

God Will Provide Our Witness Opportunities  
Pastor Larry Kroon  
Wasilla Bible Church  
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The most powerful Roman in Palestine, and next to him is the most powerful Jew in Palestine—easily the two most influential people in all of Palestine at that time. They had entered into the auditorium with a crowd, or an assembly, of other leaders and influential people—all the people of power in Caesarea, which was the capital for Palestine at that time. All the leaders of the city, the military Romans that had been put in charge, and the officials that were given civil duties, were all there. And along with them were all the influential people of the city, the people of money, the people of influence. They all came into the auditorium. And they came in with full pomp and circumstance. They came in in a very formal procession with all the proper protocol; and they were dressed in absolute official array. They had crowns on; they had robes on. The governor probably had a red robe, and the king had a robe. And just an awesome assembly and display of power, of authority and influence, all gathered in the auditorium of Caesarea. And as they took their places and all went silent, they brought in a man in chains. His name was Paul. And he began to talk about Jesus.

He had not planned for this. In fact, two years before, he had been in Ephesus. And his plan was to move further out to the west and get to Rome. But instead, God had told him, 'No, go to Jerusalem,' the opposite direction. And so Paul had gone to Jerusalem. He'd gone, as he said, bound by the Holy Spirit, compelled by the Spirit of God, not knowing, he says, what would happen there; but constantly being warned by God it was gonna be difficult; and by others around him, it may even be fatal. But he went.

And it did prove to be difficult, very difficult. When he got to Jerusalem there was immediately a riot; and after the riot he was put under arrest, and then began a process of accusations and charges made, and responses, and formal hearings. He was charged with being anti-Jew, and being anti-Roman. And over a two-year period he argued against those charges that no, he was not anti-Jew. He, himself, was a Jew. And no, he was not anti-Roman. He, himself, was a Roman citizen. He was simply for Jesus Christ. For two years the legal proceedings drag out, unresolved. For safekeeping he is moved from Jerusalem to Caesarea, the Roman center of power in Palestine, and he's kept there.

But now a new governor has arrived. He's faced with a big challenge. His name is Festus, and his challenge is to maintain Roman rule in Palestine, but to do it in such a way that he managed to keep peace with the Jewish population that did not want Roman rule. It was a tough balancing act of trying to be firm and trying to be conciliatory. This particular governor was up to that. He was firm, but he could also be understanding. Within three days of arriving in Palestine he immediately went down to Jerusalem and decided to meet, and chose to meet, with the leaders of Jerusalem, the religious people there. And he tried to work out with them 'what do you, as Jews, need from us?' Their first request is 'Give us Paul. Give us Paul.'

It didn't actually follow Roman protocol and procedure, but Festus wanting to please them said, 'Listen, what we'll do is we'll meet up in Caesarea and we'll have a formal hearing. I'll review his case with you.' And that's exactly what he did. He went up to Caesarea and the Jewish leaders came up from Jerusalem, and they met and they reviewed his case. And when he was done with the review of the case the governor was confused. He was unfamiliar with Jewish custom and Jewish patterns, and all he could say is, 'This really looks like it's a religious issue. It just seems like a religious issue, a debate between those who keep sayin' that this person named Jesus is dead, and Paul keeps insisting that this person named Jesus is alive. It's just a matter of religion.' And so he says, 'Why don't we just send him back to Jerusalem?' And Paul says, 'No! I'm a Roman citizen in front of a Roman tribunal. And you can't send me into Jerusalem for a death sentence. I appeal to Caesar.'

And the appeal is granted; only it creates a bit of a problem for this governor, Festus, because he is now sending a Roman citizen to Rome to appeal to Caesar, but he's not sure what to put on the paperwork. He's not sure how to describe what exactly the charges are, because he hasn't been able to find anything that is culpable, that requires a death sentence. And so he's not sure what to do, and he's confused; and he's not sure what to put because he doesn't want to look the fool.

Help comes. The king, Agrippa, and his sister—they come in a formal greeting to meet the new governor. Agrippa is a Jewish king, but he'd been raised in Rome. He favored Rome. And he was one of the few Jewish leaders trusted by the Romans. He was there to make sure that he kept a good relationship with the Roman governor; and he and his sister had come. And the governor had met with them, and they'd begun to talk. And the governor raised the issue, the question about 'What about this Paul? How do we deal with him? You know Jews; you understand 'em.' And Agrippa said, 'I'd like to hear him.'

And so they arranged the meeting in the auditorium. It was to be the first formal meeting of the governor's new rule, and so they did it right. They all put on their best robes. They put on their crowns. They put on their medals. They did everything according to protocol. They marched in in sequence, the right order. They were given the proper places according to their role, their position, their influence. Everybody was there, everybody was alert, and everybody was there to impress. In the early weeks of Governor Festus' rule this was the biggest event—and they bring in Paul. It's not a formal trial. There's not going to be any verdict. They just ask Paul, 'What are you about?' And Paul gives his defense. Agrippa simply says, 'Talk.' And that's exactly what Paul begins to do.

He starts off, in Acts chapter 26, and his defense covers the verses 1-23. He starts off by describing and explaining how he had, at one time in his life, resisted Jesus and all that Jesus stood for; how he had grown up as a godly Jew, and he had been in Jerusalem as a committed, devout, committed Jew. And when this Jesus thing exploded on the scene, and people got excited about Jesus, he had resisted it to the hilt. In fact, he says, 'listen, I thought to myself—this was my core conviction, it wasn't just people suggesting it to me,' he says, 'I determined in my self I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. I had to get rid of this man; even if nobody else would stand with me, I took that stand. He had to go.' But as he goes on and describes further his story, and explains it to these rulers and influential people, he goes on and describes how he had also encountered Jesus. Years after he had been hostile and persecuted Christians there had been a moment when he had actually encountered Jesus. A blinding light and a voice that others couldn't understand, but he could. And as he was there on the Damascus road and this encounter, he heard the voice—the voice of the risen One named Jesus. And the voice had said to him, "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*" And He had gone on and said not only that; He said, 'I have appeared to you to appoint you a minister and a witness. You are gonna tell people about me.'

He'd encountered Jesus. And following that encounter he had obeyed Jesus. As he told those leaders that moment, that day, he goes on to Agrippa and he says, 'Listen, so King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision. I saw Jesus, and I was told to be His witness. And that's what I'm doing. I'm not anti-Jew. I'm not anti-Rome. I just obey Jesus. I've met Him, I've seen Him, He's alive.' He summarizes everything about Him in this statement near the end of his speech to Agrippa. He makes this statement. He says,

*"So, having obtained help from God..."*

'...having God be there with me and for me throughout these years,' he says, 'I stand to this day, right up to this very moment,' Paul says, 'I stand testifying both to small and great, any setting, any circumstance, any condition, any person—I simply talk and testify, giving witness to Jesus,' the One which he describes in the verses that follow as the One the prophets of old had spoken of, the One crucified, the Once raised from the dead, the One who is a light to all. 'Having obtained help from God, I testify to small and great. I'm not anti-Jew; I'm not anti-Rome. I just obey Jesus.'

This is, in the book of Acts, one of my favorite scenes. It's one of my favorite situations in the entire story of Acts because it's so far beyond Paul's doing. Imagine...just think for a second...imagine what would have happened if Paul had come into Palestine, and as he did he sent out formal invitations. He sent a notice to the governor. He sent a notice to King Agrippa. He sent a notice to all the leaders, the political leaders in Caesarea, the capital. He sent a letter of notice to everybody they could put on a list of influence and power. And he sent out this note when he came into the area, when he came into the region. He sent out this message, this formal invitation. He says, 'Listen, I wanna meet with all of you. And I don't wanna meet with you one-on-one. I want you to all meet with me. I want you to all gather together, and I want you to come because I want to tell you about Jesus. I wanna tell you about who He is and what He's done; I wanna tell you about my King, my Lord. I wanna tell you about the difference He can make. I want you all to come together to hear what I have to say about Jesus. And oh, by the way, this is so serious, it is so important, it is so critical...I want you to dress up for this. This isn't casual. This isn't light. This is absolutely serious. And so what I want you to do is I want you to put on your best dress, your best clothing. I want you to dress like the officials you are. And I want you to come into that auditorium, and I don't want you chit chatting; I don't want you joking; I don't want you being flippant. I want you to come in and I want you to be serious. I want you to follow protocol. I want you to be attentive. I want you to give me all ears, 'cause I want you

to hear about Jesus.’ It would have never happened. I could see Festus rippin’ up that invitation and sayin’, ‘We got a real lulu here,’ and throwin’ it up. I can hear the joking at the local coffee shop—‘Did you get that letter from that crazy preacher? As if I’m gonna dress up to hear him!’ Can you imagine them coming into King Agrippa’s court, and [hearing Paul] say, ‘Put on your crown, and come in here. We gotta talk about a bigger king.’ See, that sort of thing doesn’t happen; but in a way, it did.

It’s as if...try to imagine this. Try to imagine this. It’s as if...picture me...picture me, just a pastor. Picture me sending a notice to CNN and saying “I want you to send one of your film crews. And I don’t want one of your lowly film crews; I want one of your best. I want him to come out of New York City. And I want you to send me one of your best interviewers. And I’m a little bit busy, so they’re going to have to come all the way here. I’m not going to meet ‘em in Anchorage. And by the way, here’s my schedule. They need to be here right here, because I’ve got a meeting a little later. You come in, get set up, and I’ll meet with you because I wanna tell you about Jesus. I know there’s other things you may wanna talk about, but I don’t wanna talk about those. And I won’t. When we meet I’ll talk to you about Jesus and our relationship with Him, and our core commitments. In fact, I’d like you to read these core commitments before you come.”

Or can you imagine me calling MSNBC and saying to the network, “Send me that film crew, the one I saw on TV the other night. I like that interviewer. Be here at this time; I wanna talk to you about Jesus.” Or imagine me calling FOX News and sayin’, “Listen, I want Greta here. And I want you to take your camera and fix it on our five core commitments, and I want you to read it out loud on the national TV as an explanation as to what we Christians are about. I want that done.” Imagine me sayin’ “I’m tired of talkin’ to local stringers that don’t get stories straight. Would you send me somebody from the New York Times? Look through your staff and find the best one you can, somebody who really knows evangelical Christianity. In fact, I hear there’s a guy in Denver who’s the best. I want him.” Can you imagine me sayin’ to the Republican Party and the Democratic Party, “I’ve got two years of sermons backlogged on our web site. I want you to read through ‘em. I want you to listen to ‘em. In fact, I want you to go through ‘em with a fine-tooth comb and hear what me, a typical preacher in a typical church, has to say about Jesus.” That would never happen. In your wildest dreams that would never, ever happen. But, in a way, last fall it did.

This stuff is so far beyond our doing. Paul’s explanation in front of Agrippa...I just love it! He says, “*Having obtained help from God...*” ‘I’ve just been testifying to both small and great.’ There’s a little later past this time when he’s in another situation, and he moves on and he eventually does get to Rome. And things are quieter because he’s under house arrest. And he’s there and he starts writing some letters to fellow Christians. And he writes in one of those letters...he’s explaining what the whole Christian experience is, and what it’s been like to serve this God who met him and called him and said, ‘I’ve got something for you to do.’ And he makes this statement in Ephesians chapter 2, and it’s one of my favorite all-time passages. He says this to the Christians that he’s writing to, and he’s describing what it’s like when God has touched your life and He’s called you to be what we’re called to be. He goes, ‘Listen, God’s the one who’s touched us. He’s shaped us the way we are, and we’re...’

*“...His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works...”*

In our relationship for Jesus God has done something amazing—He’s changed us, He’s designed us for things that He desires for us to do, good things.

But it doesn’t stop there. He goes on. Not only are we created in Christ Jesus for good works; he goes on and he makes this statement.

*“...which God prepared beforehand...”*

...that God has gone ahead and arranged, and set up, ‘...so we would walk in ‘em.’

As Christians, we are called; we are called by God to be the salt of the world. We are called to be the light of the world. We are called to witness in our time, our generation, any place, any circumstance, to the wonder, the glory, the mystery, and the grace of Jesus Christ. That is our calling. That is the good we are called to. And the wonder and the amazing thing of this verse is Paul is saying not only are we called to that; God is going ahead of us to arrange for us to do that. He is preparing opportunities, circumstances, situations, for you to be able to speak of the wonder, the glory, and the mystery of Jesus Christ...both to small and great. He’s arranging ahead of you. That is such a relief to me. That is such a wonder to me! I do not have to make things happen. God is ahead of me preparing the situations.

Now, I don't know what'll happen next. Every appointment is different. Paul went from that meeting in Caesarea, in the full auditorium, with full pomp and circumstance...he went from there to a shipwreck on the island of Malta. We went from the interviews and the TV coverage to a burned building. You can't arrange it. You can't orchestrate it. You can't decide what it'll be and when. He is there, doing it for us. All we need to do is keep walking forward. That is such a relief! There is so much freedom to that.

We're coming to the end of our study in the book of Acts. We only have two sermons, this one and next week's. And I chose with both these to just slow down a moment and reflect on our whole year, and reflect on this book. See, other times I've read through the book of Acts it's been a discouraging experience for me. The book opens with this statement, where Jesus says, "*You'll receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses.*" That's Jesus speaking to His followers and saying, 'I'm gonna pour out My Spirit upon you, and He is gonna enable you, and He is gonna sustain you, and you will be My witnesses.' I've always read that as a command at the opening of the book of Acts. And I've always said, "I've gotta be a witness. I gotta be a witness." And I've set out to say "What can we do to actually be what this book is talking about? What can we set up so that we can do exactly what this book does? How can we make this book...how can we make ourselves like this book? How can we arrange the time to witness? How can we arrange for the Holy Spirit to come upon us? How can we do this?"

And then you realize that is *not* a command! It's a statement of fact. Jesus said, "You will be..." "*You will be my witnesses.*" And then you realize that, as you go through the book of Acts, it's not a command to follow. It's not a dream to pursue. It's not a mission to accomplish. It's not a goal to achieve. It is the reality we are living. We are the salt of the earth. You and I are the light of the world. You and I are His witnesses. He will set the time; He will set the place; He will arrange everything. He will arrange everything. You simply walk in faith and hope, and care.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in His grace.