

Homiletics Analysis: Acts 25

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Acts 25 narrates the transfer of Paul's case from the outgoing governor Felix to the new governor Festus. The chapter moves through three distinct scenes: Festus's initial encounter with the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, who press for Paul's trial to be moved there (planning an ambush); Festus's formal hearing of Paul in Caesarea, where Paul categorically denies all charges; and Festus's conference with King Agrippa II and Bernice, in which Festus describes Paul's case as theologically bewildering, centered on "a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive." The chapter closes with Agrippa's expressed desire to hear Paul personally. Throughout, Luke traces the mechanics of Roman provincial justice being applied, delayed, and ultimately leveraged — Paul's appeal to Caesar becoming both his legal protection and, in God's sovereign ordering, the vehicle by which the gospel will reach Rome.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish two related effects through this passage: First, to demonstrate that the gospel's advance is sovereignly secured even through the machinations of political expediency and human injustice — Paul's accusers control none of the outcomes they intend, and Festus's confused management of the case actually accelerates rather than impedes the gospel's trajectory. Second, to display Paul's composure, clarity, and gospel-centered witness under sustained institutional pressure — modeling for every subsequent generation of believers what it looks like to hold one's ground before worldly authority when the resurrection is at stake. The passage is simultaneously a confidence-builder (God governs the circumstances of witness) and a character-formation text (this is how the gospel-shaped person conducts himself under unjust pressure).

Subject Sentence: God's sovereign governance advances the gospel through the confusion and injustice of human courts.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that neither political maneuvering, institutional cowardice, nor judicial confusion can arrest the gospel's advance — and calling His people to the same unshaken clarity Paul displays when the resurrection is the real issue on trial.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Nature of Paul's Appeal to Caesar

The primary interpretive question in Acts 25 is the nature and function of Paul's appeal to Caesar (*Caesarem appello*, v. 11). Three positions deserve evaluation.

A purely legal reading treats the appeal as no more than a constitutional right of Roman citizenship — a procedural fact Luke records to explain Paul's journey to Rome. This reading is accurate as far as it goes but is exegetically incomplete: Luke's narrative throughout Acts consistently shows providential design beneath institutional events. The appeal to Caesar is not merely a legal maneuver — it is the fulfillment of the Lord's word to Paul in Acts 23:11 ("as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome"). The legal mechanism and the divine purpose are not competitors; Luke presents them as convergent. The Reformed reading holds these together rather than reducing the event to either pure providence or pure procedure.

A charismatic or triumphalist reading sometimes reads Paul's composure as evidence of supernatural boldness in the moment — emphasizing spiritual empowerment as the explanatory category. This is not wrong but is partial. Paul's confidence before Festus rests not primarily on a felt experience of the Spirit in the moment but on the substantive claim he keeps making: the resurrection of Jesus is a historical fact, and Paul's behavior flows entirely from that fact being true. The content of Paul's witness (the resurrection) governs his demeanor, not merely a spiritual state. To preach this passage as primarily about Spirit-filled boldness abstracts the boldness from its doctrinal foundation.

A dispensational reading sometimes treats this passage as exclusively about Israel's national rejection of its Messiah — the Jewish leadership's ongoing opposition being read as the formal, final turning of the gospel to the Gentiles (connecting to Acts 13:46 and 28:28). While the broader Acts narrative does trace this movement, Acts 25 itself does not make this the operative claim. The chapter's focus is on Paul's individual case within Roman jurisdiction, not on a covenantal turning point. This reading imports more than the chapter is carrying at this particular moment.

The most exegetically faithful reading is one that holds the political and providential together: Paul navigates Roman legal institutions with full sophistication while simultaneously being carried by divine sovereignty toward Rome. His appeal to Caesar is simultaneously Paul's wisest available legal move and God's chosen mechanism for gospel advance. The chapter does not force a choice between human agency and divine purpose — it narrates their convergence.

Festus's Mischaracterization of the Case

A second interpretive moment is Festus's summary to Agrippa in verses 18-19: the accusation against Paul is not about what Festus expected (crimes deserving death) but

about “points of dispute about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.” This is frequently read as evidence of Roman incomprehension — Festus simply cannot categorize the dispute. This reading is correct but incomplete. Luke records Festus’s summary with evident intentionality: the Roman governor, without understanding its significance, has stated the gospel with remarkable precision. The dispute is about a dead man Paul claims is alive. That is exactly the gospel. Luke is doing something subtle here — the very man who cannot appreciate the significance of what he is saying is nonetheless a vehicle for stating the central claim of Christianity plainly before Agrippa. This irony is homiletically significant and should not be collapsed into a simple note about Roman legal bewilderment.

Key Canonical Support

- **Acts 23:11** — The Lord’s direct word to Paul: “You must testify also in Rome.” Paul’s appeal to Caesar in Acts 25 is the visible mechanism by which this divine directive is being fulfilled. The chapter cannot be read without this anchor.
 - **Luke 21:12-15** — Jesus’s own prediction that His disciples will be dragged before governors and kings, and that He will give them words that their adversaries cannot withstand. Acts 25 is the fulfillment of this promise in Paul’s experience — his composure and the clarity of his testimony are the Lord’s own provision.
 - **Genesis 50:20** — Joseph’s statement to his brothers: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.” The structural parallel is exact: human hostility (the Jewish leadership’s plot, Festus’s political maneuvering) is the instrument through which God is accomplishing His specific purpose. Luke’s narrative theology throughout Acts operates on this logic.
 - **Proverbs 21:1** — “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.” Festus’s decision-making — including his politically motivated offer to try Paul in Jerusalem, and his subsequent conversation with Agrippa — is within the Lord’s governing hand. The chapter illustrates rather than merely asserts this proverb.
 - **Philippians 1:12-14** — Paul’s own later theological reflection that his imprisonment “has really served to advance the gospel.” Acts 25 is one of the concrete chapters that forms the factual basis of that claim. Paul’s appeal to Caesar is not a setback dressed up as progress — it is actual gospel advance through apparent institutional delay.
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Aim: To demonstrate from this passage that God’s people can hold their ground with unshaken clarity before worldly authority because the resurrection is not vulnerable to

political outcomes — and that God’s sovereign governance makes the advance of the gospel not contingent on favorable circumstances.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3	Festus travels to Jerusalem; chief priests and Jewish leaders present formal charges against Paul and request his transfer to Jerusalem for trial	The ambush plan (v. 3) reveals that the opposition is not legal but lethal — they have no case, only murderous intent
4–5	Festus declines the transfer; invites the accusers to come to Caesarea and make their case there	Festus’s refusal is procedurally routine but providentially significant — it foils the ambush without Festus knowing one is planned
6–7	Festus returns to Caesarea and opens the tribunal; Jewish accusers bring “many and serious charges” they cannot prove	The inability to prove the charges is Luke’s editorial note — the legal vacuum beneath the opposition is being exposed
8	Paul’s defense, summarized: he has committed no offense against Jewish law, the temple, or Caesar	Three-part denial: religious, cultic, and civil — covering every potential category of charge
9	Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, asks Paul whether he is willing to go to Jerusalem to be tried there on these charges	The phrase “wishing to do the Jews a favor” is Luke’s key editorial note — Festus is playing politics, not administering justice
10–11	Paul appeals to Caesar, asserting he has done nothing wrong, declining to die if guilty but refusing to be handed over to satisfy political pressure; formal appeal lodged	Paul’s appeal is legally precise, morally clear, and providentially decisive — it closes the Jerusalem option permanently
12	Festus confers with his	Festus’s words are

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	council and grants the appeal: “To Caesar you shall go”	politically routine; Luke records them as the pivot point of the entire subsequent narrative
13–14a	King Agrippa II and Bernice arrive in Caesarea to greet Festus; Paul’s case is described to Agrippa over several days	Agrippa’s presence is historically plausible and narratively significant — a Herodian king with Jewish knowledge is about to hear the gospel
14b–21	Festus describes Paul’s case to Agrippa: the Jewish accusations, his own investigation, Paul’s claim that Jesus is alive; Festus’s confusion about how to characterize the case for his report to Rome	Festus’s summary in v. 19 states the gospel’s central claim — “a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive” — with uncomprehending precision
22	Agrippa expresses desire to hear Paul personally	Agrippa’s interest may be political curiosity, but God is opening a door for the gospel before the most powerful audience yet assembled in this narrative
23	The formal setting: Agrippa, Bernice, military tribunes, and leading citizens assembled; Paul brought in	Luke’s staging is deliberate — Paul before the full apparatus of provincial Roman power and Herodian royalty
24–27	Festus addresses the assembly, recounting the case, acknowledging he finds no capital charge, and stating his intention to send Paul to Rome with Agrippa’s help in drafting the charge	Festus’s dilemma: he must write a report he cannot compose because the charges are theological, not legal — Paul’s appeal has created institutional confusion that Paul’s witness will have to resolve

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
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1	1–5	The Plot Foiled — Festus denies the Jerusalem transfer
2	6–9	The Trial Without a Case — Accusations that cannot be proved
3	10–12	The Appeal — Paul invokes Caesar, closing the Jerusalem option
4	13–22	The Governor’s Dilemma — Festus describes an incomprehensible case to Agrippa
5	23–27	The Stage Set — Paul before royal and military power; the gospel’s next audience prepared

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: God’s sovereign governance advances the gospel through the confusion and injustice of human courts.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that neither political maneuvering, institutional cowardice, nor judicial confusion can arrest the gospel’s advance — and calling His people to the same unshaken clarity Paul displays when the resurrection is the real issue on trial.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe institutional opposition as gospel opportunity, not gospel obstruction.

(*Mind/belief*) Festus’s political maneuvering, the Jewish leadership’s plotting, and the two years of procedural delay all appear to obstruct Paul’s witness — but Luke presents every one of these “obstacles” as the mechanism through which the gospel reaches the next audience. The believer who reads this passage and still interprets institutional hostility, professional setback, or unjust treatment primarily as threat has not yet believed what Luke is narrating. The question is not whether opposition is real but whether God governs it. Acts 25 answers that question concretely: He does, and He uses it.

2. Identify the resurrection as the real issue every time worldly authority

misunderstands the gospel. (*Mind/belief*) Festus summarizes Paul's case as a dispute about "a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive." He means this as a confession of confusion — he cannot understand what the fuss is about. But his summary is the gospel. When the world mischaracterizes Christianity as a cultural preference, a political tribe, or a social identity, the believer's task is the same as Paul's: clarify that the actual claim is about a resurrection. That is the offense the world has always had with Christianity, and it is the one worth defending. Do not let the argument settle on secondary issues when the resurrection is the real one.

3. Grieve the failure of institutional justice without losing confidence in God's superior

governance. (*Affections/worship*) Festus knows Paul is innocent — he says so explicitly in verse 25. He sends him to Rome anyway because it is politically convenient and legally procedurally necessary. This is a genuine injustice, and it should register as such. The believer who has experienced institutional injustice — a false accusation, an unjust verdict, a system that operates by convenience rather than truth — is not wrong to grieve it. Paul does not pretend Festus is doing something praiseworthy. But grief at human injustice and confidence in divine governance are not mutually exclusive; Acts 25 holds them both. Festus's injustice does not define Paul's future — God's word to Paul in Acts 23:11 does.

4. Speak with unmistakable clarity about what you actually believe and why you

actually behave as you do when pressed. (*Will/behavior*) Paul's defense in verse 8 is precise, unembellished, and unrepeatable by abstraction: he has committed no offense against Jewish law, the temple, or Caesar. He does not hedge, moralize, or make himself understandable to the court at the cost of accuracy. When challenged to give account for your faith — at work, in family, in public — the temptation is to soften the claim until it is no longer offensive and no longer true. Paul's model is the opposite: state the claim clearly, accept the cost, and do not treat the audience's comfort as a criterion for the content of your testimony.

5. Refuse to trade an unjust death for a compromised testimony. (*Will/behavior*) Paul's

statement in verse 11 is among the most clear-eyed in Acts: "If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death." He is not appealing to Caesar to preserve his life at any cost — he is refusing to die on the wrong terms, for charges he did not commit, to satisfy someone else's political agenda. The appeal to Caesar is not cowardice; it is the refusal to let the opposition control the narrative of his death. The believer who faces pressure to capitulate — to confess to what he did not do, to accept terms that misrepresent his actual position — has a model here: accept genuine consequences for genuine actions; refuse to accept false terms that misrepresent the truth.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Acts 25 presents God as the sovereign governor of history at the level of provincial judicial procedure — not only in dramatic interventions but in the ordinary machinery of human politics, legal process, and institutional decision-making. Festus's procedural choices, the Jewish leadership's murderous plotting, Agrippa's curiosity, and Paul's appeal all function within a divine architecture that ensures the gospel reaches Rome. This is not a passage about God overriding human agency but about God governing it — Festus acts freely according to his own political calculations, and those calculations serve God's stated purpose (Acts 23:11). The chapter also establishes the resurrection of Jesus as the specific, contested, historically locatable claim at the center of every conflict in Acts — not religion in general, not ethical teaching, not social reform, but the resurrection of a specific man named Jesus. That claim is what the opposition cannot tolerate, what the courts cannot categorize, and what Paul will not soften.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Acts 25 is a concrete illustration of the Reformed doctrine of providence applied to the advancement of the gospel — God's sovereignty operating not through the suspension of ordinary causation but through it. The chapter resists two errors that Reformed exposition must guard against: a passive quietism that waits for God to act without human wisdom or agency (Paul uses his legal rights with full skill), and a practical Arminianism that treats the gospel's advance as contingent on favorable human decisions (Festus's decisions are unfavorable, and the gospel advances anyway). The Reformed reading holds that God's decretive will and human secondary causation are not in tension — Acts 25 narrates their integration. Additionally, the passage underscores the Reformed insistence that the gospel is a specific historical claim (the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ) rather than a general religious feeling or moral framework — a distinction Festus's bewilderment unintentionally illuminates. The gospel's advance toward Rome is not incidental to the Spirit's mission in Acts; it is the Spirit's mission, and Acts 25 is one chapter in that mission's unstoppable fulfillment.

Main Takeaway

The resurrection of Jesus cannot be tried, convicted, delayed, or politically managed out of relevance — and neither can the witness of the person who has staked everything on it. God moved Paul toward Rome through a lying ambush, an indifferent governor, a politically motivated offer, and a formal appeal to the most powerful court on earth. Not one of those obstacles stopped him. You are not waiting for circumstances to become favorable before your witness becomes possible. The circumstances are already in God's hand.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing Paul's appeal to Caesar to a lesson about using legal rights.** Paul's use of Roman citizenship is a component of the chapter, but making it the primary application ("Christians should know their legal rights and use them") misses what Luke is narrating. The legal mechanism is providentially significant, not primarily strategically instructive. The homiletical point is not "be legally savvy" but "God uses the mechanisms available to His servants to accomplish His purposes — including mechanisms that look like setbacks."
- **Preaching Festus as a villain without noting Luke's irony.** Festus is not presented as uniquely wicked — he is a competent administrator doing what competent administrators do: managing competing interests without moral conviction. He knows Paul is innocent and sends him to Rome anyway. The preacher who turns this into a denunciation of corrupt politicians has missed the subtler point: Festus's theologically illiterate, politically motivated summary of Paul's case ("a dead man Paul asserted to be alive") is the most precise statement of the gospel in the chapter. God's governance operates through theologically confused bureaucrats, not in spite of them alone.
- **Skipping the resurrection as the chapter's central theological pivot.** Verse 19 is the theological center of the chapter: the entire dispute is about whether Jesus is alive. Preachers who treat Acts 25 as primarily a political or biographical narrative of Paul's legal odyssey will miss that Luke is making a sustained theological point: this is what the opposition is always really about. The resurrection is the claim that cannot be accommodated, ignored, or procedurally managed. Do not let the legal machinery crowd out the theological substance.
- **Treating Paul's composure as a personality trait rather than a theological position.** Paul is not calm because he is temperamentally cool-headed. He is clear and unshaken because he is certain that Jesus rose from the dead and that God told him he would reach Rome. His demeanor is the fruit of specific convictions, not a character virtue to be imitated in general. Applications that draw on Paul's composure without anchoring it to the resurrection and God's word to him in Acts 23:11 will produce moralistic "be calm under pressure" exhortations rather than gospel-grounded applications.
- **Overlooking the function of Agrippa's arrival as narrative staging.** The chapter closes with the stage being set — Agrippa and Bernice present, the full apparatus of power assembled, Paul about to speak before the most prominent audience yet in Acts. A sermon that ends with the appeal to Caesar (v. 12) has stopped the chapter too soon. The final movement (vv. 13-27) is Luke showing the reader where God is taking this: not just to Rome procedurally, but to the most powerful human audience available as the next platform for Paul's testimony. The gospel is being carried upward through the institutional hierarchy, not suppressed by it.

- **Importing the Israel/Church turning point from Acts 28 back into Acts 25.** The Jewish opposition in Acts 25 is real and sustained, but Acts 25 is not the formal turning-point passage about Israel's national rejection. That argument belongs to Acts 28:25-28 and its exegetical context. Preaching Acts 25 as though it narrates a covenantal turning point imports more than the chapter is carrying and distracts from the chapter's actual claim: the gospel's advance is unstoppable regardless of who opposes it or what institutional form that opposition takes.