

Acts Chapter 24 v 1 - Chapter 25 v 12

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Preacher: Matthew Seymour

[0 : 00] It's now in Acts chapter 25, and we're just going to read the first 12 verses. Acts chapter 25, beginning in verse 1 through to verse 12.

Now 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, and they urged him, asking as a favor against Paul, that he summon him to Jerusalem, because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way.

Festus replied that Paul was being kept in Caesarea, and that he himself needed to go there shortly. So, said he, let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let him bring charges against him.

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.

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. Paul argued in his defense, neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.

[1 : 33] 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? 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 well. If then I am a wrongdoer, and I 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. Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, To Caesar you have appealed.

To Caesar you shall go. So we're going to briefly look at all of chapter 24, and the first half of chapter 25 of the book of Acts.

And my title this evening is, When Gospel Progress Seems Slow. When Gospel Progress Seems Slow. The subway system in New York City has a very clever design.

[3 : 00] Each line has two tracks running through the city. One track is called the express line. And that one stops about every four or five stations.

And it goes very quickly through the city. And the other track is called the local train. The local line. And that train stops at every station along the way.

So if you're travelling around the city, And you want to get to it, You have to make sure you get on the right train. Because of course if you only want to go one stop, And you get on the express train, Then you'll find that you've gone four or five stops.

But if you're wanting to go a long, long way, And you get on the local train, Then you find yourself it takes a very, very long time to get anywhere. Because it's stopping at every stop.

Now when we think about our calling as God's people, To make the gospel known around the world, And in our cities and towns, That calling to make the good news known.

[4 : 02] There are times when progress can feel very slow. Can't it? Times that can feel like we're not making very good progress.

We desire that all people should hear, And come to faith in the Lord Jesus. We seek that for our family members, For our friends, For our colleagues, And for our neighbours.

But there are times when it can feel like We're on the local train. We're on the slow train. We're making very little progress towards the goal Of reaching people with the good news, And seeing them come to faith.

I wonder, how do you cope with that slow progress? Does your mind wonder, Are we doing something wrong? Has God forgotten us?

Well the wonderful thing about God's words, Is it speaks into all kinds of different situations. And our passage this evening, Covers a time in Paul's life, The apostle Paul's life, Where the progress of the gospel, Seemed to be very limited.

[5 : 13] It was a time of slow progress. Paul is in Caesarea, He's been in Jerusalem, But his great desire, Is to go to Rome.

He wants to go to Rome, He wants to encourage the church in Rome, And preach the gospel in Rome. In fact, in the letter to the book of Romans, He speaks of his eagerness, To go and to preach in Rome, And it's very likely Paul wrote that letter, Prior to this point in the book of Acts, When he was on his third missionary journey, In the city of Corinth.

So we know that, That Paul has this desire, To take the gospel to the city of Rome, That's where he longs to go, And speak about Christ, In the centre of the ancient world. And God confirms Paul in that desire.

He confirms it to him, In chapter 23 of the book of Acts, In verse 11. After he's taken into custody, For his own protection, The Lord comes and speaks to him, And says, Take courage, For you have testified about the facts about me in Jerusalem, You must testify also in Rome.

So God has told Paul, That his desire to go to Rome is a good desire, And that's what is going to happen. He confirms that to him. But then, Paul doesn't seem to make very good progress, Towards the city of Rome.

[6 : 39] He's arrested in Jerusalem, And he's taken up to Caesarea for his own safety, And then he spends at least two years, Under arrest, And not being able to move anywhere.

So he's travelled about 80 miles, From Jerusalem to Caesarea, And that's it. And he wants to get all the way to Rome, But he's not been allowed to go there. He's making very little, Gospel progress.

So our passage this evening is here to teach us, How to respond when, Gospel progress seems very slow. It teaches us about what God is doing, When it seems like, Nothing is happening.

That's what it's all about. And that's an important subject in our day, Isn't it? It's an important subject in our day. We live in a time when, Gospel progress does seem to be very slow, Doesn't it?

Remember hearing, We often have, A man from UFM, Come and speak at our church. And he gives us a, A summary of what's going on, In the work, In the mission around the world, But also in this country.

[7 : 51] And UFM have a missionary in Luton, Who's seeking to reach, Muslim people with the gospel. And he's been there for 10 years, And not seen any conversions.

So 10 years of ministry, Given 10 years of his life to that work, And seen, As far as he can see, No fruit. So it can be very hard, Not to become frustrated with ourselves, Or perhaps even, Not to become frustrated with the Lord.

So how should we think, How should we act when, When gospel progress seems slow?
Well I want to, Draw three lessons from this passage, From this time in, In Paul's life,
When gospel progress seems slow.

And the first is this, When gospel progress seems slow, There is still a plan. When gospel progress seems slow, There is still a plan.

The first thing we need to see, From our passage, Is that the apparent, Slow progress of the gospel, Can be part of the purposes of God. One of the repeated themes, In the book of Acts, Is the sovereignty of God.

[9 : 04] The fact that God is in control, Of these things. You see it all the way through the book, You know, It's a real lesson in providence, Isn't it? In God's sovereignty. Because again and again, You see God exercising, His sovereign rule and control.

Luke always wants us to see that, The author of the book, He's always telling us, God's in control. He's directing events. Even though progress seems stalled or slow, His plan is being worked out.

And that was a very important lesson, For the early church to learn. Because although they haven't experienced it, Significantly yet, In not many years, Significant persecution was coming.

Significant pressure on Christians was coming. And in light of that, You have to believe, That God is in control, Don't you? Because if you don't believe, God's in control, Then the plan's gone.

Everything's fallen apart. It's so important. And we need to remember, That when progress seems slow, Although we're tempted to think, That God has stopped guiding events, He hasn't.

[10 : 11] He is still in control. You know, I was thinking, And preparing this message, I wonder how I would have coped, If I was in Paul's shoes. You know, It could have been hugely frustrating, Couldn't it?

Paul has some liberty, He can see his friends, We probably shouldn't picture him, Being chained in a cell, For these two years. But nonetheless, He's stuck in Caesarea, He certainly can't preach in public, And imagine, A lot of his time, Was just spent waiting, Waiting for the authorities, To do something.

He's a man of action, Isn't he? Paul the apostle, He wants to do things, To speak to people, To be active, And busy for the lords. But he was greatly restricted, During this time.

And I think, If I were Paul, I'd have been tempted, To think those years were lost. Perhaps even wasted. But that would be a mistake. That would be a mistake, Because if God is in control, Then, Those words shouldn't be in our vocabulary, Should they?

Wasted years, Or lost years. So what is God doing, In this stall, In Paul's life? Well, One of the big things, That God was doing here, Was using Paul, To defend the gospel, Against accusation.

[11 : 36] It's a very significant thing. You know, When I first read this passage, I did wonder, Why there were these two, Lengthy trial accounts. It reads a little bit like, The court proceedings, That you find in the Times newspaper, Doesn't it?

If you ever read those. You know, An account of, A legal conversation, Between Paul and his accusers, And then the judges, And you're thinking, What's going on? But remember, God doesn't waste words, And if God has recorded this, He's recorded it for a reason.

It's in the Bible for a reason, And the reason God, Allows Paul to remain in Caesarea, For those two years, Was to give this public defense, Of the gospel.

Because the Christian faith, Was viewed with great suspicion, Christians were seen as, As members of a dark, And secretive sect. The authorities, Were highly suspicious of them, Because they thought, They were new and different.

And so God allowed Paul, To remain in Caesarea, And to stand before these rulers, To give a public defense, To the Christian faith, To show this isn't something, To be afraid of.

[12 : 43] It's not something new, It's something that comes, Right from the Old Testament. And these Christians, Aren't troublemakers, They don't stir up riots, They are law, Abiding citizens.

One of the things, That comes out, Again and again in the reading, Was that Paul was innocent, Of the charges being brought against him. That Christians haven't been, These difficult people, Undermining the authorities, And going about in sneaky ways, He says, I've done everything in public.

I'm an open man. So part of the purposes of God, In allowing this slow progress, Was to give Paul the opportunity, To bring a defense for the gospel.

And that was important. The other thing, That's probably going on here, Is it seems that Luke, The author of Acts, Was with Paul, When he traveled from Jerusalem, To Caesarea.

So Luke is probably there, In Caesarea with Paul, For those two years. Now I wonder, What was Luke doing, While Paul was in prison, For two years? Well one commentator, Makes a suggestion, I think it's very possible, That during that two year pause, On the edge of Israel, Luke was traveling around Israel, And gathering the stories, That he put together, In his gospel.

[14 : 02] This is a time, Probably, When those stories, Are brought together. So that could have been, Part of God's purpose, In allowing slow progress, For Paul, Because it gave Luke, The time to gather, Those accounts, And to write his gospel.

So what we're seeing here, Is that God has a plan, And a purpose, Even in times of slow progress. Now, In our day, When outreach is hard, When few seem to show an interest, And fewer, Still come to faith, That's a lesson, We need to hear as well.

We may not be seeing, Much progress, Or fruit, But we shouldn't assume, That the reason for that, Is that we're getting it wrong, That we're not walking with the Lord, That we're not being faithful, That we're not being, Prayerful enough.

It could be, That the purposes of God, Are that we are living in a time, When he intends for us, To keep on bearing witness, With little progress, And fruit, Because he's doing other things.

You know, Some might say, Well we're not making gospel progress, Because there's sin in our lives, And that could be the case, And we should be dealing with sin, If it is, But it's not necessarily the case. We might be walking with the Lord, And there could be another reason.

[15 : 20] It might be where, Some might say, We're not making much gospel progress, Because we're not prayerful enough. Now that could be the case, But it's not necessarily the case. We should be praying together, Both corporately, And individually.

But it's not certain, That a lack of prayer, Is the reason why we're not making gospel progress. It might be that God is choosing, To give little progress, For another reason.

And it's not for us, To try and see the purpose, Of God, But rather, It's for us to keep on doing, What God has called us to do. To keep on sharing the good news, To keep on living a consistent life, To keep on praying, And then to leave, The wider plan and results to the Lord.

So, When gospel progress, Seems slow, God still has a plan. And don't believe otherwise, Because we believe in a sovereign God, Don't we? Second point, When gospel progress seems slow, There are still openings.

There are still openings. One of the dangers, About living in times, When progress seems slow or hard, Is that we forget, There can still be openings for the gospel.

[16 : 35] And that comes out in our passage, In the interaction, Between Paul and Felix. Right in the middle of all that legal, Sort of those legal arguments, There's a personal encounter.

And it's an encounter between Felix, The Roman governor, And Paul. Now, Felix has heard Paul speak formally, In that courtroom situation. But then in verse 24 to 27, There's an account of, A personal interaction with Paul, A private interaction with Paul, Not a legal discussion, But a personal conversation, About spiritual things.

And we read in verse 25, That Paul and Felix, Reason about righteousness, Self-control, And the coming judgments. So Paul has his conversations, With Felix, And what's striking, Is you read in verse 25, That Felix was alarmed.

Now, That's pretty light, If you look at the original here. A better translation, Would be terrified, Or very afraid. So the thought here, Is that Felix hears these things, And he's deeply, Deeply troubled by them.

Felix is beginning to see, The implications of what Paul is telling him. He's beginning to see, That he's a sinner, That God is holy, And there's a judgment that's coming, And that God will judge him for his sin.

[18 : 03] And that really worries him. Some conviction of sin, It seems like he gets close, To the things of God, To coming to faith. Then he sends Paul away, On that occasion, Perhaps it got too uncomfortable for him.

Now Paul comes back, And speaks to him again and again, Over this, The two year period, But Felix never seems to come to faith. And it's sad, That Felix doesn't believe, But it is a remarkable opening for Paul, Isn't it?

Before the Roman governor. And the lesson for us is, Just because we're making little progress, Doesn't mean there are no openings. It's so important for us to see, That Paul needed to be alert here, For the opportunities for the gospel.

Even in times where progress was slow. And there is a danger, And we live in times in that slow progress, That we can become, Spiritually sleepy.

Where we can not be, Alert to opportunities. One of the areas where, I see this in myself, Is when I'm with, With my close family, And close friends. It's often hard, Isn't it?

[19 : 14] To reach those, Who are particularly close to us, Because they know us well. And it's difficult. Perhaps we've been trying for many years, And seeing few opportunities, And so maybe we stop trying, Or stop looking.

And perhaps we lose that intentionality, And alertness that we used to have. Such that when the genuine opening comes, We're not ready, And responsive for it.

A few years ago, I had a minor operation on my nose. Not on the outside, But on the inside of my nose. And when I had, It was an operation, Where I had a general anesthetic.

And I remember, Prior to going for the operation, I was on the ward, Waiting to be called down to a theatre. And there was a man just opposite me, Younger than I was, And he was waiting for a biopsy, On a lymphoma.

And often young men, Get these lymphomas, And often quite aggressive, And difficult to treat. He and his partner, Were clearly very worried, By what was going on. We talked a bit, As you do, Just waiting, Waiting for something to happen.

[20 : 21] And of course, He asked me what I did for a job. And I said, Well, I'm a minister. I work in the church. And we didn't get to talk to a lot for long, Because at that point, I got called down to theatre.

But then when I came back up, In my bed, And I'm a bit of a wimp, When it comes to pain. So when they said, Have you got any pain? I said, Yeah, I've got lots of pain. Give me all the painkillers you can. I took them all on board. And those painkillers, Just starting to kick in.

And then, This man started to talk to me, About the Christian faith. And asked us, You know the sort of direct questions, You pray that someone would ask you. But they never do.

Well, He was asking me these questions. And I'm there, And I'm half awake. Because I've got this painkiller I've taken, And I'm not quite with it. But, It was a real amazing opportunity, To speak with him.

Because, He was thinking about these things, Because of the situation, He was in in hospital. And I did my best, And afterwards, I guess I wish I hadn't been so quick, To take those painkillers, On the recovery ward.

[21 : 20] But I'm a typical man, With a low pain threshold. But, My point is, That conversation came, At a very unexpected time. And we need that kind of alertness, To be aware, About those opportunities.

And we especially need it, When there's times of, Of slow gospel progress, We have to be careful, That, We're still looking out for opportunities, Because they'll still be there.

So when gospel progress is slow, Doesn't mean there's no openings, Make sure that you're looking out for them. And lastly and thirdly, When gospel progress seems slow, There is still progress.

So when gospel progress seems slow, There is still a plan, God's in control. When gospel progress seems slow, There are still openings. And lastly, When gospel progress seems slow, There is still progress.

Slow progress, Is not the same as, No progress, Is it? Now one of the parables, I've always found really interesting, Is the parable of the mustard seed.

[22 : 26] Little short story Jesus tells, But in it, Jesus compares, The kingdom of God, To a mustard seed, Doesn't he? Luke 13, He says, The kingdom of God, Is like a grain of a mustard seed, That was sowed in the garden, Then it grew, And became, A tree.

And the birds came, And made nests, In its branches. Now that parable, Has a lot to tell us, About God's work in the world. And the thought is, That something small, Becomes something big and great.

And it always, Keeps growing, Doesn't it? That mustard seed. You plant it, And you water it, But it keeps growing, And if you stand and watch, You don't see it growing, But it is growing.

Little progress, Is not the same, As no progress. And the kingdom of God, Is like that. God's work in the world, Is like that. It keeps on growing, And growing.

It doesn't happen all at once, It happens a bit at a time. And we need to remember that, When we're in, A period in a time, Of slow progress. It is not, That nothing is happening.

[23 : 38] That's a danger, That we say to ourselves, Nothing is happening. But that's not the case. Because the kingdom of God, Is still growing. God's work, Is still going on. God is still moving. Now where do we see that, In our passage?

Well we see it, In what happens to Paul, In verses 1 to 12. There's a new, Governor who comes on the scene, Festus. And Festus, First of all, Speaks with the Jews, And they want, Festus to bring Paul, To Jerusalem, Because they want to ambush him again, And kill him.

Festus declines, And comes up, To Caesarea, But he brings, The Jews with him, And they bring charges, Against Paul again. Now remember, To this point, Paul has been, We might say, Just waiting, For something to happen.

He's been two years, Just waiting, For the legal, You know, The legal cogs to turn, And something to happen, In this case, And nothing has happened. But because, Because the governor changes, And because the Jews, Want to try and attack, Paul again, He gets a hearing.

He gets a hearing, Before Festus. And because he is given that hearing, He is given the opportunity, To make his appeal. And who does he appeal to?

[24 : 55] He appeals to Caesar. And what does that mean? Where's Caesar? Rome. Where will Paul go? Rome. What has God promised? You're going to Rome.

Do you see the principle? God's plan is working out, Even in times, Of slow progress. God is moving, Even when it seems like, Nothing is happening.

And that's such, An important principle for us. And Paul is so patient. He doesn't force things. He waits for God. Now I'm not a very patient person.

You probably know that, Having known me a bit. I'm not a patient man at times. And I find it difficult, In all areas of life, But especially in evangelism. Patience in evangelism, Is a difficult thing.

You know, I think that nothing is happening, In someone's heart. And I need to move things on, And try and push things forward. But sometimes what we need most, Is patience, With God's work in people.

[26 : 00] We need to remember that, Because God is still at work. We might be sowing a seed for years, Before we see any progress. But when God intends to move, He moves, doesn't he?

Do you know how many years, It takes for a bamboo seed, To grow at all? Five years. You plant it, And in year one, You water it, And you fertilize it.

You do the same thing for five years, And you see practically nothing. And then, At some point in the fifth year, Over a six week period, It grows 90 feet high.

It's astonishing. I couldn't believe it when I read it. But it must be true, Because I read it. But it's amazing, isn't it? You see nothing, But actually a huge amount is going on.

You just can't see it. And God's work in people's lives, Can be like that as well. Isn't it interesting, That one of the pictures in the Bible, Of coming to faith, Is that of being born.

[27 : 07] A birth of a child. Now we know that all births are different, Aren't they? Some births are quick, Some are slow. But God is the perfect midwife. He doesn't rush the new birth, He guides and He directs it, And draws someone such, That when they come to faith, It happens just at the right time, And just in the right way.

And we need, That patience, The patience of God, When it comes to God's work, In individual lives. So we need it personally, We also need it, In the work of the church, In our calling as God's people.

Because sometimes, God calls us, To sow the seed of the word, For years in a place, Before we see people, Come into faith. Don Carson, Tells the story of his father, Who was a minister, In French speaking Canada, For many years, And he labored faithfully, Speaking about Christ, Planting seeds of the gospel, Wherever he could, And he saw very little fruit, In all his life, And he died.

And he'd seen practically, Nothing happen. Then after his death, In the years that followed, Massive. Interesting isn't it?

That's how God works sometimes. Just because, You can't see something happening, Doesn't mean there's no progress. And we need to believe that, When we're trying to reach, Hardened family and friends, We need to believe that, Don't we?

[28 : 41] We need to believe that, As we're seeking, To teach, Perhaps in Sunday school, Or in the children's work, And you feel like, You spend all your time, Doing crowd control, And no time speaking, About the Lord's, But you're sowing seed, You're putting the gospel, Into hearts, We need to believe it, As we speak to our children, About the Lord, Don't we?

That we labor on, We sow the seed of the gospel, And God bears the fruits, And we need to do that, As we labor hard in the church, In wherever it might be, We put in hours, And it seems like, We see so little fruit, And we wonder, What are we doing?

We need to believe, This is the way God works, Because the kingdom of God, Is like a mustard seed, And it seems like, There's little, It seems like there's slow progress, But God, Is still at work, So let's draw encouragement, From this passage, With a confidence, That God works, And he works even in times, When it seems like, There is little progress, So don't lose heart, Don't stop speaking, About Christ as God's people, But stand together, As a people of God, Because God has called you, To share the gospel in this place, With your neighbors, In your families, With this community, And he will work for his glory, He will save the people, He intends to save, And it will all, Be his doing, So because God has called us to speak, We keep on speaking, So when gospel,

Progress seems slow, Remember there's a plan, When gospel, Progress seems slow, Remember there are still openings, And when gospel progress, Seems slow, Remember God, God is still at work, Let's pray, Lord God, We thank you, That you are the sovereign God, We thank you, That you are, The Lord, Who is in control, Of all things, You're in control, Of all the events, In this world, And most of all, You're in control, Of the miracle, Of the new birth, Of someone coming to faith, Lord, We pray, That you would help us, That you would help us, To be faithful, In sharing the good news, And you'd help us, Not to lose heart, In that calling,

To make the Lord Jesus known, Lord, We can't read, Or know, Your purposes, You've chosen your wisdom, Not to tell us these things, But we do know, That you have given us a calling, And that calling, Is to make Christ known, So we pray, That you'd help us, To do that, With all faithfulness, And all diligence, Thank you Lord God, For all the ministry, That happens, Through, The body of the people, In this place, For all the things, That happen in the church, For all the opportunities, That I had, Personally one to one, Lord I pray, That you would, Grant much fruit, That you would grant, Many coming to know you, Through this ministry, And through those conversations, And Lord I pray, That we would remember, To look out for those openings, And we would, Draw great confidence, From the knowledge, That you're at work, And you're always at work, Help us we pray,

[32 : 23] To rest in you, As a supernatural God, Who does work, And is alive today, So Lord, Send your word to our hearts, And use it for good, May it spur us on our evangelism, And may it build us, In our confidence in you, We ask it in Jesus name, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen,