

Faith in the Waiting Room

Acts 25:1-22

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If you've ever been to a doctor's office, you've experienced something we're all familiar with: the waiting room. Usually when you go for a routine appointment, you may only spend a few minutes in the waiting room. If you have to wait for surgery or some other procedure, you may spend all day in the waiting room. Waiting rooms are interesting places to observe people, because you see all manner of emotions on display. Some are very quiet and reserved. Others are loud. Some may be laughing, others may be crying. But underneath those external displays, there is a commonality—everyone is facing the unknown, which is always scary.

There are other “waiting rooms” we face in life as well. They are not so much physical spaces, but times when we don't know what will happen, and have to simply wait to see what's next. That may be waiting for a diagnosis to come or waiting to see the outcome of a treatment. It could be waiting to see what is going to happen with a job or with your investments. It may be waiting to see what impact the next government administration will have on you, your family, and our nation. There are all sorts of things we find ourselves waiting for. Many things can drastically change the course of our lives and the lives of those we love. Most of the time, we don't know how those things will turn out. So, we wait.

As we pick up our passage today, that's where Paul was. He was in a waiting room in Caesarea. God had told him that he had been a faithful witness in Jerusalem, and that he would also be a faithful witness in Rome. Paul had great confidence and was surely geared up for this next chapter in his mission. Then there was a plot to kill him, he was transferred to Caesarea, and he ended up spending the next two years in prison there, waiting for justice of some kind. For two years, God's all-star evangelist was seemingly on the bench. But God's delays are always purposeful. And I think we see in our passage today that Paul had not lost sight of what was important, nor had he forgotten the task God had given him. Paul's faith continued to burn strong, even while he was in the waiting room.

Festus

Last week, we were introduced to Governor Felix. He held the position Pontius Pilate once held. He was the Roman ruler over the region of Judea. Felix had proven not to be a very reliable leader. He knew Paul was innocent but left him in prison as a way of currying favor with the Jewish leaders. He had a strained relationship with the Jews and ended up getting fired from his job after he responded too violently to a Jewish uprising. He was replaced by a new leader by the name of Porcius Festus.

Three days after Festus arrived in Caesarea to take over his new responsibilities, he left for Jerusalem, ² where the leading priests and other Jewish leaders met with him and made their accusations against Paul. ³ They asked Festus as a favor to transfer Paul to Jerusalem (planning to ambush and kill him on the way).

⁴ But Festus replied that Paul was at Caesarea and he himself would be returning there soon. ⁵ So he said, “Those of you in authority can return with me. If Paul has done anything wrong, you can make your accusations.” (Acts 25:1-5, NLT)

When Festus arrived in Caesarea, he would have surely been exhausted. He would have had a long boat ride, followed by a trek to get to Caesarea. There would have been a lot of business for him to attend to. He would be making the palace there into his home, and he would have surely needed to meet his staff and try to get things set up for his new position. But we see wisdom in Festus, because he understood he was there to govern people. So one of his first acts was to go to Jerusalem to get to know the people he was to lead. Three days after arriving in Caesarea, he was back on the road, heading toward Jerusalem.

The Judean posting was a notably difficult one. Even though the Jews were ruled by Rome, they were permitted a measure of freedom. They were allowed to have local leaders who wielded a significant amount of power. This local, Jewish leadership often came into conflict with the Roman leadership. It took a skilled person to maintain law and order and assert your authority while also doing your best not to upset the local leadership so that they began revolting against you. Many leaders had failed at this task. Festus was wise to travel to Jerusalem so he could understand the region and get to know the local leaders.

Somewhat surprisingly, Paul was still a topic of discussion for these leaders. He had been in prison for the last two years, so why would they still have issues with him? My guess is that it's because Paul was still preaching and teaching and having an impact, because Felix had given him a great deal of freedom. He may have been under guard at all times, but he was still allowed to meet with people who came to see him. We know there was a group of believers in Caesarea, so it is not hard to imagine that Paul would have continued ministering to and teaching them during this time. He likely continued to minister to the people he encountered in Caesarea, guards, officials, and other prisoners. He may have been in the waiting room, but that didn't mean he could be idle. He had a job to do, so he sought to be faithful in whatever circumstance was in.

Some of you find yourself in waiting rooms right now. You aren't sure where the Lord is leading you or what is coming next. Some of you wonder why you're still here or why you're not moving. You may be frustrated that things aren't going the way you thought and may be questioning why. I may not be able to answer those questions, but I can tell you what you should do in the meantime—find ways to serve the Lord! It might look different than you'd envisioned, but the challenge is to ask, how can I serve the Lord in every situation? When we approach life that way, it gives us purpose, even when we're waiting.

The Jewish leaders still saw Paul as a threat and wanted to kill him. It is noteworthy that the group who wanted to kill Paul initially was a group of zealots—extremists willing to use any means to kill Paul. They had bound themselves with an oath not to eat until they had killed him. Most likely, they had given up on their oath, because if they didn't

they would have been dead by now! But the people who were carrying forward the plan to ambush and kill Paul now were not the zealots but the religious leaders themselves! They had become brazen in their hatred of Paul and were no longer afraid of the political fallout from being seen as being part of the plot to kill him. So they asked Festus if he could have the prisoner Paul transferred to Jerusalem to be tried. They framed it as a favor to them that would help Festus get off on the right foot with his new subjects.

Festus seems to have had a pretty good head on his shoulders, because he didn't just agree to their requests. I wonder if he suspected they had less than pure motives in wanting to have the trial in Jerusalem, because instead of ordering Paul to be transferred, he invited them to go back to Caesarea with him in a few days, and they would hold the trial there.

Festus showed great wisdom in this moment. He did not dismiss their allegations, but he also did not simply give in to their demands. Instead, he recognized there was another option—he could ensure justice was carried out while also maintaining some measure of control. So he invited them to come back with him to Caesarea.

Trial – Round 2

When Festus and the Jewish leaders traveled back to Caesarea, he immediately called Paul from the prison so he could stand trial.

⁶ About eight or ten days later Festus returned to Caesarea, and on the following day he took his seat in court and ordered that Paul be brought in. ⁷ When Paul arrived, the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem gathered around and made many serious accusations they couldn't prove.

⁸ Paul denied the charges. "I am not guilty of any crime against the Jewish laws or the Temple or the Roman government," he said. ⁹ Then Festus, wanting to please the Jews, asked him, "Are you willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there?"

¹⁰ But Paul replied, "No! This is the official Roman court, so I ought to be tried right here. You know very well I am not guilty of harming the Jews. ¹¹ If I have done something worthy of death, I don't refuse to die. But if I am innocent, no one has a right to turn me over to these men to kill me. I appeal to Caesar!" (Acts 25:6-11, NLT)

Festus' trial was in many ways similar to the trial before Felix. Two years had passed, but the arguments hadn't changed. The Jewish leaders came and made the same basic arguments but still had no evidence. Paul pointed this out, and reiterated that he had committed no crime, either against the temple (which would have been the purview of the Jews) or against the Roman government (Felix's domain). Paul did not waver in his statement of his innocence.

Festus realized he was in a tough spot. He had no reason to hold Paul, but he also knew these Jewish leaders really didn't like him. He saw this whole thing as a chance to establish a positive relationship with the Jewish leaders, and denying their request to prosecute Paul would make that significantly more difficult. So he once again looked for another option, asking Paul if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem to stand trial.

Why would he do this? Surely he would have known about the plot to kill Paul before! Was he now going to essentially cooperate with their assassination plans? We can't be sure. If Paul were assassinated on the way, it would give him political cover. He could claim that it was the Jews' fault Paul was dead, not his. It would solve his problem: he'd be in the good graces of the Jewish leaders and he could claim to have no responsibility for Paul's death (even though that wasn't true).

But Festus also may have known that a trial in Jerusalem, even one overseen by him, would likely have as a jury (or advisory panel) a bunch of Jewish leaders, who would certainly vote to convict and execute Paul. Again, he could claim that he was simply following the advice of the people who knew the region better than him.

It seems Festus was unwilling to risk offending the Jewish leaders because he wanted justice for Paul. Paul was seen as expendable, a mere pawn in a political game of chess.

But Paul knew that was the case, and he still had an ace up his sleeve. He knew this offer to transfer him back to Jerusalem was just an excuse to pass off responsibility, and that it likely wouldn't end well for him. So, he exercised his rights as a Roman citizen once more, this time exercising his right to appeal his case to Caesar.

Roman citizens all possessed this right. At any time in legal proceedings, if they felt they could not receive a fair trial in the place they were at, they could appeal the case to Caesar and have their trial transferred to Rome instead. It did not necessarily mean that Caesar himself would hear the case, but it was a way for citizens to ensure they got an impartial hearing. Paul exercised this right.

Festus saw his solution! He would be able to pass Paul off, avoiding offending the Jews (after all, his hands were tied, since this was Roman law), and he could move on to more important matters. He didn't care much about Paul, so was happy to be rid of him.

I want you to see something in all of this though. Think about how this ended up working in Paul's favor. Paul knew he was going to Rome. He longed to do so. He did not expect that his trip to Rome would be in chains, but the Lord had other plans.

But what would have happened if things went the way Paul likely wanted (and what we would have wanted as well)? Paul would have been set free, and the assassins lying in wait for him would no longer have to contend with Roman soldiers. They would kill Paul at their first opportunity. Paul would have been in significant danger.

But now, under Festus, he had a ruler who was willing to do what was right, and he would be assured safe passage to Rome, because he would constantly be surrounded by Roman soldiers. Any would-be assassins were not likely to be successful now. God's delay and choice to leave Paul in chains likely saved his life and allowed him to keep ministering, even as he made his way to Rome. This wasn't how he expected things to go, and it had taken far longer (and would still take a while more), but he knew the Lord was in control.

Agrippa and Bernice

Festus had a problem though. He knew Paul was innocent, and couldn't rightly send a prisoner to Rome for a trial without explaining the case against him. If he said the man was innocent and sent him to Rome anyway, he would be seen as a weak and ineffective leader. So, he needed to write something to the Roman leadership about Paul. He wasn't really sure how to word this. Thankfully, there was another ruler coming to visit him, one who was well-versed in how to handle the Jews.

¹³ A few days later King Agrippa arrived with his sister, Bernice, to pay their respects to Festus. ¹⁴ During their stay of several days, Festus discussed Paul's case with the king. "There is a prisoner here," he told him, "whose case was left for me by Felix. ¹⁵ When I was in Jerusalem, the leading priests and Jewish elders pressed charges against him and asked me to condemn him. ¹⁶ I pointed out to them that Roman law does not convict people without a trial. They must be given an opportunity to confront their accusers and defend themselves.

¹⁷ "When his accusers came here for the trial, I didn't delay. I called the case the very next day and ordered Paul brought in. ¹⁸ But the accusations made against him weren't any of the crimes I expected. ¹⁹ Instead, it was something about their religion and a dead man named Jesus, who Paul insists is alive. ²⁰ I was at a loss to know how to investigate these things, so I asked him whether he would be willing to stand trial on these charges in Jerusalem. ²¹ But Paul appealed to have his case decided by the emperor. So I ordered that he be held in custody until I could arrange to send him to Caesar." ²² "I'd like to hear the man myself," Agrippa said. And Festus replied, "You will—tomorrow!" (Acts 25:13-22, NLT)

This leader was Herod Agrippa II. He was part of the dynasty of Herods. His great-grandfather, Herod the Great had tried to have the infant Jesus killed. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, had participated in Jesus' trial. Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great, and he was killed by God after accepting the praise of men who had declared him to be like a god. The Herod family was half-Jewish by ancestry. Because of this, they claimed to be part of the people of Israel. But they did not follow God.

We know that Agrippa II was with Bernice at this time, who was his sister. She had already been married twice, with both of her husbands dying at young ages. Now, she was living in an incestuous relationship with her brother, Agrippa II. The Herodians had a good handle on how things worked in Judea, but they certainly weren't godly. Nonetheless, Agrippa was intrigued by Paul's case, and was eager to help his new

colleague, so he asked to have Paul speak to him. Festus eagerly agreed and said that Paul would make his case before him the next day. When we return to Acts, we'll look at what this encounter looked like, but we know that no matter what, Paul will soon be heading to Rome.

Conclusion

So, what lessons can we draw from this strange passage, which in many ways feels like a rehashing of the experience with Governor Felix? I've got some suggestions.

First, being in the waiting room shouldn't sideline us from the Lord's work. There will be many times in life when you don't know why God is doing what He is doing. You may not understand why things don't seem to be happening or why there are roadblocks in your way. When things don't go our way, our temptation is to become frustrated and give up. But Paul shows us a better way. He chose to look for opportunities to serve God, even in his less-than-desirable state. Even in prison, he apparently had continued to minister to such a degree that he was still a thorn in the flesh of the Jewish leaders. You can be effective for the Lord wherever you are—but you may have to change your approach and your focus to do so.

Second, the bumps in the road are not accidents or pointless. I think it is worth noting that by God allowing Paul to remain in custody, He provided him protection and a unique opportunity to reach people he might otherwise never have encountered. What we see as God denying our prayer may simply be God showing us He's got another, better plan. Rather than complaining, we would do better to trust and find peace in the confidence that God knows what He is doing even when we don't.

Third, families tend to teach habits, both good and bad. The Herodian dynasty is a fascinating case study, because each generation seemed to follow the pattern of the one before. They were all brutal and ruthless, they were all paranoid, and none of them seemed to care much about what was right, only what was expedient or enabled them to get what they wanted. We should remember this principle in our own lives. When we indulge sinful patterns, when we refuse to do the hard work of changing our habits, when we do not make the things of God a priority in our lives, our children will take note and will likely follow our pattern. But the reverse is also true. If our children see consistency in our walk, if they see us seeking the Lord in our everyday lives, if they see us making the Lord a priority, they will eventually do the same. We should be intentional in the legacy we are teaching, because our children will likely follow our pattern. So we should strive to set a good example for them to follow.

The waiting room is a universal experience, which is why I think this passage is an important one for us to pay attention to. Paul understood that even in the waiting room there was work to be done. He looked past himself and continued to focus on the Lord. I don't know what waiting room you might be in this week, but I would encourage you to follow Paul's pattern, because his way is the right way.

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