

Appealing to Caesar
(A Law-abiding Gospel Reputation)
Acts 25:1-27 on January 9, 2022
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Please read Acts 25:1-27 before going further in this transcript.

Today we're picking up where we left off in our journey through the book of Acts. Back in November, we came to the end of Acts 24. Pastor Eric preached a great sermon titled "In Defense of an Offensive Gospel."¹ We then pressed pause for the Advent Season. So let's get back up to speed. At the end of Acts 23, Paul narrowly escaped a plot in Jerusalem to take his life. (He rode out of Jerusalem "in style" on horseback with hundreds of armed soldiers and the cavalry escorting him.²) At the end of Acts 24, Paul was now sitting in Caesarea awaiting trial. He sat there under guard, but his friends were allowed to visit him and take care of his needs.³ Paul's defense of the gospel had landed him in prison once again. And that's where we left him, back in November... sitting in prison, waiting...⁴ Acts 24:27 tells us, "When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius⁵ Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a FAVOR to the Jews, he left Paul in prison." And this is where we pick up the story today. Acts 25 begins with the newly appointed Governor Festus, leaving Paul in Caesarea, while he traveled to Jerusalem to meet with the Jews. So even after all this time, the Jews were still angry with Paul, and they were still intent on murdering him.

As I began studying Acts 25 this week, I found myself wondering why Luke decided to spend all of chapter 25, basically telling us that things haven't really changed much, since the end of chapter 24. So why not just give us a very brief summary of these events, or even just skip over this part? In other words, it's not until Acts 26 that we actually get to "the good stuff;" the part where Paul gives his incredible Gospel Defense. And yet, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Luke records every single word that we read in Acts 25. So what can we glean from these 27 verses? Well, at least 2 things.

First of all, **Acts 25 reminds us (once again) that...**

1. Human rulers can't stop God's sovereign plans. Acts 25:2-3 reveals that "...the chief priests and the Jewish leaders appeared before him and presented the charges against Paul. They requested Festus, as a favor to

¹ Available on our church website: <https://efcbemidji.org/sermon/in-defense-of-an-offensive-gospel/>

² See Acts 23:23.

³ See Acts 24:23.

⁴ Consider Hebrews 13:3.

⁵ "PAWR shuhs" Severance, W. M., & Eddinger, T. (1997). In That's easy for you to say: your quick guide to pronouncing Bible names (p. 132). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

them, to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way.” Boy does this ever sound familiar!⁶ Once again, just like back in Acts 23, we see that the Jewish Sanhedrin continues to resist the gospel and to attack God’s gospel messenger.⁷ Now, at first, Festus refuses to transfer Paul to Jerusalem. Instead, in verse 4, he invites these leaders to come with him down to Caesarea and press their charges there. However, after these Jewish leaders fail to prove their charges, Acts 25:9 tells us, “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?’” So, Festus apparently changes his mind. And this is now the 3rd reference to human leaders doing the Jews a favor. In other words, over against justice, these leaders are practicing a system of favoritism. Now, it’s unclear whether Festus was actually aware of the plot to kill Paul along the way, but it is clear that his motivation was political: do the Jews a favor. So clearly his motivation was NOT to ensure that justice would be done, but rather to ensure that he did what was politically expedient, what was most advantageous to his newly appointed position as governor. Frankly, we’ve seen this pattern all throughout the book of Acts. Various people in power are busily preoccupied with their own plans/purposes, and they pay no attention to God’s sovereign plans/purposes. In fact, this is a pattern throughout much of human history; we looked at this last week from Psalm 33.⁸

Despite the political jockeying going on here, God gave Paul a bold confidence as he stood before these human leaders. Acts 25:10-11 tells us, “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!” In essence Paul is saying, “if I’ve done the crime, I’ll do the time.⁹ I’m not afraid to die, but it needs to be for a just cause, and what’s going on here, is far from just.”¹⁰ When Paul appealed to Caesar at the end of verse 11, it

⁶ See Acts 23:20-21.

⁷ See Acts 7:51-52.

⁸ Psalm 33:10-11 says, “The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.” God’s sovereign plans and purposes for the gospel of Christ will not be stopped, or even slightly hindered, by something as insignificant as the plans of the nations, or the purposes of the peoples. Furthermore, God will be faithful to watch over His fully devoted followers. Psalm 33:18-19 gives us this assurance, “But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine.” The eyes of the LORD were most certainly on Paul. He had no reason to fear his opponents because he feared the Lord. Paul was confident that the One in whom he hoped was the God of unfailing love. Paul knew that the LORD could deliver him from death, which is exactly what God does once again in Acts 25.

⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 702 commentary on Acts 25:10-11.

¹⁰ It must have cut Paul to the heart, as a Jew, to ponder the stunning reality that there was no justice for him in Jerusalem. Soberingly, the very city that should have been a shining example of justice, was just

came as no surprise to God's sovereign plans.^{11 12} After all, a while back Acts 23:11 predicted this course: "...the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome." God had already reassured Paul that He had his back. And he'd already revealed part of His future plans for Paul: I'll be sending you to Rome! And so it shouldn't surprise us that Festus agrees to send Paul to Rome. Not to mention, this actually helps Governor Festus get out of his own dilemma. It was probably a great relief to push Paul's case up to a higher court; Paul and his Jewish adversaries are no longer Festus' problem!^{13 14}

Acts 25:13 then tells us, "A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus." Without getting into all the sundry details, this is a pretty disturbing pair. Agrippa and Bernice are not husband and wife; they are brother and sister. However, the local gossip was all over the place regarding various allegations of incest and other scandals. That said, it's incredibly ironic that these unrighteous human rulers were invited to give their judgment about the righteous Paul.¹⁵ The thing we really need to know about King Agrippa, is that he ruled over certain Jewish territories. Therefore, it made good political sense for him to pay his respects to the new Governor Festus.¹⁶ It also made sense for Governor Festus to ask for King Agrippa's help. You see, not only was Agrippa part Jewish, but he was also "well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies."¹⁷ So he had definite potential to be a helpful advisor to Festus. One author points out that the very fact that Festus seeks Agrippa's opinion, reveals that Festus already knows that this debate is actually about religious questions, not about any criminal bad behavior by Paul.¹⁸

The irony continues as Festus then goes on to mention an insightful piece of just law practice. In Acts 25:16 he says, "I told them that it is not the

as corrupt as any other place in the world at that time. It's a sad commentary indeed, on the state of affairs among the Jewish leadership, that Paul appealed to Rome for justice over against Jerusalem.

¹¹ "It was the right of every Roman citizen to have [their] case heard before Caesar himself (or his representative) in Rome. This was the highest court of appeal, and winning such a case could have led to more than just Paul's acquittal. It could have resulted in official recognition of Christianity as distinct from Judaism." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1876 footnote on Acts 25:11.

¹² "It is not clear whether Paul's appeal is done for apologetic purposes, to argue that Christianity should be recognized by Rome, or because Paul desires to share the gospel in Rome." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, bottom of p. 703 commentary on Acts 25:12.

¹³ See *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2273 footnote on Acts 25:12.

¹⁴ "Paul probably suspects a problem here in the Jewish proposal to return to Jerusalem and in how Festus might respond because of politics.... So Paul makes a legal maneuver around Festus, who allows the move and takes himself out of the line of fire because it does fit Roman custom." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 703 commentary on Acts 25:12.

¹⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 710 commentary on Acts 25:13-16.

¹⁶ See *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1876 footnote on Acts 25:13.

¹⁷ See Acts 26:3.

¹⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, bottom of p. 709 commentary on Acts 25:13-16.

Roman custom to hand over anyone before they have faced their accusers and have had an opportunity to defend themselves against the charges.” This is one of the best things Festus says in this whole chapter. However, despite his attempt to present himself as an upholder of Roman justice, he already revealed his true colors back in verse 9, when he tried to do the Jews a favor and send Paul to Jerusalem after all. The next day Festus explains his predicament to King Agrippa. In Acts 25:25 he says, “I found he had done nothing deserving of death,¹⁹ but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome.” So we see here, that Luke continues to record this history of Paul’s innocence, and by direct association, the righteous standing of Paul’s gospel defense.²⁰

Festus then goes on in Acts 25:26-27, “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 a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him.” Again, verse 27 lays out an excellent piece of just law practice, but it’s surrounded by ridiculous circumstances. Despite having already heard the accusation of the Jews on two separate occasions, once in Jerusalem back in verse 2, and then again in Caesarea in verse 7, Festus *still* doesn’t even know what charge to bring against Paul. By the time we get to verse 25, he’s only gotten so far as to conclude that Paul had done nothing to deserve death. And now, in verses 26-27, Festus openly admits that he really has nothing specific to charge Paul with. And yet, at the same time, he admits that it sure seems unreasonable to send a prisoner all the way to Rome, to stand in front of the great Caesar himself, without some kind of a specific charge. Hum... You think?!

²¹ In light of all of the ridiculous political gamesmanship going on here, isn’t it just so encouraging to know that God is on His throne? That despite human rulers who may abuse their power, and play dangerous political games, that God will always be around to take care of this crazy world?! Brother or Sister in Christ, human rulers can’t stop God’s sovereign plans!

A 2nd thing that Acts 25 reminds us of, is that...

2. A law-abiding gospel reputation matters. Let’s go back to Acts 25:7, “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.” The Jews make all kinds of serious accusations, but

¹⁹ This echoes the words of Claudius Lysias back in Acts 23:29, “there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment.” It also echoes Jesus’ trials before Pilate and Herod back in Luke 23:14-15, “...I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him.”

¹⁵ Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death.”

²⁰ Back in Acts 25:10 Paul says, “I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well.”

²¹ This entire chapter comes across as clearly suspicious; there’s some funny business going on here! Or, as they say in the south, “this all sounds a little hinky to me!”

they can't prove any of them!²² That's because they have no real evidence because there was no real crime. Therefore, Governor Festus could have, and certainly should have, dismissed this case outright!²³ In fact, later on in verses 18-19, Festus himself admits that this case was not about criminal charges at all. He knew it was about religious disputes and a man named Jesus. These were not the kind of things that fell under Festus' jurisdiction. All of this illustrates an amazing disrespect for law-abiding justice! In Acts 25:8, Paul gave a simple defense, "...I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar." One author notes: Paul respected the Jewish Law.²⁴ Paul never defiled the temple or committed any act that would dishonor it.²⁵ Now admittedly, Paul did proclaim "the KINGDOM of God, but NOT as a political rival of Rome. He advocated for law and order [as well as] prayer for civil rulers."²⁶

It's worth noting something else that happened just a few years before the events that we're reading about today: Paul had recently written his New Testament book of Romans.²⁷ You see, before Paul had ever even gotten to Rome, he'd already written them a lengthy explanation of the gospel.²⁸ He not only laid out a clear gospel plan of salvation, he also articulated how law-abiding, gospel believers, ought to live. In Romans 13:1-5 Paul writes the following, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. 4 For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience." The immediate context for these verses is literally the Caesar, Emperor Nero! The very Caesar to whom Paul appeals in Acts 25:11.^{29 30}

²² See Acts 24:12-13.

²³ This is the same thing that happened back in Acts 24, before the then Governor, Felix. Paul's accusers made all kinds of stern accusations against him, but then produced no convincing evidence of any kind. See Acts 24:12-13.

²⁴ See Romans 7:12 and 1 Corinthians 9:21.

²⁵ See Acts 21:28-29.

²⁶ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1875 footnote on Acts 25:8.

²⁷ Romans 15:25-26 refers to Acts 21:17 and following. Also, see a probable timeline for the events of Paul's life on pp. 1844-1845 or *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

²⁸ See Romans 1:11-12, 15:23-24.

²⁹ Just a few years later, the Apostle Peter strongly concurs in 1 Peter 2:11-17. See also Paul's advice in 1 Timothy 2:1-4.

³⁰ "Perhaps the most infamous of Rome's emperors, Nero Claudius Caesar (37-68 A.D.) ruled Rome from 54 A.D. until his death by suicide 14 years later. He is best known for his debaucheries, political murders,

Paul's defense in the book of Acts, is that he's not a troublemaker. He's not a revolutionist nor a zealot, and, despite the claims of his accusers, he most certainly was not interested in leading a revolt against Rome.³¹ In other words, Paul not only wrote the words of Romans 13, he lived by them! In Acts 25:8 Paul is declaring that he hasn't broken any law.³² "...I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar." In other words, Paul is not a threat to the "Pax Romana," the peace of Rome.³³ Throughout the book of Acts, Luke keeps driving this point home, over and over again.³⁴ Acts 25 makes this clear to his readers all the more: a law-abiding, gospel reputation, matters!³⁵ So even though, at first, Acts 25 seems to be a long, overly detailed transition to Paul's actual trial,³⁶ it turns out to be an intentional "peek behind the scenes." Acts 25 paints a contrasting picture between the gospel's reputation for integrity and lawfulness, and the reputation of these particular human rulers, who lack integrity, and who lack a commitment to genuine lawfulness. In other words, Acts 25 spotlights the integrity of the Christian gospel.

A guy named Darrell Bock summarizes it this way: "Nothing Paul does evidences a threat to the state even though his opponents claimed this about Paul's teaching. Paul works within the legal system of Rome to the best of his ability. He does not try to undercut the rule of law.... At the same

persecution of Christians and a passion for music that led to the probably apocryphal rumor that Nero 'fiddled' while Rome burned during the great fire of 64 A.D." (<https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/nero>)

³¹ For example, consider Acts 21:38 and see the false allegations in Acts 24:5-6.

³² However, we must also remember Acts 4:18-20.

³³ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 704 commentary on Acts 25:12.

³⁴ See sermon from 9/26/2021, "A Gospel Uproar" from Acts 19:21-41. <https://efcbemidji.org/sermon/a-gospel-uproar/>

³⁵ You see, it's true that Luke is explaining the events that led up to Paul's trip to Rome, which is the crescendo of the book of Acts. However, it's also important for us to remember who Luke's writings were addressed to: Theophilus. Acts 1:1 begins, "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach." Theophilus is also the one to whom Luke addresses his "former book," the Gospel according to Luke. Luke 1:3-4 tells us, "...since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." Although scholars can't be certain, it seems most likely that this Theophilus was "an individual of high social status." (See pp. 2208-2209 of the *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, "Recipients, Place of Writing, Destination.") He likely provided the funding for both of Luke's writing projects, in support of his effort to record an accurate history of Jesus and His Church. (To be clear, Luke dedicates his two-volume work to Theophilus, but his intended readership is likely much broader than just this one man. See "Recipient and Purpose" notes on pp. 1695-1696 of *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.)

Many also believe that Theophilus may well have held a position in the government. And if that is indeed the case, it might help to explain why Luke records so many particular details of various trials in his writings. Be that as it might, regardless of Theophilus' exact identity, for one reason or another, Luke records all of these various legal proceedings. He seems to be trying to make an ironclad case for law-abiding Christians, who embrace a law-abiding gospel reputation. Brother or Sister in Christ, "a law-abiding gospel reputation matters!" In other words, Luke wants Theophilus to get a glimpse behind the scenes, into the hearts and motives of those who were opposing Paul and his gospel defense. That's what we find what we find here in Acts 25: a compelling contrast that spotlights the integrity of the Christian gospel.

³⁶ We don't find too many of our favorite memory verses in Acts 25!

time, he will utilize what is available to him within the law to do as much as he can to defend himself. By this manner of defense, he enhances the gospel's credibility, for he does not look like many others, who might do whatever it takes to escape. The difference, and the patience shown, are a part of the testimony to those who do not yet appreciate the gospel."³⁷

Let's wrap up by asking ourselves some questions. Do our lives enhance the gospel's credibility? Are we living in such a way that we have "a law-abiding, gospel reputation"? When people see us in the community, or spend time with us, or learn about our reputations on social media, are they struck by our willingness to trust God? Do they witness us obeying His command, to submit to the governing authorities, and to obey the laws of the land? Or, do they see us as troublemakers? As people who don't really care about law-abiding practices, unless they suit our own agenda? Here's how the Apostle Peter states it, in 1 Peter 2:13-15, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people." As followers of Christ, we are only temporary citizens of this world. But during our time here, the gospel calls us to submit to the human authorities over us. As fully devoted followers of Jesus, our citizenship in this world should make the gospel, appealing.

³⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, bottom of p. 653 commentary on Acts 21:34-36.