

Dead Man Walking

Acts 23:12-24

¹² When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. ¹³ There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. ¹⁴ They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near."

¹⁶ Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. ¹⁷ Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him." ¹⁸ So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, "Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you." ¹⁹ The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?" ²⁰ And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him. ²¹ But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent." ²² So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, "Tell no one that you have informed me of these things."

²³ Then he called two of the centurions and said, "Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night.

²⁴ Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor." – Acts 23:12-24 ESV

Paul was in protective custody. The Roman tribune in charge of his care was at a loss as to what to do with Paul. He was still searching for a reason to keep Paul in custody because there appeared to be no valid charge against him or cause to keep him. But the Jews were still in an uproar and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, had ended up in a violent debate over Paul and his guilt or innocence. Paul was most likely being kept somewhere within the Fortress of Antonio, just outside the walls of the temple compound.

Back in chapter 21, Luke recorded the arrival of Paul in the city of Caesarea, where he stayed in the home of Philip the Evangelist. While there, Paul received a visit from a man from Judea named Agabus, who had the gift of prophecy. This man had received a message from the Holy Spirit and delivered it to Paul.

¹¹ He came over, took Paul's belt, and bound his own feet and hands with it. Then he said, "The Holy Spirit declares, 'So shall the owner of this belt be bound by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and turned over to the Gentiles.'" ¹² When we heard this, we and the local believers all begged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. – Acts 21:11-12 NLT

This man's prophecy had come true. Paul had been bound by the Jewish leaders and now he was being kept under lock and key by the Roman authorities. Yet, all of this was part of God's divine plan for Paul's life, and he knew it. In fact, when those in Philip's house had tried to convince Paul not to go to Jerusalem, he had replied: "Why all this weeping? You are breaking my heart! I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13 NLT). And Paul, while sincere in his statement, had no idea just how prophetic his words had been.

While Paul was in the custody of the Romans, the Jewish leadership had been approached by a group of forty Jewish zealots who had developed a plan to take Paul's life. They were so serious that they had made a pact with one another, sealed by an oath and a mutual commitment to fast from food or drink until Paul was dead. But their plot would require the assistance of the high priest and the Sanhedrin. With Paul safely sequestered within the walls of the Fortress of Antonio, where he was surrounded by Roman guards, the only hope these men had was to somehow force the Romans to bring him out in the open. So, they appealed to the Sanhedrin, saying, "ask the commander to bring Paul back to the council again. Pretend you want to examine his case more fully. We will kill him on the way" (Acts 23:15 NLT).

Now, the text does not say whether the Jewish religious leaders agreed to this request. But Luke seems to take it quite seriously, because he records the fact that Paul's nephew somehow got wind of what these men were planning and delivered the news to Paul. And Paul immediately sent his nephew to inform the Roman tribune. Which raises an interesting side note. Notice how Paul reacted to the information his nephew delivered to him. He didn't smile and say, "Thanks for the warning, but I'm going to trust God." He didn't send his nephew away with a pat on the head and an assurance that God had this all under control. No, Paul seems to have viewed this news as having come from God and he took it seriously. Paul was not afraid to die, but he was in no rush to have his life taken by men who were driven by nothing more than hatred and motivated by Satan himself. Paul knew that there was a spiritual battle going on. He lived with a constant awareness that dark forces were gathered against the Kingdom of God and stood opposed to all that he was doing. Which is why he had written to the believers in Ephesus:

For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. – Ephesians 6:12 NLT

Paul felt a strong compulsion to go to Rome. Earlier, as Paul was making his way to Jerusalem, Luke records: "Paul felt compelled by the Spirit to go over to Macedonia and Achaia before going to Jerusalem. 'And after that,' he said, 'I must go on to Rome!'" (Acts 19:21 NLT). He somehow knew that a visit to Rome was in his future. He had even written to the believers in Rome, expressing his strong desire to be with them.

¹³ I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to visit you, but I was prevented until now. I want to work among you and see spiritual fruit, just as I

have seen among other Gentiles. ¹⁴ For I have a great sense of obligation to people in both the civilized world and the rest of the world, to the educated and uneducated alike. ¹⁵ So I am eager to come to you in Rome, too, to preach the Good News. – Romans 1:13-15 NLT

So, it would appear that Paul knew the plot against his life was not part of God's will for his life. He was not to die in Jerusalem at the hands of religious zealots. God had other plans for Paul and he knew it. As a result, Paul sent his nephew to inform the Roman tribune about the plot on his life. As we have seen all throughout the Book of Acts, this whole scene has God's sovereign hands all over it. Nothing escapes the divine will of God. He knew all about the plot and the names of every one of the forty men who had conspired to carry it out. And God had arranged for Paul's nephew to discover their plans so he could inform Paul. This whole sequence of events was actually God working behind the scenes to bring about His will that Paul arrive in Rome. In the eyes of the Jewish leadership, Paul was a dead man. It was only a matter of time before his life would be snuffed out, just like Jesus' had been. But Paul was going to walk out of that Roman barracks, under armed Roman guards, and with his entire trip to Rome paid for by the Roman government. And, as we will see in tomorrow's blog, Paul was going to be given opportunities to appear before powerful men and share the good news of the gospel, just as Jesus had told Ananias.

"Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings..."
– Acts 9:15 NLT

It is always amazing to see how God accomplishes His will. The sad thing is that we don't always recognize or appreciate it when it is happening. We tend to look at the circumstances of life and see nothing but the apparent negatives that stare us in the face. Take this story as an example. Paul had been mobbed by a crowd, falsely accused and nearly beaten to death. He had been arrested by the Romans and barely escaped a violent flogging. Then, when he had appeared before the Sanhedrin, instead of getting an opportunity to defend himself, he had gotten his face slapped, and ended back in Roman custody. Now, he was facing a conspiracy to take his life. Oh, and Luke describes Paul having to depart Jerusalem in the middle of the night, surrounded by 200 Roman soldiers, 200 spearmen and 70 mounted troops. Could it get any worse?

But if we look at this same scene from a God-focused perspective, we see this seemingly insignificant Jewish evangelist, getting an all-expenses paid trip to Rome, complete with an armed escort made up of nearly 500 Roman soldiers. Paul was on his way to Caesarea where he would get a one-on-one, divinely ordained appointment with the Roman governor, Felix. In his wildest dreams, Paul could have never imagined something like this happening to him. And he would view it all as positive, not negative. He knew that God was in control and he was willing to rest in the knowledge that God was all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving. He was living out the very words he wrote to the believers in Philippi.

⁶ Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. ⁷ Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. – Philippians 4:6-7 NLT

My Chosen Instrument

Acts 23:25-24:1

²⁵ *And he wrote a letter to this effect:*

²⁶ *“Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. ²⁷ This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen. ²⁸ And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. ²⁹ I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. ³⁰ And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him.”*

³¹ *So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. ³² And on the next day they returned to the barracks, letting the horsemen go on with him. ³³ When they had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him. ³⁴ On reading the letter, he asked what province he was from. And when he learned that he was from Cilicia, ³⁵ he said, “I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive.” And he commanded him to be guarded in Herod’s praetorium.*

¹ *And after five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and a spokesman, one Tertullus. – Acts 23:25-24:1 ESV*

Paul’s dream of going to Rome is finally taking place, but not the way he had most likely envisioned it. He is being accompanied by nearly 500 Roman soldiers, whose sole responsibility is to protect Paul from a plot on his life and ensure that he arrives safely in Caesarea. The Roman tribune was sending Paul to Caesarea in order for him to be tried before Felix, the Roman governor of the Roman province of Syria, which included Judea. In the letter he sent to Felix, the Roman tribune, who had been anonymous up to this point in the story, reveals his name: Claudius Lysius. We know, by his own confession, that this man had bought his Roman citizenship, so Lysius was likely his Greek name, and he had added the name of the emperor, Claudius, in recognition of his newly acquired and costly citizenship.

Claudius Lysius’ letter bears the marks of a man who is addressing his more powerful superior. He seems to know that his sending of Paul to Felix could easily be seen as shirking his duty, as if he is passing the buck to the governor. In a sense, he is handing the governor more work and what could be a potential time bomb. He knew how incensed the Jews were over this man name Paul, and he had failed to arrive at a solution. So, in his letter, Claudius Lysius paints himself in the most positive of lights. He falsely claims to have rescued Paul from his beating at the hands of the Jews because he knew him to be a Roman citizen. But the truth was that he had been prepared to have Paul severely flogged, until Paul informed him of his Roman

citizenship. That would have been a political disaster and an oversight that could have ended in his own death. So, he conveniently leaves that part out of his letter.

The only real facts he could provide the governor were in regard to the so-called charges against Paul. He really didn't have any. There had been a lot of accusations hurled against Paul by the Jews, but they had contradicted themselves, and there had been some in the Jewish council, the Pharisees, who had claimed that Paul was innocent. The tribune's conclusion had been that Paul was guilty of nothing that concerned the Roman government. This was a simply another internal dispute among the Jews. But because Paul was a Roman citizen, Claudius Lysius had determined to send him to Felix for fair hearing.

I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. – Acts 23:29 ESV

This was not the first time Paul had been accused by the Jews and found himself standing before Roman authorities. Back in chapter 18, Luke records an incident that had occurred in Corinth. Paul had been drug before the Roman governor of the province of Achaia. The accused Paul of “persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to our law” (Acts 18:13 NLT). But before Paul had even had a chance to speak a word in his own defense, the governor, Gallio, stopped him, and delivered the following bombshell to the Jews.

*¹⁴ “Listen, you Jews, if this were a case involving some wrongdoing or a serious crime, I would have a reason to accept your case. ¹⁵ But since it is merely a question of words and names and your Jewish law, take care of it yourselves. I refuse to judge such matters.”
¹⁶ And he threw them out of the courtroom. – Acts 18:14-16 NLT*

It would appear that Claudius Lysius had reached the same conclusion, but he did not have the same level of authority as a Roman governor, so he had chosen to let Felix decide the matter. In his letter, he also informed the governor that the Jews would be sending a contingent to Caesarea in order to state their case against Paul. In essence, the tribune had effectively passed this hot potato of an issue off to Felix. He could get back to managing affairs in Jerusalem, free from the distraction of Paul's incendiary presence.

Paul made it all the way to Antipatris, without incident, so a portion of the Roman soldiers returned to Jerusalem and Paul was escorted the rest of the way to Caesarea by a smaller, yet heavily armed force. When he finally arrived in Caesarea, Paul was presented to the governor, along with the letter from Claudius Lysius. Here was Paul, standing before one of the most powerful men in the Roman empire. Once again, we can't afford to overlook the words Jesus spoke to Ananias, commanding him to meet the newly converted Saul in Damascus: “Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings...” (Acts 9:15 NLT). The Greek word for king is *basileus*, and it refers to “the leader of the people, prince, commander, lord of the land, king.” Felix most certainly fit that description. The words of Jesus concerning Paul were being fulfilled in an amazing and unexpected way. Paul's presence before Felix was not the result of chance or bad luck. It had been meant to be. It was all part of God's

divine plan for Paul's life and, more importantly, for the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth. Paul was about to go further than any of the apostles had been before. His trial before Felix was just the beginning of an incredible journey that would end up in the capital city of Rome, the political and social epicenter of the Gentile world at that time.

After having established Paul's citizenship and provincial birthplace, Felix informed Paul that he would hear his case as soon as his accusers arrived. In the meantime, Paul was placed in Herod's praetorium for safe keeping. He would remain there for five days, waiting for the representatives of the Jewish council to show up. During that time, Paul would have been under house arrest. As a Roman citizen, he probably enjoyed relative freedom during his stay, and the Romans were prohibited from placing him in chains or treating him poorly. Later on, in chapter 24, Luke confirms that Paul was treated with respect and afforded the right to have visitors while he remained in custody.

²³ Then he [Felix] 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. – Acts 24:23 ESV

The Jews that arrived from Jerusalem had come fully prepared to do Paul in. They were loaded for bear. They saw this as their opportunity to rid themselves of yet another menace to their way of life and threat to their authority. To them, Paul was another thorn in their side, much as Jesus had been. They had successfully convinced the Romans to kill Jesus, and they saw no reason why they could not accomplish the same objective with Paul. As they saw it, they had been able to convince Pilate, the governor at the time, to put Jesus to death, so why shouldn't they be able to do the same with Felix? It is likely that they believed they had God on their side. But their efforts, while done in the name of God and, from their perspective, with the full blessing of God, would fail to accomplish their goal.

When “The Way” Seems Wrong

Acts 24:2-21

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.’” – Acts 24:2-21 ESV

The day for Paul’s trial before Governor Felix had arrived. A contingent of Jews, including the high priest, Ananias, as well as a hired attorney named Tertullus, had finally made their way to Caesarea and the governor called them all to appear before him. The primary spokesman for the Jewish leadership was Tertullus, who is described by Luke as an attorney, but the Greek word he used is *rhētōr*, from which we get the English word, rhetoric. A *rhētōr* was an orator or forensic advocate. To put it in more modern terms, he was a prosecuting attorney, skilled in public debate and the intricacies of legal disputation and argumentation. In other words, the Jews had brought a professional. They saw this as their chance to not only get rid of Paul, but to do heavy damage to the cause of Christ, as we will see in Tertullus’ line of prosecution.

Tertullus started out his speech by showing proper respect for the governor, addressing him “most excellent Felix.” Then he proceeded to flatter the governor by expressing their collective gratitude for his many years of wise and proactive leadership.

² *“You have provided a long period of peace for us Jews and with foresight have enacted reforms for us. ³ For all of this, Your Excellency, we are very grateful to you.”* – Acts 24:3-4 NLT

The facts were that Felix was anything but a good governor. The historian Tacitus describes him as cruel, licentious, and base. He was a former slave who had moved up the ranks and had been appointed governor by the emperor Claudius himself. He enjoyed his position and all the power and wealth it afforded him and would do anything to protect and preserve it. Any “reforms” he had brought about would have been for purely selfish motives and accomplished through less-than-legal means. So, the words of Tertullus were nothing more than flattering lies designed to win the governor over and make him receptive to their charges against Paul.

The charges Tertullus leveled against Paul had been well-chosen and carefully worded. First, he accused Paul of stirring up riots among the Jews all throughout the Roman empire. He wanted the governor to know that had taken place in Jerusalem had not been an isolated incident. Paul was creating this kind of chaos and confusion everywhere he went. This charge was designed to strike fear into the heart of Felix. He reported directly to the emperor, and should news get back to Claudius that a renegade Jew from one of the provinces under Felix’s control was disrupting the peace of the empire, Felix would have to answer for it. The second charge brought against Paul was that of being a ringleader in what Tertullus called “the sect of the Nazarenes’ (Acts 24:5 ESV). The words Tertullus used were very carefully chosen and meant to strike fear into the heart of Felix. He refers to Paul as being a leader in a “sect” – using the Greek word, *haireisis*, from which we get the word “heresy.” Now, this word could be used in a positive manner, referring to groups such as the Pharisees and Saducees, who happened to have opposed views. But Tertullus was going out of his way to paint Paul as a leader in a dangerous and insidious group of radicals from the region around Nazareth. In essence, Tertullus was attempting to link Paul to Jesus of Nazareth, without using the name of Jesus. One of the things the Roman government feared were Messianic-like movements among the Jews. It was not uncommon for splinter groups to form based on a belief that they were being led by the long-awaited Messiah. The Romans were well aware of the long-held belief of the Jews in a future savior or Messiah who would restore them to power by setting them free from the oppression of Rome. By labeling Paul as a member and leader of one of these insurrectionist groups, Tertullus was attempting to paint Paul as a dangerous threat to Rome and to Felix’s power. Finally, Tertullus brought the charge against Paul that was more directly an affront to the Jews. He accused Paul of attempting to desecrate the temple. He provided no details and presented no evidence. While this final charge would have meant little to Felix, it was an attempt on the part of Tertullus to eventually make an appeal for Paul’s death. According to Roman law, the Jews could request the right to execute anyone who desecrated the temple. With that, Tertullus rested his case and invited the governor to examine Paul himself in order to corroborate their charges.

But Felix simply provided Paul with an opportunity to defend himself against the charges. It's interesting to note that Paul, while addressing the governor in respectful terms, said nothing could be construed as flattery. He made no attempt to heap false praise on Felix. He simply referred to the fact that Felix had been governor over the Jews for a long time, and that he was happy to have the opportunity to present his case before such a long-standing judge over Israel.

In Paul's response, we get an insightful look into his keen intelligence and thorough grasp of the circumstances surrounding his situation. As a former Pharisee, he was well acquainted with the inner workings of the Sanhedrin or high Jewish council. He knew exactly what Tertullus was trying to do. So, Paul started with the last accusation first. He addressed the charge that he had desecrated the temple by claiming that he had done nothing wrong. In spite of all Tertullus' lofty rhetoric, Paul flatly stated:

¹² My accusers never found me arguing with anyone in the Temple, nor stirring up a riot in any synagogue or on the streets of the city. ¹³ These men cannot prove the things they accuse me of doing. – Acts 24:12-13 NLT

He demanded proof. And his clear inference was that no proof existed or they would have presented it. Next, Paul addresses the second charge accusing him of being a ringleader in the sect of the Nazarenes.

¹⁴ "But I admit that I follow the Way, which they call a cult. I worship the God of our ancestors, and I firmly believe the Jewish law and everything written in the prophets." – Acts 24:14 NLT

But Paul made it clear that he was not part of some new and radical anti-Semitic group. He was a Jew himself and a worshiper of Yahweh, the God of the Jews. He was a faithful adherent to the Mosaic law and believed all that was written in the Hebrew Scriptures by the prophets. Now, this is where Paul made his move. He placed himself on the same level as his accusers, claiming to worship the same God, keep the same law and believe in the same Scriptures. And those Scriptures clearly taught that there would be a resurrection of the dead. Why is Paul bringing up resurrection at this point in his speech? What is he attempting to do? If you recall, when he was first arrested by the Roman tribune and forced to appear before the Sanhedrin, he had also brought up the issue of resurrection. That's because he knew that the Sanhedrin was divided between Sadducees, who rejected the idea of the resurrection of the body, and Pharisee, who embraced it. When Paul had broached the subject in that context it had resulted in a virtual brawl between the members of the Sanhedrin. So, here we have Paul raising this touchy subject yet again. Paul described himself as "having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust" (Acts 24:15 ESV). Ananias, the high priest, was a Sadducee, and he most certainly had no hope that there would be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. He didn't believe in resurrection at all. Paul was goading his accusers. You can imagine the frustration the high priest and the other members of the council felt as they listened to Paul speak. They most likely wanted to disagree with him, but there knew they couldn't without revealing that his was all nothing more than a

theological disagreement between themselves and Paul. If they spoke up, they ran the risk of getting their case thrown out by Felix.

Next, Paul gave his recollection of the events that had taken place in the temple and had led to his appearance before Felix. He described his presence in the temple to offer sacrifices and make purification. And he firmly denies any wrongdoing, even questioning why the Asian Jews, the very ones who had accused him, were not present at the trial. He even demanded that the members of the Sanhedrin present clear and compelling evidence as to why he had appeared before them in the first place. The truth is, at the point of Paul's arrest, no one had been able to agree on what it was he had done wrong. There was no evidence presented or clear and compelling charge brought against him. And it was at this point that Paul brought back up the resurrection of the dead. He recalled that the only thing he had said at the time of his arrest that seemed to have caused a stir was, "It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day" (Acts 24:21 ESV).

Paul's whole point in bringing up the matter of the resurrection was that, when he had done so at his trial before the Sanhedrin, there were those on the council who had declared, "We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?" (Acts 23:9 ESV). Even the council had been divided over his guilt or innocence. Paul knew if he could expose the fact that all of this was nothing more than a theological debate, Felix would be prone to dismiss the trial as unnecessary and irrelevant to Roman concerns. The whole reason Paul was standing in front of the Roman governor was because the Jewish religious leadership refused to accept that Jesus, the one they had crucified, had actually been the Messiah and had risen from the dead. Even the Pharisees, who believed in resurrection, refused to accept Jesus as the Messiah. None of this was about desecration of the temple, insurrection, or crimes against the state. It was all about the Way, the gospel of Jesus Christ and His offer of justification before God through faith in His sacrificial death on the cross. Paul was preaching hope. But the enemies of the gospel will always see it as a threat to be exterminated, not a life-changing gift to be embrace.

Sin, Righteousness, and Judgment

Acts 24:22-27

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 24:22-27 ESV

Having listened to the impassioned pleas of Tertullus, describing Paul as a radical and dangerous heretic; and the reasoned defense of Paul, expressing his innocence of any and all charges against him, Felix forestalled judgment. He sent the Jews away and left Paul in protective custody, providing him with certain freedoms, including visitations from his friends. It appears that Felix was reluctant to pass judgment, not wanting to infuriate the Jews by siding with Paul. But at the same time, Luke leaves the impression that Felix was anticipating some kind of a bribe or payoff from Paul. This appears to be the motivation behind the frequent discussions he had with Paul over the next two-year period. "He also hoped that Paul would bribe him, so he sent for him quite often and talked with him" (Acts 24:26 NLT).

So, for the next two years, Paul was held in Rome, permitted certain freedoms, but provided no judgment as to his guilt of innocence. It is important to note that Paul was nowhere near Rome yet. He was being held in the city of Caesarea and would remain there for two long years. And during that time, he was given repeated opportunities to meet with Felix and his wife, Drusilla. One of the things this royal couple asked Paul about was faith in Christ. Luke doesn't tell us the reason behind their curiosity. He provides no insights into what may have motivated their desire to discuss these matters with Paul. He does insinuate that Felix was hoping that some form of cash payment might be a byproduct of their conversations, but it would seem that the curiosity of these two individuals became increasingly greater. They were intrigued by what Paul was telling them. And Luke is very specific about the content of Paul's discussions with them.

...he reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the coming day of judgment... – Acts 24:25 NLT

There is a very strong similarity between these three topics and what Jesus had said the Holy Spirit's role would be when He came. Just prior to His betrayal, arrest, trials and crucifixion, Jesus had given His disciples the following explanation regarding what the Holy Spirit would do when He came:

⁸ *And when he comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment.* ⁹ *The world's sin is that it refuses to believe in me.*

¹⁰ *Righteousness is available because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more.*

¹¹ *Judgment will come because the ruler of this world has already been judged.* – John 16:8-11 NLT

Notice that he lists three things: Convicting the world of its sin, convicting the world of God's righteousness, and convicting the world of the coming judgment. The NET Bible translates verse 8 in this way: "he will prove the world wrong concerning sin and righteousness and judgment." It seems that Jesus was saying that the Holy Spirit was going to expose and demand a change in mind regarding three things: Sin, righteousness, and judgment. Every individual who has ever lived has had a viewpoint on these three things. Each of us has a personal perspective on what is right and what is wrong. We may not call it sin, but we inherently know that there are some things that are off limits and unacceptable in terms of behavior. And we know that there are certain things that are deemed by us and the society around us, as acceptable or righteous. For the most part, all men live with a mindset that if you sin (do what is wrong), there will be consequences. If you do what is righteous (or good and acceptable), you will be rewarded. Thus, the judgment. Wired into mankind is the God-created sense of right and wrong, with the accompanying ideas of merit and punishment. But Jesus was teaching that the Holy Spirit was going to prove the world wrong in terms of their view on these important topics. One of the Holy Spirit's primary roles is that of conviction, showing men and women that they are sinners in need of a Savior. He also exposes the futile nature of mankind's attempt to achieve a righteousness on its own. The Bible makes it painfully clear that "No one is righteous--not even one" (Romans 3:10 NLT), and that the penalty or judgment against unrighteousness is severe: "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23 NLT).

These were the very same concepts that Paul discussed with Felix and his young wife. Pretty heavy topics, and they were making an impact on this royal couple. And it's interesting to note that Paul used the term *egkrateia*, when discussing the topic of sin. It is a Greek word that refers to self-control, but particularly in regard to one's sexual appetites or sensual passions. This was very specific topic that Felix and Drusilla needed to here. It is believed that Drusilla was no more than 16 when Felix married her, and this would have been his third marriage. She was the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I who had been king over Palestine from A.D. 37-44. So, she was from royal blood. Felix had married each of his wives in an attempt to further his career. He was a man driven by his lusts – for physical pleasure, political power, and financial success. They were a power couple, who struggled with self-control, and who operated under the own definition of what righteousness looked like. As long as something met their own selfish desires, they would have deemed it as right and good.

But as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit convicts and Luke records that the discussions Paul had with Felix left the governor alarmed and a bit shaken. He reached the point where he told Paul, "Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you" (Acts 24:25 ESV). And these impromptu conversations went on for two solid years, and all the while Paul remained in a permanent state of house arrest in the city of Caesarea. We are not provided with much in the way of details concerning Paul's stay in Caesarea. We know he was able to have visitors and was likely communicating with and through Luke all during his time there. While there are a few scholars who believe that Paul may have penned some of his letters during this time, the majority insist that he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon at a later date, while a prisoner in Rome.

This lengthy period of relative silence and forced inactivity must have been difficult for Paul. He was a mover and shaker. He was used to teaching, preaching, debating and discussing spiritual matters. He was a missionary but was forced to take a two-year hiatus from the road. But he remained zealous to share what he knew with anyone who would listen. In this case, it happened to be one of the most powerful men in the entire Roman empire. And this ongoing dialogue with Felix provided Paul with a warmup for even more significant encounters that were coming his way in the not-so-distant future. God was at work, even in the seeming setback of a 24-month-long delay. And, in spite of the lengthy delay, the Jews never stopped plotting and planning for ways to get rid of Paul. He may have been out of sight, but he was never out of their minds. So, when Felix was replaced by Festus as governor, the Jews would see it as an opportunity to reinvigorate their vendetta against Paul. But God was still in control.

To Caesar You Shall Go

Acts 25:1-12

¹ Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. ² And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, ³ asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. ⁴ Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. ⁵ “So,” said he, “let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him.”

⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ Paul argued in his defense, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.” ⁹ 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?” ¹⁰ 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 very well. ¹¹ If then I am a wrongdoer and 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.” ¹² Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.” – Acts 25:1-12
ESV

Paul had been held in what amounts to a state of suspended animation for two years by the governor, Felix. A trial had been held, but no decision made. No clear charges had been brought against Paul worthy of his execution, but, rather than release Paul and face the wrath of the Jewish leadership, and a potential riot by the Jewish people, Felix had chosen to leave Paul in Roman custody. Somewhere around 57 A.D., the emperor Nero recalled Felix and replaced him with Porcius Festus, the former procurator of Palestine. He became the new governor of the province of Syria, which included Judea and, therefore, the city of Jerusalem. Luke indicates that three days after having arrived in Caesarea, Festus made a trip to Jerusalem and met with the chief priest and other religious leaders of the Jews, most likely referring to the Sanhedrin or high council, the very same group who had brought charges against Paul two years earlier. The Jews brought Festus up to speed on their complaints against Paul and even begged him to allow them to conduct a trial on their home turf, which would have required that Paul be transferred from Caesarea to Jerusalem. Once again, they had an ulterior and sinister motive. They intended to have Paul ambushed and murdered along the way. Two years earlier, there had been more than 40 men who had vowed to neither eat nor drink anything until they fulfilled their pact to put Paul to death. Their plot had been exposed and had resulted in Paul being transferred under Roman armed guard to Caesarea. Obviously, these men had been forced to break their fast, but their hatred for Paul had never diminished. It seems that they were more

than willing to renew their vow and recommit themselves to Paul's destruction when given the opportunity.

But Festus refused the Sanhedrin's request, instead demanding that they bring a delegation to Caesarea, where he would conduct yet another trial so that he could hear the specifics of the case for himself. This at least reveals that Festus was going to give Paul a fair hearing, rather than simply turn him over to the Jews to do with as they saw fit. Festus most likely had looked into the case enough to have known that Paul was a Roman citizen and, therefore, according to law, deserving of a fair trial.

About a week later, the Jews arrived in Caesarea, and the trial was begun. Once again, the Jews had come prepared to paint Paul in the worst possible light. In fact, Luke records that "the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him" (Acts 25:7 ESV), but he also states that they had no proof. These charges were all fabricated and fictitious. And when Paul was given a chance to defend himself, he simply stated, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense" (Acts 25:8 ESV). Now, it seems obvious that there was much more to this trial than Luke records. But it was likely a repeat of all that had been said in the trial that had taken place two years earlier before Felix. And there would have been court records from that previous trial to which Festus had access. At this point in his chronicle, Luke doesn't appear interested in providing a word-for-word record of all that was said in the trial, but in showing that nothing had changed. Two years had passed, but the facts remained the same. The Jews were determined to see Paul put to death, and Paul was convinced of his own innocence.

Now, at this point, we see the political nature of the situation. Festus was a new governor, appointed by the emperor, Nero. He wanted to make a good impression. And, as the former procurator of Palestine, Festus was well acquainted with the volatile nature of the Jewish situation. He also knew that Rome preferred peace over rioting and insurrection, so, seeing an opportunity to throw the Jews a bone and give in to their request to have Paul tried in Jerusalem, he broached the idea with Paul. As a Roman citizen, Paul had a say in the matter and it is clear that Paul knew his rights. He responded to the governor's request boldly and clearly:

¹⁰ "No! This is the official Roman court, so I ought to be tried right here. You know very well I am not guilty of harming the Jews. ¹¹ If I have done something worthy of death, I don't refuse to die. But if I am innocent, no one has a right to turn me over to these men to kill me. I appeal to Caesar!" – Acts 25:10-11 NLT

There is no indication in the text that Paul had been directed by the Spirit of God to demand a trial before Caesar. It would appear that Paul knew there was still the likelihood of a plot against his life, and he was doubtful that a trial in the city of Jerusalem, where hatred against him was high, would result in a fair and unbiased outcome. Paul was a Roman citizen and knew his rights. He also knew he was innocent and that his hopes of receiving a fair and unprejudiced trial would be under Roman jurisdiction, even if that meant he had to travel all the way to Rome. One of the things that should strike us is that Paul's Roman citizenship plays a huge

factor in this entire portion of Paul's life story. Had he not been a Roman citizen, he would never have made it out of Jerusalem alive. The Roman tribune who had rescued him two years earlier from the Jewish mob who had tried to beat him to death in the temple courtyard, would have flogged Paul and allowed him to undergo trial by the Jews. He would never have sent Paul to Felix for trial. And whether we recognize it or not, Paul's citizenship was part of God's sovereign will over Paul's life. Paul was born in Tarsus, not by chance, but because of the preordained plan of God. Paul would state as much in his letter to the church in Galatia: "But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by his marvelous grace" (Galatians 1:15 NLT). God had chosen Paul. God had determined the time and place of his birth, and the parents to whom he would be born. Paul's Roman citizenship was not a coincidence or some form of blind luck. It was a part of God's plan for Paul's life and, more importantly, for the God's predetermined plan to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. Paul was appealing to go to Caesar, to stand before the most powerful man in the world at that time, and he had the right to do so. Not only that, he had the God-ordained responsibility to do so.

And, after conferring with his counselors, Festus announced to Paul: "To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go" (Acts 25:12 ESV). After a two-year delay, Paul was going to see his dream of going to Rome fulfilled. But it would not be exactly as he had imagined it. Paul had longed to visit Rome for some time. He had a deep desire to minister to the congregation of believers who had formed there. A year or two earlier, Paul had written a letter to the church in Rome, while he was in the city of Corinth, and he had told them:

⁹ God knows how often I pray for you. Day and night I bring you and your needs in prayer to God, whom I serve with all my heart by spreading the Good News about his Son.

¹⁰ One of the things I always pray for is the opportunity, God willing, to come at last to see you. ¹¹ For I long to visit you so I can bring you some spiritual gift that will help you grow strong in the Lord. ¹² When we get together, I want to encourage you in your faith, but I also want to be encouraged by yours. – Romans 1:9-12 NLT

Now, Paul was going to get his prayer answered. Not in a way that he would have imagined or even desired, but according to God's sovereign will. He was going to get to minister to the believers in Rome, as a prisoner. And while in Rome, Paul would write four of his other letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Paul's time in Rome would end up providing him with time to minister and to put his thoughts in writing, ultimately providing the universal church with the vast majority of the content that makes up the New Testament. God had a plan for Paul. He had a purpose for the life of Paul. And that plan included a trip to Rome.

At a Loss for Words

Acts 25:13-26:1

¹³ Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus. ¹⁴ And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, "There is a man left prisoner by Felix, ¹⁵ and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. ¹⁶ I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him. ¹⁷ So when they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought. ¹⁸ When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. ¹⁹ Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. ²⁰ Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. ²¹ But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar." ²² Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," said he, "you will hear him."

²³ So on the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. ²⁴ And Festus said, "King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. ²⁵ But I found that he had done nothing deserving death. And as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him. ²⁶ But I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write. ²⁷ For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him."

¹ So Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense: – Acts 25:13-26:1 ESV

Paul had made an appeal to have his case transferred to Rome, so that he might stand trial before Caesar himself. Because Paul was a Roman citizen, Festus, the governor, was obligated to fulfill Paul's wish. But before he could send Paul to the emperor, he was required to include a formal document outlining Paul's crimes. And that was where Festus was at a loss. He had no clue as to what charges he could file against Paul that would warrant a hearing before the emperor. Festus had listened to the accusations leveled against Paul by the Jewish Sanhedrin, but he had heard nothing that would make Paul a threat against the state. Sure, the Jews had accused Paul of inciting riots and desecrating the temple, but they had been unable to prove anything (Acts 25:7). Their rhetoric was unaccompanied by realistic facts that could be backed up by hard-and-fast evidence.

It just so happened that King Agrippa and his sister, Bernice, were visiting Caesarea about that time, so Festus shared his predicament with the king, relating the situation involving Paul and the Jewish religious leadership. Festus explained that it all had to do with “...something about their religion and a dead man named Jesus, who Paul insists is alive” (Acts 25:19 NLT). In other words, it all appeared to be nothing more than an internal, religious dispute among the Jews. He expressed his predicament to King Agrippa in no uncertain terms:

²⁵ But in my opinion he has done nothing deserving death. However, since he appealed his case to the emperor, I have decided to send him to Rome.

²⁶ “But what shall I write the emperor? – Acts 25:25-26 NLT

King Agrippa was intrigued and asked for an opportunity to hear Paul for himself. Now, at this point, a little background is necessary. The Agrippa Luke refers to in this passage is Marcus Julius Agrippa II, the son of Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-25) and great-grandson of Herod the Great (Matthew 2:1-23). His great-grandfather was the Herod who had ordered all the Jewish baby boys under the age of two to be slaughtered – in an attempt to eliminate the “newborn king of the Jews” who the wise men had informed him about (Matthew 2:1-1). So, Agrippa came from wicked stock. And he had not fallen far from the family tree. Luke records that he was accompanied by Bernice. In some translations, she is described as his wife. But she was actually his younger sister. At one point, she had been married to her uncle Herod, the king of Chalcis. But upon his death, she had moved in with her brother and the two of them began an incestuous relationship, a fact that was well-known throughout Palestine and Rome. So, Paul was brought before this notoriously sinful and extremely powerful couple to state his case.

Festus set up the interview by reiterating his belief that Paul was innocent of any crime worthy of his death. The Jews had demanded that Festus condemn Paul (Acts 25:15). In other words, they were looking for a death sentence. They were demanding the right to put Paul to death for desecrating the temple, even though they had provided no definitive proof. But Festus made it perfectly clear that he had heard nothing that warranted the handing down of a death sentence. It was his hope that perhaps, after having heard Paul’s story for himself, Agrippa might be able to shed some light on the matter and help come up with a believable charge against Paul that would make sending him to Caesar worthwhile and not a waste of the emperor’s time.

Now, stop for a moment and consider the gravity of this situation. Paul has been accused of crimes against the state and violations of the Mosaic law that were punishable by death. He has already had to appear before the former governor, Felix, and he had been forced to endure a similar hearing before the new governor, Festus. And now, he was given the opportunity to state his case before King Agrippa. With each one of these encounters, Paul had been given a God-ordained opportunity to speak openly and boldly about the good news concerning Jesus Christ. As Festus had made clear, Paul had spoken to him about the resurrection of Jesus. Now, Paul was going to get the same chance with King Agrippa and sister/mistress. What an incredible occasion. How many people get the opportunity to speak of Jesus before kings? But

this was all in keeping with the promise Jesus had made to Ananias, when He had sent him to visit the newly converted Saul.

“Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel.” – Acts 9:15 NLT

Paul had already spoken to a Roman tribune and two Roman governors. Now, he was being provided with a remarkable opportunity to address a king. And, if all went well, he would soon find himself standing before the most powerful man in the world at that time: The emperor of Rome.

Paul’s life was on the line. The accusations against him were serious and the Jew’s hatred for him was intense. They wanted him dead. Consider how you would react if you suddenly found yourself in his sandals. What would you do? How would you feel? What would you say? It is so easy to read these stories and to assume that Paul, Peter, John and all the rest of the early founders of the church were just some special breed of super saints. They were especially brave and supernaturally gifted to endure the trials and tribulations they experience. And they were. But it is essential that we remember what Jesus said to His disciples when He was preparing to send them out on their first ministry excursion on their own. He had warned them:

*¹⁶ “Look, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. So be as shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves. ¹⁷ But beware! For you will be handed over to the courts and will be flogged with whips in the synagogues. ¹⁸ You will stand trial before governors and kings because you are my followers. But this will be your opportunity to tell the rulers and other unbelievers about me. ¹⁹ **When you are arrested, don’t worry about how to respond or what to say. God will give you the right words at the right time.** ²⁰ For it is not you who will be speaking—it will be the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”*
– Matthew 10:16-20 NLT

Paul had already experienced the reality of these verses. He had known what it was like to stand before the Roman tribune and two Roman governors. The Spirit of God had given him not only the courage to stand his ground, but the content to speak. And this situation with King Agrippa would prove to be no different. Jesus had told His disciples not to worry.

²⁶ “But don’t be afraid of those who threaten you. For the time is coming when everything that is covered will be revealed, and all that is secret will be made known to all. ²⁷ What I tell you now in the darkness, shout abroad when daybreak comes. What I whisper in your ear, shout from the housetops for all to hear!” – Matthew 10:26-27 NLT

And while Paul had not been present when Jesus spoke those words, they undoubtedly had been communicated to him in some form or fashion. Either from the disciples themselves, or by the Holy Spirit. And Paul inherently knew that his life was in God’s hands, a fact that Jesus had tried to convey to His disciples.

²⁸ *“Don’t be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”* – Matthew 10:28 NLT

Paul saw the opportunity placed before him as a Godsend. He was going to get to speak to a king, a man who had a reputation for promiscuity and for unbridled ambition. Yes, he was powerful. He had the authority to set Paul free or to seal his death sentence. But Paul seemed to know the reality of the words spoken by Jesus to His disciples some years earlier:

³⁸ *“If you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of being mine.”*
– Matthew 10:38 NLT

As we saw earlier in Luke’s text, Paul had already made his intentions known. “I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13 NLT). Now, he was in Caesarea. But his attitude remained the same and he articulated it to the believers in Philippi. “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21 ESV). As long as Paul drew breath, he would speak on behalf of Christ – to kings, governors, tribunes, Gentiles, Jews, and anyone else who would listen. But, in Paul’s mind, death, while always a potential, was never a cause for fear. Which is why he was able to say, “I will continue to be bold for Christ, as I have been in the past. And I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die” (Philippians 1:20 NLT).

Festus was at a loss for words and incapable of knowing what to write to the emperor. But Paul would prove to be anything but tongue-tied or at a loss for what to say. And what he had to say would have little to do with saving his own skin, and everything to do with seeing others experience the saving grace of God made possible through His Son, Jesus Christ.