# Acts 25:1-12 - DiCicco

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[0:00] What is the dream? 2024 was an interesting year for the DeSico family.

! We had submitted our request to process Jasmine's green card the July before, really, no, the June before that.! We had been waiting for a while. It was supposed to be pretty open and shut. We'd been married for seven years.
We had two kids. It's definitely not a fraudulent marriage. But we were just waiting. And in January, we realized that the online portal that told us when we could expect a decision was not to be trusted.
Because it gave us a timeline of four weeks, counted down to zero, and then shot back up to two months. Then that counted back down to one week, and then that shot up to four months. And this happened over and over in 2024.
And in the midst of all this, I had already sort of announced my plan to resign at the church where I was serving. So by the time March came around, we finished at that church according to the date we had set.
[1:07] And so by March, we were without a job. And because of that, we were without a home because we were staying in the house provided for by the church. And we had no idea when this situation was going to end because the portal was less than helpful.

And so we were wondering, how do we live in this situation? We started this process of moving back to the States, trusting in some what seemed like providential moves of God in our life.
And yet here we were sort of backed into a corner with nothing to do, nowhere to go, living in a borrowed house. When what seemed like borrowed time, really not knowing when that was going to run out.
How do we live in this situation confident in God? What do we do in this situation where it seems like we have nothing left to do? I think the story that Luke tells in Acts today, this is our third trial narrative so far, helps us get a handle on this question.
You know, as Christians, we are forced to answer the question, how do we live when we're backed into a corner? What does confidence in God's sovereignty look like when we're backed into a corner?
[2:20] And if you're not a Christian this morning or you're not totally sure on whether or not God has an overwhelming control of the universe, well, the question is when life inevitably corners you, where's your confidence?

And what are you going to do? And maybe wouldn't it be nice if there was a God who was over all things and was actually in your corner with you, having your back?
So I want to walk through chapter 25, verses 1 to 12 with us for you note takers. Luke sort of starts this by setting the scene.
So the first five verses, Luke sets the scene. And in verses 6 to 12, Paul takes the stage. And I want to walk through this with an eye towards answering the question for ourselves.
How do we live in the tension as Christians between a firm grasp and a belief in the sovereignty of God and the situations in life that have us cornered? And what do we do when the deck is stacked against us?
[3:27] Let's pray and then we'll come to our text. Oh God, would you give me the tongue of one who has been taught by you, that I might know with a word how to sustain those who are weary.

And we ask, Lord, that you would give us all ears that have been taught by you, that we may know how to hear and to do according to all your word, that we might live lives that please you.
We pray these things in Christ's name. Chapter 25, not surprisingly, comes on the heels of chapter 24, where we left off last week.

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It's a profound statement for today. Please write that down. And it starts with this transfer in power. Last week we heard about Paul's trial before a man named Felix, a man who was corrupt, who was seeking money, and who really cared nothing for Paul's innocence or lack of innocence.
He was looking to promote himself. Well, Luke sort of tosses in at the end of that chapter, the fact that Felix kept going to Paul every so often, sort of expecting him to give him money.
[4:42] And he did this for two years. And Festus' time as governor of this province of Judea came to an end, and he was succeeded by a character in our chapter, Portius Festus.

And Paul was left in prison by Felix in order to do the Jews a favor, sort of on the way out of office. I'll throw the Jewish leaders a bone. Well, as we get to chapter 25, we're sort of dropped into the middle of a story.
And it reminds me of a TV show that Jasmine and I started watching at the beginning of this summer. It's not my normal cup of tea. It's a political drama, which is very interesting.
It's taught me a lot about how government works or doesn't work. But it's called The West Wing. And one of the producers is a guy named Aaron Sorkin. And he's famous for the Aaron Sorkin walk and talk, which is long camera shots following people, having conversations.
And in The West Wing, they're in the West Wing of the White House. And so an episode opens and the camera's already panning and moving, following people walking down the hallways. It goes in between cubicles and into boardrooms as they talk about some sort of high stakes thing.
[5:51] And so from the moment an episode starts, there's tension in the narrative. The camera movements themselves are designed to push everything forward, to drive the way that this story is being told in every episode of the show.

And the dialogue in the show raises the stakes immediately. Luke does sort of the same thing in chapter 25. Do you notice how long Festus had been in the province when he went down to Jerusalem?
It's three days. Three days after Festus shows up at Caesarea, which is the Roman capital that their head of government in Judea, he goes straight down to Jerusalem.
Because in Jerusalem, well, that's where the Jewish leaders are gathered. That's where they have their sort of seat of power. And as one commentator puts it, the Jewish leaders at this time were the political power brokers of the province.
They held the power. Maybe not in title like Festus, but they held the power. The historian, ancient historian Josephus, puts it this way.
[6:55] In describing the kind of scene that Festus shows up to. Upon Festus' coming into Judea, it happened that Judea was afflicted by the robbers. While all the villages were set on fire and plundered by them.

He defines these robbers. He says, It was at this time that the Sicarii, as they were called, who were robbers, grew numerous. And these were a band of brigands.
It's also translated in Josephus, which is a great word. We don't use enough. They had these small swords that they would hide in their shirts. Not machine guns in violin cases, but small little daggers in their cloaks.
And they would walk into crowded public places until they got an eye on their target. And they would stab them in the public place. Maybe multiple of these Sicarii at once. And then jump back, surprise with everyone else.
And slip away into the crowd and disappear. And this was just a raging problem when Festus shows up in Judea. And so there's the Jewish power brokers. There's these brigands who have some relation to the leaders of the Jews.
[7:59] And then there's Festus. It's just a tense situation. And it's why Festus immediately goes to Jerusalem. And you would think with all of these things bubbling under the surface, with the fact that in just about seven years, a civil war is going to break out between the Jews and the Syrians in Caesarea.

That sparks the war that destroys the temple and scatters the Jews until much later. You think that the Jews would have some important policy things to talk to Festus about. Some things to clean up. But no, what they do is they come to Festus. And they lay out their case against Paul. This guy who's been rotting in prison for two years. Who apparently is the number one thing on the Jewish leader's mind when Festus comes to Jerusalem.

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You see, the Jews haven't forgotten what Paul has done. These Jewish leaders, the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews. You might remember a couple weeks ago, there was this plot to kill Paul.
Actually, it was actually why he was transferred from the prison in Jerusalem, where he was first detained, to Caesarea. And there was this plot that a whole group of men had sworn not to eat or drink until they killed Paul on the road from Jerusalem to Caesarea.
[9:14] Well, it's been two years. And these guys are very hungry. And so they immediately asked Festus, can you bring him back town to Jerusalem? They saw, they did this trial with Felix and the others.

There's really nothing that they can prove against Paul. And so they just want to kill him on the way. Maybe they want to get him into the crowded city of Jerusalem, so that on his way to the tribunal, these Sicarii could come up and stab Paul in the open market.
And they could all go away with the problem solved. And so Festus, being the shrewd politician that he is, said, well, I'm going to Caesarea tomorrow or in a couple of days.
Why don't you gather some of your men, come with me, and we'll try him. If there's something against him, we can bring charges against him. And maybe as a point of consideration or application, isn't it nice to know that politics has sort of always been this way?
That there's not some sort of golden Roman age of politics that we're really hopeful to get back to. That we don't set our trust in the way our politicians act, the way the policies play out.
[10:26] Because the Jews just want to use their position to get Festus to do what they want. And Festus would really like to start his tenure in Jerusalem well. And so he'd like to give the Jews a favor.

In any case, Luke sets the scene for us. He sets the scene for us because as the leaders of the Jews and as Festus are sort of wrestling over the sovereignty of this province, they're playing this game to see who can gain control.
And the pawn that they're using is the Apostle Paul. This guy who becomes sort of the tipping point for all of these things. And Paul gets set in the middle of this tension between the Jews and Rome.
But we, like Paul, know that God has told him just a few chapters ago that he's going to bring the gospel to Rome. And so we know something that Festus and the leaders of the Jews don't.
That God has a plan for Paul's life. And that he's going to carry it out. And so the question is, as Luke sets the scene, what is Paul going to do? How does Paul behave?
[11:35] And what is he going to do? Now look with me at verse 6. After Festus stayed among the Jews in Jerusalem, not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea.

The next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. When he had arrived, the Jews who came down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove.
And Paul argued his defense. Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense. Again, but Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, Do you want to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?
And Paul said, I'm standing before Caesar's tribunal where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I've done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. Again, this is our third trial narrative in a row.
And this one is the most compressed out of them all. It's 12 verses. And we'll have another next week that I think might be our longest trial narrative of them all. And so as we're considering how to read the word, this narrative that Luke has set up, again, I think some modern analogues are helpful, like the West Wing.
[12:55] I can bring that up again. Because one thing the West Wing does well is there's not only individual episodes that have an arc and tension wrought throughout them, but it traces lines of story that transcend episodes and go across the whole season.

And these things sort of build and build and build. And as we've been going through trial narrative after trial narrative after trial narrative, the question is, what is each one doing to us in readers? What does each one want to teach us or convince us of?
Each one sort of ratchets up this tension. What's going to happen to Paul? What's going to happen to Paul? And I think it's at this one that something shifts. We'll get to that at the end.
But in this episode of the season of Paul's trial in Judea, what does Luke have for us? I think one of the things he has is an emphasis, a desire for us to consider how do we live as Christians in the

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tension between the sovereignty of God and our situation in life?
We've talked a couple of times about Paul's behavior, Paul's conduct before these people. And you can see Luke calls out that the Jews, when they came down, they brought against them many serious and grievous charges that they could not prove.
[14:19] And Paul's response isn't to lash out at them. There's no ad hominem attacks from Paul, not in this abbreviated narrative Luke gives us. And we saw last week that when they brought Tertullus up to butter up Felix, Paul didn't join in that game.

He simply appealed to Felix. You've been a governor a long time. You know what that guy's doing. I'm just going to tell you my bit. Like one of the things that's instructive for us is put very well by the apostle Peter in 1 Peter 2.
Peter's writing to Christians who are under persecution for their faith. Not necessarily for Paul who was in the temple and preaching the gospel to the Jews who started a riot and he was saved from that.
But the people 1 Peter addresses, the people Peter has in mind are Christians who are maligned and slandered, even for just not engaging in the pagan practices of their friends and neighbors.
It's as simple as not joining in what he calls the flood of debauchery that Peter's audience is being maligned. And here's what he says to them. His encouragement is to keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, very similar to Paul.
[15:45] The people around them were slandering them and maligning them for the way they lived. And Peter's encouragement is that one day, on the day of visitation, God will judge all people and all things.

And on that day, the people who malign you now will see that the way you acted was actually in good conduct. It was honorable. And on that day, maybe not today, but on that day, they will glorify God because of the way you acted now.
Now, I think Paul's behavior before Festus is one piece of the puzzle that Luke has been putting together. One strand of this tapestry he's been weaving throughout the trial narrative of Paul's behavior.
Some of it interesting, questionable. Some of it laudable. And I think here, Luke gives us a laudable defense. I mean, two times, Paul tells Festus, you know there's nothing against me.
I haven't done anything against the Jews or the law or against Caesar. My conduct has been good.
And Paul's good conduct, in the same way as the audience Peter is writing to, his good conduct is grounded in his confidence.
[16:54] And Paul, verse 11 is a great example of that. Paul says, If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I don't seek to escape death. But, if there's nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them.

And Paul is living in this tension with a conduct that is honorable. And so, I think we can ask ourselves the question, how do we live when we're backed into a corner?
At work or at home, how do we live when the deck is stacked against us? When we are faced with situations that are less than desirable, do we lose patience under pressure?
Do you lose composure when you're under fire? Friends or neighbors, simply for being a Christian, for not engaging in the things your neighbors engage in, or your friends?
Do we lose confidence in the face of the unknown? I mean, Paul has been in this jail cell for two years. If there's any time for Paul to come out of the gates swinging against the Jews who are bringing these false charges against him, it's now with a new governor who has the notes of the case before him.
[18:09] And Paul can make his strongest argument now to just, let me go. So, when we're under fire, do we come out swinging?

Do you maybe sit back muttering? Paul could have also just sat back on his heels and gotten very bitter in the two years over this time. That's a lot of time to sit and to think about how you ended up, where you ended up in life.
We're encouraged not to lose patience under pressure, not to lose composure when we're under fire. Not to lose confidence in the unknown.
I mean, this was our big lesson in 2024 in our house. We were living in a house that wasn't ours. There were attacks and comments on my competence, even my character, throughout 2024. And there was just the endless unknown of when are we going to be able to go home?

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[19:13] Which isn't actually quite home yet because we haven't been there. Paul is grounded in God's confidence or in his confidence in God's sovereignty.

And this leads to his conduct. At the same time, what are you supposed to do?
If you know how to live, you live in an honorable way. When you're backed into a corner, Paul's example teaches us to aim for honor, not necessarily outcome. There's a lot of things Paul could have done, but what he does do is honorable.
So we ought to also seek to be honorable in our conduct rather than just aim at outcomes. But at the same time, what are you supposed to do? Is Paul just supposed to sit back and float like a log down a river as Festus and the Jews use this little pawn in their power games?
Well, Paul makes this appeal at the end of verse 11. He says, I don't seek to escape death, but there is nothing to their charges against me. No one can give me up to them.
[20:22] And Paul has argued before Festus his good conduct. His conduct is grounded in his confidence in God's sovereignty. And his confidence in God's sovereignty is actually what allows Paul to play his final card.

When the deck is stacked against Paul, he's got one card left. That's what he plays. And this card is essentially this Roman citizenship card that he's used a couple of times throughout Acts, where he appeals to his Roman citizenship in times of imprisonment or when he's beaten or like here when he is under trial.
And one question is, why hasn't Paul done this earlier? Why does he appeal to Caesar now? Why not two years ago when he was on trial with Felix?
I think one reason is that this Roman citizenship card, this appeal to Caesar was not really a get out of jail free card. It conveyed a lot of benefits, but I read this week about one Roman citizen who had killed a friend of a governor and the governor was going to have him crucified.
And so this man said, hey, I'm a Roman citizen. I appealed to Caesar. And the governor said, okay, I'm just going to set your cross up really high. I'm going to paint it white.
[21:40] So everyone knows that this is what happens when a Roman citizen does something that's really wrong. It's not exactly a get out of jail free card. I think Paul waits to use it until the most opportune moment.

Here you have Festus and the Jews who are struggling in this game, wrestling for sovereignty and control. And Paul sees that he's a pawn in this game.
All right, you notice in verse nine what Festus says and how Luke characterizes this. I mean, this trial has been going on for who knows how long.
Luke abbreviates it for us. And it's clear, at least from this narrative, that their charges they can't prove. Paul's appeal to his innocence and Festus' decision is let's do this somewhere else.
And maybe what we can do is give Festus the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he was going to free Paul from these charges. Maybe he's going to release him. He's a good judge. At least Josephus tells us that Festus is definitely not as bad as the guy who comes after him.
[22:54] And he gives a whole list of things about that guy. So Festus is not a super controversial governor. He's only there for a little bit of time. So let's give him the benefit of the doubt. He's going to release Paul in Jerusalem. At the same time, he still wants to do the Jews a favor.

But Paul knows that going to Jerusalem, even if he's free, is not in his best interest. Because going to Jerusalem, even if he's freed in Jerusalem, Paul is as good as dead.
There was this plot on his life before, two years earlier. At least Luke is aware of some sort of plot in the early verses of this verse. But even if not, if Paul gets handed over to the Jews, even if Paul is made free, there are these brigands running around with daggers in their cloaks.
Paul knows how the Jews condemned Stephen when he was put in front of them and stoned him. Because Paul was there when they did that. And he held the cloaks for the people who killed Stephen.
And so, freedom for Paul is not necessarily victory. Freedom for Paul is not necessarily safe. And so, I think just like Paul in Acts 17 when he's in Athens, he uses the wisdom of the world to promote the truth of the gospel.
[24:07] And so, he does a similar sort of thing here. Paul's not afraid in the sovereignty of God to use the ways of the world to promote his own safety. And so, he appeals to Caesar.

Paul plays the card he's got. I mean, when you're under fire, yes, the aim is to live honorably, not necessarily for outcomes, but still you have to do something.

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And so, Paul plays the only card he's got. And it's actually a brilliant move because it takes all the power from Festus and the Jews and puts it in Paul's seat. We saw he did this in the other trials. And at the very least, Festus has to make a decision. And two weeks into his term as a governor, he confers with his council and says, okay, to Caesar, you will go.
I think the encouragement to us, when we find life backing us into a corner, when the deck feels stacked against us, what do you do?
[25:11] You do what you can. I mean, I think I had gotten every job I'd ever applied for by the time I resigned at this church in New Zealand, which was strange.

But I started applying for jobs and I was getting denied from all of them. I didn't even get a call back from the grocery store when I asked if I could, I don't know, shut carts or do something. It was a weird time for us.
I was doing anything I could. One of those things being emailing my local representative in DuPage in Kane County. I sent, I don't know how many emails to Dick Durbin's office before I finally got a response from an aide who said, well, give me your case number.
And he did. And the very next day, our case was approved, which is great. An example of how bureaucracy works, maybe. When you're backed into a corner, what do you do?
You do what you can. I couldn't do much from America, but I could email my elected official. And the question is, how do we know when we lean forward, when we drive forward and when we sit back?
[26:18] I mean, because in Paul's case, God's sovereignty drives the servant of God forward. And I think if we learn anything from this narrative is that God's sovereignty always drives his people forward.

There was a time for Paul to sit back in these two years as he trusted God for whatever was to come. Luke doesn't record them for us, but for Paul, that was a time to sit back, still confident in the sovereignty of God.
But this situation presented itself, and so Paul plays his card. He does something. It's not always the case that these sort of things will work, but one of the things that we do when we're confident in the sovereignty of God is act.
Which somehow seems counterintuitive to us often. I mean, there's this idea that the higher view of God's sovereignty you have, the less urgent or necessary our actions are.
But John Calvin, who can say it better than John Calvin, this is what he says about the sovereignty of God and our responsibility. He says, for he who has fixed the boundaries of our life has at the same time entrusted us with the care of it.
[27:38] So the same God who doesn't let a drop of rain fall to the earth without his command, that's what Calvin says. That same God entrusts us with the care of our life.

He's provided us with the means of preserving it, and our duty is clear to defend our life. That since he supplies remedies, we not neglect them. And so a confidence in God's sovereignty should always drive his people forward.
Whether driving us forward, taking action actually means sitting back for a season. There was only so much I could do in New Zealand to get back to America. Plenty of options that were less than ideal, but when we were faced with an option, we took it.
And it's not always the case that taking action means that we're going to get what we want. I mean, it's very possible for Felix to make a power play here, and when Paul appeals to Caesar, Festus sends him down to Jerusalem to be killed.
I mean, Paul will eventually die for the name of Jesus in Rome. But we still move forward.
[28:47] We act in confident assurance of God's sovereignty. It's what we sang earlier, our confidence in Christ and what he has done, a God who holds time in his hand.

And it's actually this confidence in God's sovereignty that allows Paul to appeal to Caesar. Because even in shackles, Paul is free in the sovereignty of God to go to Rome as a prisoner.
To serve God in that way. But it rests on Paul's use of his rights. It rests on him playing his card. It rests in the sovereignty of God and Paul's confidence in that. I mean, imagine Paul's appeal. It's like being able to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court for anything that you want.
Be like, we're stuck in New Zealand. We need our case dismissed or adjudicated or our application reviewed. And I could, as a U.S. citizen, say, I'd like you to take our application to the Supreme Court.

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[29:49] Because I am a U.S. citizen. Would have been fantastic. Would have been a fantastic waste of the taxpayers' time. But it would have been great for us because it was an open and shut case. Paul appeals to Caesar in the sovereignty of God because really his appeal to Caesar is an appeal to God's sovereignty.

That God is going to do what he does. And so while our confidence in God's sovereignty allows us to use the ways and means of the world to achieve goodness and justice and work for the gospel. And to use things like budgeting programs to help people not only live better lives but to share the gospel with them. How much better an appeal do we have than Paul?
And Paul, with his Roman citizenship, can appeal to Caesar to save him. But we, as Christians, can appeal to the blood of Christ. Can appeal to the redemption that is in him before the God of all the universe.
And so that even in front of the greatest sovereign the world has ever known, we have a clean conscience like Paul. And God's confidence always drives his people forward.
[30:59] The question is, when we're backed into a corner, how are we going to live? What does confidence mean when you're backed into a corner? How are you supposed to live in the tense situations in life?

And what are you supposed to do in them? Well, we aim for honor over outcomes, trusting that one day we will be vindicated as Christians.
But at the same time, you do something. You do what's in front of you, trusting in God's sovereignty or resting in his sovereignty until that day.
God's sovereignty always drives his people forward. Would you pray with me? Our God and Father, we ask you this morning that you would strengthen us, strengthen our hope in your reign over this earth.
Would you give us wisdom as we seek to live lives that are not easy, that are oftentimes full of tension. Would you give us peace in the midst of that tension by placing a confidence in you deep in our hearts.
[32:17] I pray that our conduct would glorify you and that our choices would honor you. I pray in Christ's name. Amen. Thank you.

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