

6/2/24 - Acts 25:1-27 - "A Steady & Ready Church"

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[0 : 00] The reading is Acts 25, I believe page 934, using the Pew Bibles. Now three days after Festus had arrived 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, because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way.

Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. So, said he, let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the men, let them bring charges against him.

After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day, he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. 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.

Paul argued in his defense, Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense. But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?

[1 : 27] But Paul said, I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death.

But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar. Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, To Caesar you have appealed, to Caesar you shall go.

Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus. And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, There is a man left prisoner by Felix.

And when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him.

So when they came together here, I made no delay. But on the next day, took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought. When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed.

[2 : 51] Rather, they had certain points of dispute with them about their own religion and about a certain Jesus who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them.

But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar. Then Agrippa said to Festus, I would like to hear the man myself.

Tomorrow, said he, you will hear him. So on the next day, Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city.

Then at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. And Festus said, And as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him, but I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him.

Therefore, I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after we have examined him, I may have something to write. For it seems to me unreasonable in sending

a prisoner not to indicate the charges against him.

[4 : 21] That is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. We're in this series here at Steel Valley Church through the book of Acts, and we've been in here for quite a while.

We took a break, a hiatus from the series for a while, went into a couple different genres of scripture, and now we're back in the second part, and we are finishing to the end.

We're in chapter 25 of chapter 28, so that's fun. It's been a long journey. And this passage has quite an occurrence that takes place with what Paul does and how Paul responds.

And so what we're going to be looking at in the passage today is observing the opposition and the response of Paul at this time period.

And I want to have a simple illustration that will carry us through to the end of our time, and that being of golfing. I don't know if many of you know that I try to golf once in a while.

[5 : 26] I was on varsity, second, I don't know, what do they call it, second chair or something, like in the orchestra, whatever the second person was. So I guess I was okay, but I never practiced, and so God had given me the ability to golf.

But every now and then, I like to go. And there's nothing better from a golfer's standpoint than getting to a short par four that has a dog leg left.

Do you know what a dog leg is? It's the fairway goes out straight and then hits a left turn, and the hole is guarded by trees.

You have a hazard that's guarded by trees. And so there's nothing that will get a salivating good driver golfer than a short par four with a hole that's designed like that.

And so what you have is you either have a choice of gripping that driver real tight, praying to God that it does not hit the trees, and you just want to shortcut straight to that green.

[6 : 43] It's option one. That's usually the option I find myself in, and nine out of ten times, I end up in the woods and lose a ball. But there's another option where you can play the long game.

You can go out with a nine iron and hit about 150 yards out just to set you up good for a shot coming in, and you can play the long game. Or you can choke that driver and give it a good whirl and a good whack and hope you find your ball.

And what unfolds for us today is a testimony of how the church spread through the ends of the earth, just as it was Jesus' commission to his disciples in Acts 1-8.

The spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to all Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth. And here this is spreading in the ends of the earth. And now some may wonder, okay, what did that look like? I could imagine there were probably, Billy Graham was leading the crusades, leading their revival. They put up their tent and all of a sudden, magically, through religious pragmatism, all of a sudden, the gospel's going out.

[7 : 59] They might think that it looks like a college campus revival or other avenues of perceivable momentum where things are working out.

power drives that just go perfectly around the hazards and land right where you want it on the green.

But what we find today is that the gospel also spreads through injustice and opposition. That hazards force us to take a different path at times.

See, God's providence is unusual at times as pushback from the world actually propels the mission of God forward.

Newton is scratching his head. This doesn't meet the law of physics. This doesn't make sense. But this has been a two-year-long journey of Paul.

[9 : 12] He has been sitting, rotten away in Caesarea, in prison. And I am sure that at this point, his mission supporters, the people who he was given bond to allow to come in and visit him and take care of his needs that we saw last week, I'm sure that they're probably like, how about we just kind of just let Paul go?

I mean, nothing's going on. He's not going anywhere. He's kind of, I mean, he could accept a bribe or he can give a bribe to the governor and get out of jail and he's not willing to do this stuff.

So how dedicated, is it right for our money to be financing a guy rotting away in prison? Hmm. Maybe let's move to Barnabas instead, right?

But maybe Luke wants us to see something today in the text about the long game of the Christian life. That the long game, while you see all these crusades, all these power drives going over the hazards and everything is going well, maybe the long game is also part of God's plan as well.

Right? Laying it up. But the church must also maintain the readiness to respond when God calls for aggressive decision making.

[10:47] And what we're going to see by the end of our time today, I believe, will remind us by the end of this sermon that the church stands steady and ready to carry out God's mission.

And what we're going to see today is basically two sections in a sermon titled A Steady and Ready Church.

And we're going to break this up into two sections, just how it's set up in the passage. We'll have Festus' arrival to Caesarea, and then we'll take the next section and it'll be Agrippa II, the King Agrippa's arrival to Caesarea.

And I want us to see something come out of this text that the church stands steady and ready to carry out God's mission.

And let's pray before we dive into this passage and ask the Lord to help us in this daunting task of heralding His Word today.

[11:59] Let's pray. Father, thank You for Your Word in bringing us to this moment in history and time and season. And just as we as a church are looking at, we've had a history of two pastoral transitions that were detrimental to the life of this church.

We had two seasons of wondering if this thing was ending. But Father, You are the one who is in control.

Help us to look at our history and the history of the church and be encouraged that there is something about this long game that You carry out through the life of the church and that we need to be a steady but ready church.

Father, help us to see that today. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Alright, so the first section, just as I said, we're going to take them thematically and what's going on in the passage.

And Festus enters into the chaos. what's the chaos? Paul is in chains without any evidence to keep him in chains.

[13:16] This is a messed up situation. And so there's a transition that kind of took place in the passage last week. There was a change in order.

If you're a nurse in the church today, you know those shift changes where you kind of debrief and here's this and this and this. Don't forget this pill and he's done this and he's yelled and thrown the bedpan at me twice and here you go.

Good luck. Governor Felix, the one last week who was in charge of Paul, who should have released Paul after hearing the case, chose to selfishly seek out a bribe for not just one time but two years long.

Not only was the church sick of him, but Emperor Nero, according to history, was sick of him too and got rid of Governor Felix. And now we meet Festus.

These names are wonderful. Felix and Festus. Bring the names back. So we got Felix coming here. And, or Festus.

[14:23] I'm going to mix them up now. And so he's coming into office. He's making his political circuit. You know how politics play. I mean, you go through the city.

You visit all the people to build your campaign. He's doing his circuit. And it's customary for political figures to make their way around the country.

And he naturally finds himself meeting the Jews. An interesting bunch in Jerusalem. And here, remember, this is two years later that Festus is coming and getting things in order.

Come to find there's quite a chaotic situation going on. After two years, these chief priests in verse two, don't take my word for it, keep your Bible open, look at it.

In verse two, the chief priests and the principal men of Jerusalem still continue to lay their case out against Paul. I mean, two years of lies.

[15:29] Two years trying to convince others that Paul is a menace to society. And now, the Jews propose something if you know how you play politics.

How can I swing this politician in my favor, right? That's what people do. They use political figures for themselves. Political figures use people. I mean, it's a very, very odd relationship.

It's hard to get close to politicians because you don't know who to trust and what to trust that comes out of their mouths. And so, they're like, well, hey, you know what would be a good idea? Could you transfer Paul back here to Jerusalem?

This is a religious thing. This has nothing to do with the Roman government. Bring him back here. And now, it's unclear if Festus knew that this plan of the Jews was still that ambush plan to take Paul out on the road back.

And we see that through verse 3 through verse 5. We don't know if he knew about that, that ambush, but as any good governor, he'd probably say, well, it's at the federal level.

[16:40] It's been taken away from the state. Let's just keep it at the federal level. Let's not digress. Let's just keep it. And I'm just on my political circuit trying to make y'all happy, so you vote for me in the next election, right?

We know that's not how it worked, but that's how our world works today in our democracy. And so I want you to imagine Festus here. Imagine him going through this circuit as a new leader trying to make a good impression and then drama.

Drama. He's just trying to clear off his docket and he finds that there's a Jewish man who has Roman citizenship who is locked up and has been in limbo for two years back in Caesarea. All the while, while Governor Felix was trying to squeeze the lemon to get a bribe out of Paul. So, Festus finds out that this is going to be an interesting endeavor indeed.

So he makes his way to Caesarea and finds himself there in verse six. And Festus finds his new royal seat. Imagine the courtroom scene here.

[17:54] Festus takes for the first time this royal seat at the tribunal. Verse seven, he summons Paul to get down to the bottom of all of this drama.

And Luke doesn't really inform us of the details of all the accusations, but based on Paul's response to Festus, in his defense, his quick little defense here, we get the idea of two similar things that we've seen before, that Paul is anti-Moses and that Paul is anti-Temple, but here's a new one. The past two years, all of a sudden, they've made Paul to be anti-Caesar, an enemy of the state. Treason.

And so apparently, Paul is portrayed being quite seriously off of his rocker. He's insane. He's a rogue in society.

He's the enemy of the state. And knowing that we all love politics, we probably just, I don't know if you've been in the news with what's going on with all these hearings of former presidents and everything like that and all this stuff.

[19:11] We all love political seasons. We're in a political election year this year and politics are on the rise, right? But look, Festus attempts to play political games here in verse 9 to win the opinions of the Jews.

And this thing seems to be going in a political merry-go-round. And Festus should have dismissed this case just like Felix, just like Governor Felix.

But what we have here is another selfish governor, another selfish leader who could have made a difference, a God-given difference to oversee justice for his people.

And so he says, send Paul back to Jerusalem to sort all this out, right? It would be a double win for Festus. I mean, he'd be relieved of all this stinking drama and he'd also win the support of the Jews. He doesn't really care about Paul here. So Paul, in verse 10, and we're going to slow down in a moment, Paul, in verse 10, two years imprisoned, rotting in prison, being buttered up to by Governor Felix, is standing there watching this go round and round in this political merry-go-round and he has had enough.

[20:45] He says in verse 10, I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, not Festus, Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried.

He says, to the Jews, I have done no wrong as you yourself know very well. Can you sense the tone?

This is important in this passage. I've done no wrong as he's looking to the Jews. Verse 11, if then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death.

In other words, justice is good. And even if I were to do bad, give me the death penalty if I deserve it. And he says, but if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. In the famous shockwave words, I appeal to Caesar. let's take this up a notch.

[22:06] Paul has been playing the long game for quite some time, two years rotting away. But there came a time where it's time to choke that driver and take that swing and advance to the intended goal.

legal appeals, this is when a case is brought before a higher court to challenge the decision of a lower court appeal.

You're probably going to watch it on Fox News or CNN, whichever poison you watch, and you're going to see it all unfold, the appeal. In other words, imagine someone who is found guilty of a crime in a local trial court, and that they disagree with the verdict and believe that the judge made a mistake.

Their lawyer can file an appeal to a higher court, such as a state court of appeals, and the higher court will review the case and decide whether to uphold the verdict of the original court or to overturn it, an appeal.

And obviously we haven't even reached a verdict. Paul is appealing the injustice, a corrupt broken government system. We ought to marvel at the firmness of Paul's conviction here, the determination to seek justice and not revenge, and the aggressive requests that would slingshot him straight to the intended goal that he sensed God was leading all along, I must go to Rome.

[23 : 50] What better way than to appeal to Caesar? He's given this a lot of thoughts in the two years of rotting away. And you see, at various times, church, pushback from the world actually propels the mission of God forward.

History makes it clear. And that hazards reroute the church, similar to golf, but never ever off course. And the church doesn't just roll over and play along with games of injustice and just roll over and be a doormat for injustice according to government and corrupt government standards, but the church is called to boldly at times to stand, to boldly speak, and at times boldly act in the face of injustice.

And we have to remember that as Luke is making his case to his intended audience, which was a commissioned work by Theophilus, Theophilus was wondering in chapter 1 how the church came to be.

What is the story of the church? He got the story of Jesus in Luke's gospel in the first volume, but to the story of the church and how this all came to be. So do we.

We know that it entailed at times risky endeavors to act, to boldly speak, to boldly stand at some point or another.

[25 : 30] And we can be assured that if you're looking into the future, the same is true in the future. There will be risk involved. There will be boldness needed.

There will be a call for Steel Valley Church to stand. I love Dietrich Bonhoeffer, his writing, his story, and what better person to know about this case than him.

He was a Lutheran pastor in Germany during the rise of the Nazi regime. And initially he saw the Nazi movement as a challenge to the established church and a threat to German values.

However, as the Nazis' brutality became undeniable, like the writing on the wall, Bonhoeffer's faith compelled him to take a stand against it.

So how did Dietrich Bonhoeffer respond? Did he just say, okay, I'll just roll along with the injustice? What was the action of his to follow?

[26 : 37] Did he curl up and seek out his safe space with maybe a therapy dog or two? No. The first action was Bonhoeffer challenged the Nazi ideology with theological arguments.

He argued. He argued that the state did not hold ultimate authority and that Christians had a duty to resist tyranny.

He wrote influential works like *The Cost of Discipleship*. Great book. It should be on every Christian's bookshelf. Go on Amazon right now on your phone. How many times does the pastor tell you to go on your phone?

Order it right now. It's a great book. He wrote these works at this time period which emphasized the active nature of the Christian faith. The second action to follow this stand is that Bonhoeffer became involved in the German resistance movement at this time period.

He helped smuggle Jews out of Germany and facilitated communication between resistance groups. He was the guy on call organizing a resistance.

[27 : 49] This is like a cool Star Wars movie but this is real history folks. And this put his life at personal risk. And the third action to follow was abstention from Nazi Christianity.

Nazi Christianity. Bonhoeffer refused to endorse the Nazi controlled theology.

The Nazi controlled German Christian movement which sought to align Christianity and just tie it to Nazi theology and ideology.

You see Bonhoeffer's story exemplifies the power of faith to inspire action against injustice. His legacy continues to challenge Christians to stand up for what is just even in the face of danger. And church not only did Paul's actions but Bonhoeffer took note of Paul's action as well. For Paul this request was a shock wave of hope to the church.

[29 : 05] Shock wave of hope. And in verse 12 Festus responds after conferring with his counsel he's probably scratching his head well this is interesting. He answered to Caesar you have appealed to Caesar you shall go.

It was granted the hazard comes intending to push back against the church only to propel it further and advancing it through the ends of the earth.

Isn't that fancy? The second section as you get Festus here we got Agrippa King Agrippa entering the chaos now.

And we see the other side of this shock wave we see not only this appeal but the chaos that this makes the world look around and confused about.

It says now in verse 13 we see the other side the response of those guilty of not honoring God through carrying out justice and these selfish governors rulers and authority that God has given to them and they're misusing their authority and they're playing politics and allowing injustice to stand.

[30 : 29] To say the least in verse 13 Festus is in quite a pickle. Lo and behold though Festus receives an unexpected visitor to welcome him to office.

You can see this fanfare of King Agrippa entering into Caesarea and he's like oh thank God I don't know how to handle this.

I got a guy I got no evidence about who's appealing to Caesar I'm going to get sacked just like Felix did and I'm on my first day. Might we say that this is impeccable timing.

for Festus Festus finds a moment to fill this king in about this debacle with Paul and he says in verse 14 there is a man left in prison by Felix I inherited a problem and when I was at Jerusalem the chief priest and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him asking for a sentence of condemnation against him I answered them that it is not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone apparently Festus has a little bit of law and order here but before they the accused met the accuser face to face and had the opportunity to make a defense concerning the charge laid against him and so they came together here welcome king Agrippa it's pretty crazy here in Caesarea we got quite a situation he says I may no delay but the next day took my seat at the tribunal and ordered the men to be brought look at what

I'm doing I'm doing a good job king affirm me Mr. King he says in verse 18 thinking that Paul probably massacred families and everything but there was nothing to make the case in verse 19 rather they had certain points look at this certain points with of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus who was dead but whom Paul asserted to be alive and being at a loss of how to investigate the questions I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them I was looking out for my office and hey kick the drama out of here in verse 21 when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor I ordered him to be held until

[33 : 19] I could send him to Caesar and I just imagine this burly king I would like to hear the man myself right just just you ever you ever just want to know what's going on you just I mean it's it's kind of like the car crash like nobody can look away from a car crash and something happens in your neighborhood we come out of our homes like aunts like what's going on I am just interested in all these things that don't even relate to me this king has found some entertainment oh young Festus you'll get there someday boy let's figure this thing out right in other words how does Festus explain this to Caesar on who he's on like who wants to be a millionaire and he's telling Regis I'd like to phone a friend here because I don't know what to do with this situation to say the least

Agrippa leans into this entertainment I mean wouldn't we all right you just laughed you admitted it and so the next day Paul was brought in for an examination and so the king and his sister entered the audience hall this big hall in Herod's palace this praetorium the residence of the governor in Caesarea and fanfare they are seated and Festus begins to explain why they are here with opening statements Festus is out to save his job he needs to figure out how to successfully transfer Paul to Rome without losing his job and don't miss this important fact though church in the middle of this effect of a shock wave in Caesarea Paul makes his aggressive appeal in the middle of it even this unbelieving governor can pinpoint the root of the issue in verse 19 he doesn't even know how powerful of a root it is says in verse 19 rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their

own religion and about a certain

Jesus who was dead but whom Paul asserted to be alive we remember the whole debacle that got Paul there in the first place but we see here that even this unbelieving governor and political figure can even identify the central facet of the gospel the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the middle of this shock wave and chaos he can you see even in the world's most chaotic state of disarray they are able to identify the central issue at hand that Jesus was dead but the church proclaims him to be alive now I doubt that there is any unbeliever here that is trying to handle a situation like like

Festus here concerned about what they're going to explain to some federal court about the church's appeal and my appeal to you today running up the flag well I don't agree with what he said up there about the death and resurrection right that's a good imitation I don't know I should start preaching like that but I can assure you you might not be appealing against that message if you do good luck but I can assure you that you should be concerned about what you will explain to God regarding my appeal to you today if you are not in Christ today it was a powerful situation life is uncertain in its time our health is uncertain in its condition our possessions are uncertainty and their value but there is a certainty that you better remember if you are not in

Christ today that all things in your life will end your time will expire your health will expire your things are going to be meaningless after your death and you will meet God Almighty but what will your appeal be to God for rejecting Jesus Christ there is no higher court above God Almighty you can't appeal the Lord and the gospel calls us to repent of our offenses against a holy just God and believe in Jesus Christ and be pardoned acquitted of the charges and we hear those chains that bind us from our sin fall off and you can hear them rattle being acquitted and legal record removed why you finally today stop making excuses of why you can't follow

[38 : 58] Jesus or how it doesn't make sense and just observe the central facet of the gospel that it's all about the resurrection and he's asking you will you believe it today not only will you believe it but will you be transformed by it and bear fruit in your life because faith without works is what dead will you follow but for the church what a reminder that our chains that bind us don't define us pushback doesn't define us and injustice will never stop us the church is not a victim of circumstance the church is under the hand and the provision and the providence of the almighty God who is guiding all history you want to know what he's guiding he's guiding an entire universe that is fast in motion you think you are taking a restful nap but in the universe there is nothing at rest is there the earth revolves on an axis that goes a thousand miles per hour and

God is in control of it the earth's orbit around the sun goes 66 thousand miles per hour around the sun and here we go right God has control of it all and not only that let's stand back more the sun orbit around the Milky Way galaxy is almost 500 miles per hour in force and if that doesn't convince you that God is in control the Milky Way is ripping through the galaxy at 1.3 million miles per hour we are completely unaware of this breathtaking motion but we can know for certain that God is in control of it all we can't miss the parallels here of his providence between

Jesus and Paul both were prosecuted by a Roman governor for Jesus it was Pilate for Paul it's Festus both were brought before a Jewish king Jesus being Antipas and Paul being Agrippa and both were found innocent and maybe the church shouldn't get all riled up about facing injustice and maybe we should actually rejoice as we walk in the footsteps of Jesus according to the great and almighty providence of God we are never victims of circumstance God is always in control always working in our lives and for that we'll put a pause on this trial as we'll pick up next week with Carmen as he enters the hot seat but we see that for Paul his appeal was boldly standing against injustice and it was risky but in the scope of all things

God is holding everything together according to his providence and the question we have is will we have the deep faith required of us to stand against risk and if we forget to stand if we forget the perspective if we think that all of this is too difficult to endure we remember the Milky Way galaxy that God is holding in his hand will you stand steady and ready to carry out God's mission according to the direction of his will I'll leave that in your hands today let's pray