

Week of June 10-June 16

RIGHT OF APPEAL

Scripture Reading: Read Acts chapter 25

The Supreme Court, the highest court of the United States, is ultimately responsible to determine the constitutionality of laws passed in our country. Each June, newscasters and political commentators await rulings handed down by the Court in Washington, D.C. 2012 is no different. In fact, this year a couple of momentous decisions will be announced. One of them has to do with the constitutionality of the individual mandate in the President's Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act that was passed by Congress two years ago. The second case has to do with the constitutionality of an immigration law passed by the state of Arizona.

In the first century world of the book of Acts, the Supreme Court for a Roman citizen was the Emperor himself. Roman citizens were granted the right of appeal; a right which Paul availed himself of according to today's chapter reading. After failing to receive a ruling in his case during the reign of Governor Felix and languishing in jail for two years, Paul hoped for justice under the new governor, Festus. Unfortunately, he got the runaround with Festus, too, and Paul finally had enough and he appealed to Caesar.

Why would Luke include this account in his book? In part, it was probably due to the fact that it was an accurate historical account of what happened. But, was there another purpose in his mind as well? The answer is most certainly yes. Luke is not just an historian. He is also a theologian and an apologist for the gospel. It's possible, as some Bible scholars have suggested, that Acts (and possibly his gospel as well) is the defense Luke wrote on behalf of Paul and the gospel he preached and that it was used at Paul's hearing in Rome before Caesar. If so, this means that one of Luke's goals in writing his gospel is to show first the innocence of Jesus, the founder of the Christian faith, by noting that both Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate found Jesus not guilty. Then, in Acts, by noting how Festus (Acts 25:25), King Agrippa (26:32), the high ranking officers and the leading men of Caesarea (Acts 25:23; 26:30), Claudius Lysias (Acts 23:26,29), and Gallio, proconsul of Achaia, all found Paul innocent of any crime worthy of death, Luke wanted to make it known that the charges against Paul and the gospel he preached were baseless too. This set the stage for Emperor Nero to release Paul following Paul's 1st Roman imprisonment and also paved the way for the gospel to continue spreading throughout the Roman Empire unhindered by the Roman authorities. In other words, it wasn't just about Paul's freedom. It was also about the gospel's proclamation.

Today, 20 centuries later, there are still times when attempts are made by political leaders to limit the expression and proclamation of the gospel faith, even in America. When this occurs, we sometimes are forced to go to court to protect the rights of believers, with the right of an appeal all the way up to the Supreme Court, if necessary.

Action Step & Prayer Focus: Take time this week to become acquainted with at least one religious freedom issue that is being debated in our country. Pray for those Christian groups who are fighting the case in court to be given God's wisdom in their defense and for the Lord to be glorified.

Take-a-way: *When the gospel is at stake, a court appeal you might have to make.*