

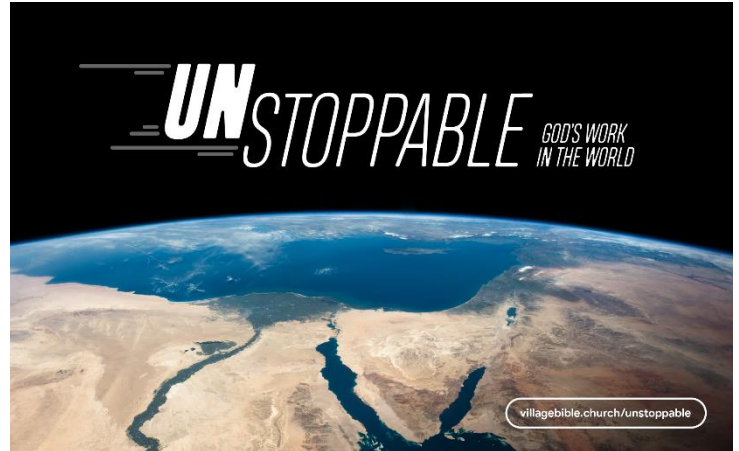


**VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH**  
**SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS**

# UNSTOPPABLE: God's Work in the World

**The Real Trial — Acts 25:1–22**

**Jeremy Anderson | March 10, 2019**



This morning we're going to continue in our series through the book of Acts. We're in Acts 25 and will be looking at verses 1–22. As you're turning there, I want to share something with you.

I've heard of a man who served as a board member at a Christian college for a number of years. He shared a story about an encounter with a foreign ambassador who had come to work with their college. The king of Swaziland had decided they wanted to set up a Christian school system, so he sent his ambassador to the United States, which was why this man was visiting this Christian college.

The board member mentioned in his story that he considered his interactions with the ambassador to be a great privilege. Having always lived in a democracy, he was unprepared for the power of a monarchy. He'd never before met a government official from such a country and realized that ambassadors are a very special kind of official. He also said the ambassador of a king is even more special than an ordinary ambassador.

The first thing he noticed was this man's sense of dignity. It was apparent that he was the personal representative of a king. His office bore an inherent power that gave the ambassador great confidence. From his behavior it was clear that he was well aware that he spoke for a king. He was quick to say, "Well, the king says...." If anyone questioned his authority or his word, he could simply reply, "Call the king." He had dignified confidence, which rested in his assurance that he spoke for a monarch who had nearly absolute authority in his country.

I thought that was a great idea relating to what we're going to see in this passage today in Acts 25. We're going to come back and visit this encounter near the end of this sermon, so tuck it in the back of your mind. We'll see its application to our story later.

As we spend time reading through these passages, try to make them real. Don't just let this be a part of the sermon where we're reading through the Bible. This is the Word of God, and we need to understand that it's the most important reason we gather. Of all the words coming from this pulpit this morning, the words of Scripture are what have power and will bring life changes.

Let's see what Luke records about Paul in this episode in Acts 24:7–22:

<sup>27</sup> When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

<sup>25:1</sup> Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. <sup>2</sup> And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, <sup>3</sup> asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. <sup>4</sup> Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. <sup>5</sup> "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."

<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> Paul argued in his defense, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor

against Caesar have I committed any offense.”<sup>9</sup> 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?”<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.”

<sup>13</sup> Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus. <sup>14</sup> And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul’s case before the king, saying, “There is a man left prisoner by Felix,”<sup>15</sup> and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. <sup>16</sup> I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him. <sup>17</sup> So when they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought. <sup>18</sup> When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. <sup>21</sup> But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar.” <sup>22</sup> Then Agrippa said to Festus, “I would like to hear the man myself.” “Tomorrow,” said he, “you will hear him.”

If you’re thinking critically about this passage, you might say this is pretty similar to what we’ve already talked about. As I was preparing to preach on this, I had the same thoughts. Can’t we just take the recording from a couple weeks ago, press “play” and go over that again. But as we study this, we’re going to find some important things. I’ve decided to take a risk and give you my entire outline right now, then I want to challenge you to stay with me as we unpack this sentence to see why we should come to this conclusion. Our big idea for this morning is this: **Paul’s trial reveals it’s not all about Paul, but about God’s purposes in view of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.** Let that sink in for a minute. We have a tendency as believers to put ourselves in the place of whoever the main character is in a Scripture story.

A movie came out recently called “Captain Marvel.” I’ve not seen it, so don’t worry that I’ll give you any spoilers. I’m just assuming Captain Marvel is in a movie that’s named after him. I’m bringing this up because when we look at this Scripture, we have a tendency to think we’re like Paul. But if we were to watch a movie like “Captain Marvel,” we don’t really have a tendency to say, “I’m Captain Marvel.” We would think that’s odd. So we need to recognize that we are not Paul, but even more, this whole story isn’t actually about Paul, either.

The reason we started in Acts 24:27 is that two years had passed since Paul’s last trial. For us, it’s only been a week. It’s hard for us to naturally take that time gap into consideration. Paul has been held in Roman custody for two years. We think waiting on the Lord for a week or a month is a challenge. Paul waited two years.

What happened then is that new Roman leadership came in. Felix, whose name means cruel ruler, was succeeded by Festus. We know from secular history that Festus was actually a pretty fair ruler, but there was a lot going on in the region at this time, especially with the Jews. Festus came in, as any new ruler would, and he wanted to get on the good side of the Jews by doing them favors. His main job was to keep the peace, yet even after two years, the Jews still wanted to kill Paul. Since Felix had already ruled on the matter, nothing happened for the rest of his time in office there.

But new leadership presented a new opportunity for the Jews, so they decided to see if they could again accuse Paul. We also know from secular history that the Jews had appointed a new high priest. Ananias was the high priest in Paul’s earlier trial, but now there was a man named Ishmael in his place. So that meant there were two new leaders stepping into a circumstance that was essentially still the same.

## Paul’s trial reveals it’s not all about Paul...

We don’t really know from the text what accusations were now being brought against Paul but, based on his defense, we can assume they were similar to the earlier ones. So again, Paul testified in Acts 25:8 that he had not sinned against the laws of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar. He may have taken more words than that one sentence to explain that, but maybe not. Either way, that was his defense.

When we really begin to see that this trial was not about Paul is when we move to the conversation between Festus and Agrippa. As Festus recounted the situation to Agrippa, he boiled it down to what we read in Acts 25:18: *“When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed.”*

Right there we know the Jews were making a pretty big deal to Festus, asking for extreme punishment for Paul. Festus had therefore assumed Paul had done some terrible crimes. You can imagine Festus listening to the case and wondering what all that was about, concluding, “You guys are blowing this way out of proportion.” It wasn’t about what Paul had done, but from Festus’ point of view they just had some disagreements about the Jewish religion. It had something to do with a certain man named Jesus Who was dead, but Whom Paul claimed was alive.

Paul’s trial wasn’t really about him and his actions; what was on trial was Jesus and His resurrection. Even though there was new Roman and Jewish leadership, the case was still the same. When Paul was first arrested by the Romans, by a man named Lysius, Paul gave his defense by saying, “I am on trial for my hope in the resurrection from the dead.” From the very beginning, it’s been Christ Who’s been on trial, not Paul. Paul was just an instrument.

It’s also not you that the focus is on. We tend to look at the Bible thinking, “Paul goes to all these places preaching the gospel and look what happened to him. He was beat up and stoned within an inch of his life. Then he was arrested and falsely held in prison. If I preach the gospel, I may have to face these same things.” Remember, it’s not about us; it’s about Jesus. We have to shift the focus of what we’re dealing with.

When I was in college at Taylor University, we had a “Missions Fest” with missionaries from all around the world. I was planning to go on a missions trip, so one of the requirements was that I had to interview a missionary while they were visiting. I thought, “Just one more thing I have to do....” I talked with a man named Ron. I didn’t know much about him, and I still don’t remember his last name, but he gave me some advice that has stayed with me. I asked him, “What’s the most important thing you keep in mind as you’re involved with missions?” He said, “I always ask myself, ‘Who do you want them to remember?’” I thought, “Well, God?” Maybe it was a trick question, but I went with the Sunday school answer: Jesus. He said, “Exactly. You want them to remember Jesus, so when you’re gone for five years, who do they remember? Do they remember Jeremy, or do they remember Jesus?”

He likened it to a concert. “Say you went to a concert by one of the most famous trumpet players. When you were on your way home, what were you talking about? Were you talking the shiny gold trumpet that made cool noise? Or about the musician who was able to use that trumpet make beautiful music?”

I responded, “Oh. I see. Naturally, you would be thinking about the talent of the musician. It could be any trumpet. Sure, there are differences in trumpets, but it’s the musician that’s the focus.” He said, “That’s exactly right.” And that should be our mindset when we are serving the Lord and serving other people. We are instruments. That trumpet, by itself, would sit in a case in some closet and do absolutely nothing.

Are you making the connection to John 15 right now, where Jesus said, “Without Me, you can do nothing”? Ron said, “We are but instruments to God. When we try to steal the focus from Him and make things about us, we are trying to rob the King of the universe of the glory that’s due only to Him.”

Although I don’t remember Ron’s last name, or even what missions organization he was part of, I remember what he taught me. It’s a very humbling thing for me—someone whose vocation is ministry, someone who is given a microphone and allowed to talk in front of a lot of people—to say, “It’s not about whether you guys remember me. It’s when I’m long gone, middle schoolers will look back and say, ‘I remember God.’” I want middle schoolers not to leave my ministry saying, “Man, I had an awesome youth pastor.” Rather, I want them to say, “I met Jesus when I was in middle school.” That’s what it’s about.

Although Paul is a character in this text, it’s not about Paul and his trial. It’s really about Christ. He is the focus.

## **Paul’s trial reveals it’s not all about Paul, but about God’s purposes...**

If it’s not about Paul, then why are the Jews spending so much time focused on him? If you think back to the context of Paul’s conversion in Acts 9, you see that he was on the road to Damascus. His goal was to continue persecuting Christians, but God met him on that road and later He spoke through Ananias, whom He had sent to heal Paul’s blindness. God told Ananias that Paul was His chosen instrument to carry His name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

Now what we’re reading about today makes more sense. If Paul was called to minister in Rome, being in Roman custody made sense. Even though it seemed inconvenient, he was still in the custody of the nation where he was called to eventually preach the gospel. God’s purpose for Paul was to be an apostle to the Gentiles and testify to Jesus Christ in front of kings.

So who shows up in our passage this morning? None other than King Agrippa who hears Paul’s case. Next week we’ll see how Paul stood before King Agrippa and shared his “defense,” which was actually not about Paul at all, but about the God he served. That was the purpose of God. God called Paul for the purpose of preaching to the Gentiles. God called Paul for the purpose of preaching

before kings. And remember in Acts 23:11, God said to Paul, *“Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”*

This is what is crazy about the Bible. It’s so cool to see God’s plan unfolding. Paul was offered the option of taking his case back to Jerusalem. But what did he say? “Listen, I’m standing before the Roman courts right now. If you can’t find anything against me, then I appeal to Caesar.” That was his right as a Roman citizen. At any point during a court session, that appeal would have to be approved. Festus conferred with his council and said, “All right. To Caesar you’ve appealed—to Caesar you will go.”

When God told Paul he would be going to Rome, we might think that would mean he’d just get on a ship by himself, as he had always done in his previous travels. Instead, God was saying, “Not only are you going to go to Rome, but I am sending you to Rome with a Roman escort.” How about that? That’s God working out His purposes. It wasn’t about Paul’s plan; it was about God’s purposes. Would Paul have had that opportunity if God hadn’t put him in prison and he wasn’t held there unjustly for two years? God worked out His purposes in His way. It was not about Paul; it was about God. It’s not about you; it’s about God. It’s not about me; it’s about God.

As we work through our faith, we have to take ourselves out of the center of the universe. God doesn’t revolve around us. God doesn’t create His whole plan around us. We are instruments in God’s plan. He has called us as His disciples to take the gospel to the nations which starts right here in our community. Who has God called to share the gospel with your neighbor? You! It’s not because His plan revolves around you, but it’s His mission and it revolves around Him.

If God has called you to do something, I want to challenge you this morning: do it. Don’t make excuses. We could spend all our lives making excuses for why we can’t do the things God has called us to. Do what He’s called you to. Take that risk. It will probably be very, very uncomfortable for you. But in the discomfort comes the greatest peace and the greatest blessing, because you will be serving and living in obedience to your God, carrying out His mission.

Remember I said we’d go back to that ambassador from Swaziland who was sent on a mission by his king. It wasn’t his own mission; it was his king’s mission. He went on behalf of the king. God has sent us as ambassadors. Paul said in 2 Corinthians that we are ambassadors for Christ. What an opportunity we’ve been given to bear the message of hope that the world needs. You can stand behind all kinds of causes, but without God, without Jesus, without the gospel message, the world is lost and hopeless. You have the hope. You know the hope. If you have that, share it with the world. Share it with your coworkers. Share it with your neighbors. Share it with your friends, with your locker buddy, with the people you rub shoulders with in life. If you know the hope and they don’t, share it with them. It’s about God and His purposes, which are far greater than we are.

## **Paul’s trial reveals it’s not all about Paul, but about God’s purposes in view of the resurrection of Christ.**

Lastly, Paul’s trial shows us it’s not about Paul, but about God’s purposes in view of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is it. Everything hinges on this. If the resurrection is just a hoax, we’re hopeless. If it never happened, we’re fools. We’re still in our sins. The resurrection changes absolutely everything.

Festus says in our text, “He’s not done anything wrong or evil, as I expected. It’s all about this Jesus Who was dead, but Paul says He’s alive.” Do you get the worldly perspective of that? “It’s just some Jesus guy. I don’t really know Who He is. I know He died, but now Paul is saying He’s alive. I don’t know. How do you rule on that?” But that’s exactly Paul’s hope—that Jesus was resurrected. That’s what he’s on trial for.

When we realize that our sins—no matter how big, no matter how many terrible things you’ve done, or how small, those things we think nothing of—are an attack against God, an act of rebellion against a perfect and holy God, that’s when we begin to realize what took place on the cross. Think of the gravity of that. Think of the amazing act of love God showed by sending Jesus to the cross. It had to be Jesus, because the penalty for our sin is death. That’s what each of us deserves. But Jesus came to this earth and lived a perfect life, undeserving of death. He went to the cross and laid down His life.

But He didn’t just lay down His life. If we left the story there, that in itself is amazing. If you were to ask a random number of people, “What is the gospel?”, many would talk about the cross, but they leave it at the cross. Jesus died for our sins. Yet if all He did was die, we are without hope. But on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead. He conquered sin and death, so that you and I in faith might have life. We might have victory over sin. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:

<sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup> Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time....

<sup>12</sup> Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? <sup>13</sup> But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. <sup>14</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. <sup>15</sup> We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. <sup>16</sup> For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. <sup>17</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup> Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. <sup>19</sup> If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

This is what it's all about—the resurrection, the conquering of sin. Our Savior has risen from the dead, and in faith we must recognize that we can do nothing on our own to bring us reconciliation with God. It took a perfect and holy God to give His life up on a cross and to rise again. When we recognize we are totally sinful—and when we realize that even the smallest of our sins is an attack against God and an evil that blemishes us forever—then we'll realize that it's only through the blood of Christ and His resurrection that we can be reconciled to God through the forgiveness of our sins.

That is what it's about. Don't get distracted. That is the fuel and the motivation for everything about living the Christian life. We live in righteousness; not because we are righteous, but because Christ is righteous. He has given us His righteousness. We don't tell the truth only because we're told not to lie, but because God is the truth. In being given new life, we have freedom to tell the truth.

We serve others because we have first been served. We love others because we have first been loved. It is about the cross and the resurrection from the dead. I tell you, when you are gripped by that reality, when that captures your heart, the sky is the limit as to what God can call you to do. Then with your whole being, you will own that it is not about you, but it's about the gospel.

That's why Paul can say, "To die is gain." That's why people like Pastor Andrew Brunson—the pastor from Wheaton College who was unjustly imprisoned in Turkey for years—can endure that, not because of himself, but because it's about the gospel. It's about Christ. That's why you can hear of believers around the world who are facing death willingly, not giving up their faith, but trusting in Christ. They know, "Though I might lose my life, it's not about me. It's about the cross. It's about Jesus Christ. He is the reason I am who I am. He is the meaning that gives me life. He is the whole reason for living."

That will change the way you live your life. That will change the way you go to work tomorrow. It will change the way you interact with your neighbors. It will change the way you see family get-togethers. It's going to change the way you interact with your friends. It will change the way you minister in the church. It's going to change everything about you, because it's about Christ, not you.

What an act of love that a holy and perfect and amazing God demonstrated, that He sent His only Son to die on the cross and raised Him again so that you and I—the worst of sinners—might be forgiven. I don't deserve that. What an act of love that He has shown us.

I know you might have heard the gospel a million times, but let it grip your heart today. I don't want you to leave here saying, "Man, that's great. Yeah, Jeremy, I've heard that." Rather, I want you to take this and leave here saying, "That's what I'm all about," and go and live your life for Christ with confidence.

Let's go back one more time to the board member and the ambassador story. The board member ended his reflections on his meeting with the ambassador with this comment: "Because the ambassador spoke for the king, a certain authority accompanied everything he did or said. At the same time, however, the ambassador was quite reserved. At all times, he deferred to the king from whom his confidence and power came. For neither the message he spoke nor the mission he was on were his own."

Brothers and sisters, you and I are ambassadors for Christ. The message we bear is not our own. The mission we are on is not our own. But that is what brings us together, so we can glorify God in what we do and have confidence in it. Remember, "It's not about me, but I can do this for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of my Savior, my King."