As we return to our journey through Acts, we once again find the Apostle Paul on trial in the city of Caesarea following two years of incarceration. I will unpack this story with you this morning, and then we’ll wrap up by considering what it points to in our own lives. Let’s pick up the story beginning with Acts 25:1-12. Please stand for the reading of God’s Word.

The first thing that happens here in chapter 25 is that we meet the newly appointed governor of Palestine, a man by the name of Porcius Festus. Most scholars estimate that Festus took office around AD 59 or 60 and was replaced in AD 62. We know very little about Festus as a man, or how it came to be that he was appointed as governor. We do know some Roman/Jewish history that was taking place during this time that will help provide some context for our story this morning.

First of all, Festus enters into office during the fifth year of Nero’s reign as Emperor, so we should assume that Nero appointed Festus to replace Felix, who was a vestige of the former Emperor, Claudius. Upon arriving in Caesarea as the new governor, Festus actually had new currency, the bronze prutah, created in honor of Nero’s fifth year (show pic) https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/15/Coin_of_Porcius_Festus.jpg. Now, why is any of that significant?

On the fifth year of his reign, Nero…who was 21 years old at the time…had his mother, Agrippina the Younger, executed. Let me say that again…Nero (who was 21 years old and in office for 5 years as Emperor), had his own mother executed. Now…keep in mind that it was Nero’s mother who poisoned the former emperor, Claudius…her husband, so that her son (born from a previous marriage) could become the Emperor of Rome. History reveals that Nero’s mother was a very cruel and controlling woman who essentially ruled through her son for the first five years of Nero’s reign, but when Nero began to have affairs on his wife Octavia (who was also his step-sister, the natural born daughter of Emperor Claudius), Agrippina chose to back Octavia…which didn’t end well for her. With the controlling influence of his mother removed, Nero’s reign as Caesar began to look a lot like what you might expect of a 21 year old who had unlimited power and resources. The trickle down effect of Nero’s youthful lusts and ambitions led to increased taxes and increased tensions throughout the Empire.

Nowhere was the transition of emperors from Claudius to Nero met with more bitterness than in the Roman province of Judea. According to the first century Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, there was a major storm brewing in Judea. Relations between Rome and the Jews was disintegrating quickly, particularly around the Jew’s insistence on civic privileges. The Jews wanted privileges to govern their own state according to their own law; they resented the massive, ever-increasing taxes leveraged against the Jews; and they very much resented their new “king,” Herod Agrippa II, who was raised as a Roman and was very “Roman” in his
loyalties (we’ll meet Agrippa and his sister Bernice next week!). So…to put it mildly, Festus enters into office with quite a mess to manage.

Keeping all this juicy historical context in mind, let’s look to Acts 25:1, “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 man, let them bring charges against him.”

Do you see how the historical context brings understanding to this story? What are the Jewish leaders asking for? They are asking for a civic privilege… “let us try Paul on our own turf.” Of course, they are trying to manipulate the green-horn governor because they have a plan to ambush Paul and have him assassinated prior to any trial taking place.

Festus is feeling the pressure here. We’ve already read about the former governor, Felix, trying to win favor with the Jewish leaders; and now, once again Festus, as the new governor, is being pressured to cut a deal with the Jewish leadership under the threat of a pending rebellion amongst the Judeans. By the way…at this point in history, we’re only about 7 years away from the first Jewish-Roman War that will take place in AD 66…so this tension is real and growing.

Now, it’s unclear whether Festus was briefed about the former assassination plot that had caused Paul to be transported from Jerusalem to Caesarea two years earlier. If he does know, he doesn’t show his hand here in Acts 25; instead, Festus politely resists sending Paul to Jerusalem at this time. He reasons that since he is due back to Caesarea in a few days, it makes better sense to have a quick and speedy hearing there rather than having Paul shipped to Jerusalem. He invites the Jewish leadership to make the trip to Caesarea to file charges against Paul, ensuring them that he will give them a hearing just as soon as they can get there. Festus is following Roman protocol here…it would have been unusual to have Paul shipped to Jerusalem and have a hearing away from the provincial capital where Festus would sit upon his “bema seat” as the provincial governor and judge.

Let’s pick up the story beginning in vs. 6: 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.

Festus has been true to his promise, holding court and examining Paul immediately upon his return to Caesarea. The speed by which this trial takes place leads me to believe that Festus was eager to make inroads with the Jewish leadership, and the Jewish leaders were feeling very optimistic that they had a sympathetic advocate in Festus.
One historical note here: since Paul’s last trial two years ago under Felix, there has been a change in guard in the office of the high priest. The former high priest, Ananias, was a shrewd and brutal man. The new high priest was a man by the name of Ishmael ben Phiabi (also known as Ishmael ben Fabus). This is actually the second time this man has been appointed to the office of high priest—the first was AD 15-16. He is never mentioned by name in the Bible, but history reveals that he was appointed as High Priest in the years 58-62 by Herod Agrippa II. The only quote I could find about ben Phiabi was this one, “The handsomest man of his time, whose effeminate love of luxury was the scandal of the age.” So…that’s who is now serving as the High Priest, and I’m guessing that was not going over very well with the Jews in general. Keep in mind that there was a lot of politics involved with the High Priest appointments due to a raging debate about who’s house the High Priest should hail from…but that’s a story for a different day. Given the quote that we just read regarding ben Phiabi, I’m a little doubtful that he is even present during this trial in Caesarea…I suspect those prosecuting Paul are those who were recruited under the former High Priest, Ananias.

Now, Luke records that the Jews “stood around” Paul and made many serious charges against Paul…but then Luke qualifies those charges as statements that could not be proven. The picture here is not unlike the trial of Jesus, where the council would have surrounded Paul in a semi-circle, all taking turns at accusing Paul to his face before the governor, who sat on the seat of judgment. We get the sense that Festus is listening patiently to all the accusers, but every time he asks for some form of proof regarding the accusations, the accusers fail to provide any substantial evidence.

Luke sums up Paul’s defense in vs. 8, “Paul argued in his defense, ‘Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.’” Paul is a brilliant and learned man. He understands the law of God, the Jewish laws surrounding the temple, and the law of the Roman state. He says with full honesty and conviction, “I’m not guilty of breaking any laws here. I am innocent.”

Now, Festus (not unlike his predecessor, Felix…and not unlike Pilate during the trial of Jesus), is in a pickle. He is desperate to improve relations with the boiling pot of political unrest in Jerusalem, but as a Roman judge, the Jews have simply failed to make a case against Paul. As we’ll read later in his conversation with King Agrippa, Festus will state in vs. 18, “When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. 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.”

Notice…from the governor’s perspective, even if Paul was guilty of all the “serious charges” made against him by the Jews, these charges would still not qualify as reason for Paul to be imprisoned or executed as a Roman citizen. As far as Rome is concerned, Paul is innocent of breaking any law against the state. The real question Festus must wrestle with comes back to the Jewish insistence upon civic privileges. Should the Jews be allowed to try a Jew based upon their own religious laws and customs? If so, it would make sense to send Paul back to Jerusalem.
However, notice what Festus offers up next in vs. 9: “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?’”

Remember: the Jew’s first request at the beginning of Acts 25 was that Paul be tried in Jerusalem. Festus is demonstrating good will to the Jews by making this offer to Paul, but it’s odd to say the least. According ancient Roman history, a “trial by jury” was previously a practice of the Romans many years prior to the first century...so that may be what the Jews are asking for...and that may be what Festus is offering to Paul. By this late date in the history of the Roman Empire, the court system had all but eliminated the use of “juries” in their justice system, so that would have been a real exception to the rule...but it’s possible that Festus is offering up that possibility as a favor to the Jews and also as a way for him to avoid having to condemn an innocent man or liberate a man who the Jews wanted dead. When Festus makes the offer to move the venue to Jerusalem, he is stalling...he is trying to avoid rendering a verdict...just like Felix who came before him.

And I think Paul sees the writing on the wall. Nothing good can come from having another trial in Jerusalem. The Jews in Jerusalem are not “unbiased” when it comes to Paul and his convictions regarding Jesus of Nazareth as the long-awaited Messiah. At the same time, if Paul simply declines the offer to have a new trial in Jerusalem, he risks the likely outcome that Festus will condemn him simply to appeal to the Jews, or that Festus will lock him away like Felix did, with no verdict, just more procrastination and indecision with more years of sitting around doing nothing.

Paul, having weighed all the options, speaks clearly, utilizing his rights as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar. Let’s see what he says beginning with vs. 10, “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.’”

Paul speaks in a way that is logical, faithful to God, and yet strategic. He first appeals to Roman law under which the governor must operate. There is no legal rationale for moving his case to Jerusalem...that would simply be “passing the buck” and a sign of cowardly abdication of responsibility by Festus. I imagine Festus winced a bit when Paul spoke that sentence, because Paul is spot-on, and Festus knows it. Paul also appeals to the justice that has already been determined in his trial before Festus...the Jews have made no claim upon him that could be proven as even breaking their own law. Paul is appealing to Festus as a judge who has already made a determination...there could be no logical reason to hear the same accusations again when those accusations have already fallen flat before the state appointed judge. Paul then acknowledges that he is not afraid to be sentenced and even to die if legitimate charges could be proven, but if no such charges have been presented and established, it is legally and morally unjust for a Roman governor to hand an innocent man over to those who very openly desire to have him killed.
Having said all that, Paul then casts his vote of “nonconfidence” concerning Festus and his office. He is not willing to give Festus the opportunity to screw this up, because by simply entertaining the notion and offering Paul a second trial in Jerusalem, Festus has demonstrated a lack of integrity and good judgment. Festus has betrayed his political agenda, and Paul will not be used as a political pawn. Consequently, Paul exercises his right to appeal to Caesar.

Paul’s appeal to Caesar is known as the *provocation*, an appeal of a citizen for Caesar’s judgment BEFORE a judgment has been rendered. Originally this was the right of appeal to have the people, not a ruling official, decide a case. But by the first century, the appeal was to have the highest official make the decision. The case is *extra ordinem* (outside the order or code of law), which means that there is some freedom in how it is being handled (Bock, *Acts* 702). This type of an appeal is one of the oldest Roman ancient rights, dating back to 509 BC.

Now, Festus is a bit befuddled. It’s possible that Festus would have simply proclaimed Paul innocent and sent him on his way…it’s possible that Festus would have ordered the trial in Jerusalem and knowingly or unknowingly sent Paul to his death. We will never know. What we do know is that Festus confers with his legal council (called the *consilium*), and decides to grant Paul his request to be transferred to Rome to be heard by Caesar. We read in vs. 12: “Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, ‘To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.’”

We’ll pick up the story here next week, but for now, let’s reflect as to how this story reveals truth and even speaks into our lives as those living in the 21st century.

There is much we can observe, but on account of time, let us focus our attention on the subject of justice. Everywhere around the world, regardless of the culture, what you will find is the effort to create systems and processes to protect and enact justice. This tendency has been central to human communities since the beginning of time. Why is that? Why justice? It’s a reasonable question.

In our prevailing materialist worldview which is now taught in every public school in American…a worldview in which all human beings evolved over billions of years from impersonal particles and unguided processes, it is quite difficult to account for the absolutely predictable moral nature of human beings and their obsession with justice. In other words, immoral machines care little about justice or injustice…they simply do what machines do, based upon their wiring, no matter how complex that wiring might be. Furthermore, when we look to other living organisms said to have evolved from the impersonal, amoral primordial soup, neither animals or trees or other “evolved” organisms give a flip about justice (revenge, maybe, but not justice). No other living organisms are so deeply offended in the face of immorality and injustice…only humans…and it’s always been that way…that’s nothing new. In fact, what serves as “justice” in a culture from 2000 years ago is not so different from what we define as justice today, or even what was defined as justice in cultures dating back to 6,000 years ago. For
example, in ancient cultures as in our modern culture, a person is not guilty of a crime simply because he has been accused of a crime. The burden of proof in determining the guilt of a person is universally required...because that’s what justice demands. In the same way, if a person is not guilty of breaking a law or committing a crime, it would be unjust to punish that person as though they were guilty. Again, that is universally true in every culture, because all humans understand what justice requires when it comes to protecting those who are innocent. Again, in the same vein, all cultures are aware that justice demands punishment and or/restitution from those who have broken the law and committed a crime. Without punishment...without penalty...without restitution...there can be no justice for those who were the victims of the crime.

Now, to be sure, different cultures have different laws, but for the most part, what serves as morally right and wrong and what serves as just and unjust is shockingly consistent amongst various cultures over thousands of years.

Our story today paints a perfect picture of what we all know is inherently true about our human condition: we are all inherently moral, we all long for justice, and we are all hopelessly unjust and immoral! I’m not making a religious statement of faith here; I’m simply making an observation that all philosophies and observers of human behavior have agreed upon for centuries. The truth is as plain as the nose on your face: Justice is deeply woven into the DNA of every human being. But where did it come from? How did we get this way? That is a reasonable question. Evolutionary answers simply fail to account for the moral, just nature of humans...even as evolutionary answers fail to account for the twisted, immoral, unjust nature of humans that so disappoints us every day when we read the papers or watch the news...or even when we look in the mirror.

The Bible provides us the only reasonable, satisfying answer: humans were made in the image of a just God; the law of God is written upon the hearts of men; as a result of Adam’s fall, we all bear the curse of disobedience and as such are prone to injustice; and finally, we all live with the knowledge that we are moral, that we are accountable, and at the same time, we know that we are guilty, and that we deserve punishment. That is the human condition according to the biblical worldview, and it lines up with our experience, right? We are all inherently moral, and we are all hopelessly immoral, thus we all feel condemned...that is what we call the moral dilemma of humanity.

So...how do we deal with this moral dilemma? Historically humans have dealt with it in any number of ways. One way we deal with the moral dilemma is by changing the law to fit our preferred lifestyle or belief system. If you sit in a position of power, you can do that...you can simply change the law or create your own ethic to accommodate your life so that you can convince yourself that you are not guilty of immorality or injustice. King Henry VIII changed the law and even created a new denomination of Christianity so that he could justify his adultery and annul his marriage with Catherine of Aragon. Numerous cultures found that it was easier to have slaves do their hard work, so they may laws to justify slavery because otherwise we all know it’s unjust to treat people like slaves. The prophet Mohammed claimed a new law had been revealed
to him from God that allowed him to have has many women as his eye desired, and that those
who lost their lives in the war against infidels would be granted 70 dark-eyed virgins in paradise.
Notice that our American politicians and powerbrokers have utilized the same methodology over
the past 50 years. Unwanted pregnancies were an inconvenience, so we legalized abortion such
that we wouldn’t come under the conviction that we were killing our own children…because that
would be unjust, right? We make divorce simple and without fault because it’s inconvenient to
remain in a marriage that isn’t fun anymore, but simply divorcing our spouse because we’re
bored would be immoral if not unjust, right? There are many examples of how we have changed
the law to redefine what justice means…but does that work? No, it doesn’t, because justice isn’t
established upon popular vote or upon the whims of the powerful. Justice is established by God,
and His laws cannot be amended. His ethics are timeless and imprinted upon the hearts of His
creation. Try as we might through power and politics, the unrelenting conviction that we are
guilty before the ultimate Judge cannot be undone by simply changing the laws.

We also try to evade our moral conscience through the art of comparison. We simply look at the
worst offenders we know and say, “I’m a good person compared to those people. At least I
haven’t killed or raped or stolen. I know I’m not perfect, but all things considered, I’m a good
person.” That kind of thinking leads to narcissism, because we must constantly dwell upon the
sins of others in order to avoid seeing and feeling the weight of our own immorality and
injustices. Given enough time, the narcissist can literally come to a point of feeling no regret, no
conviction of wrong doing, and no guilt whatsoever. We have a name for those kinds of people:
they are called sociopaths, and they are considered extremely dangerous, right? So, evading
moral accountability through the exercise of comparison leads to narcissism is not a very
healthy option, agreed?

Now, I could go on for a while listing all the unhealthy ways that humans deal with the moral
dilemma such as self-medicating, working hard to do good to somehow make up for what
they’ve done wrong, or withdrawing from society, but let me jump to the end and tell you the
only way to deal with the moral dilemma that actually leads to healing, hope, freedom, and joy
both for you and for the world. The ONLY way to deal with the moral dilemma…the fact that
we are all hopelessly moral and hopelessly immoral at the same time…the only healthy way to
deal with the moral dilemma is the biblical worldview which points us to the Gospel of Jesus
Christ.

The biblical worldview helps us to identify the problem: there is a law…it’s a good and just
law…and we’ve all broken that law. That’s why we feel bad all the time. And oh, by the way,
feeling bad about breaking the law is not a bad thing…it’s a good, healthy thing. Our moral
conscience is not something to be stifled, drugged, or denied any more than we would unplug the
smoke alarms in our house because we’re afraid they might wake us up in the middle of the
night! Duh…that’s why the smoke alarms exist, right? Their job is to wake you up when trouble
is coming…such is the function and purpose of your conscience, which is why we want that
thing working at its peak performance all the time, even when it’s inconvenient to hear it.
Now, the biblical worldview doesn’t just stop with an explanation of why we feel guilty based upon the law of God. The Bible also reveals that our loving God took great steps to attend to our guilty conscience by accomplishing JUSTICE…which we all long for…through His perfect Son, Jesus Christ. The justice question is answered in the perfect, unblemished One who gave up his perfect record to atone for our spotty record. Jesus steps down from the “bema seat” of judgment, having declared us guilty according to the laws we have broken, and he then takes on our punishment so that Justice is satisfied, and we are forgiven the debt we owe to God…because ultimately, our sins and injustices are against God, the maker of heaven and earth and the Holy One who gave us the law as an act of love and justice.

You see, here’s the hope that comes with the Gospel: that though we have all like sheep have gone astray…breaking the law and accruing guilt…though our sins are like scarlet…because of the sacrifice of Jesus…our record can be made as white as snow. The promise of scripture is that our sins will be separated from us as far as the east is from the west. The hope of the gospel is that if we are forgiven in Christ, when the Father looks upon us…He no longer sees our sins…He sees instead His perfect Son, our Mediator…the One who suffered our punishment and fulfilled the demands of justice in our place.

But here’s the deal: the Gospel solution to the moral dilemma comes only when we quit denying our sin…it’s available only when we stop comparing ourselves to others…it’s experienced only when we confess our sin, and when we turn from it…this is called repentance. Apart from repentance, we will never benefit from the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross. It is not enough that we agree with a biblical worldview or that we enjoy religious customs. Theological agreement and church attendance will not save us. Listen friends: the moral guilt that you feel in your heart is a smoke alarm that says in no uncertain terms: there is a fire, and it will destroy you. Get out now, or this whole house is going down in flames. That fire of sin will consume you now, and left untreated, it will burn you for all eternity. There’s only one way out of the fire of our immorality and injustice, and it requires that we stop now…repent…and then call upon the name that is above all names…the name of Jesus. He is the only one who died for you…He is the only one who can save. But listen friends: He saves EVERY TIME! He has never ignored or failed to save a soul who cried out with true repentance and brokenness. He has never failed to act, He has never lost a soul…He always saves. It doesn’t matter how horrible your past has been, it doesn’t matter how well you know the Bible, it doesn’t matter how badly someone hurt you, it doesn’t matter the color of your skin or the way your were brought up. What matters is that you confess your sin, and that you repent…that you turn, and that you begin to walk in the opposite direction from the sin that you are currently engaged in and bear fruit keeping with repentance. Turn, and call upon His name, and you will be saved. Your conscience will be washed clean, and that burden of condemnation that you have been suffering under for so long will be lifted, gone, eliminated…you will be free, and you will be free to be part of God’s healing work in the world. I can tell you that being free of condemnation with a clear conscience will change your life…you will literally be transformed…it’s like being reborn…it is exactly what Jesus talked about in John 3 when He said, “I tell you that unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”
Friends, if your smoke alarm is going off, it’s time to wake up and do something about that fire. Confess, repent, and call on Jesus. Do it now. Let’s pray.