

WELCOME TO FAVOR COUNTRY

ACTS 25:1-12 FEBRUARY 17, 2021

There are four words that can strike fear into the stoutest heart, words that can frighten young and old alike. Hear them and your pulse quickens. You brace for the impact of what follows. What are the four words? “*I need a favor...*” It’s been said that the world runs on little favors. From the airport pickup to rolling out a neighbor’s trashcan, most of us are on both ends of favors all the time. In the halls of government, giving favors can get you into trouble. Right now, some are accusing President Biden’s pick to lead homeland security of “[doing] his best to turn U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services into an unethical favor factory for Democratic Party royalty.”¹ Meanwhile, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton (a republican) is being sued for “swapping political favors for a donor’s help with a home remodel and a job for his alleged ‘mistress.’”²

Sadly, in this sinful world, many favors are not done out of the kindness of a person’s heart, but as a means to win leverage or accomplish selfish goals.

Giving favors is a theme in our text tonight. The chief priests want one. Festus wants to give them one. But they’re each trying to gain leverage for themselves in the situation.

I’m no language scholar, but there are a couple of interesting words used here that make us think about our faith in Christ and the difference between what He does and what the world does. The first is the word translated here as “favor.” It’s the word *charis*. You’ve probably heard that Greek word before. We more commonly associate it with the word *grace*. God’s grace is His *charis*, His *favor* toward His people. The Jews will ask Festus for *charis* and, he, in turn, wants to give them *charis*, or at least the human equivalent, which is nothing like God’s grace at all. You see, *God’s charis* is unmerited favor given as a free gift. Not as leverage, not to manipulate, not so He can hold something over us. But out of immeasurable love He freely offers us salvation and satisfaction in abundance. It’s His *favor* toward us, working all things together for good. Beginning and completing a perfect work in us as He continually sends us His kind, compassionate care.³ That grace of God is not only for our *benefit* but is meant to *define* our lives.

This is *not* the kind of favor Festus and the priests were talking about. No, they’re elbowing for position in a very deadly game. Their struggle is for power and they find themselves in a tug-of-war concerning Paul, this Christian missionary who has been imprisoned in Caesarea for 2 years.

So where is this astounding grace in *his* life? It’s there. In fact, even in these hard circumstances we see it at work in and through Paul. No, his life wasn’t full of material wealth or worldly power, but he *was* defined by God’s grace and wrapped up in it. That joyous lovingkindness, given out of the fullness of God’s love, sent to help in time of need.

Paul was definitely in a time of great need and the Lord did not disappoint. He never does! Let’s see how the Savior gave grace to His humble servant while opposing the proud.

Acts 25:1 - Three days after Festus arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea.

¹ <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/mcconnell-rips-dhs-nominee-mayorkas-creating-unethical-favor-factory-democratic-party-royalty>

² <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2021/02/11/lawsuit-texas-ag-ken-paxton-swapped-political-favors-for-home-remodel-job-for-alleged-mistress/>

³ <https://www.gotquestions.org/charis-in-the-Bible.html>

Festus was appointed after Felix was recalled. Felix was fired from the job after someone blew the whistle on his murderous corruption against the Jews. In many ways, Festus was a very different man than Felix was. Felix was a procrastinator, but Festus was quick to act and make moves. Though many historians think he was generally a man of higher character, we'll find he was no more inclined to the Gospel. In fact, he'll be *less* interested in hearing about Jesus than Felix was.

At the time, the region of Judea was on the brink of civil war.⁴ There was significant unrest. The Roman government had been responsible for the slaughter of thousands of Jews (that's why Felix was recalled). And so, Festus immediately gets to work. There's no time to lose if the *pax Romana* is going to be maintained. While he was busy getting his hands on the job, the leaders of Israel were busy trying to get their hooks into the new governor.

Acts 25:2-3 - ²The chief priests and the leaders of the Jews presented their case against Paul to him; and they appealed, ³asking for a favor against Paul, that Festus summon him to Jerusalem. They were, in fact, preparing an ambush along the road to kill him.

They say "absence makes the heart grow fonder," but not in the case of Paul. For two years he had been benched, but his enemies in Jerusalem hadn't forgotten him or removed him from their hit list. We're even *two* high priests removed from Ananias who we saw back in chapter 24. The guy after him had been assassinated by Felix, and now we've got another high priest named Ishmael.

As soon as Festus gets to town they were on him. They start hammering Festus, who maybe didn't know any of the details of Paul's case yet, to give them this favor and transfer Paul to Jerusalem.

The last time there was a plot on Paul's life it had been this group of guys who came to the leaders of Israel and said, "Here's what we want to do...we're gonna ambush Paul and murder him." But now the elders and chief priests are going full Thanos and say, "Fine, I'll do it myself." It's heartbreaking to see their descent into evil. These priests were *meant* to reconcile people to God, speaking the word of God and bringing purity not only to Israel, but ultimately to the whole world.

Now we, in the church, have been made priests. Peter explains that we are a royal priesthood. And, in 2 Corinthians 5:18, we read that God has committed the message of reconciliation to us and given us a *ministry* of reconciliation. Not of destruction or any of the sort of conniving seen demonstrated here. We are sent throughout the world to help the lost be reconciled to God as He makes His appeal through us. We should regularly evaluate if we are fulfilling that purpose as God's holy priests.

Now, if I had been shackled to Roman guards for two years, I think I would've lost heart. But when we see Paul again he's full of peace. Because, despite his unfair circumstances, he was experiencing the power of God's grace, which filled him with patience. He was able to trust that this time was *not* a waste, even though many days it must have felt like it. God's grace is bigger than difficult circumstances and can help us make sense of senseless times in life. Paul was remaining faithful and Spirit-filled and so, despite the fact he wasn't doing what he really wanted to do, he could be confident he was still in the will of God.

I was thinking that it must be frustrating for the Devil and his angels to not be able to get to targets like Paul. Satan wanted Paul dead. He kept that malice alive in the hearts of the chief priests. And

⁴ Ivor Powell *The Amazing Acts*

we see in the Gospels that demons were able to attack people, throw people into fires and things like that. A demon possessed man practically tore apart the seven sons of Sceva in Acts 19. So why not just possess one of the guards and have him murder Paul? Because God, in His grace, would not allow it. Greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world. The Devil, for all his power and influence could not lay a finger on Paul. We see that in the story of Job. All Satan could do was *accuse* Job. Otherwise, until God allowed certain things, Job was completely safe from the Devil.

The Lord promises in Psalm 5 that He will surround His people “with favor like a shield.” That was true for Paul and it’s true for us. No weapon formed against us shall stand. These are the benefits enjoyed by the servants of the Lord.⁵ Paul was shielded from demonic attack and shielded from human attack because grace is not just a *feeling*, it is God’s *function* in our lives.

Acts 25:4-5 - ⁴Festus, however, answered that Paul should be kept at Caesarea, and that he himself was about to go there shortly. ⁵“Therefore,” he said, “let those of you who have authority go down with me and accuse him, if he has done anything wrong.”

Festus needed to bring stability to the region but he couldn’t start his administration as a pushover. So he’s doing this dance, not wanting to offend the Jewish community, but also not wanting to get mowed over like Pontius Pilate or Felix had been. He gives the impression that he was willing to work with them but that he was going to do everything “by the book.” We’ll see about that.

Acts 25:6 - ⁶When he had spent not more than eight or ten days among them, he went down to Caesarea. The next day, seated at the tribunal, he commanded Paul to be brought in.

Interesting: At first he deliberately slows their roll, but then after a few days with them, he’s ready to scratch their itch. Notice how it says, “The *next* day.” He wastes no time getting to this issue once he’s back in Caesarea. It seems like the Jewish leaders had been priming the pump to get that favor.

It would seem like Paul was at a total disadvantage in the situation. He’s got a new judge who is less informed about everything, who’s probably been wined and dined all week by these accusers and Festus is totally incentivized to throw them a Paul-shaped bone. You see, despite Festus acting like everything was going to be on the up-and-up, he was still a political animal. He wasn’t concerned with justice as much as we was concerned with the bargains he would have to make with his new subjects.

Acts 25:7 - ⁷When he arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him and brought many serious charges that they were not able to prove.

Scholars say the language indicates that they *actually* encircled Paul as they accused him, hurling charge after charge in their effort to get him executed.

Sometimes when a defendant is brought in to their trial they break down when the charges are read aloud. In 2013, Oscar Pistorious, the Paralympic superstar, wept openly in court as the charge of premeditated murder was read into the record.⁶

⁵ Isaiah 54:17

⁶ <https://www.lowellsun.com/2013/02/15/pistorius-wept-openly-in-court/>

But there's Paul, standing calm and collected. He's not *happy* to be there, but he's not afraid or broken down. Though his adversaries formed a ring around him, the favor of God was closer still, wrapping him as a shield.

You know, right now there's a scene not unlike this one playing out in the court of heaven. Day and night Satan stands before God accusing you and I and all our brothers and sisters. But we have an Advocate who will plead our case - Jesus Christ - who will never leave us. He has atoned for us and given us *His* righteousness so we might enjoy the gracious favor of God.

Our enemies may bring attacks and accusations, but here is what's true: *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. No power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck me from His hand. And I have decided to follow Jesus, though none go with me still I will follow, no turning back, no turning back.* These things are true because of what Christ has done for us and won for us by the grace of God, offered freely to all who will believe.

As an aside, it is so good and so important for us to be reminded of truths like these. That's why we sing them, to keep grace as a life-sustaining melody in our hearts.

Acts 25:8 - ⁸Then Paul made his defense: “Neither against the Jewish law, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I sinned in any way.”

Paul is very calm, very clear. God's favor gave him the ability to endure this hardship. The Bible says that God's grace, His favor, strengthens us for moments like this. Despite how unfair this is, Paul is still a peacemaker. Trouble always followed Paul, but he was a peacemaker not a troublemaker. Our world is already troubled. We're to live at peace as much as it is possible for us. Here we see that Paul shot straight. He was a man with consistent integrity. No scheming. No maneuvering or manipulating. No flattery or personal attacks on these guys. What a great example to us of how to conduct ourselves in the power of the Spirit.

Acts 25:9 - ⁹But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, replied to Paul, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem to be tried before me there on these charges?”

The charis of Festus had nothing to do with kindness or love, but his desire to get on the good side of his subjects and have them in his debt. What a difference between man's favor and God's.

On one level it would be embarrassing that in his very first case as governor he was unable to render a verdict. Doubtless by now he had familiarized himself with Paul's case history. He knew there had already been an attempt on his life. But he's willing to sacrifice this Roman citizen to buy himself some polling points.

His suggestion is ridiculous. “Hey, we're all here, all the parties and all the officials and all the data... so why don't we all pack up and do this same thing 50 miles from here!” The truth is, for all his political acumen, Festus will admit in verse 20 he was “at a loss” to know what to do.

Acts 25:10-11 - ¹⁰Paul replied, “I am standing at Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. I have done no wrong to the Jews, as even you yourself know very well. ¹¹If then I did anything wrong and am deserving of death, I am not trying to escape death; but if there is nothing to what these men accuse me of, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar!”

This was a dead-locked, no-win situation. In World War I there were these enormous, bloody battles that would stretch week after week with only a few feet being won by one side or the other.⁷ It's like that here. Just the same thing again and they find themselves at an impasse. But God's grace shows Paul a way out. He would explain to us through his epistle to the Ephesians that the Lord has planned good works for us long ago and it is our duty to discover them. But, by God's grace, He *shows* us the way. We see it in Paul. He knew that he was to preach in Rome. Meanwhile, everyone's trying to get him to *Jerusalem*. "How do I do what God has called me to do?" And then God shows him the way. He appeals to Caesar, which was his right as a Roman citizen.

While God's favor was showing Paul a way out of his predicament, it was also empowering him to speak with boldness. Notice the gentle warning he gives this new governor. Essentially he says, "Look, you *know* what's right. You *know* what you *should* do. Are you going to do it or are you going to be like Felix?" He confronts Festus with his crookedness. Later he will preach the Gospel to him. God's grace gives strength to the weak and provides the heart and the words for us to do our duty as His witnesses.

Some criticize Paul for appealing to Caesar. They say it was a guaranteed death sentence. The truth is, Paul would be acquitted at his first trial.⁸ And though we remember Nero as a world class madman, at *this* point in his reign he wasn't crazy. So, it makes a lot of sense that Paul would use this right to move himself toward Rome, which was the assignment Christ Himself had given in chapter 23. Ultimately, Paul will say that he felt "compelled" to make this appeal.⁹

Acts 25:12 - ¹² Then after Festus conferred with his council, he replied, "You have appealed to Caesar; to Caesar you will go."

It's hard to tell Festus' tone, but it seems to have a sneer on it, or at least some exasperation. But in this we see that nothing can overwhelm the favor of God. In this case, God used the legal system to protect his servant and even have Rome foot the bill for his trip to see (and preach to) the Emperor.

So, in the end, the human favors didn't work out. But *God's* favor was doing a lot. It provided Paul with peace and strength, a way out of death, boldness, perspective, comfort and so much more. That same matchless grace is given to us today. If you're a Christian, you're offered the grace of God, given in rich abundance for you so that you might be helped and sustained and prepared for the duties and ministries God planned for you from before the foundations of the earth. We don't have to curry favor with Him, He's already extended it to us. We're to walk in it and allow it to operate in us, whether waiting or moving, fighting or fleeing, resting or serving.

Just one more thing before we go: I said there were a couple of interesting language things in this passage. The first is that use of *charis*, the second is where we see that Paul was brought before this tribunal seat in verse 6. There's a technical term used there, it's *bema*. In the Roman Empire it was meant to be this imposing place of judgment. But not for Paul. He didn't cower. You know why? He had seen the *Lord's* bema. By this point in his life he had already had his vision of heaven, walking in eternity with his Savior. It wouldn't be long after this passage that Paul would write to the Philippians, "Man, I can't wait to get back to heaven." And he had already written to the Corinthians about the fact that one day all of we Christians are going to be summoned before the *bema* of Christ. But standing there we have nothing to fear because our guilt has already been decided.

⁷ <https://graphics.wsj.com/100-legacies-from-world-war-1/trench-warfare>

⁸ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/classics/barnes-scenes-in-life/pauls-first-trial-before-nero.html>

⁹ Acts 28:19

We're dead to sin. There's no condemnation for we who are in Christ Jesus. He erased the certificate of debt that was against us and has taken it away by nailing it to the cross. The bema we look forward to isn't like Paul before Festus. It is a *reward* seat, where Christ is going to say, "You're finally here! I've been waiting for you!" And then our work on earth will be judged so that the Lord might reward us for our service to Him. But those things that we've done in our lives that are *not* built on the Lord and for the Lord, they're like wood, hay and stubble that are going to be burnt up. We'll suffer the loss of them. But what God wants is to heap reward after reward on us.

Knowing that we have this appointment in heaven, let's not be like Festus or the Jews, busying ourselves with earthly pursuits, but instead live in and exercise the grace of God, building a life for His glory. Knowing that there is a bema waiting for us, thanks to the amazing charis of God, this magnificent gift, revealed and entrusted to us, to the praise of the glory of His grace.