

Acts 25:1-22

Outward Church: The Highest Court

Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / February 13th, 2022

Have you ever faced injustice? Have you ever been treated unfairly? Maybe a boss mistreated you at work, or a family member or friend did not treat you right. Maybe you can think of a family member or friend who has experienced injustice. My dad told me the story of how he was let go from his job for something he had not done, and it was painful for him. Maybe you've faced something similar.

As we look at the Apostle Paul's story in the New Testament, we find someone who knows what it's like to face injustice, persecution, and suffering. Paul has been sitting in prison for two years because the procurator of Judea, Felix, a Roman official, wanted a bribe. It's around this time, when Paul is in prison, that he writes:

Philippians 4:12 (NIV)

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

Wait, Paul is malnourished, cold, tired, worn-out in prison, facing years of imprisonment for false charges, and yet he can still say that he feels "content?" That's amazing! I want what Paul has; because if I face the tiniest of injustice or unfairness, I get upset, I feel like my rights have been violated.

In Acts 25, abstract injustice becomes personal injustice. To see this, we look at the new procurator (minor governor) of Judea, Festus. We don't know much about Festus, except that he was brought in to clean up Felix's mess, the guy who wouldn't let Paul go. Festus, as we read about him in Acts 25, seems more capable, more willing to find solutions, and yet also wanting to please his Jewish subjects.

Festus, at the start of our chapter, travels up to Jerusalem, where the chief priests and Jewish leaders present their false charges against Paul (Acts 25:1-2). They want Festus to bring Paul up to Jerusalem so that they can ambush and kill him. Those 40 assassins who took a vow not to eat or drink till they'd killed Paul must be famished. Festus must know this because he refuses and invites the Jewish leaders back to Caesarea.

So Festus leaves Jerusalem, goes down to Caesarea (which was actually north, but because Jerusalem is on a mount, it was up), and the very next day convenes court and calls Paul before him (Acts 25:6). This is no procrastinator for two years like Felix. Maybe, possibly, here, at last, we've found someone who will give Paul justice, who will set him free so he can obey the Holy Spirit and go to Rome (Acts 23:11).

Acts 25:8 (NIV)

Then Paul made his defense: "I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar."

And so Festus realizes Paul has experienced a great injustice by being held in prison for two years even though he's innocent, and sets him free so he can be on his way to Rome... No! That's not what happens. Festus wants to keep his constituents happy, the Jewish rulers in Jerusalem. He can't risk his rule not going well and getting deposed like Felix. If you know anything about Festus, he only lasted three years; and he spent a lot of that time putting out fires, literal fires.

A Jewish band of rebels called the Sicarii were burning villages, and he was trying to get rid of them.¹ The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem also built a wall so high those in the palace couldn't see the inner courts of the temple. Lots of tension. Can you blame him for wanting to please those in Jerusalem? So this happens:

Acts 25:9 (NIV)

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?"

Don't miss what Festus is doing here. He knows that if Paul goes to Jerusalem, he will die, but he also knows that Paul is a Roman citizen with Roman rights. He can't force Paul to stand trial before the Jews and to be judged by a Jewish court, which will inevitably find him guilty and condemn him. But neither can he set Paul free, which will lead to a lot of angry citizens. We don't know if he was trying to trick Paul or if he actually knew exactly how Paul would answer. But it's clear Paul is facing unjust powers.

Acts 25:10-11 (NIV)

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. ¹¹ 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!"

If you've ever read Romans 13, you know that God institutes governments to give justice and to maintain the rule of law, but this one isn't functioning as God intends. So Paul, working through the human system, exerts his right to justice. Paul can't be taken to Jerusalem to die. God has called him to Rome, so he appeals to Caesar. But Caesar, which is the emperor's title, is not going to face an easy path either. Nero is the emperor of Rome. And although Nero starts off reasonably, by the end, he burns down his own palace and uses it as an excuse to kill Christians. Not a good guy. But Paul appeals to him anyways.

So the name of today's sermon title is "The Highest Court." Is it a right application of today's text that when we as Christians face persecution and hardship, we should appeal to the highest court in the land? The Supreme Court? That would be a very direct application. But just because Acts describes something doesn't mean it prescribes something. Acts is a descriptive book, but not really a prescriptive book. It tells us how things happened without actually telling us we should do the same thing. One option is to do that, to appeal in our court system, and that takes wisdom and discernment to know if that's what you should do. But Paul's ultimate concern isn't justice; but the gospel advancing, the gospel going all the way to Rome. When we exert our rights, do we do so for our own sakes or for the sake of the gospel? I think Paul is just in another way of thinking than we normally are—he was on mission for Christ.

Paul faces a lot of injustice. In the second half of our passage, we're introduced to two more characters, King Agrippa and his sister Bernice. I had a friend growing up whose dog was named Bernice. It was widely thought that King Agrippa and his sister Bernice were acting inappropriately. King Agrippa ruled over northern Galilee and that region. Agrippa II was the son of Agrippa I, or Herod, who had James killed. And Agrippa II, this king, was the great-grandson of Herod the Great, the one who killed innocent young boys in Bethlehem around the age of Jesus. They are like Bonnie and Clyde, like Felix and Drusilla. While they don't hold jurisdiction over Paul, they've come down to meet Festus and will preside with him over Paul's testimony. Do you think Paul will get justice from them? If not Felix or Festus? No.

But see, that's not what Paul really cares about. Paul isn't about any earthly court. Paul is about a higher court. When Festus recounts the circumstances of Paul's case to Agrippa and Bernice, he says this:

¹ Arnold, Clinton E.. Acts (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary) (p. 240). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.
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Acts 25:18-19 (NIV)

When his accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected.¹⁹ 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've been really surprised by how often Paul emphasized the resurrection in his preaching and legal trials. He must have gone back to it over and over again. Paul isn't really concerned about justice. He isn't really concerned about what's fair or not fair. Paul is concerned about the gospel, that Jesus died, and rose again to pay the penalty for our sins so that whoever repents and believes in him will receive eternal life. That's what Paul cares about! Do you know why Paul can be content in any and every circumstance, even in prison?

Philippians 4:12-13 (NIV)

¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Paul doesn't have his eyes set on his circumstances or the court he is facing but on a higher court. No matter how unfair life gets or how unfair life feels, you can always appeal to a higher court, the highest court, the king of kings, the Lord of Lords. That king has told Paul where to go, and he trusts him. If you're like me, you might get easily wrapped up in whatever injustices we have in our world. We should care about those things, but they should never have hold of our hearts. If they do, can I encourage you to pray Psalm 72, a royal Psalm? It goes like this.²

Psalm 72:1-7 (NIV)

¹ Endow the king with your justice, O God,
the royal son with your righteousness.
² May he judge your people in righteousness,
your afflicted ones with justice.

King Solomon wrote this Psalm in response to God's promise to place a king on David's throne from David's line who would rule forever and ever. And you know what, Solomon, who was a pretty good and wise king, knew that he wasn't the royal son. He wasn't good enough. He fell short. Our rulers and kings will always fall short, but there's one royal son who never does. That's the Christ, which means "Messiah," which means God's specially chosen king. How do we know the Messiah King is good?

This king, who is perfectly just and seated on God's throne right now, ruling and reigning over the whole universe, knows what it's like to be judged unfairly. Jesus was bound in chains and led before Pontius Pilate, a similar Roman Governor who knew the right thing to do, to set Jesus free, but instead took the politically safe route. Jesus allowed himself to be condemned, to be flogged, and to be crucified, and die in an unjust manner so that you and I can be set free from injustice. *Jesus experienced injustice so we could know peace and contentment, even in unfair circumstances.* Let's pray.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church in Westford, MA. You can listen to his other sermons at CornerstoneWestford.com or on [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com).

² N.T. Wright points to Psalm 72 in *Acts For Everyone: Part II*.

Dear Church,

Thanks for listening to this past Sunday's sermon. You can find this past Sunday's message and other weeks in our [Sermon Archive](#). Did you know we have manuscripts, slides, and videos for many of our messages? I hope you'll check it out. You can sort through by [topics](#), [series](#), [books](#), [speakers](#), or [dates](#). Thanks for checking out the further resources below. I hope they help you follow Christ this week.

- Pastor Jonathan

Discussion Questions

Upward – Why did Paul appeal to Caesar? What role did Paul's citizenship play in his ministry?

Inward – How has God used moments of misused authority in your own life (yours or someone else's) to teach you? What did he teach you? How has it shaped you? How might God use your own experiences of injustice to help others?

Outward – The Holy Spirit advocates for us to the Father. Jesus has experienced injustice so we can experience freedom. How might you advocate for others in prayer and in their circumstances?

Spiritual Exercises

Reflect – Ask God to show you how to exercise good authority in your own life. How can you be an example of justice, humility, and wisdom with whatever authority God has given you?

Confess – Confess any times you have misused authority in your own life or over others. Is there anyone you need to seek forgiveness from? Pray this prayer:

Heavenly Father, I come to you convicted that I have misused the authority you have given me, whether in my family, job, or relationships. Would you forgive me and make me new? Would you help me seek forgiveness wherever I need to seek it? Would you help me be humble and wise and exercise the authority you have given me in a way that honors you and seeks the welfare of those I oversee? Thank you for Jesus' perfect exercise of authority, and that even now, he is ruling and reigning over this world. Amen.

Worship – Andy recommends listening to “Jireh | Elevation Worship & Maverick City.” Enjoy!
<https://youtu.be/mC-zw0zCCtg>

Content Curation

Video – Monica created a second overview of Acts covering Acts 9-12 (sadly, there's no part three). Take a moment and check it out here. Great review! <https://youtu.be/fWqPJbX7qt8>

Book – A helpful resource that has helped me better understand Acts (and not get as caught in the weeds, although maybe you can't tell from my preaching, lol) is *Acts: A Visual Guide* by Kevin DeYoung and Chris Ranson. It's a hand-drawn overview of the book of Acts. I have a copy at church if any would like to borrow it.