

Acts 25:1–27

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Date: 09 September 2018

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[0 : 0 0] as we begin our fall together and still finding ourselves in this wonderful book of Acts. If you're new or looking for a church home, a special welcome to you, and we pray that God would minister to you even in the minutes that are before us.

I want to provide some rails for the road, just a couple of hangers for the homily.

I want you to see the movements of the message as it was just read to you. The text, chapter 25 as a whole, breaks down like this.

A motion denied, an appeal granted, and some help wanted.

It really is as simple as that. The context around this text is Luke, the writer, looking Theophilus, his original reader, squarely in the eye and through this story saying this.

[1 : 2 8] So you want to know how Christianity got global. So you're interested in how the birth of the church in a jaundiced-like condition in Jerusalem grew up in a very short season of time to this robust worldwide religion from Rome.

Let me put it to you as simply as I can, says Luke, through these stories. It happened like this. Opponents who attempted to derail it were shut down.

Their motions were denied. Aggressive Christian advocates who did everything in their power to expand it were given approval.

And the world, which did not understand it, blindly assisted it. That is the movement of the text.

And for us, you're going to walk out of here, I hope, with renewed confidence that religious opposition cannot stop the gospel.

[3 : 0 9] That aggressive gospel action will always propel the gospel and that the world in which we live will unwittingly and unbeknownst to them assist us in the advance of the gospel.

So let's take a look. Emotion denied. Verses 1 through 5. In chapter 25 and verse 1, we find a new governor is on the ground.

A new man is running the district. Festus is in the seat and Felix is out. And like newly elected officials, he takes an early official trip to a city that is important to him in regard to a base of political strength.

He goes from what you might call the state capital of Caesarea to the large center of Jerusalem.

And while there, it looks like there's some official business they want him to do. Now my text does not tell me whether he got in his black suburban with his tinted glass and drove, as it were, from Springfield to Chicago or did he get in a private jet and puddle jump his way there.

[4 : 4 2] But it does say that only after three days of arriving in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea and the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul and they urged him, asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem.

There it is. The governor in an important city and official business is now before him.

Let's take a look at what they put on his docket. One, either verbally or in paper form, they would have submitted a legal brief to him.

It says there in verse 2, they laid out their case against him. In other words, there were charges that were brought.

But then it says, asking him to return the trial to Jerusalem. So the charges have been brought against Paul and a motion has been made to move the trial out of the state court in Caesarea and back to the county in which the offenses were made.

[6 : 12] In other words, they appealed on the basis of jurisdiction and venue. The motion was denied.

You can see that clearly there in verses 4 and 5. Festus, evidently, had already been briefed on Paul, who had now been in one of his jails at Herod's Praetorium for well over two years.

You know this because verse 4 says, Festus replied that Paul was being kept in Caesarea. In other words, when he took over office, one of his cabinet members gave him appraisal of all that was going on and there must have been an account of those who were in his own jail and indeed, Paul, who has been here now for some years, is yet before you.

Festus is aware that Paul is a Roman citizen and that as a Roman citizen, he has the right and the government has the obligation that at a trial, he is to see his accusers face to face.

Festus knows that you can't do this simply by returning him to Jerusalem to something that he may or may not be subject to and so he says, Motion to remove the trial from the state courthouse to the government in which the offenses were made is denied.

[7 : 45] You are to make your trip to where I will be and I will hear your case there. Let me stop. The continuance is laid out.

A date, it looks like somewhere within the next 10 days has been put forward for them to come. How is it that the gospel gets global?

In part, religious opposition bent on derailing it does not succeed. Now look what the narrator did there.

He buried in that little clause at the end of verse 3. They wanted the trial moved because Luke indicates they were planning an ambush to kill Paul on the way.

Festus wasn't aware of this even though two years before they had already tried this when he was transferred from the county jail to the state penitentiary. And they are still now two years later opposed to Paul.

[9 : 00] They view him a threat to their life. They want the Christian message stamped out. And the simplicity of the narrative is this. Motion denied.

In other words, bad stuff that could have happened to prevent the gospel from going forward never did. Some of the best things that have ever happened in the history of the Christian church are the things which never happened.

The protection of God thwarting opponents who would push it aside. Motion's denied.

looking back at Holy Trinity Church now we are into our 21st year. I remember sitting in restaurants in the first few months and half of you weren't even born yet I don't know but there it was.

And I would speak quietly to the others on the other side of the table because I was quite aware that if you whispered something on 47th Street they'd hear it at the midway.

[10 : 18] I was a bit fearful. Wasn't sure whether the gospel would gain a foothold. Looking back now my fears were foolish and immature and unfounded.

But I didn't know whether there would be some who would be opposed to a new church that preached the Christian message trying to take root in the community.

And it would have helped me then to have heard my preaching today to be reminded that religious opposition with intention to derail the advance of the gospel it cannot hold.

Let's move from a motion denied to an appeal granted to that's 6 through 10 or 12 I should say.

Look at how it opens. After he stayed among them not more than 8 or 10 days he went down to Caesarea and the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought.

[11 : 47] And when he had arrived the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove. Let me set the stage by way of analogy.

This really is the difference now between arriving at the county courthouse in Cook County as opposed to having to make your way to Springfield and standing in the Illinois Supreme Court building.

We are now in Caesarea. if you were to go to Springfield you would find this granite limestone building rectangular in an entrenched solid footing where the Supreme Court sits.

And if you were to enter into our state's highest court you would walk into a wood paneled room. the motto over which would read hear the other side and a convex raised wood bench would be there and seven leather chairs behind it.

One for each of the seven Supreme Court justices of our state. Three of whom would have been from Cook County and the other four from the other districts in the state and underneath that wood convex bench or bima or tribunal was beautiful and is beautiful green marble and the entire room fills fills your sense with awe and justice.

[13 : 34] When we find here that Festus took his seat on the tribunal you need to understand that you are in Caesarea on the Mediterranean and you are in Herod's Praetorium both the royal residence of Festus as the leader of the entire district and that through archaeologists we have discovered was built right on the water with two terraces set back into the landscape and the one nearest the water was his private residence with a harbor built out into it it was a marvel of that era where it protected the royal residence from the beating of the Mediterranean sea creating this placid like environment out some 200 yards into the water there was a promontory just like we have our own at the point that jettisoned itself into the Mediterranean his own pools his own home all of it right there and yet up behind him into the rock was the public area of the praetorium where Paul himself would have been jailed for now well over two years and the tribunal sat which we have uncovered and it was a rectangle 75 yards long by 47 yards wide with porticoes around the interior and a raised square platform in the middle that was the seat of justice and what you are hearing is that Festus is now there and the crowds are around and now some two years after his initial arrest and transport to that place and the charges are brought my guess is when it says that they came down bringing many and serious charges they probably had a lead prosecutor and the lead prosecutor is probably the same Tertullus that would have come after him those years before chapter 24 verse 1 so there it is you are in the

Roman court and Tertullus or one like him submits in formal ways what would be the statutes or the laws the purported violations the arguments on either side and what they hope to be the recommendation for conviction now it doesn't tell you what the charges were but when you read that Paul was his own defense counsel verse 8 you by way of implication see what the charges were for Paul argues neither against the law of the Jews nor against the temple nor against Caesar have I committed any offense probably each one of those phrases outlining the defense in summary form to what they brought against him they had charged him that you have done something egregious against the

Jewish law furthermore you have brought a man behind the wall of hostility into the temple and furthermore and now for the first time the most serious of all you are an insurrectionist for you actually are following another king and you want Caesar himself overthrown now whatever that went down light in the courtroom it indicates that they could not prove the charges were in a sense put forward but the argument was faulty and so Paul has now defended himself and here's Festus in his newly donned regal robe and he's well aware they don't have a case but he's politically astute enough to want to curry the favor of the leaders of a prominent city in which he oversees so he says to

Paul I tell you what how about we go back to Jerusalem and I'm not going to put you before their judges look at the way it ends there in verse 9 we'll go back to Jerusalem and they'll try you before me in other words he's hinting to Paul you've got me as the judge not the Sanhedrin or someone else to which Paul at that moment makes his appeal I'm not going back he says this may be a civil case that they're trying to impute criminal charges against the state but they had nothing against me there and as a Roman citizen I have the right to be tried here and then Paul with all of his legal background forced the issue on Festus and he says

I appeal to Caesar you see just as in our world there are occasions where you might be tried in a state court but as a citizen of the United States you as a defendant at times have the opportunity to say I don't want to be before the state court I want my trial to stand in a federal court and that is your right Paul leapt on that right which he knew would propel him to Rome so Festus leaves with his counsel verse 12 probably three or more legal experts and they say well this is an interesting thing man I mean um there's nothing here to convict the guy of but I don't know how you acquit the guy because he's just exercised the rights of a citizen to move it from our jurisdiction to the federal jurisdiction which means he's got to go to

[20 : 39] Rome I think you've just got to send them to Rome and with that Festus confers and says look at these words again you ought to see them with your eyes they are the most stunning words I think in the latter half of the first century church to Caesar you have appealed to Caesar you shall go I think that was a byword for coming decades in regard to how in the world did the gospel get to the major centers of the world how does the word of God arrive in Rome this is it the appeal was granted let me put it to you this way Paul took on all the risk all the cost through all of his aggressive gospel action to push the matter to an ever expanding audience that's what he did he said

I'm going to push you to put me before Nero I don't know where it would go today I don't know if we go I guess we don't go to the ninth circuit federal court I don't know how appeals work today but I do know that the appeal in that day there was only one place for him to go this this line to Caesar you have appealed to Caesar you will go ensure that the gospel has now gone to the very center of the Roman world it was a done deal in other words the vote had been taken the decision had been made let me see if I can make a couple things on this I remember when Holy Trinity Church had 37 members 37 we met in one place now we have four congregations approximately like this size in other places but I remember when 37 members voted unanimously to hire a third pastor that's absurd we already had two with 37 give me a break they voted unanimously to hire a third pastor to start a congregation downtown from which we only had eight people coming to

Hyde Park for now that just bucks all conventional wisdom because conventional wisdom says you don't plant well you plant as a result of having grown so when you got enough people to spin off and still be good then let them go but these 37 insanely voted to approve forced the issue that the gospel is growing and we're sending people with it so now some 20 years later somebody says you know what what's going on how did all this happen all I can tell you is it happens when godly people make aggressive gospel decisions where they take on the risk they take on the cost they take on the unknown and they push the message of Jesus us somewhere else that is the way it works I want to ask you what's next

I remember a few years after that where this congregation decided to raise \$600,000 not for a building but because we knew we needed multi-ethnic pastoral leadership black Asian Hispanic and people in the congregation said I'm going to give money so that we can actually start to represent the city in which we live so that we can be led by those who know those and let's work together that was a that was a an appeal granted that was a vote taken that was a decision made that was an offering given that was sacrifices laid down so how is it that it goes how will it go only through aggressive gospel action that pushes of necessity the word of Jesus going somewhere else beyond us I hope we're not done I'm tired of a rear view mirror you gotta know this people when you look out your windshield there's a reason the windshield is this big and the rear view mirror is this big because you're not supposed to be driving in the rear view mirror you're supposed to be looking out the windshield

I've been here 20 years I don't mind glancing back into that rear view mirror once in a while to make sure I'm not getting hit when I change lanes but we need to be going forward we're going that direction and it calls for aggressive gospel action to Caesar you have appealed to Caesar you will go what gives Paul the right to say I'm taking the gospel to Rome well it was in his calling but it was in his conviction what he had come to know about Jesus was to move from and out and into the ends of the earth what will we decide when will the day come when we have again another unto Caesar you have appealed to Caesar you will go moment let me put it this way we need to keep doing things for

[26 : 40] Jesus you may not know what they are yet we may not know what they are yet but we are not content to sit in Herod's Praetorium in Caesarea!

oh may the Lord give us wisdom and fortitude and strength as he gave to Paul a motion denied an appeal granted let me get ready to shut this down don't worry about all those verses 13 to 27 it simply it simply hangs like a like a new sign outside Festus' house and it all can be captured under the words help wanted Festus has a visit from another federal employee Agrippa who's up the ladder a little bit and his sister Bernice who in extra-biblical literature actually indicates some kind of horrific relationship between the two but they've evidently walked into town to greet the new governor and he says you know

I got a little thing going on here I need a little help I got a guy that I got to get to Rome because he is a citizen and he moved it to the federal system I can't convict him because there's nothing here to convict him on I can't acquit him because he of his own initiative has taken himself out of my oversight but I don't know what kind of legal brief to send with him maybe if you heard him you could help him and that's the way the chapter ends the world which doesn't know what to do with Paul nor with the Christians today the world which has no complete understanding will mysteriously under the hand of God assist the church in moving the message along that's the three movements of the text the religious opposition cannot stop it the aggressive gospel action of the church will continue to propel it and the world without any understanding at all is going to sustain and assist it now you might say that's not true the world is suppressing the church what about the guy in

Turkey we keep hearing about he's in jail you know but Paul says I might be bound but the word of God is not bound listen while we all would love to have his release and we all ought to labor for his release and the release of many others in many other situations you need to know I need to know we need to know that his placement is propelling the gospel somehow beyond and the world might be holding him not knowing what to do with him but in light of it it will blindly and unwillingly be moving the message forward that is the way it works and it looks like nothing has been going on this is another thing let me tell you I'm done I'll take my seat Paul has been in jail for over two years!

We were supporting at that point we would be going like can someone from the global ministry partners committee please tell me why we're still sending money to Paul I mean there's nothing going down with his work that's the way it happens people low seemingly inactive participation in the church all of a sudden arrives at a critical moment an appeal to Caesar day and then it tumbles forward again I can't I'm old enough now to tell you to you like that the church becomes great in the most ordinary of ways where you wonder is anything really happening is anything really going let me put it to you this way the people that are not yet born are one day going to ask you about your life and your church commitment and what they see of the extent of the gospel and you will answer just as this text is answered how did it happen well first of all most of the time it didn't look like anything was happening but let me tell you how it happened some bad things that could have gone down they never went down motions were denied some action that we took risk on miraculously got approved and the city in which we live man they didn't know anything about us certainly wouldn't understand us but all I can tell you is whether we were behind their bars or on the streets they blindly and unwittingly assisted it spread what stories do we have in front of us our heavenly father protect the church this church from bad actors protect us from those who would derail the ministry of your son may you continue to deny motion lord give this church a pursuit of bold action may there be many things approved under the guidance of your spirit and lord we ask that you would provide for this church even in the city in which we live in the country and all of this instability provide ways that we get your word to the world from this day we have known the help that comes from god oh lord may we continue to testify to your name amen well