

## Suffering Injustice

Psalm 89:1–18, Acts 25:13–27

The Psalmist says, “I will sing of the mercies of the LORD forever.” He praises the covenant mercy of God, which is never-ending and continues to all generations. The God of heaven is “infinite, eternal, and unchangeable,” and being such, his covenant mercies never change, but endure to all generations—praise his holy name! He is the same “yesterday, today and forever.” He will never abandon those who put their trust in him. The last few years we have learned that we cannot trust human rulers. They lie about many things. But the God of the Bible—the God of heaven, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—will never disappoint us, will never deceive us. Whatever he says is just and true. This is indeed something to sing about! We can say with the Psalmist, “I will *sing* of the mercies of the LORD forever!” Praise his holy name! “With my mouth will I make known your faithfulness to all generations.” It is evident that God wants us all to open our mouths and sing his praises! Will you open up your mouth and sing to King Jesus? Christian, you have something to sing about!

In contrast to human rulers, who are undependable, it is said of God, “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; mercy and truth go before Your face.” This cannot be said of any mere man. The LORD—Yahweh, the God of heaven, whose mercies are forever—is a God of righteousness and justice and truth. His promises are sure. He is completely and totally and utterly and perfectly dependable. Whatever God has said is absolute truth, and will certainly come to pass—you can bank on it! Righteousness and justice are the foundation of God’s throne. It cannot be otherwise. So the Psalmist continues: “Blessed are the people who know the joyful sound! They walk, O LORD, in the light of Your countenance. In Your name they rejoice all day long, and in Your righteousness they are exalted.” What a glorious truth!

What a contrast with what we hear of civil rulers today! Many of those in authority lie through their teeth but are still reelected! Many people don’t want to hear the truth, but want their leaders to tell them what they want to hear. As we look at our New Testament text today, remember the words of our Psalm: “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne.” Amen!

As our Acts text begins, the apostle Paul is in prison in the city of Caesarea. Governor Festus has kept him there as a favor to the Jews. Festus is a politician, and like most politicians, his main interest is his own political power. Pleasing the Jews is a lot more important to him than justice for the apostle Paul. It’s kind of like the treatment of whistleblowers in our day. People who speak truth to power become the enemies of the state. Some are imprisoned, others have to seek asylum in foreign countries. Justice is not important; power is *all*-important. But *righteousness* and *justice* are the foundation of God’s holy throne!

Our text opens with the words “after some days King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Festus.” Now the word *king* suggests to us a man who has absolute authority within a particular area.<sup>1</sup> But King Agrippa ruled only with the approval of the Roman authorities. He is called “king,” but he is a petty king, a client-king of Rome. This King Agrippa was the son of the King Herod of Acts chapter 12, known as Herod Agrippa. Herod Agrippa was the tyrant who killed the apostle James and imprisoned the apostle Peter, not because they had committed crimes, but as a favor to the Jews. This King Agrippa’s father was the man in Acts 12 who gave a speech on a festive occasion, and as he spoke, the people shouted out, “This is the voice of a god and not of a man.” Luke tells us that “immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God,” and he was “eaten by worms and died.”<sup>2</sup> That was the father of the “King Agrippa” of our text this morning.

Notice the unusual wording: “King Agrippa and Bernice.” Who is this Bernice? Luke is being accurate. He does not say, “King Agrippa and *his wife* Bernice,” because Bernice is not his wife. Her relationship with King Agrippa is not identified in the text. Bernice was actually Agrippa’s sister. She was Jewish by birth—but a secular, non-practicing Jew. She was a nominal Jew in much the same way that many Americans are nominal Christians—Christian in name only.

In the Bible, a Christian is a follower of Christ. Christ is the *Lord*—God in human flesh, the Lord of heaven come to earth to take upon himself our humanity and die for his people’s sins. Christ is Lord of all, and to him one day every knee shall bow. He is the Lord God and worthy of our worship! We are required—all of us—to love him with all our heart and mind, soul and strength. If you love Christ, you will love his worship, and you will love his church. Why will you love his church? Because, if you love Christ, you will love what *he* loves. The Bible specifically says that “Christ *loved* the church, and gave himself for it.” If Christ loved the church, can we who love him *not* love the church? The church is the apple of God’s eye. God assures his people, “he who touches you touches the apple of His eye.”<sup>3</sup> Bernice was a Jew in the same way that many so-called Christians are Christians—in name only. That was her heritage, but not her practice. Her real god was political power, and she sacrificed everything—even her “religion”—for the god of political power.

Agrippa and Bernice were brother and sister. They had both been previously married—Bernice twice. But the secular histories tell us that they were living in an incestuous relationship; their god was fleshly desire, not purity. Calvin observes

---

<sup>1</sup> Louw & Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 1:480

<sup>2</sup> Acts 12:1–2, 23

<sup>3</sup> Zech. 2:8

that Bernice “married with Polemon, king of Cilicia. Notwithstanding, because she gave herself more to lust than to chastity, she forsook him.”

How many people forsake their principles for worldly gain! Agrippa and Bernice, though nominal Jews, rejected the law of God concerning sexual purity. In Leviticus 18 God commands, “None of you shall approach to any that is near of kin to him, to uncover their nakedness: I am the LORD.” It continues: “The nakedness of thy sister, the daughter of thy father, or daughter of thy mother . . . even their nakedness thou shalt not uncover.” The Bible is very specific on this point. The seventh commandment says simply and clearly, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” Sexual intimacy is reserved for the marriage bed. “Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge” (Heb. 13:4).

Modern man makes a god out of sexual fulfillment. People want to be free to express their sexuality in any way they choose. All manner of filth and perversion must be accepted, and anyone who expresses disapproval is called a bigot. But God gave the seventh commandment for man’s good, and the person who practices sexual purity is blessed. God says, “With long life will I satisfy him, and show him my salvation” (Ps. 91:16). Young person, if you obey God in the matter of sexual purity, you will never regret it.

So King Agrippa and Bernice came to Caesarea to greet Governor Festus. During the course of their visit Festus brings up the case of the prisoner Paul. He informs them that the Jews had asked for a judgment against Paul. But in verse 16 he says that he had told them, “It is not the custom of the Romans to deliver any man to destruction before the accused meets the accusers face to face, and has opportunity to answer for himself concerning the charge against him.” What is Festus saying? He is stating the fundamental principle of justice, *innocent until proven guilty*. As we showed last week, this is part of the judicial law—instructions to judges in Israel as to how they were to decide cases that came to them “between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, being matters of controversy within thy gates” (Deut. 17:8). Civil judges keep the peace by rendering temporal judgment. Civil judges the world over are responsible to judge righteously and justly in accordance with the law of God. They are reminded that they themselves will one day stand before God at the final judgment. Psalm 82 says, “God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods [civil judges]. How long will ye judge unjustly, and accept the persons of the wicked? Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy: rid them out of the hand of the wicked. . . . I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High. But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes. Arise, O God, judge the earth: for thou shalt

inherit all nations.” When a civil judge condemns the innocent or justifies the guilty, God remembers! The civil judge will answer to him in the end.

So here in our text a pagan Roman articulates the fundamental principle of justice: innocent until proven guilty. By the common grace and mercy of the Lord, even a pagan government recognized this principle.

But though he recognized this principle, he failed to practice it. In the case of Paul, accusations had been made, but no judgment had been rendered. Paul is still innocent under law. He must be considered innocent until proven guilty, yet he languishes in prison because Festus wanted to do the Jews a favor (v. 9 of our chapter).

Festus articulates a principle of biblical justice but doesn't see the irony in his not following it. Here is Paul, who has committed no civil crime but has only spoken a message that is unpopular. He has offended the high priest and the Jewish leaders—not in the biblical sense of an actual offense against the holy law of God, but he has displeased the Jews, who didn't want to be reminded of their crimes against Jesus.

Festus says that “When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against him of such things as I supposed, but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive.” Festus recognizes that the Jews had no civil case against Paul. It is clear to Festus that the main issue is Paul's assertion that Christ rose from the dead. To Festus, the whole idea of a man dying by crucifixion, whose body lay decomposing in a tomb for three days and three nights—such a man rising from the dead and out, walking about, alive—was utterly ridiculous. To assert such a thing was not a violation of any Roman law. The civil case against Paul was utterly non-existent, yet Festus was going to send this man to be tried by Caesar. What would be the charges against him? Festus was in a legal pickle. Agrippa says to Festus, “I also would like to hear the man myself.” Agrippa, with his knowledge of the Jewish faith, would be interested in hearing Paul, a trained rabbi, argue for the resurrection of Christ.

The next day Agrippa and Bernice came into the auditorium “with great pomp.” *Pomp* is ceremonial display or pageantry. Agrippa and Bernice had the attention of the crowds—the Roman commanders and prominent men of the city. The word translated “pomp” is actually the Greek word *φαντασία*, which comes into English as *fantasy*. Disney has its Fantasyland, with all its theatrics and special effects, and the masses love it. Agrippa and Bernice make their entrance with great pomp. How different is the demeanor of penitent sinners!

Jesus taught that “whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted” (Matt. 23:12). He says, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you,

and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls” (Matt. 11:28–29). Some churches have great processions where the bishop and clerics make their entrance with their tall, gaudy headdresses and gorgeous apparel and symbols of authority, but the Lamb who was slain is meek and lowly in heart. If you want to have mercy in the sight of a holy God you must abase and humble yourself. True Christianity exalts *Christ*, not the sinner. If your attitude is, I want to be saved, but I want the spotlight on *me*, then Christ is not for you. We don’t receive Christ on our own terms, we come to him as penitent sinners.

After everyone is seated, Festus speaks. He says, “King Agrippa and all the men who are here present with us, you see this man about whom the whole assembly of the Jews petitioned me. . . . But when I found that he had committed nothing deserving of death, and that he himself had appealed to Augustus, I decided to send him.” Tony Merida observes that Festus “speaks with great rhetorical exaggeration,” claiming that the “whole” Jewish community was calling for Paul’s execution, but being a just governor, he delivered him.<sup>4</sup> He omits the fact that, as a favor to the Jews, he had kept an innocent man in prison. He needs the assembly’s help, assisting him to write up charges against Paul. Of course, he has none to write at this point because he knew Paul was innocent.<sup>5</sup> Festus speaks as a man drunk with his own power, not as a penitent sinner desperately in need of mercy.

The Bible teaches that we are all sinners with no hope of mercy in the sight of a holy God. Our forefather Adam, representing the whole human race, sinned against God by disobeying him, eating the forbidden fruit, contrary to his command. As the New England Primer so pithily expressed it, “In Adam’s fall, we sinnèd all.” Yes, it’s true: “In Adam’s fall, we sinnèd all.” All of us, sons and daughters of our first parent Adam, sinned in him and fell with in and his first transgression. We come into this world, not as innocent and pure and holy, but as those who have original sin, inherited from our forefather Adam. As Paul so perfectly expressed it, “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). The tense of the Greek word for “all have sinned” indicates an act that took place at a point in past time—at the precise moment when Adam ate the forbidden fruit. Eve had eaten first, but she was deceived by the serpent. Adam, on the other hand, ate with full knowledge and understanding of what he was doing: disobeying the clear command of the Creator God.

He whose name is Jehovah is the Lord and giver of life. In him we live and move and have our being. As creatures, we are all responsible before a holy God. He has authority to require the obedience of his creatures. We are his by divine right. He gave us life and has given us richly all things to enjoy. He has not withheld from us any good thing.

---

<sup>4</sup> Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Olive Tree Bible Software)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Sinful man cries out against the God of heaven, calling him unfair. Despising God's good gifts, man is never satisfied. He compounds his sin by the sin of ingratitude. "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you."

Paul's statement "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God"<sup>6</sup> not only teaches that the whole human race fell in Adam, it also teaches that each one of us continues to sin, every day of our lives. The text does this by a deliberate shift from the Greek aorist tense to the Greek present, which indicates continuous action. Thus, the verse is teaching that all the human race sinned in Adam's first sin, when he ate the forbidden fruit, but *continues* to come short of the glory of God by particular sins, every day of our lives. In other words, we have two strikes against us: we inherit the guilt of Adam's first sin, and we continue to incur the guilt of the sins we commit every day—sins both of commission and omission. God's commandments are of two kinds: negatively, he tells us not to do certain things: we are not to worship other gods, make graven images, take the name of God in vain, kill, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, and covet; positively, he tells us to *do* certain things: keep the Lord's day holy, and honor those in authority over us. Moreover, whatever we do, we are to do it with a heartfelt desire to bring glory to God alone. If we keep the outward form of the commandment *without* a heartfelt desire to glorify to God, then even the good works that we do are sin. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). If we do good works in order to draw attention to ourselves, in order to win the praise and approval of men, then according to God's word we have actually sinned.

What is our only recourse? It is to flee to God for mercy. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Praise his holy name!

God is a holy God, but he is also a forgiving God. He forgives our sins in Christ, the only sacrifice. "He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). There is salvation in Christ alone; there is no other Savior. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. He alone could do this, as he is the perfect man, who had no sins of his own to die for. Our sins were laid on him, and his perfect righteousness is credited to us who believe in him. That is the gospel—the good news of Christ's salvation. Christ died for us, but he also rose again the third day. He was "delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:25). He "died for our sins according to the scriptures ... was buried, and ... rose again the third day according to the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3–4). No wonder Paul emphasized the resurrection so! There

---

<sup>6</sup> Rom. 3:23

is no gospel without it. If Christ did not rise from the dead, then we are all still in our sins. We are of all men most miserable. There is no hope for us.

The apostle Paul suffered injustice at the hands of a Roman ruler, as his Savior had suffered injustice at the hands of a Roman ruler years before. And in a sinful world you and I might suffer injustice as well. But God is on the throne, and he is working out his perfect plan in spite of the machinations and scheming of wicked men. In the end, the devil will not be able to destroy the work of Christ, or prevent him from bringing every one of his own to be with him forever in heaven.

Truly we have every reason to sing of the mercies of the Lord forever, with our mouths to make known his faithfulness to all generations. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne; mercy and truth go before his face. God is not like the petty tyrants of this world. They may persecute the righteous, but in the end, Christ wins! Praise his holy name! Amen.