

Sermon 73, Resurrection Hope on Trial, Pt. 2, Acts 25

Proposition: Christ works out complicated circumstances so that Paul ends up testifying before a governor and a king, thus showing that He really reigns over the tiniest details.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we resume our travels through Paul’s long and tangled journey to Rome this morning. As you have probably noticed, the book of Acts changes in this final quarter. Luke zooms in on a single character, to the exclusion of all other Christians and apostles. Why? His purpose hasn’t changed. He is still interested in the certainty of the kingdom. But he is also interested in showing the fulfillment of some of God’s promises regarding the kingdom. For instance, Paul was told that he would testify before governors and kings; now, here in Acts 25, he testifies before both of these. Luke describes how Paul came to testify before a governor and a king at great length. If you and I had written Scripture, we would have appreciated a whole chapter on the mode of baptism, or a whole chapter describing how James and Thomas advised new churches on the correct form of church government. But instead, Luke gives us a whole chapter on the political machinations of a small-time Roman official named Festus. Why, exactly? Because this story demonstrates only too clearly that Jesus reigns, even over the tiniest of details. Jesus reigns over the political games of Festus and Agrippa, over boredom, over the CYA mindset of bureaucrats the world over. And that’s how we know the Kingdom is certain — because we see it in action in the most mundane of events and circumstances.

I. How Paul Came to Testify Before a Governor and a King, vv. 1-27

The chapter recounts at length the story of how Paul came to testify before a governor and a king. Unlike the chapters before and after it, it does not include any long speeches from Paul. Instead, it is mostly taken up with the record of Festus' activities, or Festus' statements about Paul. What on earth are we supposed to learn from this? Well, I think we should take a look at three major factors that Luke highlights, factors that culminated in Paul's testimony before Festus the governor and Agrippa the king, just as Jesus promised in Luke 21:12: "But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake."

A. Politics

The first factor, unsurprisingly when we're talking about governors and kings, is politics. Politics more than anything else gave Paul the chance to testify and proclaim his resurrection hope. Now, can you accept that? King Jesus uses even so dirty an instrument as politics to work His will. In fact, given the amount of political history in the Bible, one could even say He specializes in it.

1. Do Us a Favor, vv. 1-9

The political aspect of this chapter boils down to this: The province of Syria, which included the region of Judea in this period, was a brutal assignment. It was like being governor of New Jersey. (Kidding.) In all seriousness, though, governing a territory with such a strong and stiff-necked population was no easy task. Felix had been hated for being soft on crime and allowing desert terrorists to flourish. His final act, of leaving Paul in prison for his successor to deal with, was certainly an act of cowardice. It was also an act of politics, trying to do something to leave a slightly less bad taste in the mouth of his constituents. Well, the same Jews who wanted Paul left in prison as a favor, trying to get some action on the case, come to Felix's successor Festus and once again ask for a favor. This favor, however, is a desire to have Paul tried once more, in Jerusalem of course so they can murder him.

Now, it seems to me that Luke is hinting that Festus' ten days in Jerusalem gave the governor some idea of what he was up against. When he first arrived there, he said "No, I'm not about to summon this guy Paul down here. Forget it. You can come to my Caesarean HQ and there we'll talk." But less than two weeks later, when the trial of Paul commences in Caesarea, Luke tells us that Festus is "willing to do the Jews a favor" (v. 9). What brought about this sudden desire to do a favor for the Jewish residents of his province? I don't think it was that he just fell in love with them while he was in Jerusalem. I think he realized that they could make or break his governorship based on whether they were willing to cooperate with him. And so he realized that he needed to earn some political capital at the expense of nobodies like Paul so that his administration would not be a total flop. Rome was often not happy with governors who didn't know how to keep the province peaceful.

It's amazing to me that Festus was a good enough politician that his attitude could completely switch in a mere ten days. But on the other hand, it's not amazing at all. This is exactly what we would expect from a political animal. He got to be a governor by being good at reading moods and giving people what they wanted.

2. “No One Can Give Me as a Favor,” vv. 10-12

Paul, however, insists on his rights as a Roman citizen. He is well aware of Festus’ desire to do the Jews a favor, and that’s why says, in so many words, “No one can give me as a favor.” The word “favor” is the same word that Paul himself uses so often for “grace” — *karis*. “I am not your ticket to favor with the Jewish population,” Paul tells Festus.

In other words, he knew that Festus may have been afraid of the local elites, but he was even more afraid of the Imperial center and what it would do to him if he were found to have broken the law. He could hardly afford to make the Jews mad, but he most definitely could not afford to make Caesar mad. Paul was willing to play a little bit of politics as well to ensure his safety from the murderous mob that had been trying to kill him for years.

B. Entertainment, vv. 13-23

Well, politics explains how Paul came to testify before a governor. But the desire for a little entertainment, something new to talk about, was what allowed him to testify before a king. It says that Agrippa and his sister Bernice, whom Roman gossip accused of living in an incestuous relationship, came to pay a visit to their new neighbor, and that they stayed on and on. “Bored? In Jerusalem?” I recently heard someone who had stayed in that city for a semester ask. Well, it would seem that Agrippa and Bernice were bored in Jerusalem. Why else would they linger so long with Festus? But anyway, Luke doesn’t say why they stayed forever. He just says that they did so, and that eventually Festus remembered this fellow Paul. He summarized for Agrippa the history of how Paul came to be there — history the reader already knows, of course. Why does Luke record this speech? So that we can see that Jesus reigns even over the self-serving thought processes of politicians who are looking for entertainment. Notice how Festus describes himself as extremely noble-minded, someone who was fanatically devoted to Roman justice and wouldn’t even consider condemning Paul without a trial. Now, according to Luke that is not what the Jewish elites had asked for; they had simply asked for a trial in Jerusalem. But Festus conveniently forgets all that and acts like they had asked him to condemn Paul out of hand.

Anyway, the upshot of it all is that Agrippa and Bernice find something new to do, and Festus does too. Agrippa would like to hear from Paul. Again, Luke doesn’t say so, but the length of the visit makes it likely that a new source of entertainment and conversation is not far from the minds of the governor and his guests.

C. Self-Protection, vv. 24-27

The final element that leads to Paul’s testimony before governors and kings is the good old bureaucratic formula called “cover your a**.” Yes, you better believe that that’s what Festus is doing in the latter part of this chapter. As he has a conversation with Agrippa, he realizes that here is the perfect way to do that. Rather than being personally responsible for what he does with Paul, he can drag Agrippa into it. Agrippa is a local elite, a client king, one who can help Festus deal with fallout from the Jews (who will definitely be unhappy that Paul has appealed to Rome) and who can also help him have a better looking report to send along with the prisoner. After all, he can say that the decision wasn’t just his, but was Agrippa’s too— never mind that Agrippa has no jurisdiction in the case and is nothing more than an expert adviser. With his name on the

report too, Festus feels like his rear end has a much smaller chance of being chewed by the Imperial center to which he's beholden.

So Jesus rules over politics, entertainment, and the political entertainment of protecting yourself from negative consequences.

II. What Paul Testified, vv. 8, 10-11, 19

Though there is no long testimony from Paul in this section, he does have some short speeches. Caught as he seemingly is, as a pawn in local Palestinian politics, Paul still takes the opportunity to testify to some important things.

A. I've Done Nothing Wrong, v. 8

The first of these, of course, is the insistence that he had done nothing wrong. Paul was committed to telling the truth. And therefore, he couldn't plead guilty because that would be a lie. So he insists that regardless of the charge, he's not guilty. He's done nothing against the Jews. He's done nothing against the temple. He's done nothing against Caesar.

B. If You Sin, Take Your Punishment, v. 10

But, intriguingly, Paul adds this: If you sin, you need to take your punishment. He is explicit about this. It's almost like he can't resist the opportunity to shove a little political theology into the account of how he came to testify before a governor and a king. Neither can Luke. Anyway, the thing he teaches is this: Criminals should be punished. If you are guilty of a capital crime, you ought to die. If you have done something worthy of death, don't try to fight it. Just submit to it. But at the same time, if you're not guilty, then fight conviction tooth and nail. You cannot be handed over to "justice" when you are innocent!

These two convictions go a long way. They animated a good part of the American Civil Rights movement. They produce a righteous justice system. And they are something that we as Christians should passionately embrace.

C. I Demand Trial as Roman Citizen, vv. 10-11

Well, one key plot point here is that Paul demanded trial as a Roman citizen, and thus helped pave the way for his upcoming journey to Rome. Jesus had promised to bring him to Rome to testify; now, with Paul's request to be taken out of Palestine and away from his mortal enemies there, he is set to go to Rome at taxpayer expense. Yes, he was a prisoner on the boat — but it had to feel good to finally not be paying for a trip himself!

D. Jesus Lives, v. 19

The final thing to which Paul testified is stated by Festus in v. 19: Jesus was dead, but Paul claimed that He was alive. Festus obviously thinks of this as absurd. But Luke, and all Christians, think of it as obvious. Of course Jesus was dead and is alive. That is the absolute cornerstone of our faith. Without it, there is no Christianity.

Since Jesus lives, justice matters. Since Jesus lives, Paul is ready and able to testify before governors and kings.

III. Why It Matters

So why does this matter? Why does Luke spend 27 verses describing how Paul ended up speaking before Festus and Agrippa?

A. Jesus Reigns Over Politics, Entertainment, and Self-Protection

The first answer is that Jesus reigns over the things at play in this chapter. This is not just a random story about how Paul ended up testifying before a high-status set of VIPs. It is a testimony to the reign of Christ over politics, over entertainment, and over bureaucratic self-protection. Christ can set His messenger up to testify at any time, through any number of apparently less-than-ideal circumstances.

B. Jesus Reigns Because He Was Dead and Is Alive

But you can also be certain of the Kingdom because Jesus was dead and now He is alive. Paul didn't disagree that Jesus had once been dead. He simply contested whether He was dead now. And He wasn't and isn't! Jesus is alive, brothers and sisters.

C. Jesus' Reign Is Certain Because He Gave Paul Opportunity to Testify

In short, Jesus' reign is certain because He gave Paul an opportunity to testify. He called a witness and sent him before a governor and a king for His own sake.

Are you certain about the Kingdom? Are you ready to testify for Jesus? Then do it. Live it out. Live like the Kingdom is real. Amen.