I APPEAL TO CAESAR

Acts 25:1-27

Key Verse:25:11 “If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them, I appeal to Caesar!”

Last week we studied the hope of resurrection in Paul’s testimony. Paul is known as the champion of the gospel faith. Paul suffered for the Lord and the gospel more than anyone else in the New Testament. He testified in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29, “*Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashed minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from the Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?”* Paul wrote this letter to the believers in the Corinth Church before he was arrested and tried in Jerusalem. Paul overcame all these sufferings and hardships because of the hope of resurrection. He was bold and confident before the Jewish leaders, governors, and kings because of the hope of resurrection. Paul said in Romans 8:18, “*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us*.” This is Paul’s statement about the hope of resurrection. Those who have the hope of resurrection like Paul become strong and faithful to the Lord. We are still in these difficult times because of the COVID-19 pandemic. But unless we are infected by the virus, we live a good life even though keeping social distance makes things inconvenient. God also provides manna (stimulus check) for us when we are in need. So, we have no reason to complain or to be unhappy with our current situation. Let us repent of our ingratitude and complaining, and let us give thanks to God for his grace and love in all circumstances. (1The 5:18)

Paul’s trial continues today. He stood before the former Roman governor Felix. Now he stands before the new governor Festus. Jesus’ trial was over before Pilate. But Paul’s trial continues because his mission was not over, yet. He had to go to Rome. He had to stand before Caesar, the Roman Emperor. Let’s study how Paul’s trial before Festus was processed, and how God used this trial for world salvation.

Felix was replaced by Festus. Three days after arriving in the province, Festus went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem, where the chief priests and the Jewish leaders went to greet their new governor. At that time the Jewish leaders had presented the charges against Paul to Festus. (1) They requested Festus, as a favor to them, to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way. (2) They expected that the inexperienced new governor would listen to them. But, they underestimated a clever politician like Festus, who instead suggested them to come to Caesarea for the trial. (4,5)

A day after returning from Jerusalem, Festus convened the court and ordered that Paul be brought before him. When Paul came in, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him. They brought many serious charges against him, but they could not prove them. (7) Then Paul made his defense: ***“I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar.***”(8) Paul repeated his innocence again before Festus. Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, “***Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?*** (9) How did Paul answer him? Look verses 10-11. “***Paul answered: “I am now standing before Caesar’s court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them, I appeal to Caesar!***” (10,11) According to the Roman law, a Roman citizen must not be punished before being found guilty. And if his charge is related to a capital punishment such as a death sentence, he has the right to appeal to Caesar the Roman emperor on condition of the approval of his local governor. As a Roman citizen, Paul had the right to appeal to Caesar for his innocence. His appeal to Caesar was not only to prove his innocence, but also to fulfill his vision. When Paul was in Ephesus, he said, “*After I have been there (Jerusalem), I must visit Rome also.*” (Ac 19:21) After Paul was tried before the Sanhedrin in chapter 23, Paul saw the vision of Jesus, who said to Paul, “*Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome*.” (23:11) Paul had to go to Rome in order to complete his mission. Paul had a remaining mission where he must testify about Jesus before Caesar. This was why Paul answered, “*I appeal to Caesar*.”

Paul appealed to Caesar before Festus, the Roman governor. Around 20 years ago Jesus stood before Pilate. As Paul was innocent, Jesus was innocent, too. In fact, Jesus was sinless. So, Jesus could have appealed for his innocence as Paul did. But Jesus didn’t appeal. He stood silent. He did not open his mouth for his defense. This was because Jesus knew that his silence was to please God the Father and to obey his will. Jesus stood before Pilate, not to appeal for himself, but to appeal for us. Jesus was innocent, so he did not need to stand before Pilate. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He is the one who judges the whole world and all sinners. Nevertheless, Jesus stood still to appeal for us. The sinless Lamb of God became a sin offering for us. So Jesus stood silent before Pilate and took the cross.

Slaves had no right to appeal to anyone because they were slaves. We had no right to appeal to God because we were slaves to sin. Furthermore, we are indeed sinners before God and there is no one righteous before Him. We are destined to be condemned according to our sins without any hope for salvation. But, God so loved us that he gave his One and Only Son Jesus, to appeal to God for sinners like us. (Jn 3:16) Jesus became the mediator between God and sinners, and he became the high priest who interceded for us before God. In the Old Testament a high priest entered into the Most Holy Place with the blood of animals for his own sins and for the sins of his people. They did it once a year. But the Hebrews said that Jesus, our High priest, entered the Most Holy Place with his own blood, not for his own sins, but for the sins of the world. He did it once and for all for our eternal redemption. (Heb 9:12) One of our church members violated a traffic rule and got a speeding ticket. He hired a lawyer and paid some considerable penalty for release from his charge. Without paying the penalty, he could not be free from his charge. The Bible says that the penalty of our sins is death. (Ro 6:23a) We all are destined to die because of our sins. But Jesus paid the penalty of our sins by his own blood and died for our eternal redemption. This is an amazing story that Jesus didn’t appeal to God for himself, but for sinners like us.

The Holy Spirit took Jesus’ role today. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit in his place to intercede for us and advocate us when we are in trouble. Paul said in Romans 8:26-27, which says, “*In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.*” Amen! This is the reason why we have to listen to the Holy Spirit and have constant fellowship with the Holy Spirit.

Look at verse 12. “***After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: “You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go***.” Festus accepted Paul’s appeal to Caesar and approved it as his official decision. Finally Paul had a chance to go to Rome. According to the book of Romans Paul had planned to visit Rome many times.(Ro 1:13) While he was writing the Romans, Paul was in Corinth during his third missionary journey. Paul could have visited Rome at that time if he wanted. Travelling from Corinth to Rome was a much easier and shorter course than from Jerusalem to Rome. But Paul waited until the hour came. Paul waited for God’s appointed time to visit Rome. Paul brought the contribution for the believers in Jerusalem church and reports for God’s ministry among the gentiles during his second and third missionary journeys in Asia and Macedonia. Not long after he visited Jerusalem, he was arrested and tried. He was tried before the Jewish ruling council, the commander, and the two Roman governors. Now Paul is going to go to Rome as a prisoner, not as a commissioner. As Jesus went the way of the cross as a prisoner, Paul also followed the footstep of Jesus as a prisoner. But for Paul his way of following Jesus is the way of glory and the badge of honor. In Philippians 3:10 Paul said, “*I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participate in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”*  As he confessed, Paul is now following the footsteps of Jesus and becoming like him.

We are proud of being called ‘disciples of Jesus’. We are pleased to be called even apostles and missionaries in this generation. But how much do we follow the way of Jesus and imitate his life as his disciples? Can we confess as Paul did, “I want to know Christ Jesus, his sufferings and resurrection, and want to become like him even in his death”? If Paul wanted, he could have chosen an easy method of visiting Rome. If he wanted, he could have traveled Rome by cruise ship, not by a prison ship. Why did he choose to enter into such a narrow door? This is because he had the hope of resurrection. He wanted to experience the power of resurrection after going through many hardships. Paul said, “*We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God*.” (Ac14:22)

More than two months have passed since we started worship service through online. We have weekly worship services, one to one and group Bible studies, and prayer meetings online. We don’t meet face to face regularly. I missed a barbeque fellowship last Memorial Day. Keeping social distance gives us both positive and negative impacts on our daily lives. It definitely helps us prevent any infections. It also helps us to spend more time with our families. But, it has tremendously damaged our economy and social life including our Christian fellowships. We don’t meet face to face. We don’t shake hands or hug each other anymore. It has been more than two months since we missed a Sunday lunch after the worship service. How about our attitude toward God? How about our daily prayers and Bible reading? Some of us have more time for personal prayer and Bible reading. But, others enjoy free time until they feel bored. Are there those who are idle among us? Are we ready to follow Jesus and become like him as Paul did? The order of keeping social distance and staying at home may test our attitude toward God and toward each other. Some will get better, but some will get worse. Where are you now? Today Paul’s appeal to Caesar tests our spiritual condition. As Paul chose to follow the way of Jesus, are we ready to follow him, too? As Paul appealed to Caesar to complete his mission, did you complete your mission which was given to you? You may give your own answer to God!

A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. At that time, Festus discussed with Agrippa about Paul’s case. Festus explained all details about Paul’s charge and his trial before the Jews. Festus’ dilemma was that he couldn’t find any crime from Paul that deserved death or imprisonment. He said that the Jews brought only dispute about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive. (19) King Agrippa wanted to meet Paul and hear from him and Festus allowed it. (22)

We praise Jesus who did not appeal for himself in order to appeal for us. The word ‘appeal’, which is ‘*epikaleo* ’in Greek, also means ‘call upon by the name’. Jesus didn’t call upon the Father’s name in his trial so that we might be saved by calling on his name in our trial. Praise Jesus! Last Wednesday evening Kit West visited Webster University to pray. Let us pray that the seed of his prayer in Webster U. may grow and bear fruits 30 times, 60 times, and 100 times. Now campuses are empty. But they are waiting for the prayers and the sowers for harvest this fall semester. May God make all the main campuses in St. Louis become plentiful harvest fields! May God control the coronavirus and riots so that we may freely visit campus and freely have *koionia* at church! Amen.