

Words and Deeds: To Caesar You Shall Go!

By Jason Huff

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Acts 25:1-22

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 25:1-22. May God open our ears and hearts to understand the meaning and message of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “Three days after arriving in the province, Festus went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem, where the chief priests and Jewish leaders appeared before him and presented the charges against Paul. They urgently requested Festus, as a favor to them, to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way. Festus answered, “Paul is being held at Caesarea, and I myself am going there soon. Let some of your leaders come with me and press charges against the man there, if he has done anything wrong.” After spending eight or ten days with them, he went down to Caesarea, and the next day he convened the court and ordered that Paul be brought before him. When Paul appeared, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many serious charges against him, which they could not prove. Then Paul made his defense: “I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar.” 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. 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!” After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: “You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!” A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. Since they were spending many days there, Festus discussed Paul’s case with the king. He said: “There is a man here whom Felix left as a prisoner. When I went to Jerusalem, the chief priests and elders of the Jews brought charges against him and asked that he be condemned. I told them that it is not the Roman custom to hand over any man before he has faced his accusers and has had an opportunity to defend himself against their charges. When they came here with me, I did not delay the case, but convened the court the next day and ordered the man to be brought in. When his 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. I was at a loss how to investigate such matters; so I asked if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges. 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.” Then Agrippa said to Festus, “I would like to hear this man myself.” He replied, “Tomorrow you will hear him.”

In Tokyo, you can rent a friend for about \$55 an hour. Now Japan has always been on the cutting edge of new and bizarre trends, but this one is particularly striking. You schedule a session, and your friend will meet you at the coffee shop for conversation on whatever you want to talk about. They’ll go shopping with you and help you choose what you’re looking for. They’ll accompany you to a wedding or a funeral as your “date,” if you need that, but it’s purely platonic.

The article's author told about a man who needed to convince his parents that he was OK in the big city, so he used a "rent-a-friend" to convince his parents that he was dating and even engaged, even though no such thing had happened. The writer in fact went on a few "rent-a-friend" outings and found himself genuinely surprised and engaged by these folks, who were outgoing and friendly and seemed genuine. Of course, they'd never call him back to do something else without cash on the table, but it felt real.

Why is this even a thing? Modern Japan is a strange place. Most people in the big city work ten hour days, and then they are expected to socialize with their work colleagues for a few hours after that. They know plenty of people; they put on a good face for others. But real friendships are in short supply; nobody has time to develop them. One of the biggest cities on the planet is chock full of people who are isolated and alone. They don't have a friend to listen to them when things get tough; they have no one beyond themselves to appeal to.

And if they follow the standard religious practices of Japan, they might visit the graves of their relatives to appeal to them, they might respect the spirits they believe live around them, but they have no higher authority to pray to, no higher power that hears them and cares for them. They are disconnected from others. When that's your reality, \$55 an hour looks like a cheap price to pay to have a friend, even if it's not real.

This has more to do with our sermon passage this week than might appear on the surface. Paul's situation looks more and more serious. It's starting to look that despite his innocence, Paul might get himself backed into a corner he can't get out of. Ultimately, it's his appeal to a man in a high place – the man, Caesar, the ruler of most of the known world – that keeps him out of harm's way. And yet we know that it's God who put Paul in this place, and that Paul's appeal is really not primarily to Caesar but to God. As we look at today's passage, let's see how God has given us Himself as our friend and companion to turn to, and how He has shaped our paths so that even earthly connections accomplish His purposes.

As we might remember, Paul was on trial for his life. He'd been accused by the Jewish leadership and their mob of desecrating the temple, of violating their law, and disturbing the peace in such a way that it could affect the Roman empire. There was no proof to their charges, only an overwhelming desire to get rid of him. He was tried in Caesarea under Governor Felix, a corrupt man who was looking for Paul to give him a bribe. Felix was intrigued by Christianity; he even became convicted by Paul's teaching. But ultimately he was a coward; while he believed Paul was completely innocent, he held Paul for two years in a form of house arrest, and as a favor to the Jews, rather than to release Paul, he left him imprisoned for the next guy to deal with.

That next guy was Festus. Outside of Acts, there's not a lot of historical information about him. In general, he was well-regarded because his administration got rid of the revolutionary elements and roving marauders common under Felix. It shows that Festus was really trying to listen to the people that were under his governorship. But that also meant that he wanted to keep the Jewish leadership, the Sanhedrin, happy. And the one thing that they were absolutely not happy about was Paul.

Their plans really hadn't changed very much, only who was in charge of them. In our passage a few weeks ago, we learned about the "dagger men" who went to the Sanhedrin with their idea to ambush Paul and kill him while he was being transported by the Romans. That was two years ago, and the dagger men have disappeared. Instead, the Jewish leadership are so fed up with the lack of anything happening that they've taken up the ambush plans themselves. All they need to do is get Paul moving towards Jerusalem, and they can make it happen. They try to convince Festus. "Do us a favor. Bring Paul here to Jerusalem. It's our charges and our law he's broken; let us deal with him. Not only will you save yourself the hassle, we'll be so grateful."

Festus, to his credit at this point, is like, "Now wait a minute. Paul's in Caesarea, where I'm going to be not long from now. Your delegation can come with me and bring their charges. Then we can see what's what." At this moment, he's acting like a Roman governor was supposed to act – with restraint and fairness. Besides, Paul is a Roman citizen; it's only right for Festus to try the case.

This is yet another instance where God worked through the pagan Roman system to save His servant Paul. If there are a few things we can guarantee from the book of Acts, it's that God's plans are mysterious and complex, they use all sorts of people we figure God would never use, and that God's divine will always wins out no matter how strange the path might take. Who would have thought that God would use Israel's oppressors to save His people? Yet that's what He does.

Finally, Festus and the group from the Sanhedrin get to Caesarea, and Paul is put on trial once again. Unlike last time, Luke just summarizes the charges against Paul and how false they are. Paul doesn't even seem to put up a huge defense. It's obvious that this is a sham. Two years have passed since the incident in the temple that started this mess. Leaders have come and gone. Witnesses get hazy about what happened; they don't agree with one another. Paul shouldn't have to say much because as serious as the charges are, there's no proof, no evidence. This is cut and dried.

But then Festus shows his true colors. Maybe it's from spending a couple of weeks with the Jewish leaders that he starts to cave; maybe it's because he realizes from the trial that they are going to be really sore with him if Paul goes scott-free, and the last thing he wants as he starts his administration over the region is the leadership of Israel mad at him. Doing them their favor is starting to look better by the minute. So Festus asks Paul, "Mind if we move the trial to Jerusalem?"

This is just bizarre. Why would a judge ask the defendant if he was OK with a new venue? And what would Paul gain? The prosecution has made its case; they have nothing. Moving the case to Jerusalem wouldn't change any of that. It would just put everything in his opponent's home turf. Paul smells a rat, and rightfully so, and he points it out. I'm in Caesar's court, he says, which is the appropriate place for my trial. Festus, you know full well they don't have a case against me; I did nothing to harm them. And I'm willing to go to my death if I did something deserving of it. But it's ridiculous for me to be handed over to my accusers if I haven't been proven guilty. So I tell you what – I appeal to Caesar. Let him decide my case!

On one hand, this is a shock. The emperor was Nero, who eventually started persecuting Christians when he went bonkers. Paul couldn't expect any love from Caesar. And yet, God had revealed to Paul that he was going to testify to the gospel in Rome. Paul could present Jesus not only to the city but to the very halls of power, to the one man in the ancient world that most considered to be a god. Paul's appeal would take him where he needed to go – and it would save him from the obvious plans being made for him in Jerusalem.

You almost can hear the sigh of relief from Festus about this. He has to consult with his advisors because an appeal to Caesar wasn't guaranteed, even for a Roman citizen. If you'd committed a blatant crime, an appeal to Caesar wouldn't save you. But if there was no precedent for your case, if it concerned unique or questionable matters of law, an appeal to Caesar was appropriate. And here, it was all of the above. Festus washes his hands of it – to Caesar you shall go! Paul gets a fair trial and Festus gets to save face with the Jewish leadership. I mean, there's nothing I could do, he appealed to Caesar!

The last little bit sets the stage for next week. Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice show up. The Herods are still around, and they still have some authority. Agrippa doesn't have jurisdiction over Judea, but he does have pull in Jewish circles because he chose the high priest each year. He and Festus talk about Paul's case. Like other Romans before him, Festus puts himself in the best possible light, but he admits he had no idea how to judge the case. He doesn't understand Christianity, though his statement gives us an idea how the average Roman thought of the message - "there's a dead man named Jesus that Paul claims is alive." Festus claims that he wanted to go to Jerusalem to better know how to investigate. Herod is intrigued, and so Festus sets up an audience with Paul for him. Come back next week to find out how that went!

In our remaining moments, let's look at two spiritual truths this passage illustrates. The first I want us to know and remember is that *we always have an advocate in Jesus, both our friend and Savior to whom we can appeal*. Paul makes his appeal to Caesar because he knows he isn't going to get a fair trial locally. But Paul isn't trusting in Caesar to release him or even to declare him innocent. Paul appeals to Caesar not just because he can and not just because the deck is stacked, but because he knows that God has plans for him to preach in Rome. Paul's appeal to Caesar is an appeal to God to get him where he needs to go to share the gospel of Jesus with whomever is supposed to believe in Rome. Some people appeal to Caesar as their last hope, but Paul has a hope well beyond Caesar – he trusts that Jesus will see him through.

There are times we wish we lived in Japan and could rent a friend. The modern world is so busy that relationships often fall by the wayside. We long for someone to be close to. And when troubles come, we don't even have an earthly Caesar to appeal to. When the faucet breaks or the showerhead busts or the toilet leaks – you can tell I've been doing home repairs a lot this summer, can't you? – it's the plumber and a few hundred dollars of repairs. When we need a person in charge, someone how to get things done, we can't find them. Even though we do have friends and do have family, do have relationships, we still feel awfully alone.

But we always have an advocate in Jesus. He came for us. He saves us from our sin. He saves us from the wrongdoing we've committed and the wrath we deserve. If that's all He did, it would be wonderful, far more than we can ever ask. But He does more than that. He advocates for us before the Father. He brings our case before His Dad. And not just the case of our sin; He brings our needs, our desires, our griefs, our yearnings. We can ask the Father for anything in Jesus' name. And when our desires mesh with the will of God so that we won't be harmed by what we ask for, those prayers are fulfilled.

And even more than that...Jesus is our friend. He cares about us. Whoever heard of a God who cared so much about us that He came to live among us and be one of us? Sure, the Romans believed that the gods sometimes took human form, but it was always for their own purposes, usually pursuing some human woman they wanted for themselves. Christianity is amazing because Christ came and called His friends to Him and loved them and taught them and walked with them for years.

I invite you, when you're discouraged, turn to friends at church who are Jesus' representatives for you. When things are hard enough that even that seems impossible, don't forget about Jesus. Talk to Him. Turn to Him. He is your friend in high places. We think we've got to have this all figured out, and we can't do it. The smartest, brightest, friendliest, kindest of us...this world is too much for all of us. We were never meant to do it alone.

Even before humanity's fall into sin, God intended for us to walk beside Him, as Adam literally did in the garden of eden. Call out to Him like the heroes of faith did. He is there and He will answer. Do not ever for one moment think that you don't have someone to turn. God has everything you need and more. Come to Him and know that you have an advocate greater than any Caesar and a friend far more real than anyone you can rent.

The other thing I want us to contemplate for just a moment: *God often uses ordinary means to provide His extraordinary help.* I believe without a shadow of a doubt that God, working throughout history, influenced everything perfectly that Paul was born a Roman citizen, that Roman citizens had the right to appeal to Caesar, and that Paul would know at that moment that he was being railroaded and could use this right to get out of a jam. You might say that Paul was just lucky being born a Roman citizen. You might say that Paul was wise to read the situation correctly and remember under stress that he could take his case to Rome. Or you could believe that God had worked throughout history to make everything fall into place just right for Paul to be saved and the gospel to spread throughout the Empire.

We have a choice whether to see God's hand in nothing or in everything. Our default setting is pretty much nothing; we are rarely looking for divine intervention to happen, and even when it does, we discount it. But Scripture encourages us to see God's intervention in everything. The Psalms speak of God's mighty right hand working wonders. Scripture describes the mysteries of God's creation and the heights and depths of all He has done, but it also sees that God is intimately involved in our lives.

When someone at the church happens to slip a \$20 bill in your purse on just the right day or when your boss is having a good day and thus you are having a good day, you can chalk it up to friendliness or a good disposition or whatever. Or you can see God behind it all, knowing all things, working all things out to the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes. You can see that accident you avoided and give credit to getting stuck behind that guy in the U-Haul truck going too slow – that was me last Friday – or you can just confirm that God had your back and spared you from injury.

Friends, know you always have someone to turn to in Jesus. If you have trusted Him with your life, if you have believed in Him and repented of your sins, you can know He is your advocate and friend now and always. And remember that He is actively engaged with your life, providing extraordinary help through ordinary means. Do not be discouraged when you don't see God through signs and wonders. Know that He's there, and you will begin to see His hand behind more and more of your life.