

02

SESSION TWO

Paul Before Rulers

SESSION SUMMARY

After Paul's dramatic rescue from Jerusalem, the apostle had to defend himself before the court of Caesarea. God used Paul's courage, expertise in the law, and cleverness to expose the character of three rulers—Felix the corrupt, Festus the wavering, and Agrippa the unpersuaded. Even though Paul was the defendant on trial, God turned the tables through his witness and put the earthly leaders in the hot-seat. In the face of false accusation, unfair sentencing, and even death itself, Paul seized every opportunity to share the gospel with clarity, courage, and conviction.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 24:22-27; 25:1-12; 26:24-32

THE POINT

God wants us to be concerned more about others' salvation than about our own situation.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Identity—who you truly are—matters. But have you ever noticed how often we reduce our identities to what we do? “Hi! I’m Rachel, and I’m a competitive swimmer.” Or “This is my friend Jerry. He’s valedictorian of our class.” Our identities and energies also tend to revolve around what we own or what we’d like to own—like a new car or the latest video game.

- **If you asked your best friend to identify you, what would he or she say? Is there anything he or she would miss or share that you wish went unsaid?**

When the plot to kill Paul was uncovered, the soldiers snuck him out of Jerusalem to Caesarea at night under guard (Acts 23:12-31). Paul was safe, but he was still a prisoner and would soon stand trial before three rulers. In his defense, Paul revealed how our identities as Christians have nothing to do with whether we make straight “A’s,” how many followers we have on social media, or whether we are able to get an athletic scholarship to college. As Christ-followers, we are not defined by the mistakes of our past, or the skeletons in our closets. Our identity is found in Jesus Christ alone.

Christianity is costly business. It can cost us our reputations, social status, friendships, comfort, safety, and even our lives. That’s what Paul discovered and that’s what each of us will discover as well. Christ doesn’t want part of us. He wants all of us. And as with Paul, only when we surrender ourselves to Christ will we begin to find our true identity. Then, we will worry less about preserving our lives and more about sharing life and light with others through the gospel.

Option 2

There are some things we share because we’re excited, others we share because we need advice, and others we share because it’s all a part of what we’re learning. Lead students through a few questions, asking the following:

- **When is it appropriate to share _____ ?**

You can fill in the blank with words like *a secret, new information, about our favorite games and TV shows, or food*. You may come up with your own words, maybe even some more specific to your group. Instruct students to answer with *always, sometimes, or never*. If they answer with “sometimes,” then ask them to explain why it is appropriate to share. For example, it’s appropriate to share a secret when people plan to hurt themselves or others. One thing it is always appropriate to share, no matter the consequences, is the gospel. People always need to know about God’s love for us and that we can have forgiveness of our sins—regardless of the consequences we may face for sharing.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God wants us to be concerned more about others' salvation than about our own situation.

CHARACTERS

- **Paul:** former persecutor who became a Christ-follower and apostle to the Gentiles
- **Felix:** Roman governor of Judaea during Paul's initial arrest
- **Festus:** succeeded Felix in Judea; sent Paul to Caesar rather than Jerusalem
- **Agrippa:** great-grandson of Herod the Great; heard Paul's case before Paul went to Caesar

PLOT

Even though Paul was able to avoid the Jewish mob (by the grace of God), he was not out of the woods. He had to make his own case and face his accusers in open court. And yet, even in the midst of all of this drama and trouble, Paul's main focus remained to make much of Jesus.

TIMELINE

PAUL BEFORE EARTHLY KINGS

Paul testifies before earthly rulers.

SHIPWRECKED

Paul courageously faces the storm.

JOY IN PRISON

The gospel advances in difficult circumstances.

PAUL BEFORE FELIX

Paul was imprisoned in Herod's palace in Caesarea, but just as God was not done with him (Acts 23:11), neither were the Jews. Ananias—the high priest whom Paul had called a whitewashed tomb and said God would strike down (Acts 23:3)—came to Caesarea with some elders and a lawyer named Tertullus. And with that, an epic showdown unfolded between two heavyweights: Paul, the Jerusalem-trained former Pharisee, and Tertullus, an equally matched opponent who wanted to destroy Paul's witness.

After flattering Felix, Tertullus went on the offensive against Paul by labeling him a “plague,” an “agitator,” and a “ringleader” (Acts 24:5). He went on to explain that Paul had even tried to desecrate the temple—the supposed reason for his arrest. While vandalizing the temple most likely didn’t concern Felix, the charges that Paul was an agitator and ringleader and how the Jews would have responded had he actually desecrated the temple would have greatly troubled the governor. If there was one thing Rome could not stomach, it was regional unrest. As a governor, any hint of public discord was alarming and would not be tolerated. That is what Tertullus was counting on.

The lawyer ended his appeal with another compliment before the Jews joined in to verify what Tertullus had shared. Then it was Paul’s turn to respond. With clarity and conviction, the apostle demanded that his opponents actually prove his crimes. Where was the evidence? This was, after all, a courtroom. Without proof, the Romans could not condemn him.

Paul then appealed to his Jewish roots, affirmed his commitment to living in line with the law and prophets (Acts 24:14), and declared the greatest hope of his heart a hope in God of a future resurrection (Acts 24:15).

Finally, it was Felix’s turn to weigh in:

22 But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, “When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case.” 23 Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs. 24 After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. 25 And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, “Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you.” 26 At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him. 27 When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison. (Acts 24:22-27)

Unlike the Jewish leaders, Felix did not feel threatened by Paul and his teachings, at least not at first. Felix decided to wait to hear more from Paul and extended some freedom to his prisoner. Then one day, Felix summoned Paul to hear more. As the apostle spoke about righteousness, self-control, and judgment, something happened to Felix: He became afraid.

Maybe Felix recognized that he lacked the necessary righteousness and self-control that would spare him from the coming judgment. Whatever it was that struck fear in him, Felix responded as people often do—he sent Paul away. Out of sight; out of mind.

PAUL BEFORE FESTUS

After two years of Felix being entertained by Paul, a new Judean governor, Porcius Festus, assumed office.

1 Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. 2 And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, 3 asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. 4 Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. 5 “So,” said he, “let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him.” 6 After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. 7 When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove. 8 Paul argued in his defense, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.” 9 But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, “Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?” (Acts 25:1-9)

Shortly after arriving in the region, Festus traveled to Jerusalem and the chief priests and religious leaders recognized another opportunity to rid themselves of Paul. Maybe Festus would do them a favor and agree to bring Paul from Caesarea back to Jerusalem. Maybe they thought Festus would want to make a good first impression with the influential Jewish leaders and without knowing the backstory, would agree to this seemingly simple request. And if he did, the Jewish leaders would take advantage of the opportunity of Paul being exposed, and have him killed as he traveled along the road.

But Festus refused. No, he would not call for Paul to come to Jerusalem. Instead, he would return to Caesarea and the Jewish leaders could travel with him and bring accusations against Paul there.

Days later, Paul stood before Festus and a collection of Jewish leaders in Caesarea. The Jews launched a vicious attack against Paul, one they could not prove.

TIMELINE

CHRIST IS PREEMINENT
Paul magnifies Christ in prison.

GOSPEL RECONCILIATION
The gospel restores broken relationships.

DAY OF THE LORD
The future hope for all Christians

Then Paul made his defense. He had not done anything wrong against the Jewish law, the temple, or Caesar. Neither Jerusalem nor Rome had grounds to condemn him.

Just like Felix, Festus found himself at a crossroads. What would he do? He knew Paul had committed no crime against Rome, and he could release him for lack of courtroom evidence. But he couldn't really do that, because the Jewish leaders would be furious. Maybe he could find a way to shift responsibility of the decision and curry favor with the Jews at the same time. If Festus took Paul to Jerusalem for a trial as they had requested the week before, they would owe him. So Festus wavered and asked Paul if he was willing to go.

10 But Paul said, “I am standing before Caesar’s tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. 11 If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar.” 12 Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.” (Acts 25:10-12)

Paul exerted his right as a Roman citizen and appealed directly to Caesar. In that moment, Festus and the Jews saw their authority over Paul disintegrate; his life was now in the hands of the most powerful person in the Roman Empire. But for Paul, that moment changed nothing. His life remained where it had always been: in the hands of the Almighty God.

- Place yourself in Festus’ position. What would you have done? (p. 17, PSG)
- How would you have responded if you were in Paul’s shoes? (p. 17, PSG)

PAUL BEFORE AGRIPPA

Paul was brought before the leaders, and he delivered a lengthy testimony. The apostle shared about his Jewish heritage, his Damascus road conversion, and his hope in the resurrection.

24 And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.” 25 But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. 26 For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. 27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” (Acts 26:24-27)

Paul had been accused of many things, but this was possibly the first time he had been called insane because of excessive studying. The apostle denied the accusation but then quickly moved his attention to Agrippa. Paul clarified that what he had talked about—his life, and more importantly, the life and ministry

of Jesus—had occurred in the open. All he had shared was verifiable and surely Agrippa had noticed it. Paul then asked Agrippa a critical question, and the king's answer could silence the leader once and for all. "Do you believe the prophets?" Or in other words, "Are you a good Jew?" Paul then answered for the king, saying he knew Agrippa believed that he was a good Jew.

Agrippa apparently picked up on Paul's strategy, because he deflected the question:

28 And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" 29 And Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains." 30 Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. 31 And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment." 32 And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar." (Acts 26:28-32)

King Agrippa wasn't persuaded to become a Christian. While scholars disagree on what Agrippa meant in his statement—sarcasm, anger, or sincerity—Paul's boldness in declaring the gospel and driving his audience to respond to it was evident.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God Is Just (p. 18, PSG)

God establishes standards for His moral creatures that are in accordance with His righteousness, and His moral creatures will be judged according to those righteous standards (Lev. 11:44-45; Rom. 2:5-11; 2 Cor. 5:10). It would be an injustice if God were not to uphold His righteousness, because such a failure would require God to violate His own righteous character. Since humanity has sinned by failing to live up to God's righteous standards, God has taken it upon Himself to make provision by being both just and the justifier of those who place their faith in Christ (Rom. 3:25-26).

CHRIST CONNECTION

Paul was not the only person to defend himself before earthly rulers. Jesus Christ had to defend Himself, too. Pontius Pilate asked about the truth of Jesus' identity as King of the Jews (John 18:33). Indeed, Jesus was the King of the Jews. But He was and is more than that. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tim. 6:15). King Solomon, the greatest of earthly kings, once declared that all kings and nations would bow to and serve Jesus (Ps. 72:11). And one day, every king will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:10-11).

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What surprises you most about Paul's encounter with these government officials? Answers will vary.**
- **The fact that Paul was articulate in sharing his faith with the intellectuals of his culture was more than impressive—it was necessary. What are some ways you can become more equipped at sharing your faith with the intellectuals of our culture? First, become a student. Be a learner. Being equipped to articulate your faith and defend it before others is a part of the discipleship process. The first part of that process is to have a teachable spirit that is eager to learn. Second, make time to read books on Christian apologetics and theology. Make it a goal to read a certain number every few months, and set a strategy to help you stick to this goal. Third, be in community with older, more mature believers. If you are a guy, connect with older men in your church. If you are a girl, connect with older women in your church. And learn from them.**
- **How do you think Paul was able to endure being under arrest for this long? Answers will vary.**
- **What can we learn from Paul when it comes to facing adversity and difficulty in our own lives? Answers will vary.**

HIS STORY

*God's Story of
Redemption,
through His Son,
Jesus Christ.*

YOUR STORY

*Where your story
meets His.*

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES

HEAD

When Paul's life was on the line, his greatest defense—his ultimate identity—was tied to Jesus Christ. When others brought false accusations against him and impugned his reputation, Paul unashamedly declared allegiance to his King even if it led to imprisonment, torture, ridicule, and mockery. In the end, the apostle did not budge from his Christ-centered, gospel-driven identity.

- **Why is it important that our identity be grounded in Jesus instead of our possessions, accomplishments, or earthly relationships?** *If we ground our identity horizontally in the things around us, then when those things are taken away or lose value (which will inevitably happen) our identity changes with them. However, if our identity is vertically grounded in Christ, as He designed it to be, then our identity will remain intact despite our circumstances.*
- **How does Paul's witness to his Christ-centered identity encourage and challenge you to live more in accordance with your own Christ-centered identity?** *Answers will vary.*

HEART

King Agrippa might be seen as an “almost” Christian. How many “almost” Christians do you know? Are you an “almost” Christian? There are plenty of excuses for staying in the “almost” zone: pride, pleasure, and peer pressure. But here’s the heartbreaking truth about “almost” Christianity. It’s not Christianity at all. Hell will most certainly be full of all kinds of “almost” Christians—men and women who, like Agrippa, heard the gospel but continued to reject Christ.

- **How can people live as “almost” Christians at times?** *An example might be: We can give off the appearance of being religious or even wanting our lives to change, but in the end we love the world too much.*
- **Why is it important to make sure the issue of your salvation is firm and settled? How can you have confidence that you are a genuine Christian, and not an “almost” Christian?** *You can ask yourself whether you are trusting, resting, and depending on Jesus this very minute for the forgiveness of your sins. You can look at your own life to see if there is any fruit of God at work in making you look more like Jesus everyday. Ultimately, you gain confidence by looking to Jesus and resting in Him.*

HANDS

We learn from Paul’s faithful witness before kings that evangelism is our business, but conversion is God’s business. Like Paul, you and I are responsible for sharing the gospel with anyone and everyone God puts in our path. We share. We pray. We challenge. We encourage. But we do not grant salvation. Only the Holy Spirit can take the gospel, pierce a hardened heart, and give new life.

- **When was the last time you almost shared your testimony or witnessed to a non-believer? What held you back?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How can Paul’s witness encourage us to take every opportunity to spread the gospel?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPSUM18REV)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject