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LOVING JESUS, LOVING PEOPLE, PLOWING A COUNTER-CULTURE

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**TEXT:** Acts 25–26

**MAIN IDEA:** God gives us unexpected opportunities to share Jesus with hard to reach people.

**LEADERS:**

- Registration is now closed for the Winterblast winter student retreat at Camp Orchard Hill (Jan 20–22). However, if you have a student who still wants to go, email Tyler (tyler.shuhnicki@emergencenj.org) or Curtis (curtis.thomson@emergencenj.org) and they might be able to hook you up!
- We're having a decorating party at the Ringwood to spruce up the joint for Christmas! Everyone is invited to help out on December 4 from 12–2 pm! Food will be had by all, and a jolly movie on the big screen for all the kiddos! Of course, you can bring tasty baked treats of your own as well. RSVP on the digital bulletin.
- Guess what's coming? Winter Sessions everyone! Come learn all about the archaeology and historical background to the Old Testament. Winter Sessions will be held in suite 500 of our Totowa Campus, 7 pm on Monday nights, from December 5 to January 16. No sign up necessary. If you can't make it, check out each class on the Emergence Sessions podcast.

**GETTING STARTED:**

- Watch this week's Community Extras Video.
  - **Icebreaker:** Which Thanksgiving dish do you like the most? Which one do you think is kind of gross?
  - **Opener:** What stood out to you from this week's sermon?
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Last week, we left off in the middle of chapter 22. This week, Ryan picked things up in chapter 25. Far be it from us to tell you *not* to read two and a half chapters of Acts as your opening. But for the rest of us, here's a handy summary of events:

In Jerusalem, Paul found himself in danger of being publicly lynched for his Christian views. He is protected by a cohort of Roman soldiers, who usher him out of the mob and into their barracks, where he is held and protected because of his status as a Roman citizen. A plot by certain Jewish zealots to kill Paul is exposed, and he is secretly brought under military guard to the city of Caesarea, where he is entrusted to the care of the Roman procurator, Antonius Felix.

The Romans are confused about what Paul had done that was so wrong, and they seek clarity from the high priests and several elders, who travel to Caesarea and accuse him of inciting riots and defiling the Jewish temple. Paul speaks in his own defense, pointing out that he had done neither of these things, and that his views are completely in line with the hope held by a large number of Jewish people, namely, that God raises the dead. Felix refuses to make an immediate judgment. Instead, he keeps him in custody, where Paul has the opportunity to speak with him “about faith in Jesus,” as well as “righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment” (24:24–25). Hoping in vain



to receive a bribe from Paul while also seeking to curry favor from the Jewish leadership, Felix's term expires, and he is succeeded by Porcius Festus.

Unlike his predecessor, Festus has no desire to protect Paul. When it becomes evident that his intentions are to deliver him over to the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, Paul asserts his rights as a Roman citizen and appeals to have his case heard by emperor. Not only does this save his skin from his accusers in Jerusalem and the corrupt motives of Festus, but it will fulfill what the Lord told him in a vision earlier: "you must also testify in Rome" (23:11).

After "some days," Herod Agrippa II arrives in Caesarea with his sister Bernice, who was also his lover. The Herodian dynasty had a sordid history of persecuting both Jesus and his followers. Agrippa II's father had begun the first state-sponsored persecution of Christians, during which the apostle James had been executed (Acts 12:1–3). Felix briefs Agrippa on Paul's case, and Agrippa decides to hear his case himself, although this does not annul Paul's demand to eventually be heard in Rome.

This entire ordeal calls to mind Jesus' words about Paul in Acts 9:15: "He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel."

### **Read Acts 25:23–27.**

🕒 In the midst of what many would consider a tremendous setback, Paul is able to share his faith on many different occasions, enabling him to proclaim the gospel to several highly influential people whom he would not otherwise have been able to reach. Can you think of a time when God gave you or someone you know an opportunity for ministry through what initially seemed to be a setback?

🧠 What does this teach us about God's sovereignty?

## **SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES**

### **Read Acts 26:1–8.**

Paul takes advantage of the situation. Amazingly, his imprisonment affords him an opportunity to do what no other Christian has had the opportunity to do (or ever will have again?)—preach the gospel directly to a Herodian ruler.

🕒🧠 What things that Paul says here can help you in your own efforts to share your faith?

### **Ask someone to read Acts 26:9–11, and then someone to else read 26:12–18.**

This is now the third time in Acts that we have read an account of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus (see 9:1–9 and 22:6–11). This one gives more detail than the other two, particularly in what Jesus says to Paul. Either the other two are abbreviated versions of the story, or Paul is inserting things that Jesus later revealed to him after he regained his sight.



 Consider the new material Paul adds in verses 16–18. Why does he decide to share this now, given his present audience?

 What does this teach us about how we can use our personal testimonies in sharing our faith?

 What do Paul's words here teach us about Christian ministry?

 Paul's audience with Agrippa, Bernice, and Festus affords him an opportunity to do what Jesus commanded him: To be "a servant and witness . . . to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." What unique opportunities do you have right now to do this same thing?

 Paul doesn't shy away from saying that those who have not been freed by Jesus are under the "power of Satan." How does Satan exercise his power over people today?

 Why do people have a hard time acknowledging the reality of Satan?

### **MAKING A COMPELLING CASE**

#### **Read Acts 26:19–23.**

 Sometimes people think that the call to repent implies that we are being urged to do good works to earn our salvation. How does the way Paul frames repentance here speak to this concern?

 In verse 22, Paul says that "the help that comes from God" has afforded him the chance to "stand here testifying both to small and great." What does this reveal about how Paul views his suffering, and how can that help you in understanding yours?

#### **Read Acts 26:24–29.**

 What does Paul mean by saying that "this has not been done in a corner," and how does this make Christianity compelling?

 How does an appeal to prophecy help the case for Christianity? What Old Testament prophecies would you use in sharing the good news about Jesus?

In verse 28, Agrippa perceives that Paul is not merely defending himself, but is trying to persuade him about the truth of Jesus. Then, Paul makes his powerful appeal directly to him, not hiding his intentions at all: "I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become



such as I am—except for these chains” (v. 29). And yet, Agrippa does not ultimately turn in repentance to Christ.



In the sermon, Ryan suggested three things that kept Agrippa from embracing Jesus: He didn't want to be thought weird by friends; he realized this would require him to turn from his sin with Bernice; he wanted the approval of the masses. How do each of these things manifest themselves today among those you are called to reach, and what is the right Christian response to them?

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### PRAYER TIME

Praise God for the usual and unusual opportunities he gives to you share the gospel.

Pray that God would bring more of this kind of opportunity into your life.