that, let’s remind ourselves of the setting. Paul is a prisoner of the Romans, in the provincial capital in a palace called Caesarea Maritima. He is scheduled to appear before the governor of the Roman province of Judea. Governor Felix. You remember that Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem as a riot was about to break out in the temple courts. He had made two unsuccessful attempts to placate the Jews and to testify to them of Jesus Christ. They refused to listen; and now, after a plot against his life, he has been brought down to Caesarea M.

Felix was a successor to Pontius Pilate, and he was an interesting guy. Felix was born a slave, but his brother, Pallas, happened somehow to become a favorite of Claudius, the emperor in Rome. Through the influence of Pallas, Felix had been freed from slavery and had eventually been appointed governor. FYI, he was the first slave in history to become a governor of a Roman province.

Felix had been married to three different princesses. The first one we know nothing about. But here’s another “FYI.” His second wife was the granddaughter of Antony and Cleopatra.

Wife #3 appears with him in Acts 24. Her name was Drusilla. She was a Jewess, the daughter of Herod Agrippa, the king who had put the Apostle James to death. We actually have a picture of Drusilla...oops...wrong one. All kidding aside, Drusilla had been the wife of another ruler but Felix had successfully stolen her away and now she was living with him as his wife.

I hope you get the picture here. Felix was completely unscrupulous. Not only was he a “home-wrecker,” he was also known to hire thugs to eliminate even friends who happened to get in the way of his political ambitions. This is the judge who will first hear Paul’s case.

Well, that hypocritical High Priest we met last week, Ananias came to Caesarea Maritima and brought with him a high-priced lawyer named Tertullus, with the intent of having Paul either convicted or returned to the Jews. Tertullus accused

Paul of desecrating the temple and of being the ringleader of a Nazarene sect. But Paul was as gifted as our own Bob Michael because he skillfully rebutted Tertullus' silly charges such that Felix dismissed Ananias and his lawyer.

But Felix still kept Paul under a sort of house arrest. It was referred to as: "custodia libera." This was a type of custody reserved for a Roman citizen who had not been convicted of a crime. Paul was never left unguarded, but his friends enjoyed free access to him. Plus, I imagine he could swim in that amazing pool whenever he wanted! After Ananias left Felix had Paul brought before him and Drusilla, but Luke tells us that, **"...when Paul talked about righteousness and self-control and the judgement to come, Felix became afraid."**

And sinners who reject Jesus SHOULD be afraid. Sadly, Felix was not afraid enough to deal with the Gospel, so he said his famous and tragic line, **"You may leave. When I find it convenient I will send for you."** (vs 25)

It's probably obvious but I'll say it anyway, no one should EVER put off becoming a Christian. Not only is someone who does so missing out on the amazing grace of God and the truly abundant life that Jesus gives; we never know how much time we have left. There very well may NOT be a more "convenient" time.

Well, even though Felix knew Paul had done nothing wrong this corrupt Roman Governor kept him in prison for two years to both curry favor with the Jews and in the hope that Paul or his friends would bribe him for his release. But Felix's corruption finally caught up to him and he was recalled to Rome in disgrace.

His successor was a man named Festus. And as soon as Governor Festus took office, the Jewish leaders showed up again and asked that Paul be transferred back to Jerusalem for trial. These guys weren't worried about winning the case against Paul because their plan was to ambush and kill him on the way. But, before sending him to Jerusalem Festus questioned Paul as to the charges that the Jews had levied against him, and when he did this, Paul exercised his rights as a Roman citizen and appealed to Caesar. Festus agreed to Paul's request because it took the pressure of the Jews off his back, but this left him with another problem. You see, Festus couldn't very well send Paul off to Nero without some sort of explanation as to why he hadn't been capable enough as a ruler to resolve the issue on his own without taking the precious time of his busy emperor. Festus was saved from this dilemma by the arrival of King Herod Agrippa II, the Roman-appointed Jewish King of the region who arrived at Festus' palace in Caesarea to pay his respects.

As I told you last week the palace in Caesarea Maritima was spectacular. Not only was there that fresh water pool. There was an amphitheater where you could see a play, there was a hippodrome where you could see chariot races, and of course there was the beach! I'm thinking Felix, and then Festus, had lots of rulers dropping by for a visit all the time. If I were a local king back in that day, I would have been dropping in on Festus to pay my respects every chance I could... any excuse to stay in that palace!

This reminds me of back when I was a young boy and my dad bought us an above ground pool. Once it was up and full of water it was amazing how many friends I had. Everyone and his brother was stopping by to pay their respects and they just happened to have their swimsuits and beach towels with them.

Now, let's review the heritage of this King Herod Agrippa II. He was the great-grandson of Herod the Great, best known as the murderer of the infants in Bethlehem. His grandfather, Herod Antipas, was the king who had John the Baptist beheaded. As I said earlier, his father, Herod Agrippa I, was the ruler who arrested Peter and killed James. In any case, it's easy to see that Herod Agrippa II did not benefit from a good home life. And it gets worse. You see, Herod Agrippa II had two sisters. Drusilla was married to Felix---remember him and her? And in true "Herodian form"---Herod Agrippa II was married to his other sister, Bernice. But even though he came from a shoddy family and was himself embroiled in an incestuous relationship, he was no dummy and was in fact well-known as an expert in the affairs of the Jews.

So, I'm sure Festus was somewhat relieved when Agrippa dropped by and then offered to hear from Paul so that he might advise Festus on how to handle this matter. Well, the next day, SEVERAL important people gathered at the palace in Caesarea to hear what Paul had to say about the charges that had been leveled against him two years prior. I imagine the pool emptied so everyone could come see.

Picture the audience in your mind's eye. The five, highest-ranking officers, commanders in charge of the Roman military divisions stationed in Caesarea were present in dress uniform. The leading men of the city were there as well. The Jewish religious leaders were in attendance. Festus, the Roman governor was of course there. And then, intentionally arriving late enough to make a grand entrance were Agrippa and his sister/wife, Bernice. Understand, this wasn't so much another trial for Paul as it was entertainment for Agrippa and Bernice. In verse 25 Luke says that these two, **"came with GREAT pomp."**

Understand, the Greek, the word, "pomp" here is "fantasia." It is the word from which we get our word, "fantasy" and it refers to something beautiful or impressive but also passing or fleeting, something of momentary interest only. I share this little bit of Greek trivia to remind you that even the most impressive things of this world are not lasting. They are of "momentary interest only." Think of it. Nothing was more impressive back then than the Roman empire and its powerful leaders and this beautiful palace by the sea. But today Rome is little more than a memory. This palace is in ruins. And Agrippa and Bernice and Festus and Felix are only remembered in connection with Paul, who stood before them that day in chains.

This reminds me of a verse in Rudyard Kipling's great *"Recessional"* poem of 1897, a poem that compares the passing power of the empires of the world with the eternal power of God.

*"The tumult and the shouting dies;
The captains and the kings depart;*

*Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice,
An humble and a contrite heart.*

*Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget---lest we forget!"*

Kipling wrote this poem at the time of the great Jubilee honoring Queen Victoria and the English people did not like what he wrote. In fact, most think this poem kept Kipling from becoming poet laureate. But Kipling was right to warn us about forgetting--even though it cost him earthly acclaim.

You see, we all need to be warned that we serve the one and only Eternal King and that this world and everything in it will one day be forgotten. As someone has said, *"Only one life; twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last."*

Well, as I said, amidst all this pomp and grandeur Paul came into the room manacled. He hobbled into place with his chains dragging. And I want you to be sure and note that this is a fulfilment of the prediction Jesus Himself made about Paul when He called him to be an apostle. Remember? In Acts 9:15 our Lord said to Ananias, **"This man, [Paul] is a chosen servant unto Me. I will send him to the Gentiles to stand before GOVERNORS and KINGS---that he may bear My name before them, as well as before the sons of Israel."**

Surely those words echoed in Paul's mind that day as he stood in Festus' palace. I also want to point out that the way Luke describes all this shows us that there was a hunger in Paul's heart to reach King Agrippa for Christ, in spite of his dark past and sinful present. Like our Master, Paul saw beyond Agrippa's sin to his need. He allowed God's love for Agrippa to fill his heart and mind. We must do that whenever we look at our enemies. Plus, Paul realized that this might be his last chance to reach Israel. So, he hoped against hope that perhaps the king would repent and turn to Jesus because if he did, perhaps the nation might follow.

Okay, stand and take your Bibles and follow along as I read Acts 26:2-29 where Paul says.

Acts 26:2-29

2 – "King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews,

3 – *and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.*

4 – *“The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem.*

5 – *They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee.*

6 – *And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today.*

7 – *This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me.*

8 – *Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?*

9 – *“I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.*

10 – *And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them.*

11 – *Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme.*

In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

12 – *“On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests.*

13 – *About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from Heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions.*

14 – *We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’*

15 – *Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied.*

16 – *‘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.*

17 – *I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them*

18 – *to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’*

19 – *“So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from Heaven.*

20 – *First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.*

21 – *That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me.*

22 – *But I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen---*

23 – *that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”*

24 – *At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.”*

25 – *“I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable.*

26 – *The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner.*

27 – *King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”*

28 – *Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”*

29 – *Paul replied, “Short time or long---I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”*

Now, I’m sure you’ll agree that Paul did a great job. His was a powerful testimony. In fact, until Festus interrupted Paul’s speech, the audience hung on his every word, listening attentively to what this chained former Pharisee had to say.

Okay, back to the question of the day. What made Paul’s testimony so powerful? What compelled them to give this chained prisoner the time of day? Let’s answer these questions from our perspective. Like Paul here in Acts 26, we’re trying to Share the Cure--so what principles should we glean from Paul’s example remind us what it is that makes testimonies so powerful.

1.) First, Paul shows us that a personal testimony enables you to IDENTIFY with people.

Look at verses 4 and following where Paul looks at the Jewish leaders and says: *“I was once like you. I was the son of a Pharisee and studied to become one myself.”* Perhaps he recognized a former class-mate in the school of Gamaliel in the audience and caught their eye as he said this, but the people listened because Paul identified with them. He even identified with King Agrippa by saying in verse 26, *“The king is familiar with these things.”* Or, *“King Agrippa, as a student of Judaism, you know what I’m talking about!”*

And that’s the way it is with all personal testimonies. This is why we see so many TV commercials filled with testimonials. You know what I’m talking about. A woman stands at her washing machine and says, *“I’m a mom like you and my kids get grass-stains on all their clothes just like your kids do. Nothing I tried would get the stains out until I found ALL-TEMPERATURE SPOUT.”*

Well, moms or stay-at-home dads with laundry baskets full of grass-stained jeans listen and then run out to the local store to get their own supply of ALL-TEMPERATURE SPOUT. They do this because the testimony giver identifies with them.

This principle is why we like to read biographies more than essays. It’s why most people remember the illustrations---the real-life stories in a sermon---longer than they do the sermon itself. People listen when they can identify with something that really happened to a fellow human being.

I remember my dad once telling of two college girls who were invited to give their testimonies at their home church when they were home for Christmas break. The first girl gave a beautifully prepared and well-delivered SPEECH. It would have gotten a high grade in any speech class. You could see people smiling their approval and making a mental note to put her on that list of people who are often called on to give devotionals. Well, the second girl was obviously shaken a bit by having to follow so polished a performance, but she had no reason to be. She said, *“I must have misread the pastor’s instructions. I didn’t know I was to give a speech I’m not prepared to do that. But I do want to tell you of a wonderful experience I had learning to pray as a freshman in college.”*

Well, every member of that congregation perked up a bit. Their interest was obvious because while the first girl had shared a speech, this girl was going to share something of herself. Charles Swindoll puts it this way: *“The skeptic may stop his ears to the presentations of a preacher and the pleadings of an evangelist---but he is somehow attracted to the human-interest story of how you---John Q. Public---found peace within.”*

So, remember that when you share how Jesus changed your life, other people will listen if you identify with them.

2.) A second secret to the power of a testimony is PREPARATION.

And, it is obvious that Paul was prepared. I mean, he’d had two years of imprisonment to formulate his thoughts; plus, as I said, he’d had a lot of experience sharing his testimony. I mean, if you read through Acts 22-26 you’ll see that on six separate occasions between Paul’s third missionary journey and his trip to Rome he stood before different audiences and told them his experience with Jesus, so he was prepared. He had it down pat.

This helps us to see that if we want a powerful testimony we need to prepare! So do that! Write it down, work on it, practice it in front of a mirror. Record it on your phone and then criticize yourself. But prepare!

In his book *Come Before Winter*, Charles Swindoll suggests five things to remember when preparing your testimony.

a. You want to be LISTENED to so be INTERESTING.

Remember, no one---no matter how gracious---enjoys being bored so they won’t listen if your testimony is dry. Besides, we need to remember it’s a contradiction to talk about how exciting Christ really is in an uninteresting way. So, work on your wording. Get the flow of your thoughts just right. And remember, guard against religious cliches and hard-to-understand terminology.

- b. You want to be UNDERSTOOD, so be LOGICAL.

Just as Paul does here in Acts 26, organize your testimony in three logical phases:

FIRST - Tell what your life was like before you met Jesus.

SECOND - Tell of the events or event that led you to become a Christian

THIRD - Close by telling about the difference Jesus has made and is making in your life.

This is the most important part--the part where you share how the rubber meets the road so to speak.

- c. You want to be CLEAR, so be SPECIFIC.

Be extremely careful at this point. I mean, don't be at all vague regarding how you became a Christian. Speak of Jesus, not of your walk down the aisle or your baptism. Refer to the decision you made, the moment in time when you decided to follow Jesus as Savior and Lord. Be simple and direct. Emphasize faith more than feeling.

- d. You want your testimony to be USED so be PRACTICAL.

Be human and honest as you talk. Don't promise, "All your problems will end if you become a believer..." because that isn't true. Try to think as an unbeliever thinks and trust me, theoretical, theological stuff won't attract their attention as much as practical reality, so just tell them how Jesus helps you to live your day-to-day life.

- e. Finally, you want your testimony to produce RESULTS, so be WARM and genuine.

Remember it will be hard to convince the person of the sheer joy and excitement of knowing Christ if you're wearing the face of a prison-warden. So---smile! And make sure they can sense that you are sharing out of love and concern for them. Paul did this in his last appeal by saying, ***"I would that you were like me---I wish you could experience the joy and freedom I have because of Jesus."***

I mean, be friendly and sincere. Let your enthusiasm flow freely. And above all, be courteous--as Paul was at the beginning of his testimony here when he said,

"King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today because you are well-acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies."

These are five good tips to heed because for your testimony to be powerful, it needs to be prepared. The point I'm trying to make here is that we need to obey 2nd Peter 3:15 where it says, ***"Always be READY to share the reason for the hope that is in you."***

3.) Here's a third principle Paul shows us. Testimonies are powerful because they are PERSONAL.

Now sermons are great, I love to preach and to hear sermons preached to me but---and listen closely because you won't hear many preachers say this---SOMETIMES I THINK THE WORLD HAS BEEN PREACHED TO DEATH. What this lost world of ours really needs is not more sermons, but more testimonies based on real-life experiences. You see, no sermon---no matter how bald its preacher---will ever take the place of a well-prepared personal testimony. This is because the most convincing unanswerable arguments on earth regarding Christianity is one's personal experience with Jesus.

Look at verses 13 and following and count all the times Paul uses the personal pronoun, ***"I."***

He says to his hearers,

"I saw a light from Heaven"

"We all fell to the ground"

"I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic"

"I obeyed my heavenly vision"

But please hear me on this, don't think you have to have your own Damascus Road experience like Paul for your testimony to be worth telling. I can understand the feeling of the man who went to hear an evangelist who had been converted from a life of crime and drug abuse. After hearing the evangelist tell of all the bad things he had done, the man went home and that night in his prayers he said to God,
"Oh, Lord, I've never smoked pot, never been drunk, never committed adultery, never robbed a bank, never lied to a grand jury---but if You can use me in spite of these short-comings please do."

Don't get me wrong, I love to hear how someone has come out of a life of sin, but I also think we benefit just as much if not more from people who tell how Jesus kept them from a life of sin. We need to realize that for every "Paul" converted on the road to Damascus, there are thousands of "Timothy's" who came to know Christ in a quiet way as the result of faithful parents and grandparents. And while a striking testimony makes for good programming, the more ordinary experience is easier to identify with, because most of us are just ordinary!

So, Paul's example shows us that A testimony is powerful if PEOPLE can identify with it. It's powerful if it is PREPARED. It's powerful and authoritative because it is PERSONAL---it happened to you!

4.) And, finally, a testimony is powerful if it can be SEEN.

In other words, people are more likely to be moved by your testimony if they can look at your life and see that Jesus has indeed changed you. And Paul's life showed that. The way he allowed Jesus to change him backed up his words that day. Remember, Paul had sat in that prison cell for two years because he knew it was wrong to bribe his way out. I'm sure this fact was well-known. Plus, those people in the audience were familiar with Paul's life since his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road so, they knew he was telling the truth in verses 19 and following when he said, ***"I was not disobedient to the vision from Heaven."***

They must have nodded to each other as if to say, *"I'll give Paul that much---his walk matches his talk---he HAS changed. And he has been obedient to his Lord."*

The obvious fact that God's power had reached down and changed this persecutor into a preacher, added great power to his testimony that day.

This week I read about an athlete named "James 'Deacon' White." "Deacon," as he was referred to by his teammates, played at the very dawn of professional baseball. In fact, on May 4, 1871, he had the very first hit, in the first game, of the first professional baseball league. It was a double. He was the first catcher to use a mask and the first pitcher to go into a wind-up before throwing the ball. Over his 20-year career, White played for teams in Cincinnati, Buffalo, Detroit, Boston, and Pittsburgh before joining the team that became the Chicago Cubs. White would eventually become the oldest player in the Baseball Hall of Fame. It's not an exaggeration to say that White helped create the game of baseball we know today. The inscription on White's plaque in the Hall of Fame, however, doesn't begin with the words *"19th-century star of baseball,"* or *"premier catcher of his era,"* or *"led teams to six championships,"* although all three phrases are there. No, the FIRST words on the plaque are *"consummate gentleman."*

At a time when professional athletes were viewed as unsavory, hard-drinking womanizers--James White earned the nickname "Deacon" for his commitment to Christian faith and virtue which were evident to everyone who saw him play. For example, in 1878, the Indianapolis Journal reported that an umpire actually consulted with White, a player on the field, about whether the base runner was out. When the opponent complained, the ump declared, *"When White says a thing is so it is so, and that is the end of it."*

In 1886, the Detroit Free Press wrote: *"No one ever yet heard Deacon White [curse]; no one ever saw him spike or trample upon an opponent---no one ever saw him hurl his bat towards the bench when he struck out---no one ever heard him wish the umpire were where the wicked never cease from troubling and the weary never get a rest. And think of it! Nineteen years of provocation! Will anybody deny that Deacon White is a great and good man, as well as a first-class ballplayer?"*

Like Paul, Deacon White stood out and was remembered for being blameless. He LIVED out his Christian faith in a way that was SEEN. I think Paul saw this in Agrippa's eyes because in verse 25 in essence he said, *"Jesus has changed me Agrippa. I know you can see that! And He has the power to change you to!"*

How did this king respond? He shrugged it off. Look at verse 28 where he says, ***"Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian? – Almost Paul, but not quite."***

And then he and Bernice and Festus got up and walked out. So, Agrippa ALMOST became a Christian--he was "almost won" to Jesus. Now, in that context, aren't those two words heart-wrenching? Let me ask, what about you? Remember ALMOST only counts in horse shoes and hand-grenades. To be almost saved is to be completely lost. As C. H. Spurgeon wrote: *"Almost persuaded to be a Christian is like the man who was almost pardoned, but hanged; like the man who was almost rescued, but was burned in the house. A man that is almost saved is damned."*

If you are here and are not a Christian, then don't leave here ALMOST saved. Decide now to do what so many of us in this room have done, pray-and invite Jesus to be your Lord and Savior.

And Christian, don't leave ALMOST in the center of God's will. Pray in your seat or come and pray with me---pray for God's guidance and then commit to follow it--whether it means joining this church family...or yielding completely to God's wonder-working power in some area of your life. Come now as God leads.