And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today."

As we studied in the last lesson, Paul was determined to visit Jerusalem, in spite of many warnings that prison and hardships were facing him. He visited Jerusalem to help his poverty-stricken people with the offering he collected from the Gentile churches. Also, through his testimony he wanted to help his people open their spiritual eyes to see God's great purpose for them to be a priestly nation and a light for the Gentiles. But some Jews who were prejudiced toward Gentiles stirred up the people until the whole city was aroused. Because of this, the commander of the Roman army came and arrested Paul and kept him in custody in the army barracks. In this way, Paul became a prisoner without any clear charges being brought against him. In the light of this, it is not easy to understand Paul's determination to go to Jerusalem. Today's passage is the story of Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea. During his imprisonment, Paul stands trial repeatedly before the Roman governors Felix and Festus and before King Agrippa. In these trials Paul does not defend himself; rather, he is eager to share his testimony of God's grace and explain his hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Let us learn the hope of St. Paul that gave him determination to serve the world salvation purpose of God.

I. Paul's trial before Felix (24:1-27)

Paul was transferred from Jerusalem to Caesarea by the commander of the Roman army because a suicide squad plotted to kill Paul. Caesarea was the headquarters of the Roman army in that province, and it was the place where, 20 years before, Peter and his companions were surprised when the Holy Spirit anointed the first Gentile believer, Cornelius, an officer in the Roman army. After Paul was transferred to Caesarea, the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some elders and a lawyer named Tertullus and brought charges against Paul before Felix the Roman governor. Tertullus began
his speech by addressing the court using almost nauseating flattery, with which even he himself was disgusted. His charge was that Paul was a troublemaker, a cause of riots all over the world and a ringleader of the Nazarene sect—in contemporary terms, a cult leader—who desecrated the temple by bringing Trophimus the Ephesian into it. The Jews were accusing him not because he had broken any law, Roman or Jewish, but because Paul had seemed to betray Judaism by offering grace and sonship to God to the Gentiles through faith in Jesus. Paul could have defended himself in order to preserve his own life. But he did not. Rather, Paul took the opportunity to explain his faith in the resurrection. Look at verse 15. "...and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked." Paul had hope in eternal life and the kingdom of God, which was the hope of the Jews as well; he also proclaimed God's judgment.

Governor Felix, who had married a Jewess, was impressed by Paul and later sent for him to explain the gospel more fully (24). What did Paul say to him? Look at verse 25. "As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, 'That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.'" Obviously, Felix was an unrighteous man, a man of the flesh. He had the desire to do what was good, but he could not carry it out because he was a slave of sinful desires. His agony of soul must have been indeed great, crying out, "What a wretched man I am!" (Ro 7:14-24) According to Romans 2:8, he was a man fit for God's righteous judgment. He knew he should turn to God. But when he called Paul to him frequently, his hope was that Paul would bribe him. He was a man of split personality, a mental patient. Human beings are split into two when they rebel against the Creator God to follow their immoral desires. Governor Felix was replaced because of his laziness, and succeeded by Festus.

II. Paul's trial before Festus (25:1-12)

Festus was a typical politician. As soon as he received the position as the Roman governor of the province, he made a plan to ingratiate himself to the Jewish leaders. So he went up to Jerusalem. There the chief priests and Jewish leaders appeared before him and
presented their charges against Paul. In their plot to kill Paul, they requested Festus to transfer him from Caesarea to Jerusalem. But Festus told them to come to Caesarea to press charges against Paul, since he was going on to Caesarea shortly.

When Festus came back to Caesarea, he convened the court and ordered that Paul be brought before him. The Jews who had come from Jerusalem surrounded Paul and inveighed against him, accusing him without any basis. Paul denied the charges, but 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?" Paul answered, "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried" (10). Finally Paul said, "I appeal to Caesar!" (11) Of course, Paul knew that to return to Jerusalem was very dangerous. But Paul did not appeal to Caesar to spare himself. Paul had told his companions before he entered Jerusalem, “I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” However, Paul acknowledged that to change his people’s stubborn hearts was not given to him. Moreover, the Lord Jesus had a plan to send him far away to the Gentiles. Acts 23:11 says, "The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, 'Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.'" This was the reason Paul appealed to Caesar. He could not go to Rome at his convenience or on the way to Spain, so he was ready to go in chains. At his appeal, Festus was powerless to do anything but grant his request. God was with Paul and delivered him from the hands of his people. The Caesar at that time was Nero, an inhumane brute. But Paul did not mind to appear before such a person in order to obey the world mission command of the Lord Jesus.

III. Paul before King Agrippa (25:13-26:32)

A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. Festus discussed Paul’s case with the king. Festus said, "When Paul’s accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive....When Paul made his appeal to be held over for the Emperor’s decision, I ordered him
held until I could send him to Caesar" (25:18,19,21). King Agrippa wanted to hear Paul. So Festus convened an assembly and Paul was brought before Festus, King Agrippa and his officials (25:23-27). Festus confessed his dilemma: "I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome. But I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. For I think it is unreasonable to send on a prisoner without specifying the charges against him" (25:25-27).

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself" (26:1). Again, Paul did not try to defend himself. Rather, he wanted to evangelize these dignitaries. So he gave his life testimony once more. This is now the third time Luke records Paul's life testimony. We can imagine how often Paul remembered God's grace to him. This time in his testimony Paul explains God's world salvation plan based on the Scriptures, especially through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

First, "I, Paul, was a Pharisee." In 26:4,5 Paul said that he was a Jew's Jew and a Pharisee. As a Pharisee he had learned of God's promise to his people. Look at verses 6,7. "And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me." The key point of God's promise was that he would send a Savior from the house of David. He was Jesus, who would die for man's sins and rise again on the third day so as to bring all men back to God's kingdom. Paul said he had the same hope and faith as his people. Unfortunately, his people were not interested in the promise and purpose of God, but only in Judaism, that is, their system of maintaining their cultural pride and Jewish self-interest. Their cultural thinking blinded them to the promise of God and their hope in him. Paul said in verse 6, "And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today." Paul claims that they had no reason to try him. He said in verse 8, "Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?" But this was
incredible to God’s own people who had long ago given up on his word of promise for the sake of their egos and their lives in this world.

Second, Paul met the Risen Jesus (26:9-14). In this part Paul boldly confesses the sins he had committed against God. He had tortured, punished and killed the early Christians. It was out of his self-righteousness based on Judaism. In verses 9-11 he confessed as follows: "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them."

In verses 13,14 Paul tells how he met the Risen Jesus and what happened to him after meeting the Risen Jesus. "About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'" When Paul persecuted the church of God, he thought he was serving God. But he was not serving God; he was murdering the children of God, especially a righteous man of God, Stephen. But when he met the Risen Jesus, his eyes were blinded by the blazing light of the Risen Jesus. When he met the Risen Jesus, he realized he was kicking against the goads. When he met the Risen Jesus, he realized that he was a spiritually blind man and a sinner, who was only hurting himself and others in his rebellion against God. Later, Paul confessed that to meet the Risen Jesus was to crucify his sinful nature with its passions and desires. (Gal. 5:24)

Third, Paul received grace and apostleship (15-18). At the moment Paul met the Risen Jesus, he asked, "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. Then what happened? The Risen Jesus gave him apostleship. Look at verse 16. "Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show
you." Paul was an unforgivable sinner. But the Risen Jesus embraced him as he was. Paul was greatly moved by Jesus' way of dealing with him. Jesus washed away all his sins through Ananias' help (22:16). Moreover, the Risen Christ clothed him with God's grace. It was God's one-sided love and forgiving love. So Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:10a, "But by the grace of God I am what I am." Unspiritual people analyze the faults and failings of others endlessly. But God, who knows everything about us, including our thought world, chose to forgive our sins unconditionally, and embrace us as his children. We must come to know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and practice his grace in serving others.

When God clothed Paul with his grace, it was to use him as an instrument of righteousness. It was to proclaim God's grace through his Son's death and resurrection. As verse 16 says, "I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you." When we go to a hospital to receive physical healing, we end up with a bill that we cannot hope to pay. When we receive God's grace of forgiveness, we are equipped to serve God as an instrument of righteousness.

Fourth, Paul's task. Look at 26:17,18. The Risen Jesus said to Paul, "I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." His specific task was to evangelize the Gentiles (17). His specific task was to lead the Gentiles from darkness to the light. When Americans saw their fellow citizens jumping from the burning Twin Towers in New York, they felt that they had seen the face of evil. The general assumption is that we hadn't seen the face of evil in a while. But they are wrong. In spite of technological achievements, American people have been living more and more under the power of darkness. The rates of divorce, suicide and body piercings have gone up, even as our economic situation seemed to be a never-ending success story. It is the sign that people are living in darkness. They are hopeless and torture themselves because they live under the power of sin and death. To have hope in the economic or political stability of America and the West is to have no hope at all. Please, study the fate of every other
transcendant culture and civilization in the history of mankind! Only those who have hope in the resurrection of Jesus can escape the power and sting of death. Godless people may look easygoing and prosperous. But they are not. Those who have hope in the resurrection of Jesus labor in Jesus. Sometimes it seems to be in vain, but their labor in the Lord is not in vain. To those who have hope in the resurrection of Jesus, death is like a catnap; it is only stepping through the pearly gates into the kingdom of God. Paul again affirmed that he was saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen, that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles (23).

What was their response? Look at verse 24. "At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane." His problem was that he did not know the spiritual world. What was King Agrippa's response? Look at verse 28. "Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"' His problem was his unrepentant heart. Agrippa and Festus became helpless and said in verse 32, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar." Their conclusion was indeed tragic. If they knew that Paul had not committed any crime, they should have set him free. But they ignored the truth that Paul was innocent. Though they were pompous in their fashionable clothing, they were rotten men in the sight of God because they had no truth of God in their hearts.

In this passage we learn that living without the hope of the glorious resurrection of Jesus is living under the power of sin and death. On the other hand, those who believe in the resurrection of Jesus have a living hope in the kingdom of God. Because of this hope, Paul was ready to defend and confirm the gospel of Jesus, even in chains (Php 1:7). We realize that all of us also must share God's grace with Paul to defend and confirm the gospel of Jesus. Christians must be defenders of the gospel. May God bless you with the same hope in God as St. Paul.