

Acts 25

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[0 : 00] We're in Acts chapter 25, which is on page 934. And I go on holiday tomorrow.

And this sermon feels like I'm going on holiday tomorrow.! Sometimes they've taken him into protective custody.

And the authorities really don't know what to do with him. So they play pass the parcel with him. They shunt him from one to another before finally sending him to Rome.

First it's Felix. Then it's Festus. And Festus brings us to Agrippa, who comes to Caesarea on a courtesy call. And then they ship the apostle off to Rome.

To appear before Emperor Nero. Great names, aren't they? Felix the cat. Nero the dog. Someone has said, those were the great names in those days.

[1 : 14] Felix, Nero. We call our cats and dogs Felix and Nero. And people call their sons Paul. Can you see the reversal?

But there's been how influential Christianity has been on our culture. The big names of the day were Nero. He was emperor in Rome.

And Felix was the governor, the new governor of Palestine. Felix was the worst governor that Palestine ever had. He was eventually summoned to Rome and was given the sack.

And now Festus is the guy who takes over, Uncle Festus. And anyway, Paul makes quite an impression before these people. And we're told, do you remember last week, as Felix heard Paul preach, he trembled.

Agrippa, we're told, is almost persuaded to become a Christian. At least that's what he says. Whether he's being sarcastic or whether he's being sincere, we don't know. But Paul made a remarkable impression.

[2 : 17] And this guy, Festus, in the courtroom, loses his cool. Blows his stack, as they say. And he shouts at Paul. Look over the page. Look at chapter 26, verse 24 and 25. We're told at this point, as he was saying these things in defense, Felix said with a loud voice, he shouted, Paul, you're out of your mind.

Your great learning is driving you out of your mind. I think you'll agree that's not the normal way. That's not the way a judge should behave in court.

To shout at the man in the dock. To call him mad. Paul made, didn't he? Quite an impression. And in these circles, as he's shunted from pillar to post, there are three different sets of people in Acts 25.

There are three different attitudes in Acts 25 towards the gospel of the Lord Jesus. And I want to pick up on those three attitudes. First of all, we see the hard-heartedness of the Jewish leaders. And I want you to be asking yourself, as you hear this sermon proclaimed, what's the attitude in my heart? And you might think this morning, it's impossible for me to be hard-hearted.

[3 : 28] I wouldn't be in church this morning, would I? But let me tell you, it's very easy to sit in church like this. I was brought up in a good church and be very hard-hearted. I know what it is to sit under sermons and be proud and arrogant and say, I will not believe this.

We look at the hard-heartedness of the Jewish leaders, the close-mindedness of them. And then secondly, the half-heartedness, the double-mindedness of Philip Festus. And then thirdly, the whole-heartedness of the Apostle Paul.

So let's see the hard-heartedness of the Jewish leaders. And there's a key word, which you might have picked up when Andrew read it, and it's the word against.

It keeps coming up 12 times in this chapter. These people are against Paul and against his gospel. They're against everything he stands for. Let me show you very quickly. Chapters 25, verses 1 and 2.

Three days, 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. [4 : 32] And they urged him, asking as a favor against Paul, that he summon him to Jerusalem because they were planning to ambush him. They were against him to kill him on the way.

They cannot wait to get their hands on Paul. You might have thought, surely these Jewish leaders would have forgotten him. It's been two years. Look at the last verse of chapter 24.

When two years had elapsed, two years had gone by, Felix was succeeded by Paulius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

Two whole years, he's been rotting for two years. Do you remember two years ago? You might have thought, two years was enough time for them to forget about Paul.

But Festus hasn't had time to unpack his suitcases. He's not even kind of done photo opportunities with other leaders of state. But the Jewish leaders are knocking on his door.

[5 : 35] Look what they say in verse 3. They urgently request Festus to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem. They're gunning for him. They carry out a vendetta against this man, Paul. And the tense of the verb in verse 3 is they keep on.

They will not let it go. They will not take no for an answer. And what's motivating them? It's not just a concern for law and order. It's not a concern for justice to be done. What's the concern in verse 3? They want to kill him on the way. They want him to be a dead man. And they don't care how it happens, whether it's legally or illegally, whether it's done by the authorities or it's done by the mob. They want him silenced. And when Festus refuses to bring Paul to Jerusalem, do you notice verse 4? And he invites them to Caesarea. They don't waste any time.

Look at verse 4 to 7. As soon as Festus gets back to Jerusalem, the very next day they're there again knocking on the door. They can't even wait for the trial. They surround him.

[6 : 32] They gang up on him. They charge him. They will bring any charges. Can't you see what's happening here? It's indiscriminate, isn't it?

It's deep-seated, implacable hostility. There's nothing reasonable about their hostility. Look at verse 15. They ask for the death sentence. When I was in Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. But look at the way that they ask him for him to be condemned. I would have thought, if you believe in the death penalty, it's a very serious thing. But look at verse 24. Agrippa gives us a little bit more information about this.

Verse 24. King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. They're baying for blood.

Paul, the prisoner, he is cool and he's calm and he's collected. But everyone else is angry. Everyone else is shouting at him. His accusers are shouting at him.

[7 : 39] The judge is shouting at him. Paul, you're out of your mind. You're insane. Why? Is the question, isn't it? Why is there such anger? Why such hostility against him? Why such unreasonable hatred towards Paul?

And the reason is this. The message that he preaches. What lies behind it? Why are they so desperate to silence him? Why do they want him dead?

Strange thing, isn't it? I think psychologically it's proven that often people will accuse others unfairly and passionately of the very things that they're guilty of themselves. In fact, the more unreasonable, the more angry they are, the more likely they are to be guilty of the very things they're accusing others of doing.

It's a phenomenon, isn't it? It's recognized by psychologists. It's what people often say about Bible-believing Christians. There is, despite incessant news of a quiet revival, there is neither quiet nor revival, there is, isn't there, in our culture, hostility towards the biblical message of the Lord Jesus.

When people really understand what we believe about human flourishing and about human sexuality, when people really believe what we understand about rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ and the reality of hell, what is the response?

[9 : 08] That Christians are dangerous. At least the fundamentalist Christians are. Real Christians who believe the Bible, they are dangerous. These people, actually, they believe in a violent God.

They threaten our stable, multicultural society and actually we need to silence them. They are not allowed to express those opinions. We need to cancel them.

And so if you regard yourself as a true Christian and you explain the message of the gospel, you will find that people think you're a violent, hate-filled, murderous fundamentalist. And the UK modern society would be a better place without you.

I've got an atheist friend who's a lovely fellow who worships science and mocks me mercilessly at the rugby club and he cannot see me without talking about God.

He cannot see me without saying, are you here to influence young men, vulnerable young men? Every time I see him. What's the response?

[10:21] The response is this, why are you so angry about a God who doesn't exist? That's the great question for atheism, isn't it? I don't believe in God and yet I hate him.

Why is that person so angry about a God they don't believe in? There's actually nothing reasonable to it. There's something else going on, isn't there?

There's a close-mindedness to it. There's a hard-heartedness to it. I said to my friend that I prayed for him. He said, I don't give you consent to pray for you.

I told him I couldn't care less. Let's move on from the hard-heartedness of the Jewish leaders.

There's nothing new under the sun, is there? And let's notice the half-heartedness of Festus.

Just look at that. Look at verses 9 to 11. Let me read it. But Festus wishing to do the Jews a favour.

Can you see that? Said to Paul, do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me? But Paul said, I am standing before Caesar's tribunal where I ought to be tried.

[11:23] To the Jews, I've done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. If then I'm a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there's nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them.

I appeal to Caesar. Pretty straightforward. You can't send me up to Jerusalem. I'm not prepared to go to Jerusalem. The interesting thing to notice here is that Festus changed his mind.

Do you notice verse 4 and 5 he refuses? Three days after taking office he goes up to Jerusalem and the Jews want him to bring Paul to Jerusalem to stand a kind of show trial.

But Festus refuses very strongly and firmly there in verses 4 and 5. But in verse 9 we're told that he moots the idea with Paul. Would you like to go up? Are you willing to go? What's he thinking?

Why has there been a change of mind? Why a change of policy? Why? Try and get into the psychology behind it. Festus is thinking isn't it this will look very good on my CV if I can pull this off.

[12:25] The clue is there in verse 9 isn't it? It's very simple. He's a politician wanting to do a favour to the Jews. It's not about saving justice it's about saving his career.

Festus by all accounts was a very good politician. Sadly only lasted two years in office and then he died. But whereas Felix was probably the worst governor that Palestine ever had Festus is probably one of the best.

So he was a good guy in lots of ways but he was a double-minded man. Can you see? He's not motivated by justice here but by self-interest. What's good for me? So where as the Jewish leaders are they closed their mind they'd hardened their hearts to the truth.

Festus is double-minded. Look at verses 18 to 20. Festus is talking to Agrippa and when the accusers stood up they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I suppose.

Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion about a certain Jesus who was dead but whom Paul asserted to be alive. It's an interesting thing isn't it? Do you notice that? Then verse 19 such an incredible way of putting it.

[13:36] The man who is the saviour of the world the most influential human being that's ever existed can you see how he's described? A dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive. Festus says I was quite surprised he didn't realise that was what it was all about.

It wasn't what I was expecting. Roman law doesn't actually cover resurrection. Resurrection well I know all how to deal with that but resurrection I've not got any experience of that.

Festus is out of his depth he's clearly out of his depth and he's not really that interested. It's so obvious isn't it? He's dismissive about it. Some man named Jesus Jesus a really common name he died this guy says he came back to death came back to life.

He shrugs it off but can you can you just see under the veneer can you just see underneath the surface here that of course in that shrugging it off Paul is putting his Festus is putting his finger right on the issue.

Why are the Jews so angry? Why are they so murderous? Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ the resurrection of Jesus actually reverses the verdict of history I don't think again I brought this out in the book of Acts but the preaching of the book of Acts is you thought Jesus was this you threw him on the scrap heap of history but he has died but he has been raised to life he is God's king forevermore and what are you going to do with him?

[15 : 02] they thought he was just one of the dozens of messiahs they got rid of him they thought this is the end of this Jesus this Jesus whom you have crucified God has raised from the dead so where does that leave you?

Well no wonder you are angry and if Jesus is alive from the dead if Jesus has risen from the dead then to live as though he is dead well then who is the fool?

you see if it really happened this is 30 years after the event if it really happened that this man Jesus died and Paul says he came back from the dead you cannot just shrug as Festus does this is not some kind of finer point of philosophical discussion Paul says in Corinth he is on record saying if you can disprove that Jesus Christ came back from the dead you can dismantle Christianity because if Christ has not risen from the dead your faith is vain futile a waste of time if Jesus died and did not rise I am a massive fool and so are you for believing it and Paul is saying if he did rise from the dead who is the fool now Festus notice verse 26 he says to Festus and Agrippa this was not something done in a corner isn't that brilliant it's not hidden away this is something that can be investigated here is something that is on public record 30 years down the track after it happened one writer said it's the best attested fact in history

Charles Colson he was an insider in Washington he worked in the White House he was involved in a scandal called Watergate and he became a Christian while serving his prison sentence this is what he said he commented on the 40 years that Jesus Christ's disciples never backed down on their witness to the resurrection even to the point of martyrdom and he said this we that's the Washington insiders that concocted this story we couldn't hold our stories together for three weeks under that kind of pressure he said I was around the most powerful men in the world but we could not hold the lie if the resurrection was not true those disciples could never howl out someone would have dug up the tapes or something or maybe you're a fan of the Simpsons some of you are too young for the Simpsons kind of glorious cultural commentators and if you know of a man called Lionel Hutz in the Simpsons he's the lawyer and Lionel Hutz is based on a real life lawyer who is a very different character by all accounts

Lionel Hutz is based on Sir Lionel Luccu who according to the Guinness Book of Records is the most successful lawyer ever he has apparently 245 consecutive murder acquittals which is pretty impressive but Sir Lionel Luccu became a Christian at the age of 64 and what persuaded him to change his mind was this dead guy called Jesus who Paul said was alive listen to the world's most successful lawyer he says I spent more than 42 years as a defence lawyer appearing in many parts of the world I can say unequivocally that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is so overwhelming that there is no room for doubt you see what Festus so calmly writes off as a dead man who Paul says has come to life is actually news like there's a bomb in the building there's a bomb in the building you're not very convinced do you are you still sitting there there's a bomb in the building if you saw flashing lights heard sirens police and army people come wearing their gear coming in through the doors the bomb disposal unit van outside and they come into the room and they shout there is a bomb in the building you would not sit there you'd evacuate the building straight away and the resurrection is that kind of message it isn't some point of doctrine that the Jews are debating with

[19 : 28] Paul it is bomb in the building stuff if this man Jesus really died and really came back from the tomb and if the tomb is empty in Jerusalem if this thing that was not done in a corner if this thing that has been done can be proven it's bombing the building stuff and you cannot just go on thinking about your career festus if you only knew that you're going to just last two more years anyway you can't just shrug it off festus if there really is a bomb in the building it's madness not to do anything about it and if Jesus really did rise from the dead which is what the Bible teaches and is at the heart of Paul's gospel then it means that the end of the world where every single human being will rise from the dead has broken into time and we are now living in the last days between Jesus resurrection and our resurrection resurrection and that's what the resurrection tells you it's actually what Jewish belief taught it's what Paul had in common with these Jewish leaders they believed that at the end of the age there would be a resurrection of the dead and Paul is saying in

Jesus that has happened and you cannot just shrug your shoulders and think that's interesting it's bombing the building stuff you cannot continue to be a Jewish leader and not recognise

Jesus as the Messiah you cannot continue to be a career politician like Festus and put your career first if Jesus has risen from the dead because it changes everything it changes absolutely everything what you've thought about him is not who he was and you will meet him thirdly the whole heartedness of Paul there's such a contrast between the half heartedness of the Jews the hard heartedness of the Jews and the half heartedness of Festus look at verses 24 and 25 of chapter 26 as he was saying these things in his defence Festus cried out with a loud voice Paul you are out of your mind you're nuts your great learning is driving you out of your mind it wasn't the first time that Christians have been called nuts and out of your mind and it certainly wasn't the last time in 1736 George Whitfield was ordained in his hometown of Gloucester he's one of the great Methodist leaders along with John Wesley one of the great 18th century preachers the following Sunday George Whitfield preached his first sermon in his first church and it was a sermon that apparently 15 people were converted on the spot one and a half rows were converted like that it was reported to the bishop somebody reported to the bishop that he had driven Whitfield had driven 15 people mad to which the bishop replied I hope their madness lasts till next Sunday you see when somebody is converted when somebody believes in the Lord Jesus and when somebody is born again and they begin to take their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ seriously you're going to be accused of fanaticism Tim Keller in the reason for God says people will accuse us of fanaticism but the real problem with us is that we're not fanatical enough and that's the problem isn't it because if Jesus Christ really did rise from the dead and if he's alive today then you and I ought to be a lot more fanatical than we are because it signals the end of the world and there is a date in the diary of God there's only one date left in the diary of God and it is the day of judgment and that's the significance of the resurrection the resurrection tells you that judgment's coming and the very fact that it hasn't happened yet is because God is compassionate and he's patient with you and me and he doesn't want you to perish and he's giving us as a church family the opportunity to take this message of the gospel to the ends of the earth but don't misunderstand God's patience and God's slowness the next date in the diary of God is the day of judgment and God has served notice on the human race by raising this man Jesus from the dead and Paul says to you and I anyone who takes Christianity seriously is going to be thought of as mad I've thought lots in the last few weeks about the Lord Jesus who was thought of as mad by his family Jesus is preaching to people he's in there's crowds gathering to hear him so many people are gathering to hear him that his disciples aren't even able to eat they can't get food it's so busy and then Mark tells us that when his family heard that Jesus was doing this they went to take charge of him because they thought he was out of his mind they thought that he was out of his mind the Lord Jesus is that so encouraging to some of you whose family think you're out of your mind is it so encouraging to you whose friends think you're out of your mind that they went to the man who was most in his mind the most whole human being that's ever walked this earth and they said he's out of his own family so full of the word of [25 : 08] God so keen to do the will of God so zealous for the glory of God and he misses a meal and they think he's out of his mind some of your friends and your neighbours they think for you to come to church on a Sunday night you're out of your mind but if Jesus is who he says he is and the resurrection proves that those claims are right you're in your own mind that's what these men were saying about Paul look at verse 32 this man could have been set free if he had appealed to Caesar what kind of nutcase is he he could have freed him if he had appealed to Caesar they cannot understand what was making Paul what was why did Paul want to go to Rome well we know don't we from the book of Acts because in Acts 23 verse 11 Jesus told him if you look at that take courage for as you've testified about the facts about me in Jerusalem so you will in Rome and so Paul wants to go to

Rome because he's been told that he will appear before Nero and he will preach the gospel to the ends of the earth Nero heard the gospel seems very unlikely that Nero was converted he wasn't amazing thing is the praetorium guard who guarded Paul the kind of crack troops of the empire they heard this prisoner they saw this prisoner and many of them were converted and they were sent all over the Roman empire and we're told that even some of Caesar's!

household were converted let me try and tie this together and apply it so I want to ask you what is your attitude to the message of the apostle Paul what is it that makes you tick what is it that motivates you every one of us is like one of those old fashion watches I've got my old watch on but

every old fashion watch has got a main spring and the main spring makes the watch tick and old watches tick is the best thing about watches isn't it old watches there is something in you that makes you tick there's something that drives you there's something that motivates you and I want you to think this morning as we come to the Lord's table what is it that makes you tick is it the gospel of the Lord Jesus is it the message of the Lord Jesus who was dead but is now alive and is that what motivates you you've got lots of problems you've got lots of issues and I don't want to underplay them but you look to every person in this room and they've got the same some hide! it better than others but the message that there was a dead man who is now alive changes absolutely everything and when it comes to this message of that Lord Jesus are you hard hearted close minded like the Jewish leaders implacably hostile blindly prejudiced but all done through a kind of Presbyterian lens which is lovely and people would never think that there are people in churches aren't there that sit week by week by week and they've closed their mind and they've hardened their heart and you do not have to be mad and shouting and angry maybe you're here and you think well actually I've got an open mind GK Chesterton said an open mind is like an open mouth you open it in order to shut it on the food and the truth you feed your mind in the same way you feed your body you may be here today and you say well actually I'm seeking for truth and you're willing to discuss it but you're never willing to shut your mind on the truth that there was a man called Jesus who died and rose and that's not philosophy that's not a religious belief that is a fact of history and it happened in time and space and there were witnesses and will you this morning fasten your mind on that close your mind on Jesus Christ and his resurrection it's the crux of the issue isn't it either it's true or it's not true are you hard hearted close minded when it comes to the facts of the gospel are you half hearted like Festus but your mind is somewhere!

[29 : 49] sometimes your mind is somewhere else because the preaching is boring and it's long I know that sometimes our mind is someone else because we're thinking about the week to come and we do our lists you don't think I can see that but I can are you thinking about your relationships with your friends I don't know what your mind is on and at the back of your mind you think well I believe this stuff or at least I think I do but it just washes over you this stuff about Jesus being dead and being alive again you've always believed it so the back of your mind it needs to be at the forefront of your mind and so if your career is dominating you or your family or making money and that's what you wake up to on a Monday morning and you think about and that's what makes you tick there's something very very wrong Jesus Christ is risen!

from the dead and you're half-hearted and you're double-minded when it comes to the gospel when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus you are half-hearted or are you fully persuaded wholeheartedly committed to it would anyone ever dare call you a fanatic are there some people to which you're a riddle they think you're mad what's driving you blind prejudice hatred of the truth hostility self-interest or Jesus a dead man who is risen from the dead and is alive let's pray to him to him him to him him to!