

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Paul Before Felix

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Acts 24:1-27

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Introduction:

Good morning, Redeemer! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 24.

I have to confess that my sermon preparation this week was a struggle. Over the last few weeks, we have been looking at some of the most glorious passages in all the Bible! The triumphal entry! The cross! The empty tomb! These are the mountaintop truths of our faith!

But this morning, as we jump back into Acts, our passage is not exactly a mountaintop passage. Paul is in prison, and he is caught up in a legal battle. A lawyer is going to put forward a case against Paul, Paul is going to respond, and then he's going to sit in a cell for two years. That's our text today.

But, I think this is actually one of the benefits of preaching systematically through the Bible. Because most of life is not lived on the mountaintops. Right? Let's take this past week as an example. After the joy and celebration of Easter Sunday, most of us left the corporate worship time and returned to difficult jobs, disbelieving neighbours, and divided families. We left the mountaintop and returned to the valley where the majority of life is lived out.

But God is in the valley too. Amen? And this passage was written to help us to live faithfully in those difficult days. So, let's jump back into this story.

Our passage this morning is really the continuation of a scene that began back in chapter 21. Paul arrived in Jerusalem with a generous gift that he had collected from the Gentile churches. He expected that the gift would be met with joy, but instead he was met with rumours and gossip. Upon the advice of the Christian leaders in Jerusalem, Paul went into the temple to pay for the offerings of some of his Jewish friends. This was meant to be something of an olive branch – a display of solidarity with his fellow Jews – but while Paul was in the temple, a group of men shouted out false accusations about him. A mob formed, and they attempted to beat Paul to death. They would have finished the job if Paul hadn't been rescued by the Roman guards.

They carried him into the barracks, where they intended to try his case. But they soon received word that a group had made a vow not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. At this point, the Roman tribune realized that he needed to get Paul out of the city before chaos ensued, so he ordered what was essentially a small army to escort him in the middle of the night to Caesarea where he would officially become someone else's problem.

That's where we pick up in our passage this morning. The opposition has heard that Paul has been moved in the night, and they are on their way to Caesarea to make their case against him. Look with me now to Acts 24:1. We will be reading the entire chapter this morning. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active Word to us today:

And after five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and a spokesman, one Tertullus. They laid before the governor their case against Paul. ² And when he had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying:

“Since through you we enjoy much peace, and since by your foresight, most excellent Felix, reforms are being made for this nation, ³ in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude. ⁴ But, to detain you no further, I beg you in your kindness to hear us briefly. ⁵ For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. ⁶ He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him. ⁸ By examining him yourself you will be able to find out from him about everything of which we accuse him.”

⁹ The Jews also joined in the charge, affirming that all these things were so.

¹⁰ And when the governor had nodded to him to speak, Paul replied:

“Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense. ¹¹ You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem, ¹² and they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a

crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city. ¹³ Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me. ¹⁴ But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, ¹⁵ having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. ¹⁶ So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. ¹⁷ Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings. ¹⁸ While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult. But some Jews from Asia— ¹⁹ they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me. ²⁰ Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council, ²¹ other than this one thing that I cried out while standing among them: ‘It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.’”

²² But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, “When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case.” ²³ Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs.

²⁴ After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, “Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you.” ²⁶ At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him. ²⁷ When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison. (Acts 24:1-27 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Now, this is a long text with a number of details that we could spend all of our time explaining and defining. Having spent my week in the commentaries, I assure you that I could easily fill the next 35 minutes with explanations of Roman law and biographies of Ananias, Felix and Drusilla. But, as interesting as that might be (to no-one), I don’t believe that would be a faithful use of our time. What we really want to do with a passage like this is to answer the question: “Why is this story in the Bible? What purpose does it serve?”

I wanted to condense this story down to one purpose – one major theme – because that makes for a smoother sermon outline. But in reality, this story serves two purposes in the Book of Acts. I want to make sure that we see both.

First, I believe that Luke included this story to prepare us for persecution.

Preparing For Persecution

Of course, none of us will stand trial before Felix in Ceasarea. But it is very likely that we will all face some degree of persecution in our lifetimes. Paul sets a great example for us here that we would be wise to learn from. I want to draw your attention to three lessons from this example. First, we learn in this story that in seasons of persecution we should:

1. Expect to be misrepresented

The first ten verses recount the tactics of Paul's opposition. Ananias and the elders arrive in Caesarea to make their accusations against Paul, and they bring with them a legal expert named Tertullus. Paul will now be forced to go toe-to-toe with a professional lawyer. After buttering up the governor, Tertullus brings his formal accusations against Paul in verses 5-6:

For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.⁶ He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him. (Acts 24:5-6 ESV)

Paul is presented as a plague – a contagious disease whose influence is causing riots the world over! He's presented as a ringleader of a dangerous sect who even tried to profane the temple.

Now, let's be clear: None of those accusations were true. None of those accusations were verifiable. But ALL of those accusations were masterfully tailored to force Felix's hand.

Tertullus was playing to his audience. He knew that Felix would dismiss this case if it was just about a religious disagreement. But if Tertullus could misrepresent Paul as an agent of chaos – as someone who sought to stir up riots and revolts in Felix's domain – then he could win this case.

So, he lied about Paul. He willfully misrepresented him. And I would argue this morning that we should expect that the same tactics will one day be used against us. Because the enemy who opposes us is the *exact same enemy* who opposed Paul. In Ephesians 6:12 we're told:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, **against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.** (Ephesians 6:12 ESV)

All persecution is animated by the devil and his spiritual forces. And the devil doesn't play by the rules.

Jesus was falsely accused. Paul was falsely accused. Therefore, we should not be surprised if and when we are falsely accused. That's par for the course when you're being opposed by the devil.

Jesus warned us:

When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, **for he is a liar and the father of lies.** (John 8:44b ESV)

They didn't have anything on Paul. So, they created a narrative. They painted him as someone who was a plague to society. Someone who didn't belong. And if you don't think that those same lies are being whispered about Christians today, then you're not paying attention.

There is a whole generation that has been convinced that – because you are a followers of Jesus – you are a hateful, bigoted, homophobic, transphobic, Islamophobic opponent of women's rights. There are a lot of people who have believed that misrepresentation, and that makes the work of evangelism a whole lot harder.

Where does that narrative come from? It comes from the devil – the father of lies. He uses the same old playbook.

But that's okay, because we've seen this play before. We shouldn't be immobilized by this – it's par for the course. Don't get defensive. Don't lash out. Keep shining the light of Jesus and those who have eyes to see will see right through the fog of slander. When persecution comes expect to be misrepresented. That's the first lesson that we learn in this passage.

Second, in times of persecution:

2. Make appropriate use of the law

It's important that we see this. When it was his turn to speak, Paul stood up and, having paid his respect to the governor, said:

You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem, ¹² and they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city. ¹³ Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me. (Acts 24:11-13 ESV)

Paul didn't lay down and accept all of their false accusations. He pushed back! Paul's accusers had no facts to verify their claims against him. In fact, they didn't even track down the men who accused Paul of having brought Gentiles into the temple. Paul points that out in verses 18-20:

While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult. But some Jews from Asia— ¹⁹ **they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation**, should they have anything against me. ²⁰ Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council (Acts 24:18-20 ESV)

Paul's opponents had shown a blatant disregard for due process, so Paul used the Roman legal system against them. As one commentator notes:

Roman jurisprudence insisted that accused and accusers "meet face-to-face" and that an accused person has the opportunity to "defend himself."¹

Paul knew that! And he knew that Felix knew that too. There were NO witnesses present to substantiate the claims being made against him, and that meant that there was NO CASE.

Paul didn't simply sit on his hands and play the victim while the opposition ignored the rules and attempted to end his ministry. Paul made appropriate use of the law.

I want to make sure that we see this because – as I said a moment ago – we might just find ourselves in situations like this. Some of us already have.

¹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 996.

Some of us went through the process to foster and adopt, but were denied that opportunity because of our faith. Some people in this room right now are being pushed out of their long-time professions because their companies are requiring them to say things that they cannot say and to celebrate things that they cannot celebrate.

If a person is wrongfully dismissed, is it wrong for them to make appropriate use of the legal system? The Apostle Paul doesn't seem to think so. In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul said of the King – that is, the governing authority that is over us – that:

he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. (Romans 13:4b ESV)

Kings, judges and laws are appointed by God to be a blessing to us. They are a common grace, and they exist to safeguard against injustice and wrongdoing. It was the state that rescued Paul when he was being beaten to death in the temple. It was the state that escorted him to safety when there was a plot for his life. It was the state that afforded him a fair trial. The king does not bear the sword in vain.

There is a legal system in this country that was instituted to protect you and you should make use of it. Now, you should not be animated by vindictiveness, or animosity, or retaliation, but if there is a wrong that is being committed against you, and you have access to tools that would stop that wrong from being done, then you should use it. One commentator notes:

Christians reading Luke's narrative are challenged to know their opponents and their agendas, to know their legal rights and the best way to use them, to argue their case with polite confidence and judicial competence, and to behave in a manner that is above reproach in all respects.²

That's what Paul models for us here. In times of persecution, make appropriate use of the law. Having said that, I want to make sure that we hold that in tension with this third lesson. In times of persecution:

² Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 970.

3. Remember what matters most

I want to make sure that we see that the motivation that drives Paul in this story is NOT his desire for personal freedom. He had a higher aim. We catch a glimpse of this in verses 24-26:

After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, “Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you.” ²⁶ At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him. (Acts 24:24-26 ESV)

Humanly speaking, Felix was the one person in Caesarea who had the power to set Paul free. Felix expected Paul to butter him up. He expected Paul to offer him a bribe. But Paul wasn't like other prisoners. The other prisoners wanted to be free, but Paul wanted to be faithful.

Rather than bribing or sucking up to Felix, Paul warned him about his sin and the coming judgement. The courage that Paul displays here is remarkable. Felix was not a nice man. The Roman historian Tacitus described him as:

“a master of cruelty and lust who exercised the powers of a king with the spirit of a slave”³

Felix was a violent man – a lustful man. In fact, when Felix first met Drusillia, she was married to another man. He seduced her with his power and made her his wife. As this sinful, prideful, powerful couple stood before Paul – holding in their hands the keys that could set him free, he looked them in the eyes and preached about righteousness, self-control and the coming judgement.

This might have been the first time that anyone had courage enough to tell Felix the truth about his sin. He was alarmed! He had to leave the room! This wasn't what he had anticipated. He was expecting to find a desperate man concerned about his looming trial. Instead, he found a passionate man who was solely concerned with the final judgement.

³ As quoted in Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelein, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 539.

Paul wasn't concerned about comfort or freedom. He was concerned about the great commission! He was concerned about the lost! He was concerned about the final judgement! Even in persecution, he lived his life with a singular focus.

We saw this same focus in chapter 16 when Paul and Silas chose to remain in prison even as the doors swung open so that they could lead their jailer to Christ. And they did! And they baptized him!

In our flesh, when we face persecution and discomfort, all we want to is to climb over anyone or anything that would keep us from getting out of it. But Paul's focus was different. He didn't see that Philippian jailer as an obstacle to freedom. He saw him as a lost man who needed Jesus. And he didn't see Felix and Drusilla as powerful people to be bribed. He saw them as lost people who needed Jesus.

Earthly freedom and comfort are idols that our culture worships – and that idolatry can creep into the church if we're not capable. But when persecution comes, it reveals our true priorities. Therefore, if and when that day comes, let's resolve today to remember what matters most.

One of the reasons why Luke included this story for us was as an example of how to conduct ourselves in a season of persecution. But as I said off the top, there are really TWO purposes for this story. As we come to a close, I want to very quickly draw your attention to the second – and, I believe, the most important – reason why Luke recorded this story. This passage is in our Bibles to teach us that:

Christianity Is Not A Departure From Judaism – It Is The FULFILMENT

The Jewish religious leaders have charged Paul with being the leader of a sect – a heretical offshoot – of Judaism. That's the heart of their argument. Paul's response to their accusation is so theologically important. Look with me at verse 14:

But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets (Acts 24:14 ESV)

Paul says, “Christianity does not undermine the Law and the Prophets – I still believe EVERY WORD! I have not departed from my Jewish faith – I have just pressed FURTHER IN!”

You see, at the heart of this trial – at the heart of the *hatred* that these religious leaders felt toward Paul – was one central question: Is Christianity a departure from Judaism or not?

Much of this discussion centered around the question of the resurrection. As we saw last Sunday, the resurrection lies at the heart of the Christian faith, but how does that fit within Judaism?

There were two prominent branches in Judaism, and they had two schools of thought on the issue. The Sadducees outright denied that there would ever be a resurrection, so they had no category for Jesus. This branch of Judaism was skeptical and political. It was more about status and law than it was about faith and practice.

But the other branch of Judaism – the Pharisees – the group that Paul had once been a part of – were very earnest in their study of the Scriptures. Paul appeals to the Pharisees in verse 15:

I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, ¹⁵ having a hope in God, **which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection** of both the just and the unjust. (Acts 24:14b-15 ESV)

“You believe this!” Paul says. “This is OUR hope! We have *always* been anticipating a resurrection!”

As these Pharisees heard Paul’s argument, their minds would have likely jumped to some of the Old Testament passages that DID point forward to a resurrection. Passage like Isaiah 26:19:

Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise.

You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy!
For your dew is a dew of light,
and the earth will give birth to the dead. (Isaiah 26:19 ESV)

And passages like Job 19:25-26:

For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
²⁶ And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
yet in my flesh I shall see God, (Job 19:25-26 ESV)

Job was looking forward to a *bodily* resurrection! So too was David! He wrote:

For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption. (Psalm 16:10 ESV)

Resurrection hope is *dripping* off of the pages of the Old Testament!

And this is why, when Jesus stepped out of that tomb on the first Easter Sunday, it was not a departure from Judaism – it was the FULFILMENT!

EVERYONE was surprised! But, Paul says, we *shouldn't* have been surprised because God told us that this would happen! He told us that these bodies would rise again! We just didn't know *how* that promise would ever be unlocked for us.

But now we know.

For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. (1 Corinthians 1:20a ESV)

Jesus is the true and better Adam who has obeyed where we fell into sin.

He is the seed of Abraham through whom the nations will be blessed.

He is the descendent of David who will reign forevermore.

He is the true high priest, he is the true temple, he is the true sacrifice.

“No,” Paul says, “This isn't a sect. This isn't a NEW thing! This is EVERYTHING that we were promised!”

Brothers and sisters, we were not made to die. Did you know that? Death is an enemy. Death is an imposter. Death only entered into this world because of sin, but from the very first pages of the Bible we are taught that death will not have the final word.

God had a plan. That plan would come in the form of a child. That child would be born into the family of Abraham. He would descend from the line of David. He would be born in Bethlehem. Somehow, some way, that child would suffer in the place of his people and – in doing so – would set his people free. THAT is the story of the Old Testament.

And that story culminates in the arrival of Jesus. He fulfilled every prophecy. He kept the Law perfectly. Then he died on the cross as our substitute. The wages of sin is death, and so Jesus paid our debt. Then, he stepped out of that tomb three days later proving that death no longer has the final word. He ascended to heaven where he now reigns forever – the promised King in the line of David.

This isn't a new thing. This is everything that God has promised. If we will turn from our sin and place our trust in Jesus – if we will accept this Messiah King and surrender to his rule – then in the same way that he rose, we will rise.

Ananias and the elders rejected their king. So too did Felix and Drusilla. The only person in this story who was set free from sin and death was the man who was locked in a cell. Their stories are over, but yours is not. Would you be free? Would you live?

Repent. Believe. And be saved. Let's pray together.