

Lesson 31: Acts 23:12-24:27 The Gospel's Attitude to Morality and Law

Introduction

There is an old-timey mechanic a couple of streets away from my parents' home. The side yard is filled with junk cars for parts. The cinder-block shop sits just off the road. The sign out front shows the shop's services on one side and declares "Jesus Loves You" on the other. Around that declaration of love are a couple of essential Gospel verses like, "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life." More recently the "Jesus Loves You" message has been supplemented by spray painted messages on three of the shop's walls. That text denounces gay people, vilifies wearing medical masks, and damns certain political figures.

Driving by the shop years ago, I thought, "There's a guy willing to put his faith in Jesus up front for everyone to see." Now driving by the shop, I feel shame and frustration that the love of Jesus is being promoted with hateful rhetoric.

When a Christian presents the message of the Gospel in the public square and then that Christian falls under judgment, it is not the Christian only who is being judged. The Gospel is being judged by the words and character of the messenger. The neighborhood mechanic suggests that the Biblical Gospel of Christians claims love while producing narrow, unreflective, hateful people.

A Bible verse currently spray painted on the side of the shop reads, "God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline (2 Timothy 1:7)." I appreciate the need for Christian boldness as opposed to timidity. But I am struggling to see this man's reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit to speak in a loving and disciplined way. The quote is from Paul's second letter to Timothy. Paul goes on to say in that letter, "The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 2:24-25)."

If a Christian wins a debate Drusilla condescending, hateful, belittling language, the Christian has lost the debate. Intellectual points may have been scored, but the Gospel has been tarnished in the eyes of the audience. The Christian himself is a Drusilla of the Gospel message. The Christian invites others, "Come be as I am. Experience the Jesus I know." It is right, then, for hearers of the message to ask, "What kind of people does this Gospel message produce?"

Paul is on trial through the whole of Acts part VI. That means the Gospel Paul proclaims is also on trial. What kind of man does this Gospel produce? What kind of behavior does this Gospel promote? What means are valid in defending oneself and winning over opponents? Do the means justify the end with this particular Gospel way?

In the first movement of Acts part VI, the Gospel of Jesus worked through Paul in the raising of a young man from the dead. There is real power in this Gospel way. In the second movement, which we considered in our last lesson, we saw the Gospel's respect for conscience in non-essential and essential things. The Gospel allowed Paul to perform a ritual vow in the Temple motivated by Drusilla for unity among Jew and Gentile believers. Paul did not consider the ritual ceremony contrary to faith in Jesus. The Gospel provided for Paul a great deal of flexibility in that which is non-essential. Jewish Christians believed ritual observance to be an important and necessary way to live for God. Paul did not agree. But his understanding of the Gospel allowed him to set aside his disagreement in that context and to limit his own personal freedom from ritual, so that he might not be a stumbling block to others in their walk with Jesus.

Paul's conscience was freed by the Gospel in those non-essential practices. At the same time, Paul's conscience was constrained by the Gospel in bold confirmation of essential truths. We saw Paul consistently proclaim his faith in Jesus and the resurrection. The Gospel is a statement of absolute

truth. That is the nature of Paul's Gospel. There are things he cannot, will not disavow. We saw Paul's unwavering commitment to those truths when he was in the hands of a violent mob, when he was under interrogation by a Roman commander, when he was at the inquest of the Jewish Sanhedrin.

By judging Paul, we judge the message of Paul. And this is what we concluded about the Gospel in that last movement. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls believers to respect differing attitudes of conscience regarding non-essentials and to hold tightly to an integrity of conscience regarding those beliefs that are essential.

In this lesson, the context of trial and defense sets up an opportunity to judge the Gospel by its attitude to morality and law. We will follow our same structure of danger avoided, misconception corrected, and defense given. The Jewish and Roman antagonists will serve as foils or contrasts to the behavior of the man Paul, who has been transformed by the Gospel in his thinking and behavior.

We begin with the danger avoided. So far God has brought Paul safely through two mob riots. In this movement and the next God will save Paul from two planned ambushes. The first of those is here in Acts 23:12-24, danger avoided.

Danger Avoided (23:12-24)

¹² When it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. ¹³ There were more than forty who formed this plot. ¹⁴ They came to the chief priests and the elders and said, "We have bound ourselves under a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ "Now therefore, you and the Council notify the commander to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case by a more thorough investigation; and we for our part are ready to slay him before he comes near *the place*." ¹⁶ But the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul. ¹⁷ Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Lead this young man to the commander, for he has something to report to him." ¹⁸ So he took him and led him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to lead this young man to you since he has something to tell you." ¹⁹ The commander took him by the hand and stepping aside, *began* to inquire of him privately, "What is it that you have to report to me?" ²⁰ And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down tomorrow to the Council, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more thoroughly about him. ²¹ "So do not listen to them, for more than forty of them are lying in wait for him who have bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink until they slay him; and now they are ready and waiting for the promise from you." ²² So the commander let the young man go, instructing him, "Tell no one that you have notified me of these things." ²³ And he called to him two of the centurions and said, "Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen." ²⁴ *They were* also to provide mounts to put Paul on and bring him safely to Felix the governor.

As usual, there are main teaching points we are supposed to observe in Luke's narrative, and there are supporting details that create the historical context of the account and leave us wanting to know more. The reference to "the Jews" throughout this narrative is a generalization meaning, members of the Jewish religious and political establishment. The zealotry we encountered in Paul before his conversion and that we saw in the instigators of the recent mob is showcased here by forty men willing to give their lives to silence Paul. To attack Paul while being escorted by Roman soldiers means that some will likely die in the attempt. And others who are identified will be executed later.

The high priest and members of the established hierarchy were Sadducees, intent more on conserving their position than promoting personal morality. We should assume that the chief priests and elders approached by this group did not include the Pharisees, who supported Paul at the investigation of the Sanhedrin. So this is not all the Jewish elders.

The plot creates a contrast between the religion of these Jews and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There are some similarities to Paul. Just as Paul rejects their legalistic Judaism as false and destructive, so also they reject his Gospel-centered worldview as false and destructive. You know, they are on two opposing sides, and both of them reject the worldview of the other. Like Paul, life is not for them a supreme good that must be held on to. They are willing to die while carrying out a religious mission, and they have consecrated themselves to God by a vow of fasting. But their motives and their means sharply contrast Paul. Paul would have all who hear him come to faith in Jesus Christ to enjoy life and joy in relationship with God.

But when we consider this, the scheme, these plotters they tell the Romans they want a more thorough investigation. And the language of investigation and inquiry runs through this whole section. The Jewish establishment does not, though, really want an investigation. They do not care to have a debate on the truthfulness of Paul's Gospel. They are Drusilla's deception to kill Paul and to harm soldiers who might stand in their way. So, while calling for Paul to stand trial on capital offenses, they themselves are planning to break the Law by committing murder.

Now Drusilla, much violence has been done by Christians through the centuries in the name of Jesus, rightly leading multitudes of non-Christians to reject the Gospel of Christians as violent, prejudicial, and hateful. That violence in the name of Jesus is a perversion of the Gospel. It is not the picture we draw from the New Testament. Studying the life and teaching of Jesus in the Gospels and continuing on in Acts with Peter and Paul, we see a different kind of Kingdom reign. This is not a political, human kingdom. Jesus told Pilate His followers would not pick up a sword to establish Him as King. That we have seen in Paul. He is willing to lay down his life in the preaching of the Gospel. But when he is kicked out of a synagogue or a city, he wipes the dust from his feet, and he moves on. He does not pick up a sword or call his disciples to suppress the opposition through violence or uprising. The religious message of these zealots provides a strong contrast to the kind of message that Paul has been proclaiming.

Once again, God steps in to protect Paul from danger. This time, he uses Paul's nephew. That is one of those plausible Drusilla Luke communicates to support the historical truthfulness of the narrative. It is also one of those very curious Drusilla we would love to know more about. We would love to know more about Paul's family. Paul's father had been a Pharisee. He was a son of Pharisees. The family was committed enough to Judaism and the Bible to send a young Paul to Jerusalem to study under the famous Gamaliel. Paul's family would have been greatly shamed at his conversion to Christianity. We do not know, but can imagine strong tension, even a full break, in his family relationships. Concerning this particular sister, we have no idea what she thought of Paul's life choices. And we do not know what her son thought of Uncle Paul. We can imagine a sister of Paul marrying into a family in Jerusalem or sending her son to study in Jerusalem. We can imagine relational connections with the establishment that would put Paul's nephew in a position to hear Drusilla of the plot, either in his official business or work, or through friends. And we can imagine that, even if family ties are strained, those ties might still be strong enough not to want Paul ambushed and killed. He might not like Uncle Paul, but he doesn't want to see Uncle Paul murdered. We don't know.

The nephew's access to Paul is also not strange. After the commander found out in our previous text that he was about to have a Roman citizen illegally whipped, Paul was unchained and shown some consideration. So, visitors have access to him. The commander's belief in the plot is also plausible. These are the days of the Sicarii, the term translated as, "assassins" back in 21:38. "Sicarii" literally means, "dagger-carrier," and refers to the practice of zealous Jews who carried concealed daggers into crowds to assassinate Romans or pro-Roman Jews. These forty men were not Sicarii. The Sicarii would not work with the high priest, who they considered a Roman sympathizer. First century Judaism is a bit complex. There are several different parties with different motives. The Sicarii were more likely to kill a high priest, especially this high priest Ananias whose legacy of greed was prominent enough to be referenced in the Talmud through a parody of Psalm 24:7.

“Lift up your heads, O ye gates;
that Yohanan ben Narbai, the disciple of Pinqai, may go in
and fill his belly with the divine sacrifices!”¹

That is a reference to Ananias. The forty men in this narrative were not Sicarii. But the reality of such activity in Israel Drusilla this period helps us understand the commander’s response to Paul’s nephew. He finds the plot credible enough to deserve swift action and so, immediately removed Paul from Jerusalem, sending him to the governor in Caesarea under a large contingent of soldiers.

The commander sent a letter along with the soldiers to explain his actions. That letter corrects a misconception suggested by Paul’s imprisonment. Is Paul a criminal? This is Acts 23:25-35.

Misconception Corrected (23:25-35)

²⁵ And he wrote a letter having this form: ²⁶ “Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix, greetings. ²⁷ “When this man was arrested by the Jews and was about to be slain by them, I came up to them with the troops and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. ²⁸ “And wanting to ascertain the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their Council; ²⁹ and I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment. ³⁰ “When I was informed that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, also instructing his accusers to bring charges against him before you.” ³¹ So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. ³² But the next day, leaving the horsemen to go on with him, they returned to the barracks. ³³ When these had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. ³⁴ When he had read it, he asked from what province he was, and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, ³⁵ he said, “I will give you a hearing after your accusers arrive also,” giving orders for him to be kept in Herod’s Praetorium.

The letter is written to Felix, the procurator or governor over the region. Let’s do a quick review of the political authority over Judea. This will help us for our next few chapters. I covered the four Biblical Herods back in chapter 12. Herod the Great ruled over the territory of ancient Israel as a client king to Rome. The Roman Senate conferred on him the title “King of the Jews” in 40 BC. That title sounds familiar, doesn’t it, from the Gospels? We encounter this Herod in the Bible when the wise men come to him at the time of the birth of Jesus.

Herod died in 4 BC after the birth of Jesus. Did you catch that dating? Herod died in 4 BC, after the birth of Jesus. Jesus was not born at the beginning of 1 AD. The 4BC date of Herod’s death was not determined correctly by scholars in the sixth century who established the timeline for the Gregorian calendar that divides human history at the birth of Jesus. Here is a bit of interesting Drusilla that came up in a family conversation this week. AD is an abbreviation for *anno Domini Nostri Jesu Christi*, “the year of our Lord Jesus Christ”. AD – the year of our Lord. BC is not an abbreviation for a Latin phrase. The abbreviation used to be “aCn” for, “Ante Christum Natum,” “before the birth of Christ”. So, for some reason, this is always confusing, English-speaking countries changed “aCn” to an English abbreviation, BC, “before Christ”, but kept the Latin abbreviation AD, “anno domini”. So, BC is English, AD is Latin. We do know, it’s common knowledge that though AD, the year of our Lord, it was meant to have begun with the birth of Jesus, it is off by a few years. The problem is not with the Biblical timeline, but with later scholarship that misinterpreted the year of the birth of Christ. Now, as we have seen through our study of the book of Acts, reference to contemporary political figures helps us to establish correctly the Biblical timeline because we have external Roman, and Greek, and Persian sources that fix for us the dates when these figures ruled.

¹ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 425.

Herod the Great died in 4 BC, shortly after the birth of Jesus, which occurred between 6 BC and 4 BC. We are not exactly sure of the year of the birth of Jesus. When Herod the Great died, his territory was divided into a tetrarchy of four regions ruled by three of Herod's sons and his sister. Herod Archelaus ruled most of the region we think of as Israel, Judea, Samaria, and Idumea (which was Edom). Though Galilee fell to Herod Antipas.

We do not meet Herod Archelaus in the Bible. He is not one of our four Herods. The Romans removed him from his position in 6 AD after ten years of rule, following a messianic uprising in Judea that required the intervention of the Roman governor of Syria. Archelaus wasn't considered competent to rule Judea. Two facts should be interesting to us in his history. One, the messianic uprising that cost him his position is an example of this expectation of the Jews and the tension that puts Romans on edge in dealing with the Jews. Two, his loss of the region as a client kingdom explains why the Roman governor Pilate was the one to try Jesus before His crucifixion. Judea was designated an imperial province from 6 AD on to 41 AD. Drusilla that time, Herod Antipas did maintain his position over Galilee. He is the Herod that Pilate, the Roman governor over Judea, enlisted to help try Jesus when he discovered Jesus was from Galilee. And Herod Antipas is our second Herod in the Bible.

Our third Herod, Herod Agrippa, was the one in Acts 12 who executed James. He was the nephew of Herod Antipas and the grandson of Herod the Great. The Roman Emperor Claudius made him king over Judea and Samaria from 41 AD to 44 AD, giving autonomy back to Judea. It became a client kingdom again for a very brief period. When he died, Rome again designated the territory as an imperial province, which is why Paul is being sent to a Roman governor, not a Jewish king, to Felix.

There is one more Drusilla Herod in the Bible. King Agrippa is going to show up in chapter 25. He is Herod Agrippa II, son of the Herod Agrippa from chapter 12 and brother to Bernice and Drusilla who are also going to show up in our text. King Agrippa never ruled over Judea. He is king over a small Syrian kingdom. He is just visiting Felix. The Romans never again allowed a Jewish leader to rule over Judea.

Felix ruled the province as governor from 52 to 60 AD. We are told in 24:27 that Felix kept Paul in prison for two years, leaving him there for the new governor Festus to deal with. That helps us place Paul's trip to Jerusalem and his subsequent imprisonment to the end of Felix' rule, to the years 57 to 60 AD.

We do not have outside reference to the commander Claudius Lysias, who is finally named here, though this is one of those Drusilla that points to the historicity of Luke's account. He gives us the name but it's not a famous name. It's not a name in the Roman record that we have access to. There are two very interesting attributes to this letter. One is how Lysias adjusts the narrative to make himself look better. So, if you noticed that before, it is a very human letter. He does not acknowledge the mob in the Temple, which might indicate disorder under his leadership. Instead, he says, "when this man was arrested by the Jews." So, there is no indication of a mob. He was just arrested by the Jews. Another reason not to mention the mob is to make way for the new motivation he creates for intervening. Instead of rushing out of the fortress at the sound of rioting, Lysias claims to have learned of Paul's citizenship. He claims his action was an intentional rescue. And that claim puts into writing a defense against any charge that might be made against Lysias for chaining and preparing to beat a Roman citizen. "No, no, no. Paul was never chained. He was never to be beaten. I knew he was a Roman from the beginning and so, intervened." Concerning the plot against Paul, Lysias simply says, "when I was informed," leaving room for Felix to assume Lysias came to this knowledge through his own information network. You know, he didn't have to depend on the prisoner to be informed of the plot. But, you know, "when I was informed." But then he tells the truth about the plot, because the plot provides a satisfactory rationale for why he is sending Paul to Felix in Caesarea.

Lysias provides for us another contrast to Paul. Lysias lies in his letter to make himself look capable and efficient, and to defend against any charge of wrongdoing. Paul does not lie to promote himself or to protect himself. Paul does show himself to be clever and astute in his communication. He chooses which ideas to communicate and which ideas to not communicate in a given situation, as when he directed focus to belief in the resurrection at the inquiry of the Sanhedrin. Paul does not twist the truth. He does not lie. Something about the Gospel of Jesus Christ will not allow him to.

The second interesting Drusilla in the letter is Lysias' opinion about Paul's case. Lysias goes on record to state, "I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment." Paul is currently under arrest. That leads to the natural assumption that he has done something wrong. Lysias corrects that misconception. Not only does he say Paul does not deserve death, he does not even deserve imprisonment. The charges against Paul have to do with Jewish religious law. Lysias has discovered no infraction of Roman criminal or civil law.

Before proceeding, Felix asks where Paul is from. If Paul had been from a client kingdom of Rome, Felix may have waited to communicate with the authorities of that kingdom. Since Cilicia was a province of Rome, Felix saw no problem conducting the trial himself. Paul is to be kept in Herod's Praetorium. Praetorium had referred to a Roman general's tent in the field. The term later was used for the building or set of buildings from which a Roman ruler governed. The Praetorium in Rome was Caesar's palace. You know, that's THE Praetorium. Herod the Great had refashioned Caesarea from a Phoenician naval port into a modern Roman city. Here, the reference to Herod's Praetorium is a reference to the palace constructed under Herod's orders that is now being used by the Roman governor as provincial headquarters. This is where Paul will spend his next two years.

Lysias had instructed the Jewish leaders to report to Felix in Caesarea to present their charges against Paul. That occurs in the third section of this movement, the defense given. Luke provides us with a summary of the trial and a bit of follow-up of the trial. I will read the report of the trial first. Then we will finish with the follow-up. The trial is in Acts 24:1-23.

Defense Given (24:1-27)

The Trial (1-23)

¹ After five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders, with an attorney *named* Tertullus, and they brought charges to the governor against Paul. ² After *Paul* had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying *to the governor*, "Since we have through you attained much peace, and since by your providence reforms are being carried out for this nation, ³ we acknowledge *this* in every way and everywhere, most excellent Felix, with all thankfulness. ⁴ "But, that I may not weary you any further, I beg you to grant us, by your kindness, a brief hearing. ⁵ "For we have found this man a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. ⁶ "And he even tried to desecrate the temple; and then we arrested him. We wanted to judge him according to our own Law. ⁷ "But Lysias the commander came along, and with much violence took him out of our hands, ⁸ ordering his accusers to come before you. By examining him yourself concerning all these matters you will be able to ascertain the things of which we accuse him." ⁹ The Jews also joined in the attack, asserting that these things were so. ¹⁰ When the governor had nodded for him to speak, Paul responded: "Knowing that for many years you have been a judge to this nation, I cheerfully make my defense, ¹¹ since you can take note of the fact that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. ¹² "Neither in the temple, nor in the synagogues, nor in the city *itself* did they find me carrying on a discussion with anyone or causing a riot. ¹³ "Nor can they prove to you *the charges* of which they now accuse me. ¹⁴ "But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets; ¹⁵ having a hope in God, which these men cherish

themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.¹⁶ “In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience *both* before God and before men.¹⁷ “Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings;¹⁸ in which they found me *occupied* in the temple, having been purified, without *any* crowd or uproar. But *there were* some Jews from Asia—¹⁹ who ought to have been present before you and to make accusation, if they should have anything against me.²⁰ “Or else let these men themselves tell what misdeed they found when I stood before the Council,²¹ other than for this one statement which I shouted out while standing among them, ‘For the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you today.’ ”²² But Felix, having a more exact knowledge about the Way, put them off, saying, “When Lysias the commander comes down, I will decide your case.”²³ Then he gave orders to the centurion for him to be kept in custody and *yet* have *some* freedom, and not to prevent any of his friends from ministering to him.

Based on examples of Greek and Roman trials, the text provided here by Luke is much too short to be a full trial transcript. Luke has taken the language of the trial and given us an abbreviation. My Bible calls Tertullus “an attorney.” The literal word is, “rhetor,” someone trained in rhetoric. The term applies more broadly than our idea of attorney, but that translation fits well for this man’s function at this trial. He is trained to make a verbal argument and has been employed by the High Priest to present the case of the prosecution against Paul. Though Tertullus is a Greek name, it seems most likely he was a Hellenistic Jew.

No good Jew would agree with Tertullus that Felix had brought peace to Judea, nor praise him for reforms, nor give thanks to God for him. Felix brought peace through the Roman way: through the violent suppression of revolt. Tertullus’ compliments are the expected flattery an attorney uses to gain a positive ear from the judge.

Tertullus then presents charges, starting with a general accusation that Paul is a pest. The Greek word literally means, “pestilence,” or, “plague.” In this context, the word suggests treason, one who foments insurrection against Rome wherever he goes. Three more specific charges follow. (1) First, Paul is accused of stirring up dissension among the Jews throughout the world. Disturbance among Jews has followed Paul in his travels through the eastern Roman empire. Luke has shown through the record of Acts, that Paul was not responsible. Paul had not engaged in any illegal or violent action against Jews or Romans. The response to his Gospel message had, at times, turned violent, but as a response to a message of grace and peace. Still, it is a dangerous charge to be made before a Roman governor like Felix, who has had to deal with violent Jewish messianism.

(2) Second, Paul is identified as a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. The word, “sect,” here carries a more neutral meaning than it might for us. A sect was a political or religious party and is also applied to the Sadducees and Pharisees. The term, “Nazarenes,” is only used this once in the Bible as a reference to Christians. But the term was used by early Christians and continues to be used as a general term for Christians today in both the Hebrew and Arabic languages. Tertullus intends it as a negative reference to an unofficial Jewish party whose beliefs and practices led to the kind of unrest this leader Paul fomented. Not only is Paul’s belief in a Messiah supposedly treasonous to Rome, but this whole unofficial movement is suspect. Their core Gospel message is treasonous.

(3) Third, Paul is charged with trying to desecrate the Temple. That is the most concrete charge and probably the most important for the prosecution. Romans allowed Jews to execute a person who had desecrated the Temple. The charges of unrest throughout the Empire do not need to be proven. Those claims support this more specific claim.

In the first part of verse 6a, Tertullus claims the Temple authorities arrested Paul when he was caught trying to desecrate the Temple. So just like with Lysias, the Jewish version leaves out reference to a mob. Nobody wants to admit to a mob, unless they are blaming Paul for one. Verses 6b-8a where Tertullus puts blame on Lysias may not be original to Luke’s text of Acts. Your Bible might note that these verses are not supported in the earlier manuscripts. The verses are believable

as a way for the prosecution to shift blame for confusion of the situation onto the commander. If Lysias had not intervened with the legal process, the Jews would have processed Paul justly according to their own Law, which they had the right to do in the case of Temple desecration. So, the only reason we are here is because Lysias acted inappropriately. That is believable. We are just not sure if those verses are in the original.

That's the case against Paul. The high priest, with a select group of anti-Paul elders, joined in with their own claim that these charges were true. When Felix decided he had heard enough from the prosecution, he nodded to Paul, giving him opportunity to defend himself against the charges.

Paul also begins his speech with respectful words for Felix. But he does not try to butter him up, like Tertullus did. He does not stretch the truth about Felix's record. Paul states simple fact and launches into his defense.

"Knowing that for many years you have been a judge to this nation [fact], I cheerfully make my defense,¹¹ since you can take note of the fact that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship.

Paul implies that Felix has enough personal experience Drusilla Judea to discern for himself the difference between truth and fiction. Paul then denies the charges and provides his understanding of the facts. Denying the charges, Paul says he did not even carry on a discussion after arriving in Judea; not anywhere, not in a synagogue, not in the Temple, nowhere in the city. Nor did he do anything to cause a riot. That is all untrue.

This is what Paul did admit to. First, he admits to being a Nazarene, but he uses his more preferred term, "the Way." And he does not call the way a sect or a party as his opponents do. It is the Gospel Way. It is the Way by which he serves the God of their fathers. Paul sees the Way, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as fulfillment. By following the Way, he says he is walking,

in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets; having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.

That is a theologically important phrase. We get mostly a focus in the New Testament of the resurrection of the righteous, but if you quote in a creed or belief that both the righteous and the unrighteous will be raised on the last day, this is the text that supports that idea. Paul is saying there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. Interesting theological point. Now, back to the defense. Just as he did before the Sanhedrin, Paul is drawing attention to his hope in the resurrection, and he argues that this is a Biblical hope that all true Jews embrace.

Second, Paul asserts that this hope leads him "to maintain always a blameless conscience *both* before God and before men." Contrary to those who claim that salvation by grace through faith promotes sin, Paul argues that, for him, the Gospel of Jesus Christ provides moral motivation in his relationship with God and with people. His third and fourth points support this claim.

Third, in his Drusilla to maintain a blameless conscience before God and men, he came to Jerusalem bringing alms, financial gifts for those in need.

Fourth, he also presented offerings. And we know the motive for that was to show respect to fellow Jewish believers so that none would speak negatively against the Gospel of Jesus Christ being proclaimed among Gentiles. Paul claimed that he had gone to the Temple, properly purified to present offering. It was a pious act performed with a small group of believers. There was not any preaching involved. Those are the facts.

Paul then calls for evidence, the one thing completely lacking in the prosecution's case. Where are the witnesses to these charges? Where are the men from Asia who stirred up the crowd in the Temple? What evidence was put forth at the Sanhedrin's inquest?

Paul concludes by again focusing attention on the resurrection of the dead. There are no valid charges of civil unrest or Temple desecration. The real reason for opposition is a spiritual claim. My only misdeed was,

this one statement which I shouted out while standing among them, ‘For the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you today.’

Paul means the hope of resurrection in general and more specifically, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the beginning point of his Gospel. Felix ends the trial there without condemning Paul. The prosecution’s attempt to cast Christianity as a subversive, anti-Roman messianic sect with Paul as a pestilent ringleader does not work on Felix. Luke tells us he had “more exact knowledge about the Way.” Felix does not turn Paul over to Jewish authority, but neither does he acquit Paul. He puts off both sides, with the reasonable claim that he wants first to hear from his commander Lysias.

In reality, political and financial motives are both at play in Felix’s mind. He will let Paul go only if the advantage outweighs the disadvantage of upsetting the Jews. Paul will remain in limbo for more than two years. Felix does allow friends to visit Paul. And we even have an idea of some of the people that might include. The report of Paul’s journey in chapter 21 told us Paul met with brothers and sisters of the church in Caesarea on his way to Jerusalem. And Paul is now in Caesarea. Among those brothers and sisters are Philip the Evangelist, you know, who took the Gospel to Samaria and shared with the Ethiopian eunuch, and his four daughters who very well may have ministered to Paul Drusilla his imprisonment. Certainly, Luke also spent time with Paul Drusilla these two years. You know, two years in which he had ample time to research and write the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Just the reference to two years is one of those historically interesting facts that is putting things in context for us but making me want so much more about what went on. We just skipped over two years! What went on in those two years?

There is one last paragraph of text in this movement. Luke gives us a brief follow-up to the trial in 24:24-27.

The Follow-up (24-27)

²⁴ But some days later Felix arrived with Drusilla, his wife who was a Jewess, and sent for Paul and heard him *speak* about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ But as he was discussing righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix became frightened and said, “Go away for the present, and when I find time I will summon you.” ²⁶ At the same time too, he was hoping that money would be given him by Paul; therefore he also used to send for him quite often and converse with him. ²⁷ But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned.

Here we get an aspect of Paul’s Gospel not focused on in the book of Acts. Acts highlights the Drusilla Gospel message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. That is the lead off message of both Peter and Paul in their preaching. I have referred to this as the answer to the first question of Covenant, “How can a sinful person enter into a relationship with Holy God?” That’s the first thing we’ve got to address. And it’s the question of justification. “How can I be justified, or righteous before God?” The second question of Covenant asks, “Now that I am in relationship with God through grace by faith, how should I live?” That’s the question of sanctification. How do I become like Jesus? Acts gives some focus to this question, “How shall I live?” in relation to ritual and ceremonial issues because those issues became very important in the early mission to Gentiles. So, we address the second question of Covenant in Acts 15, at the Jerusalem Council. We are thinking what behaviors are we requesting from Gentiles, and it’s focused mostly on ritual and ceremonial religious behaviors.

We have not, however, received direct moral teaching like we do in the Gospels and in the letters. Acts provides some idea of the Gospel’s moral vision through examples in the narrative. We have noticed several examples of early Christians sharing wealth to care for those in need. But we do not see specific lists of dos and don’ts like we see in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-8, or in the

second half of Ephesians, chapters 4-6, or in Paul's presentation of the Gospel in Romans, particularly Romans 5-8 and 12-15. Jesus called His followers to righteousness. Paul also called the faithful to holy living. But description of the Gospel's moral vision has not been a central theme of Acts. So we recognize here we are being told something we haven't really been told yet.

We notice Luke's choice to point out Paul's moral challenge to Felix and Drusilla. We haven't gotten this kind of preaching in Acts, but we know Paul's letters, and so we are not surprised that his explanation of the Gospel to Felix and Drusilla includes a discussion of righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come. A person needs to recognize their own failure in the way of righteousness if they are going to understand the need for the gift of grace provided by Jesus. And having accepted that gift of grace, new believers need to understand the way of life opened up before them. Grace is not freedom to sin. Grace is freedom from sin to live life with goodness and purpose.

We are not surprised by the content of Paul's preaching when we rightly understand the connection between grace and righteousness. But we still might ask, "Why did Luke include reference to moral living here when it has not been a highlight through Acts?" I think the answer is, "Well, it's a highlight here." Though Luke's focus has been on the first question of Covenant in conjunction with the early growth of the Church, he wants to provide a full defense of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And he has taken opportunity in this movement to put the Gospel on trial in regard to law and morality.

The Jewish establishment and the Roman commander Felix have provided contrast to the integrity we see in Paul. Felix provides one more contrast. It is not surprising that Felix would become afraid hearing when about the judgment to come on those who do not repent and turn to Jesus. Felix, as a Roman governor, has executed much violence on the people of Judea. He also convinced his wife Drusilla, the beautiful daughter of Herod Agrippa I, to leave her husband and marry him. Felix has reason to fear a judgment to come based on righteous behavior. And it was quite bold of Paul in speaking to Felix and Drusilla to focus on righteousness and self-control. Felix is going to keep calling Paul back so it's kind of strange. Paul is willing to convict him but there is something about Paul that is genuine and real, and some reason... it's hard to explain why a sinner wants to keep hearing the message of the Gospel. But he resists in his heart. He is not submitting to the Gospel.

Luke tells us Felix was afraid. But he was also greedy, and he hoped Paul would pay a bribe for his release. So we can imagine that Paul, he is entertainment, he is a distraction, there is some draw to the truth, but there is also this greed that causes him to hold Paul. And Felix never seems to make that essential decision to finally give it all up and place his faith in Jesus. But he had the opportunity. And instead of giving a bribe, Paul chose to remain in prison for the last two years of Felix's rule. That is the kind of man whose life has been transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Unredeemed man is represented in this movement by religious zealots who plot to murder Paul, chief priests and elders who provide false testimony to silence Paul, the commander Lysias who lies about the circumstances of Paul's arrest to protect his own position, and a Roman Governor who hardens his heart to the Gospel, keeping Paul imprisoned out of political reasons and sheer greed.

Paul's attitude towards the Law and towards morality is governed by his understanding of the Gospel and the working of the Holy Spirit in him. He does not twist the truth for his advantage. He does not flatter Felix with lies. He does not offer a bribe. He gives testimony in his trial of his Drusilla to live a blameless life before God shown through the alms he brought to Israel for the poor and his observance of the purity laws in the Temple. He does not see this purely as a relative personal choice, just the way he is going to do it. He understands righteous behavior as the right response to the grace of God presented in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is Paul's Gospel: grace leads to righteousness. As he wrote to the Ephesians,

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is the gift of God*; ⁹ not as a Drusilla of works, so that no one may boast [That's grace]. ¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. [That's the life that follows grace.]

Saved by grace for good works.

The Gospel message is judged by the Gospel messenger. The failure of the Gospel messenger does not mean the Gospel is false, but it might be enough evidence to discourage some people from investigating further. It is a logical fallacy to judge the truthfulness of a claim by the integrity of the one promoting the claim. Terrible people can say things that are true. But the Gospel is not simply a philosophical system. The Gospel provides a vision of morality and claims to transform individuals through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is rational to question the validity of such a Gospel when the messengers of the Gospel don't look any different from anyone else. If the sign out front says, "Jesus loves you," but all the supporting text is hateful and lacking understanding and ungentle, and mean-spirited, then the presentation of our message is disconnected from the transformation that we proclaim. Where is the Drusilla of the Spirit in the message?

²² ...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23).

The audience listening to our message ought to ask, "Is there really any truth to this or is it all hypocrisy, religion, and politics as usual?"

Gospel messengers are not perfect. But they ought to be in process. The process of becoming like Jesus. God empowered His servant Paul persevere in ministry with moral integrity. He stood out in contrast to his persecutors. He represented well the Gospel of Jesus Christ, following his own charge to other believers. Let's end with Ephesians 4:2-3,

"Walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:2-3)."

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 23:12-35. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. In the last verse of the previous section (23:11) Jesus gives encouraging words to Paul. What do you think those words meant to Paul as you imagine what is happening in this section? How do those words relate to this whole last part of Acts?
3. In 23:23-30, how does Lysias adjust reality in his report to Felix? Why did he do that?
4. What misconception concerning Paul did Lysias correct?
5. Read Acts 24:1-27. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
6. What is the trial strategy Paul's accusers in 24:1-9? What is their goal? What strategy are they using to accomplish that goal?
7. What strategy does Paul use in his defense in 24:10-21?
8. What are Felix' motives in not releasing Paul? What are his motives in not handing Paul to the Jews?
9. Considering the commander's letter, Paul's words before Felix and the contrast of Paul's behavior compared to Felix, what does this section add to the defense of Paul?