

Week 6 Optional Family Activities

At home:

- **With younger kids:** Encourage kids to add to their pictorial time line from week one by drawing pictures of Paul's adventure at sea. They could draw the shipwreck, landing on the island of Malta, Paul's being bit by a poisonous snake, and other events on the island.
- **With older kids:** Complete your map together, tracing Paul's final journey to Rome with all the layovers on the way.
- **Conversation topics with older kids might include:** Several years go by while Felix, then Festus, and finally Agrippa decide what to do about Paul's case. I wonder what Paul did during that time of imprisonment?

Monday, March 25th

Acts 22:30-23:11

³⁰The next day the commander freed Paul from his chains and ordered the leading priests into session with the Jewish high council. He had Paul brought in before them to try to find out what the trouble was all about.

¹ Gazing intently at the high council, Paul began: "Brothers, I have always lived before God in all good conscience!"

²Instantly Ananias the high priest commanded those close to Paul to slap him on the mouth. ³But Paul said to him, "God will slap you, you whitewashed wall! What kind of judge are you to break the law yourself by ordering me struck like that?"

⁴Those standing near Paul said to him, "Is that the way to talk to God's high priest?"

⁵"I'm sorry, brothers. I didn't realize he was the high priest," Paul replied, "for the Scriptures say, 'Do not speak evil of anyone who rules over you.'"

⁶Paul realized that some members of the high council were Sadducees and some were Pharisees, so he shouted, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, as were all my ancestors! And I am on trial because my hope is in the resurrection of the dead!"

⁷This divided the council--the Pharisees against the Sadducees--⁸for the Sadducees say there is no resurrection or angels or spirits, but the Pharisees believe in all of these. ⁹So a great clamor arose. Some of the teachers of religious law who were Pharisees jumped up to argue that Paul was all right. "We see nothing wrong with him," they shouted. "Perhaps a spirit or an angel spoke to him." ¹⁰The shouting grew louder and louder, and the men were tugging at Paul from both sides, pulling him this way and that. Finally, the commander, fearing they would tear him apart, ordered his soldiers to take him away from them and bring him back to the fortress.

¹¹That night the Lord appeared to Paul and said, "Be encouraged, Paul. Just as you have told the people about me here in Jerusalem, you must preach the Good News in Rome."

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Points of Interest:

- 'I have always lived before God in all good conscience'--they're accusing Paul of being a criminal. But he used to work for them. If he's a criminal now, what was he then?
- 'God will slap you, you whitewashed wall!—Paul narrowly avoids a flogging in yesterday's passage, and today he's almost slapped. It seems like Paul is a little tired of being pushed around. I think he's calling into question Ananias' jurisdiction here. This isn't a Jewish religious court; it's a Roman court. And in any case, only God can say whether or not it is indeed true that Paul is serving God with a clear conscience here.
- 'I didn't realize he was the high priest'--this isn't entirely easy to swallow. I'd think that, particularly for a former member of the high priest's staff like Paul, it would be easy to figure out based on his uniform or on the way others are treating him who the high priest is. Then again, this isn't the very same high priest for whom Paul had worked, and Ananias is rather new to the position. Maybe Paul, having been away from Jerusalem and out of Jewish circles for a while, is out of the loop. So, perhaps he is genuinely surprised to find out that Ananias has become high priest. In that case, he could be sincerely apologizing, or he could be putting in a little dig: 'Wow, Ananias, I didn't know you'd gotten the gig. Good for you, buddy!' In any case, through this interaction, Paul reminds the council that he's not a stranger; he's one of their own.
- 'Brothers, I am a Pharisee, as were all my ancestors! And I am on trial because my hope is in the resurrection of the dead!'—the Pharisees are a powerful minority on the high council, and Paul knows that their theology differs from the Sadducees on some important points regarding belief in the resurrection of the dead and the existence of the spiritual world. Paul decides to divide the high council in order to weaken their case against him. His theology has remained the same as the Pharisees on the important point of the resurrection of the dead. He doesn't mention ways that his theology has evolved from there. But as far as the Roman commander would be concerned, the council's dispute with Paul would be drowned out in the midst of a whole array of religious disputes he doesn't understand or care about. Instead of Paul seeming dangerous, the council now sounds petty and fractious.
- 'That night the Lord appeared to Paul and said, "Be encouraged, Paul.'—At what must have felt like one of the lowest ebbs in Paul's life, Jesus appears to him in a vision and encourages him in the mission he has given him. This unwelcome delay will not ultimately stop Paul from continuing to talk about Jesus to the whole world--including even the big capital of Rome.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Have you felt thwarted in the plans you feel God has given you? Paul finds himself in a morass of religious and legal accusations that threaten to derail the clear direction God has given him. He is discouraged and angry. He even loses his temper. Jesus' response is to encourage Paul with a supernatural visit. Where do you feel the need for an encouraging visit from God?

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- *Through your six:* Religious bodies often fight over theology and miss what God is actually doing. Jesus actually seems to care little about the religious debate Paul gets caught up in; he doesn't even mention it on his visit to Paul, not to speak of weighing in. Instead Jesus encourages Paul to continue in the work of bringing hope to those who have not yet heard about Jesus. Pray that your six would have the ability to see the difference between religion and the living Jesus who offers real hope.
- *Through our church:* Pray that our church, like Paul, would always be able to say that we've followed God's calling. Pray that we would have good ears to hear where God is leading, and the perseverance to keep on going where God points us.

Tuesday, March 26th

Acts 23:12-35

¹²The next morning a group of Jews got together and bound themselves with an oath to neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. ¹³There were more than forty of them. ¹⁴They went to the leading priests and other leaders and told them what they had done. "We have bound ourselves under oath to neither eat nor drink until we have killed Paul. ¹⁵You and the high council should tell the commander to bring Paul back to the council again," they requested. "Pretend you want to examine his case more fully. We will kill him on the way."

¹⁶But Paul's nephew heard of their plan and went to the fortress and told Paul. ¹⁷Paul called one of the officers and said, "Take this young man to the commander. He has something important to tell him."

¹⁸So the officer did, explaining, "Paul, the prisoner, called me over and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you."

¹⁹The commander took him by the arm, led him aside, and asked, "What is it you want to tell me?"

²⁰Paul's nephew told him, "Some Jews are going to ask you to bring Paul before the Jewish high council tomorrow, pretending they want to get some more information. ²¹But don't do it! There are more than forty men hiding along the way ready to jump him and kill him. They have vowed not to eat or drink until they kill him. They are ready, expecting you to agree to their request."

²²"Don't let a soul know you told me this," the commander warned the young man as he sent him away.

²³Then the commander called two of his officers and ordered, "Get two hundred soldiers ready to leave for Caesarea at nine o'clock tonight. Also take two hundred spearmen and seventy horsemen. ²⁴Provide horses for Paul to ride, and get him safely to Governor Felix." ²⁵Then he wrote this letter to the governor:

²⁶"From Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency, Governor Felix. Greetings! ²⁷This man was seized by some Jews, and they were about to kill him when I arrived with the troops. When I learned that he was a Roman citizen, I removed him to safety. ²⁸Then I took him to their high council to try to find out what he had done. ²⁹I soon discovered it was something regarding their religious law--certainly nothing worthy of imprisonment or death. ³⁰But when I was informed of a plot to kill him, I immediately sent him on to you. I have told his accusers to bring their charges before you."

³¹So that night, as ordered, the soldiers took Paul as far as Antipatris. ³²They returned to the fortress the next morning, while the horsemen took him on to Caesarea. ³³When they arrived in Caesarea, they presented Paul and the letter to Governor Felix. ³⁴He read it and then asked Paul what province he was

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from. "Cilicia," Paul answered.

³⁵"I will hear your case myself when your accusers arrive," the governor told him. Then the governor ordered him kept in the prison at Herod's headquarters.

Points of Interest:

- 'We have bound ourselves under oath to neither eat nor drink until we have killed Paul'— Paul has clearly hit a raw nerve for a large portion of the Jewish population. Up until now the Jewish followers of Jesus in Judea have been able to keep intact their Jewish religious identities while following Jesus. Lines are being drawn now, making it more and more difficult for this to be true.
- 'Paul's nephew heard of their plan'—this is the only mention of Paul having a nephew. Maybe Paul's nephew has followed his uncle's career path and is one of the younger members of the council's staff. It's easy to imagine that the oath-takers would be 'young hotheads' in Paul's nephew's class. Maybe word is spreading around the dorms, as it were. Without this insider information, Paul would most likely be killed that next day. God seems to be orchestrating Paul's rescue.
- 'I soon discovered it was something regarding their religious law--certainly nothing worthy of imprisonment or death.'—in this letter from the Roman commander Lysius to the Governor Felix there is no formal accusation. In fact, the commander declares Paul innocent, and sends him to Felix only for his own protection. You'd think this would lead to Paul's immediate release. It seems Felix's higher priority is to avoid displeasing the Jewish religious leaders. This is reminiscent of Herod's posture towards the religious leadership.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Paul's calling, his abilities, his focus and his passion could not be higher at this point in his life. He is at the top of his game; but the better he gets, the more opposition to him also intensifies. Maybe I'm crazy, but I actually find this pretty inspiring. Like Paul or hate him, everyone agrees that his life matters. If you dare, ask God for a life of such consequence!
- *Through your six:* The charges against Paul are merely religious trivia to the Roman commander. This commander is actually stationed at the Temple; yet his contact with the religious authorities has not in the least bit inspired any spiritual curiosity. Pray that your six would have experiences of believers in God that would pique their interest in spiritual things.
- *Through our church:* As our church grows in effectiveness at reaching people in the Cambridge-Boston area pray for spiritual protection against those forces that would want to 'kill' God's work among people who might not otherwise find themselves in churches.

Wednesday, March 27th

Acts 24:1-26

¹Five days later Ananias, the high priest, arrived with some of the Jewish leaders and the lawyer

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Tertullus, to press charges against Paul. ²When Paul was called in, Tertullus laid charges against Paul in the following address to the governor:

"Your Excellency, you have given peace to us Jews and have enacted reforms for us. ³And for all of this we are very grateful to you. ⁴But lest I bore you, kindly give me your attention for only a moment as I briefly outline our case against this man. ⁵For we have found him to be a troublemaker, a man who is constantly inciting the Jews throughout the world to riots and rebellions against the Roman government. He is a ringleader of the sect known as the Nazarenes. ⁶Moreover he was trying to defile the Temple when we arrested him. ⁸You can find out the truth of our accusations by examining him yourself." ⁹Then the other Jews chimed in, declaring that everything Tertullus said was true.

¹⁰Now it was Paul's turn. The governor motioned for him to rise and speak. Paul said, "I know, sir, that you have been a judge of Jewish affairs for many years, and this gives me confidence as I make my defense. ¹¹You can quickly discover that it was no more than twelve days ago that I arrived in Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. ¹²I didn't argue with anyone in the Temple, nor did I incite a riot in any synagogue or on the streets of the city. ¹³These men certainly cannot prove the things they accuse me of doing.

¹⁴"But I admit that I follow the Way, which they call a sect. I worship the God of our ancestors, and I firmly believe the Jewish law and everything written in the books of prophecy. ¹⁵I have hope in God, just as these men do, that he will raise both the righteous and the ungodly. ¹⁶Because of this, I always try to maintain a clear conscience before God and everyone else.

¹⁷"After several years away, I returned to Jerusalem with money to aid my people and to offer sacrifices to God. ¹⁸My accusers saw me in the Temple as I was completing a purification ritual. There was no crowd around me and no rioting. ¹⁹But some Jews from the province of Asia were there—and they ought to be here to bring charges if they have anything against me! ²⁰Ask these men here what wrongdoing the Jewish high council found in me, ²¹except for one thing I said when I shouted out, 'I am on trial before you today because I believe in the resurrection of the dead!' "

²²Felix, who was quite familiar with the Way, adjourned the hearing and said, "Wait until Lysias, the garrison commander, arrives. Then I will decide the case." ²³He ordered an officer to keep Paul in custody but to give him some freedom and allow his friends to visit him and take care of his needs.

²⁴A few days later Felix came with his wife, Drusilla, who was Jewish. Sending for Paul, they listened as he told them about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵As he reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was terrified. "Go away for now," he replied. "When it is more convenient, I'll call for you again." ²⁶He also hoped that Paul would bribe him, so he sent for him quite often and talked with him.

Points of Interest:

- 'you have given peace to us Jews and have enacted reforms for us'—this is not in fact true. Felix was a particularly brutal governor. The council's lawyer is simply following the well-worn strategy of starting your legal presentation with a little flattery of the judge. Paul more or less follows suit when he gets his chance to speak.
- 'we have found him to be a troublemaker'—this first charge accuses Paul of leading a political movement of insurrection against the Roman government, something the Roman government would watch vigilantly. Ironically many Jews of the time, especially the Pharisees, believed that

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it was their religious duty to politically oppose the Roman government; but they're bringing (untrue) charges of this very thing against Paul.

- 'But I admit that I follow the Way, which they call a sect.'—Paul admits to the charge that he is part of a group of people with a name, but he does not assent to the name given by Tertullus, the Nazarenes. Paul does not consider this a splinter group but believes that followers of Jesus are continuing in the true tradition of Judaism.
- 'Ask these men here what wrongdoing the Jewish high council found in me,'—in the end they have no case against Paul. They can produce no tangible evidence against him.
- 'He also hoped that Paul would bribe him, so he sent for him quite often and talked with him.'—for a complex set of reasons, Felix can't seem to either condemn Paul or to let him go, to listen to him or to shut him up.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Integrity—Felix knows that Paul is innocent, but he keeps him in prison anyway, because it keeps the Jewish council quiet, and keeps open the possibility of a little cash coming his way under the table. Are you faced with a situation in which doing the right thing could cost you? Pray for the boldness to follow your conscience, and ask God to reward you as you do.
- *Through your six:* Are any of your six facing legal troubles? Pray for peace and wisdom and poise for them, for good legal advice, and for a fair trial.
- *Through our church:* In whatever interactions we have with the city government, pray that God would give us favor, that we would bring out the best in our city leaders, and that whenever possible we could be of mutual benefit.

Thursday, March 28th

Acts 24:27-25:27

²⁷Two years went by in this way; then Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And because Felix wanted to gain favor with the Jewish leaders, he left Paul in prison.

¹Three days after Festus arrived in Caesarea to take over his new responsibilities, he left for Jerusalem,

²where the leading priests and other Jewish leaders met with him and made their accusations against Paul. ³They asked Festus as a favor to transfer Paul to Jerusalem. (Their plan was to waylay and kill him.)

⁴But Festus replied that Paul was at Caesarea and he himself would be returning there soon. ⁵So he said, "Those of you in authority can return with me. If Paul has done anything wrong, you can make your accusations."

⁶Eight or ten days later he returned to Caesarea, and on the following day Paul's trial began. ⁷On Paul's arrival in court, the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem gathered around and made many serious accusations they couldn't prove. ⁸Paul denied the charges. "I am not guilty," he said. "I have committed no crime against the Jewish laws or the Temple or the Roman government."

⁹Then Festus, wanting to please the Jews, asked him, "Are you willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there?"

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¹⁰But 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. ¹¹If I have done something worthy of death, I don't refuse to die. But if I am innocent, neither you nor anyone else has a right to turn me over to these men to kill me. I appeal to Caesar!"

¹²Festus conferred with his advisers and then replied, "Very well! You have appealed to Caesar, and to Caesar you shall go!"

¹³A few days later King Agrippa arrived with his sister, Bernice, to pay their respects to Festus. ¹⁴During 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. ¹⁵When I was in Jerusalem, the leading priests and other Jewish leaders pressed charges against him and asked me to sentence him. ¹⁶Of course, I quickly pointed out to them that Roman law does not convict people without a trial. They are given an opportunity to defend themselves face to face with their accusers.

¹⁷"When they came here for the trial, I called the case the very next day and ordered Paul brought in.

¹⁸But the accusations made against him weren't at all what I expected. ¹⁹It was something about their religion and about someone called Jesus who died, but whom Paul insists is alive. ²⁰I was perplexed as to how to conduct an investigation of this kind, and I asked him whether he would be willing to stand trial on these charges in Jerusalem. ²¹But Paul appealed to the emperor. So I ordered him back to jail until I could arrange to send him to Caesar."

²²"I'd like to hear the man myself," Agrippa said.

And Festus replied, "You shall--tomorrow!"

²³So the next day Agrippa and Bernice arrived at the auditorium with great pomp, accompanied by military officers and prominent men of the city. Festus ordered that Paul be brought in. ²⁴Then Festus said, "King Agrippa and all present, this is the man whose death is demanded both by the local Jews and by those in Jerusalem. ²⁵But in my opinion he has done nothing worthy of death. However, he appealed his case to the emperor, and I decided to send him. ²⁶But what shall I write the emperor? For there is no real charge against him. So I have brought him before all of you, and especially you, King Agrippa, so that after we examine him, I might have something to write. ²⁷For it doesn't seem reasonable to send a prisoner to the emperor without specifying the charges against him!"

Points of Interest:

- 'Three days after Festus arrived in Caesarea to take over his new responsibilities'—Felix was never able to decide what to do with Paul and after 2 whole years a new governor arrives, one with a much better reputation as an effective administrator. This presents an opportunity for Paul's case to finally move forward.
- 'But if I am innocent, neither you nor anyone else has a right to turn me over to these men to kill me. I appeal to Caesar!'—Paul knows the grave danger he is in if he returns to Jerusalem. Festus continues the tradition of indecisive and fearful (of Jewish disapproval) Roman rulers. Paul's only way out is to appeal to Caesar, which he must be taken seriously by the authorities. It's also the way he will finally go to Rome, which has been his long held hope for his next trip; this is obviously not the way he hoped to get there.

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- ‘But what shall I write the emperor?’—though sending Paul to Caesar provides a solution, there is still the small problem of providing a reason. Festus will look a little ridiculous sending Paul to Caesar when it’s clear that there’s not really a case against him in any law.
- ‘For there is no real charge against him’--this is reminiscent of the words used in Jesus’ trial. Paul’s life has come to imitate that of Jesus’ in striking ways.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Sometimes we hit periods in following Jesus where nothing seems to change. The hard things in our lives just don’t seem to go away, and the vision we feel God has given us seems further and further away. If you are in such a place right now, ask some friends to pray for you, for endurance and for a change in your circumstances. If you are not in such a place, pray that God would prepare you for such times by giving you a ‘marathoner’s’ approach to following Jesus.
- *Through your six:* God works through obvious injustices to bring good to Paul’s life. Pray that your six would see God’s work in areas of injustice in their own lives and in society, and that they would experience God working through them to bring good to others.
- *Through our church:* Pray that our church would grow in rejoicing in the midst of suffering. (Did I just write that???)

Friday, March 29th

Acts 26

¹ Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You may speak in your defense."

So Paul, with a gesture of his hand, started his defense: ²"I am fortunate, King Agrippa, that you are the one hearing my defense against all these accusations made by the Jewish leaders, ³for I know you are an expert on Jewish customs and controversies. Now please listen to me patiently!

⁴"As the Jewish leaders are well aware, I was given a thorough Jewish training from my earliest childhood among my own people and in Jerusalem. ⁵If they would admit it, they know that I have been a member of the Pharisees, the strictest sect of our religion. ⁶Now I am on trial because I am looking forward to the fulfillment of God's promise made to our ancestors. ⁷In fact, that is why the twelve tribes of Israel worship God night and day, and they share the same hope I have. Yet, O king, they say it is wrong for me to have this hope! ⁸Why does it seem incredible to any of you that God can raise the dead?

⁹"I used to believe that I ought to do everything I could to oppose the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

¹⁰Authorized by the leading priests, I caused many of the believers in Jerusalem to be sent to prison. And I cast my vote against them when they were condemned to death. ¹¹Many times I had them whipped in the synagogues to try to get them to curse Christ. I was so violently opposed to them that I even hounded them in distant cities of foreign lands.

¹²"One day I was on such a mission to Damascus, armed with the authority and commission of the leading priests. ¹³About noon, Your Majesty, a light from heaven brighter than the sun shone down on me and my companions. ¹⁴We all fell down, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why

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are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to fight against my will.'

¹⁵" 'Who are you, sir?' I asked.

"And the Lord replied, 'I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. ¹⁶Now stand up! For I have appeared to you to appoint you as my servant and my witness. You are to tell the world about this experience and about other times I will appear to you. ¹⁷And I will protect you from both your own people and the Gentiles. Yes, I am going to send you to the Gentiles, ¹⁸to open their eyes so they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God's people, who are set apart by faith in me.'

¹⁹"And so, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to that vision from heaven. ²⁰I preached first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that all must turn from their sins and turn to God--and prove they have changed by the good things they do. ²¹Some Jews arrested me in the Temple for preaching this, and they tried to kill me. ²²But God protected me so that I am still alive today to tell these facts to everyone, from the least to the greatest. I teach nothing except what the prophets and Moses said would happen-- ²³that the Messiah would suffer and be the first to rise from the dead as a light to Jews and Gentiles alike."

²⁴Suddenly, Festus shouted, "Paul, you are insane. Too much study has made you crazy!"

²⁵But Paul replied, "I am not insane, Most Excellent Festus. I am speaking the sober truth. ²⁶And King Agrippa knows about these things. I speak frankly, for I am sure these events are all familiar to him, for they were not done in a corner! ²⁷King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do--"

²⁸Agrippa interrupted him. "Do you think you can make me a Christian so quickly?"

²⁹Paul replied, "Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am, except for these chains."

³⁰Then the king, the governor, Bernice, and all the others stood and left. ³¹As they talked it over they agreed, "This man hasn't done anything worthy of death or imprisonment." ³²And Agrippa said to Festus, "He could be set free if he hadn't appealed to Caesar!"

Points of Interest:

- 'Now I am on trial because I am looking forward to the fulfillment of God's promise made to our ancestors'—God did two incredible things in raising Jesus from the dead and in pouring out the Holy Spirit on all who believe in Jesus, but Paul believes that there is much more yet to come. His hope rests on this future.
- 'Why does it seem incredible to any of you that God can raise the dead?'—Paul challenges their core assumptions of God's capabilities. Rather than his belief in the resurrection being incredible, he confronts them with the absurdity of believing in a God that couldn't raise the dead.
- 'But God protected me so that I am still alive today to tell these facts to everyone'—Paul believes every moment of his life is pregnant with God-directed meaning. His opponents put him in prison in an attempt to stop him. But as far as he's concerned, he is there so that his listeners have one more chance to believe in the living God.
- 'Paul, you are insane. Too much study has made you crazy!'—Paul's insistence on a living God who raises the dead and has been working throughout history hits something deep in Festus. He

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shouts out what is a fairly illogical accusation against Paul. Why would too much study make a man insane? It seems Festus can't handle the life-changing implications of Paul's words.

- 'Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am'—Paul has nothing more to lose. He is on his way to Rome, and there is nothing the authorities here can do to him. He gives his all and tries to convince these powerful people that they need Jesus. Agrippa can sense Paul's passion and urgency. Agrippa's question is probably rhetorical, either meant as mockery or as a little joke. Paul decides to take it straight.
- 'except for these chains'—maybe Paul is responding to Agrippa's little joke in kind, or maybe he's making an important clarification that he has nothing against them and wishes them no harm. I tend to think it's a joke, and not a bad one: it's funny, charming, and thought-provoking. The guy in chains thinks he's the luckiest one in the room.

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* It's tempting to think that our lives are mundane events with only occasional bursts of meaning. Paul views every moment of his life as a moment God cares about. Pray for God to give you faith to believe in God's involvement in your life, past, present, and future.
- *Through your six:* What Paul is saying sounds like crazy talk to Festus, but Paul thinks he's the luckiest person in the room. Is there something about your life with God that sounds crazy to your six, but you know it would be great news for them? Pray that God would break down barriers to them hearing you, and ask God to help you communicate with them well.
- *Through our church:* The essence of Paul's message is that God brings new light into the lives of Jews and non-Jews alike. Nowadays, at least in the church, more relevant than the distinction between Jews and non-Jews might be the distinction between traditional churchgoers and non-churchgoers. We're a church filled with both groups. Pray that throughout our life as a church, we'd bring new light to the lives of people who've spent their whole lives in churches and to the lives of people surprised to find themselves in a church at all.

Saturday March 30th

Acts 27

¹When the time came, we set sail for Italy. Paul and several other prisoners were placed in the custody of an army officer named Julius, a captain of the Imperial Regiment. ²And Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was also with us. We left on a boat whose home port was Adramyttium; it was scheduled to make several stops at ports along the coast of the province of Asia.

³The next day when we docked at Sidon, Julius was very kind to Paul and let him go ashore to visit with friends so they could provide for his needs. ⁴Putting out to sea from there, we encountered headwinds that made it difficult to keep the ship on course, so we sailed north of Cyprus between the island and the mainland. ⁵We passed along the coast of the provinces of Cilicia and Pamphylia, landing at Myra, in the province of Lycia. ⁶There the officer found an Egyptian ship from Alexandria that was bound for Italy, and he put us on board.

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⁷We had several days of rough sailing, and after great difficulty we finally neared Cnidus. But the wind was against us, so we sailed down to the leeward side of Crete, past the cape of Salmone. ⁸We struggled along the coast with great difficulty and finally arrived at Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea. ⁹We had lost a lot of time. The weather was becoming dangerous for long voyages by then because it was so late in the fall, and Paul spoke to the ship's officers about it.

¹⁰"Sirs," he said, "I believe there is trouble ahead if we go on--shipwreck, loss of cargo, injuries, and danger to our lives." ¹¹But the officer in charge of the prisoners listened more to the ship's captain and the owner than to Paul. ¹²And since Fair Havens was an exposed harbor--a poor place to spend the winter--most of the crew wanted to go to Phoenix, farther up the coast of Crete, and spend the winter there. Phoenix was a good harbor with only a southwest and northwest exposure.

¹³When a light wind began blowing from the south, the sailors thought they could make it. So they pulled up anchor and sailed along close to shore. ¹⁴But the weather changed abruptly, and a wind of typhoon strength (a "northeaster," they called it) caught the ship and blew it out to sea. ¹⁵They couldn't turn the ship into the wind, so they gave up and let it run before the gale.

¹⁶We sailed behind a small island named Cauda, where with great difficulty we hoisted aboard the lifeboat that was being towed behind us. ¹⁷Then we banded the ship with ropes to strengthen the hull. The sailors were afraid of being driven across to the sandbars of Syrtis off the African coast, so they lowered the sea anchor and were thus driven before the wind.

¹⁸The next day, as gale-force winds continued to batter the ship, the crew began throwing the cargo overboard. ¹⁹The following day they even threw out the ship's equipment and anything else they could lay their hands on. ²⁰The terrible storm raged unabated for many days, blotting out the sun and the stars, until at last all hope was gone.

²¹No one had eaten for a long time. Finally, Paul called the crew together and said, "Men, you should have listened to me in the first place and not left Fair Havens. You would have avoided all this injury and loss. ²²But take courage! None of you will lose your lives, even though the ship will go down. ²³For last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me, ²⁴and he said, 'Don't be afraid, Paul, for you will surely stand trial before Caesar! What's more, God in his goodness has granted safety to everyone sailing with you.' ²⁵So take courage! For I believe God. It will be just as he said. ²⁶But we will be shipwrecked on an island."

²⁷About midnight on the fourteenth night of the storm, as we were being driven across the Sea of Adria, the sailors sensed land was near. ²⁸They took soundings and found the water was only 120 feet deep. A little later they sounded again and found only 90 feet. ²⁹At this rate they were afraid we would soon be driven against the rocks along the shore, so they threw out four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight. ³⁰Then the sailors tried to abandon the ship; they lowered the lifeboat as though they were going to put out anchors from the prow. ³¹But Paul said to the commanding officer and the soldiers, "You will all die unless the sailors stay aboard." ³²So the soldiers cut the ropes and let the boat fall off. ³³As the darkness gave way to the early morning light, Paul begged everyone to eat. "You haven't touched food for two weeks," he said. ³⁴"Please eat something now for your own good. For not a hair of your heads will perish." ³⁵Then he took some bread, gave thanks to God before them all, and broke off a piece and ate it. ³⁶Then everyone was encouraged, ³⁷and all 276 of us began eating--for that is the number we had aboard. ³⁸After eating, the crew lightened the ship further by throwing the cargo of wheat overboard.

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³⁹When morning dawned, they didn't recognize the coastline, but they saw a bay with a beach and wondered if they could get between the rocks and get the ship safely to shore. ⁴⁰So they cut off the anchors and left them in the sea. Then they lowered the rudders, raised the foresail, and headed toward shore. ⁴¹But the ship hit a shoal and ran aground. The bow of the ship stuck fast, while the stern was repeatedly smashed by the force of the waves and began to break apart.

⁴²The soldiers wanted to kill the prisoners to make sure they didn't swim ashore and escape. ⁴³But the commanding officer wanted to spare Paul, so he didn't let them carry out their plan. Then he ordered all who could swim to jump overboard first and make for land, ⁴⁴and he told the others to try for it on planks and debris from the broken ship. So everyone escaped safely ashore!

Points of Interest:

- 'we set sail for Italy'—Luke has apparently rejoined Paul for this journey.
- 'the officer found an Egyptian ship from Alexandria'—Egypt was known as the breadbasket of the Roman Empire; this may very well be a cargo ship bringing grain to Rome. The broad reach of the Roman Empire and the incredible transportation that connected it cannot be underestimated in contributing to the rapid spread of the early followers of Jesus. All roads, at least in that part of the world, did in fact lead to and from Rome. The other helpful element was the role the Roman army played in keeping the peace.
- 'Paul spoke to the ship's officers about it'—I wonder if Paul has heard something from God about this trip. Otherwise, what would this teacher and tentmaker have to say to these sailors?
- 'I believe there is trouble ahead if we go on—shipwreck, loss of cargo, injuries, and danger to our lives'—if Paul's words are a word from God, then things do not bode well. In fact, most of what he predicts does come true except the loss of life.
- 'None of you will lose your lives, even though the ship will go down.'—why does the 'danger to our lives' part of the prophecy not come true though the rest does? One possible explanation is that Paul has been praying on behalf of the whole crew that God would spare their lives. It seems that God has answered his prayers.
- 'God in his goodness has granted safety to everyone sailing with you.'—or maybe no one loses their life because the sailors are needed to bring their most precious cargo Paul to Rome.
- 'the commanding officer wanted to spare Paul'—beyond just the goodness of his heart, this seems an obvious tactical decision. Don't kill the guy who has God on his side!

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Throughout the bible God describes himself as the God who wants to rescue us from danger and trouble. Paul hears from God in the midst of a life-threatening storm, and then through his faith he saves many others. As we learn to trust God with our biggest fears and problems and put ourselves in a place where only God can make a difference, we will then be used by God to do the same for others. What might God want you to trust him with today? Your money, your future, your relationships?

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- *Through your six:* Julius was used by God because of his kind heart to serve Paul in his journey to Rome. Pray for your six that, by their kindness, they will be partners to you in efforts you make to bring God's goodness into the world around you.
- *Through our church:* Hearing God's voice and allowing it to guide our decisions is not an easy thing to do. Pray that we would be a group of people who works well together at hearing God's voice, interpreting what it's saying to us, and following what we hear.

Sunday, March 31st

Acts 28

¹Once we were safe on shore, we learned that we were on the island of Malta. ²The people of the island were very kind to us. It was cold and rainy, so they built a fire on the shore to welcome us and warm us.

³As Paul gathered an armful of sticks and was laying them on the fire, a poisonous snake, driven out by the heat, fastened itself onto his hand. ⁴The people of the island saw it hanging there and said to each other, "A murderer, no doubt! Though he escaped the sea, justice will not permit him to live." ⁵But Paul shook off the snake into the fire and was unharmed. ⁶The people waited for him to swell up or suddenly drop dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and decided he was a god.

⁷Near the shore where we landed was an estate belonging to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us courteously and fed us for three days. ⁸As it happened, Publius's father was ill with fever and dysentery. Paul went in and prayed for him, and laying his hands on him, he healed him. ⁹Then all the other sick people on the island came and were cured. ¹⁰As a result we were showered with honors, and when the time came to sail, people put on board all sorts of things we would need for the trip.

¹¹It was three months after the shipwreck that we set sail on another ship that had wintered at the island--an Alexandrian ship with the twin gods as its figurehead. ¹²Our first stop was Syracuse, where we stayed three days. ¹³From there we sailed across to Rhegium. A day later a south wind began blowing, so the following day we sailed up the coast to Puteoli. ¹⁴There we found some believers, who invited us to stay with them seven days. And so we came to Rome.

¹⁵The brothers and sisters in Rome had heard we were coming, and they came to meet us at the Forum on the Appian Way. Others joined us at The Three Taverns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.

¹⁶When we arrived in Rome, Paul was permitted to have his own private lodging, though he was guarded by a soldier.

¹⁷Three days after Paul's arrival, he called together the local Jewish leaders. He said to them, "Brothers, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Roman government, even though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors. ¹⁸The Romans tried me and wanted to release me, for they found no cause for the death sentence. ¹⁹But when the Jewish leaders protested the decision, I felt it necessary to appeal to Caesar, even though I had no desire to press charges against my own people. ²⁰I asked you to come here today so we could get acquainted and so I could tell you that I am bound with this chain because I believe that the hope of Israel--the Messiah--has already come."

²¹They replied, "We have heard nothing against you. We have had no letters from Judea or reports from anyone who has arrived here. ²²But we want to hear what you believe, for the only thing we know about

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these Christians is that they are denounced everywhere."

²³So a time was set, and on that day a large number of people came to Paul's house. He told them about the Kingdom of God and taught them about Jesus from the Scriptures--from the five books of Moses and the books of the prophets. He began lecturing in the morning and went on into the evening. ²⁴Some believed and some didn't. ²⁵But after they had argued back and forth among themselves, they left with this final word from Paul: "The Holy Spirit was right when he said to our ancestors through Isaiah the prophet,

²⁶ 'Go and say to my people,
You will hear my words,
but you will not understand;
you will see what I do,
but you will not perceive its meaning.

²⁷ For the hearts of these people are hardened,
and their ears cannot hear,
and they have closed their eyes--
so their eyes cannot see,
and their ears cannot hear,
and their hearts cannot understand,
and they cannot turn to me
and let me heal them.'

²⁸So I want you to realize that this salvation from God is also available to the Gentiles, and they will accept it."

³⁰For the next two years, Paul lived in his own rented house. He welcomed all who visited him,

³¹proclaiming the Kingdom of God with all boldness and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. And no one tried to stop him.

Points of Interest:

- 'they changed their minds and decided he was a god.'—the locals are having a hard time getting a bead on Paul. At first they think that he's so wicked that the fates can't bear to see him survive a shipwreck, and thus send a poisonous snake to do him. When he survives the bite, they then decide that he's so godly that even poison can't touch him.
- 'Then all the other sick people on the island came and were cured'--it turns out that this amazing healing power isn't meant for Paul alone. Every sick person on the island gets to benefit.
- 'The brothers and sisters in Rome had heard we were coming, and they came to meet us'—Paul is not the only person in the early church effective at spreading news about Jesus. Paul has friends to greet him when he arrives.
- 'Three days after Paul's arrival, he called together the local Jewish leaders.'—he's under house arrest and can't attend synagogue. Nonetheless, Paul finds a way to follow his custom of meeting with the local Jewish people first.

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- ‘the only thing we know about these Christians is that they are denounced everywhere’-- thankfully, Paul’s reputation as someone who spurns Jewish tradition hasn’t gotten to Rome. It puts Paul in the refreshing position of being able to build a bridge between the Jewish community and the Roman followers of Jesus.
- ‘For the hearts of these people are hardened’—Paul is quoting an Old Testament prophet predicting what Paul has now found to be true of many of his own people. Paul must have spoken these words reluctantly and solemnly. What a warning! To think that we can get to a place where our hearts are too hard to receive what God has for us.
- ‘this salvation from God is also available to the Gentiles’—the assumption of the day was that Jesus had died for the Jews to inherit the salvation promised by God. The great leap was to include the rest of the world in this good news. Paul spent his life honing and spreading that message. It’s tempting today to believe that God’s goodness is intended only for those cultures that have been traditionally Christian. Paul’s final word to us is that there are no boundaries to God’s goodness – cultural, political, religious or national. God is actively pursuing every person on earth!

Taking it home:

- *Through you:* Paul finished well. Despite harassments, opposition, conflict, and abandonment Paul continued to trust God and to push ahead with the mission God had given him. As we end the Leap of Faith, what will it mean for you to finish well not only in these six weeks but in life? What do you want Jesus to do through you? Ask God once again to sharpened and focus your mission in God for your life.
- *Through your six:* Pray for the condition of your six’s hearts. Pray that God would soften their hearts and make them receptive to whatever good God has for them.
- *Through our church:* As we pursue God’s dreams for us individually and corporately, pray that God would raise up more and more faithful followers of Jesus willing to give their lives to God’s purposes. Pray that they would do this out of a sense of God’s overwhelming goodness to them personally.