

## Stamped With the Divine Imprint of the Cross

### Acts 25:13-27

**Main Idea:** *Followers of Jesus have been “stamped with the divine imprint of the cross” and are thus invited into closer fellowship with Jesus by becoming conformed to His life (image) through participating in His sufferings for the sake of the gospel.*

**Introduction:** Please open your bibles and turn to Acts 25...

#### **Orienting the Text: Where we are in the story**

I want to spend a few minutes catching us up in the narrative and where we currently are. Keep in mind that what Luke is doing is showing us how the political world of the first century intersects with Paul’s ministry and mission. While most of these figures probably don’t mean much to most of you (unless you happen to geek out on ancient history!), but if you were a first century resident, then this would be like Paul meeting with the US Senate, the supreme court and making a bid to stand in front of the president himself!

- A) Paul returns to Jerusalem to bring an aid package to suffering Christians, and is arrested on trumped up charges of starting a disturbance in the temple courts and bringing Gentiles into forbidden spaces.
- B) Next Paul goes before the Sanhedrin where he is put on trial. Here Paul divides the assembly against itself by focusing on the resurrection (dividing Jews and Sadducees).
- C) Next Paul is moved to Cesarea and faces the governor of Judea, Felix and his (illegitimate) wife Drusilla, whom he witnesses to about faith in Christ. Felix hopes that Paul will make him a bribe, and when he doesn’t he is left in prison for another 2 years.
- D) However, Paul’s enemies still have not forgotten about him! They return and plead with the new governor, Festus, to move Paul back to Jerusalem, where they hope to put him to death. In seeking to do them a favor, Festus brings Paul out to give his own defense (which he is due, according to Roman law). As usual, Paul directs the attention from himself and comes back to Jesus. He has broken no laws, been a faithful Israelite his whole life – the only difference being that he has found in Jesus the one true Messiah, and the promised resurrection/restoration of the nation of Israel, which begins with Jesus and will conclude with the literal resurrection of all of His followers at the end of history when he returns again to consummate His coming kingdom.
- E) However, Paul turns the tables and, in accordance with the legal privileges afforded him by his Roman citizenship, Paul appeals to the highest court and governance of the land, by demanding an audience with Caesar himself. Shocked and unsure what to do, Festus grants this request (thus favoring Paul over the Jews).

But underlying all of these legal procedures is a very important question: *why did Paul choose to stay in Roman custody when he could have been released?*

Last week, Pastor Michael shared how Paul appealing to Caesar not only was an act of grace towards Festus (letting him off the hook of risking the loss of favor with the Jewish leadership or being in danger of violating Roman law and getting into trouble with his superiors), but was remaining true to his call to testify about Jesus to ruling powers of his day. Building off of Michael’s insights, I want us to continue to press into Paul’s mindset and his understanding of what it meant for him to be a follower of Jesus, and the cost of that discipleship in light of God’s call on his life to be an ambassador for the gospel in the midst of the political circus he finds himself in.

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My main point will be that Paul understood his life as having been *stamped with the divine imprint of the cross*... Today, I will unpack what that means as we continue in Luke's narrative of what happens next with Paul's legal entanglements as he gets to testify with yet another infamous political ruler of the first century: King Herod Agrippa II.

### **Exposition of Acts 25:13-26:216**

*King Agrippa II and Bernice arrive - Acts 25:13*

Who are these folks and why do they matter? King Agrippa is the ruling politician of the Herod dynasty – like he's the last Kennedy. Son of the Herod Agrippa I (who dies in Acts 12) and is the great-grandson of Herod the Great (the one we meet in the gospels). Now, Bernice is even more interesting: she is the sister of Drusilla, and the oldest daughter of Herod Agrippa I. Now if you do the family tree math, you realize that AG II and Bernice are brother and sister. So the rumor/scandal of the first century is that they had an incestuous relationship (which, again, was not totally uncommon in those days). To cover up the scandal, she would later marry Poleman, the king of Cilicia, later to divorce him and return to spending time with Agrippa; later to marry the conquering General Titus who invaded and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. When Titus eventually became emperor, he put her away (divorced) and she returned home and spent her last days around her home area of Palestine.

Being newer in his position, Felix is attempting to build political connections and bridges with the Jewish authorities, so it is right and natural for him to welcome a visit from Agrippa. At the same time, this visit gives Felix a chance to ask about and get some advice about the situation with Paul.

*Festus brings his dilemma to Agrippa - Acts 25:14-22*

Now, Agrippa had a reputation for being knowledgeable and interested in his Jewish heritage and faith (some say he was devout). So, Festus asks for clarity on what exactly is going on and see if Agrippa can bring any clarity as to what is going on with Paul. The key issue is that if Paul is going to appeal to Caesar, then he has to explain it to Caesar in writing as he sends Paul along. So, Agrippa agrees to investigate and hear from Paul himself.

*Acts 25:23-27 - Paul comes before Agrippa*

So, with great pomp and fanfare, they parade themselves in with all the self-importance of a political charade (note the rhetorical flash Luke uses to describe this process!). As they do, Festus lays out the case that he can't find any specific charges against Paul, and therefore is unsure what to say about him in regard to his request to see Caesar himself. Now, here is the key turning point in the story – the very place where Paul could have called everybody out, and exposed the shenanigans of the Jewish leaders who arrested him, the ongoing violation of his rights as a Roman citizen and demanded his release on legal grounds – but he doesn't! I'm skipping ahead here, but I want you to see this in order to understand why Paul is going to say what he says. After his speech in front of Agrippa is over, Luke tells us in verses 30-32 that...

*Acts 26:30-32*

In other words, Luke is showing us very clearly that Paul chooses to remain in prison by his own cognition and choice and using his political rights to get an audience with Caesar. Why? Well, on the one hand, there was a plot brewing to kill him. BUT, Paul had faced death before and knew how to get himself out of sticky situations; furthermore, he had a lot of friends in the city who would have come to his assistance. No, there is something more brewing here...

Next week, we will come back to this passage and look more closely at Paul's testimony and how he describes the gospel to Agrippa and Bernice...But there are some other details that are important to note about Paul's calling. When Ananias was told by the Lord to find Paul shortly after this encounter (literally!) had blinded him, Ananias complained that Saul (as he was called then) had a reputation for terrorizing the church in Jerusalem.

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Here is Jesus's response: Acts 9:15-16

Now, this calling to suffer did not seem to discourage Paul; instead, he embraced it. Remember what he said back in Acts 20?

Acts 20:24 - So, getting another visit from Jesus shortly after his arrest in Jerusalem, the Lord tells him to take heart, and be courageous for he is destined to testify about the gospel all the way in Rome.

Acts 23:11 - *Paul's life is stamped with the divine imprint of the cross*

So again, we ask the question: why? Why did Paul so joyfully undergo a life of trials and hardship for the sake of Jesus? How did he not become bitter, resentful, angry with the ongoing injustices, false accusations, loss of relationships, that he endured throughout his ministry? If anyone had a reason to become an #exvangelical, it would be Paul! If anyone experienced hurt in the church and outside it, it was Paul! If anyone had reason to be disappointed with God, it was Paul! And yet, here he is, before Agrippa and Festus, the two main governing authorities for both the Gentiles and the Jews, who are both equally puzzled as to why Paul is even there in the first place?

Well, the answer is this: *Paul's life is stamped with the divine imprint of the cross, which results in conformity to and closer fellowship with the Lord Jesus*. To help us understand this more, I want to take us briefly out of Acts 25 and to another letter we have from Paul's own hand while he was actually in prison in Rome, having undergone the process that we are reading about in these chapters in Acts. Turn with me to Philippians 3. Last week, Michael referenced this passage as well, so he helped pave the way for what I want us to look at together.

This is Paul's "thanks you letter" to this church for sending him support; they were worried about him in prison. But rather than finding Paul gloomy and despondent they find him surprisingly joyful! In Philippians 3, he compares the advantages he formerly had as a Pharisaical Jew with what he now has with Christ. Philippians 3:7-9

Now, here is the verse I want us to focus on: the pathway for knowing Christ in verse 11:  
Philippians 3:10-11

Here you have the why and how of Paul's life! Here is the structure of the verse:  
*so that I may know Him...*

that, is, the *power of His resurrection*  
and

*participation in His sufferings*

So, the way Paul knows Jesus, values Jesus, prizes Jesus, displays Jesus, is by living into the resurrection power that is at work in His own life through the Spirit and by willingly suffering as Jesus suffered, that is for the sake of the gospel and the good of others. Put another way, Paul does not have to live in fear or worry or shame about his relationship with Christ, but can show his love for Jesus by suffering on His behalf, because he knows God's resurrection power will sustain Him, empower Him, and will not fail Him in times of need.

Now, it's important to note here that Paul is not talking about suffering in general, but rather, the suffering that comes when we identify as followers of Jesus and put ourselves out there for the sake of others, come what may. Listen to what one of my favorite New Testament scholars says: "Likewise, it is not just any kind of present suffering to which Paul refers...but to those which in particular express participation in *Christ's* sufferings; and the aim, as well as the character, of such suffering is to 'become like Him in His death,' which almost certainly means *suffering that is in some way on behalf of the gospel, thus for the sake of others*, since no other suffering is in conformity to His." – Gordon Fee, New Testament scholar on Phil. 3

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“Christ’s resurrection guaranteed [Paul’s] own, [so] that he could throw himself into the present with a kind of holy abandon, full of rejoicing and thanksgiving; and that not because he enjoyed suffering, but because Christ’s resurrection had given him a unique perspective on present suffering...as well as an empowering presence whereby suffering was transformed into intimate fellowship with Christ Himself.” - Gordon Fee, New Testament scholar on Phil. 3

This is why he stayed in Roman custody. Both to testify to Jesus, and be faithful to his calling, and to suffer with Jesus, and experience more resurrection power and, at the same time, grow closer to Him, be comforted by Him, enjoy Him, *so that He may know Him all the more and be prepared to greet Him in person on that day when Paul would be raised from the dead.*

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### **Exposition of Acts 25:13-27**

*Festus brings his dilemma to Agrippa - Acts 25:13-22*

*Paul comes before Agrippa - Acts 25:23-27*

Philippians 3:7-11

*Paul’s life is stamped with the divine imprint of the cross, which results in conformity to and closer fellowship with the Lord Jesus*

**Application: How is your conformity?**

