

A lesson from Acts
Acts 24

James 1:1-18
Romans 8: 18-39
Psalms 138

This morning we are going to be getting into chapter 24, continuing this account of Paul during his defense against the false accusations of the Jewish high council who were seeking his death. If you remember from chapter 23, Paul was sent out of Jerusalem to Caesarea under heavy guard since it became apparent that there was a plot against his life. He was brought to Felix, the governor of the region. As I was doing some studying this week, I thought I should look into this Felix character. It would seem that he was not what one would call, a good governor, and a just and fair leader. Apparently he was known for his cruelty, and had a penchant for taking bribes, we get a bit of a feel for that at the end of chapter 24. During his ruling over the region of Judea, there was a significant increase in crime, and corruption, and his reign was marked by internal feuds and disturbances which he would put down swiftly, and cruelly.

According to ancient historians, Felix even had one of the Jewish high Priests murdered, There is an account that Felix had hired assassins to kill Jonathan, the high priest for criticizing his ability to rule and govern over Jewish affairs. Jonathan threatened to go to Caesar and complain, so Felix convinced one of Jonathan's close friends Doras, by the use of a large sum of money, to hire some robbers to kill Jonathan. Doras hired men to mingle with the worshipers at the temple during a festival, using daggers they hid in their cloaks, they successfully murdered Jonathan and were never caught.

So we can see that this Governor Felix was not by any means a just and noble governor. Being one of cruelty, and subjects to bribes. It is interesting in knowing these things in his handling of Paul's case, for Luke does not seem to paint him in this light. I think largely this just goes to show God's sovereignty through all things, even by the use of unjust cruel leaders. By Felix's track record, it would seem all the High Priest Ananias would have needed to do was pay Felix a sizable sum of money, but maybe it was the fact that Paul was a Roman, therefore was afforded certain rights and protections, or out of a fear of backlash from Caesar if word of his injustices, and corruption were reported. What ever the reason, Felix never ruled over this case that was presented before him with Paul.

So before we get to far down this rabbit whole, we should probably read our text this morning, so let us go ahead and read chapter 24, and this account of Paul before Governor Felix. (read 24) Knowing a bit of the history around Felix and his leadership puts a bit of a different light on this passage. We can totally get a sense of the pandering that Ananias and Tertullus toward Felix. And it is interesting that despite his corrupt nature in ruling, that he doesn't instantly just side with the Jews. For in many ways it would have been beneficial for him to do so, gaining favor with them, helps to keep them in order and less likely to rebel and rise up. He could have demanded some bribery to which judging by their hatred of Paul would have had no problem paying if it meant that they could be rid of him. But he doesn't do anything of these things, he takes in a sense the just route, seeing no fault that can be proven in Paul, he does not hand him over to them but rather keeps him in captivity, which serves as a dual purpose, it keeps him out of Jerusalem, but it also protects Paul from their plots and schemes.

Paul was kept for 5 days under guard in Herod's praetorium before the high priest Ananias came down to Caesarea from Jerusalem for the trial, bringing with him Tertullus who was a lawyer advocating for Ananias and his fellow Jewish leaders.

It isn't much different here then it is today, they likely brought in a high profile lawyer to present their case in hopes that through rhetorical argumentation they would prove victorious against Paul. But Paul himself was also no slouch when it came to such debates. In Tertullus presentation of the accusation he begins with the customary flowery words to sort of butter up Felix, but it would seem that there was also a deeper meaning behind it, for example, at this time Felix had recently restored law and order by quelling the rebellion of an Egyptian prophet who rose up against him. This is mentioned in chapter 21, when the people of Jerusalem rioted against Paul and the commander sent troops to rescue him from the crowd, in verse 38 he asks Paul, "Are you not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a rebellion and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?" Tertullus in bringing up such things, as "having enjoyed a long period of peace under your rule" hints at this recent event in hopes to tie Paul as a rebellious individual as well who was rising up to cause dissension among the Jews.

He was hoping that through this appeal that Felix would be expected to maintain the peace by punishing someone who had also disturbed the public order in Jerusalem, but not just there, his argument was also across even the Jews who had been spread abroad, across the entire Jewish nation. Bringing an accusation that Paul had been causing unrest, and civil upheaval all across the provinces of Rome. Such accusations if found guilty bore the punishment of being a capitol crime, imprisonment likely followed by execution. Ananias, and those with him knew that they did not have such authority, though they wanted nothing more than to have Paul killed, through the use of their hired lawyer and rhetorical argumentation they hoped that have Paul convicted of a crime against Rome worthy of death. They were painting not only Paul's ministry, but the rise of Christianity as being a threat against the Roman Empire, and Paul with his ministry, was being likened to a dangerous disease that needed to be stopped before it infected everyone.

Paul's accusers were making themselves out to be good citizens, on the side of Felix and the ruling government, making an argument that they were just bringing the leader of a rebellious sect to justice. There were many different sects, or groups of Judaism at the time, we already know of two, the Pharisees and the Sadducee. Both Jewish in their lineage and belief, but differing on points of belief. So here Tertullus calls Paul the ringleader of this new Jewish sect of the Nazarenes, and implies that this new group is dangerous to the interests of Rome. The main thrust of their argument to show the rebellious nature of this new group is the accusation that Paul tried to desecrate the temple. Again painting Paul and this new group of Christians as rebellious trouble makers that needed to be removed. Even from a Roman point of view, this accusation would carry with it serious political implications, for the last thing they would want would be a unified Israel to uprising, so in order to keep the peace such religious matters became important political matters. Just as it was with Jesus himself, Pilate found no fault in Jesus, but in order to appease the mob had him put to death anyway. What is the death of one man in the interest of peace among thousands?

So as you can see, though the accusations are built upon false premises, and outright lies, they set forth a strong argument against Paul. Making him out to be an unruly character, who disrespects their law, how would he not also eventually disrespect the laws and the rule of the Roman's. Felix had just crushed one rebel, and would likely not want to deal with a second. But, as is the practice in Roman law, Paul is now given an opportunity to defend himself against these accusations. When Paul addresses Felix, he also does so with respect and with a brief moment of flattery as one would to not offend a person of Felix's authority. Paul expresses that he is glad to have the opportunity to defend himself before Felix, saying that "for a number of years he had been a judge over the nation of Israel"

Though the normal period for one to hold this office that Felix did is 2 years, and we see that Felix held Paul in prison for 2 years, it is likely that this was the beginning of his time as Governor over the region. But it is believed that he also served as a junior colleague of Cumanus, the previous Governor for years before. Paul here is acknowledging him as a judge who is experienced in the matters relating to Jewish people and their disputes. Paul begins his defense by using certain aspects of Tertullus' words to build his own case. He was being accused of desecrating the temple and addresses this accusation directly, saying it has been no more than 12 days since I went up to Jerusalem to worship and they neither found me in the temple disputing with anyone nor inciting the crowd, either in the synagogues or the city. Paul here is arguing of his piety as a Jew, he as a Jew would not desecrate the temple, but rather went to Jerusalem to worship, and bring alms to those in need from the others he had visited.

His second line of defense was to bring into question the reliability of his accusers reports, since they did not find him causing the issues that they are accusing him of, nor do they have proof, to which he follows up with a confession of his particular beliefs, verse 14, "but I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all the things which are written in the law and in the prophets. I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust." Paul's confession of this hope that he has in God, is to counter this argument that he, along with others of The Way is to show that he is not a destroyer of Judaism, but rather to serve God, His attitude, and behavior show that he is one whose life is shaped by the belief and worship of God, and that his belief is tied to the reality of the same scriptures as his accusers, "from the law and the prophets" And he states, just as he wrote in Roman's " This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men."

Paul is not standing before Felix guilty of these accusations, but has himself a clear conscience of having done no wrong before God, painting these accusations as a sort of civil war within the ranks of Judaism. That Christianity and those who follow The Way as it was called, are indeed a branch of Judaism, one in which the other sects, or branches is seeking to cut off, and destroy. Being that it is largely a religious, or spiritual debate and split, it really has very little to do with Rome, let alone be a threat to Rome. Although Paul is addressing the Governor with these words in his defense, he is also clearly challenging his Jewish accusers to recognize the genuineness of his own relationship with God. Paul throughout his ministry was one of unity, it was one of bringing Jews and Gentiles together in Christ. Throughout his writings he argues that those who are in Christ are equals, have the same God, with the same access, and the same blessings. This is likely one of the major reasons why these other prominent Jewish sects had such a hatred for Christianity, for they saw those outside of the nation of Israel to be nothing more than dogs, brute beasts worthy of God's judgment. Forgetting themselves their own scriptures where God says that he will call a people, who are not his people, and that he will make a nation for himself from all peoples.

Again points to the fact that the issues and accusations here are not one of legal bounds, but rather within the realms of theology, and is nothing more than one sect of a religious group seeking to persecute another. Paul ends his defense statements by saying that the only thing that he may stand accused of, is one statement he had made which was concerning the resurrection of the dead. Bringing about the differences between the 2 other sects who were bringing these accusations against Paul, showing that even they don't agree on all things. And in fact debate these things among themselves often. So being clear that this is first and foremost no threat to Rome itself, within this group of Christians, both Jews and gentiles, there is not the seeds of rebellion against Rome, but rather in many ways Roman rule has afforded Christianity the necessary stability and environment to grow. 3

After Paul had made his statement, in verse 22 it says that Felix, who was well acquainted with The Way, adjourned the proceedings and said that when Lysias the commander came down he would then make his decision. Felix had no intention of being drawn into an internal Jewish dispute, or of doing any injustice to a man whose only offense lay in what other Jews regarded as unorthodox theology.

There is no real indication as to how Felix was well acquainted with the beliefs of those who followed Christ, but it suggests that Christianity was making significant progress through the eastern part of the Roman Empire, so that its beliefs and practices would likely be known, and partly understood by those in high places. Felix's adjournment of the case is partly explained because of his knowledge of these Christ followers, and partly because he wants to hear the account from a 3rd party, who would be Lysias, the commander.

There is no mention in the text if Lysias ever came down, and it is apparent that Felix never made a decision in this case, seemingly keeping Paul imprisoned indefinitely. He ordered Paul to be held under guard, but he was yet allowed freedoms, and was allowed to be visited by his friends and family. It is largely believed that it is at this time that Paul wrote his letters to the churches that we now have in our bibles today. When studying through the book of acts over this past year or so, one of the biggest challenges has been to pull out some sort of application in this largely historical book. Unlike many of the other books, especially like those of Paul's writings which are steeped in theological concepts and lessons, this book is a series of accounts and stories of events spanning the early years of Christianity after the ascension of Christ. As we have noted many many times going through this book, one of the biggest things that sticks out is God's sovereignty, not only in the spreading of the gospel across the nations, but in the lives of individuals as well. One of the biggest things that stands out and is sort of a golden cord that weaves each chapter, each event, encounter, and person together in this historical book, is God working through the lives of people to accomplish his will.

Early on in the book we saw how persecution arose against those who followed Christ in Jerusalem and there was a mass exodus of believing Jews, fleeing into every corner of the known world bringing with them the gospel. Even so that when Paul is traveling, often times he encounters small pockets of these believing Jews. We saw God use various other means to direct Paul in his ministry, hindering him from coming or going in and out of various cities, again using the persecution of Paul in every city he entered to drive him forward to the next. And now we find Paul under house arrest, afforded some luxury not generally given prisoners and in many ways one would look at this as a horrible thing, a hindrance to the ministry that Paul had no longer being able to journey and witness, and set up churches across the world. But of course God had other plans right, A very large portion of the new testament, and the doctrines and theological instruction that we have today was made possible by this event. In a way that only God could work out, an imprisoned Paul, limited in his reach and ability, has reached out through generations to instruct, and be a gospel witness to the hearts of men and women today!

IF it wasn't for this imprisonment, we may not have these letters for I imagine nothing would have stopped Paul from continuing his journeys, reaching more people, establishing more churches, going further out into untouched regions, but God had other plans, in his sovereign wisdom he put Paul in exactly the situation needed for him to write these letters so that we may have them today. This stands as an example to us, that even the plots and schemes of man, meant for evil, God intends for good. Is there any greater hope in this life then that? The fact that we have this sovereign father who is so in control that even the plots of our enemies who seek to destroy us, God ultimately intends it for some good purpose. Look at the persecution of the Christians, Paul before his encounter with Jesus on the road to Emaus was hunting down, and killing christians, with the authority of the Sanhedrin. 4

Yet God used this awful time of persecution and suffering to spread his gospel message and caused it to grow exponentially, and then subsequently Jesus appeared to Paul, and made this zealous Jew, a mighty warrior for the gospel, who had a life of suffering and hardships, but it gave him the wisdom and faith to write about peace and hope through faith in the one and only Jesus Christ.

So what can we take away from all of this? Well, I think there are a couple things, many of which we have already touched on going through this book, but first and foremost is God is bigger than all of our problems we may personally be suffering, God is bigger than all of the problems we see all across the world, and he has his hand in all of it, for the glory of his purpose, so much so that even what we perceive as bad and awful, he intends for good. If even just for the fact that the light of the gospel shines brighter in a darker world. This also means that the tragedies that we experience in our own lives ultimately serve his purpose, we may not know why, but we can rest in knowing that nothing happens outside of his will, and he does so ultimately for the good of his people. Yes, that means loss of a loved one, divorce, sickness, and various other trials and tribulations we may face in our life are hard and difficult things, and sometimes even evil things, that God uses for his purpose. None of us here this morning are where we thought we would be, and in many ways some hardships or tragedy has brought us all here. For quite a few of you, none of you thought you would be here in this little town, in this little run down building, gathered together this morning.

Think of how God has orchestrated even hardships and trials to bring you here, and it may not even be evident as to why God has brought you here, has closed other doors leaving this one as the only real opportunity, but it is because he has a purpose and plan in it. And likewise for those who will be shortly moving away out of state, who has had to suffer through some difficult things but now has an opportunity opened that would have not been possible without those trials. God is sovereignly weaving each of us together, our lives, our experiences, guiding, and leading us through this life. Casey likens it to being our story, God has written our story, and we are now living through it. We don't know what the next chapter, or even page may hold, but we can rest in knowing that it is God who has written it, and no matter what befalls us it ultimately is for his glory and for his gain. And how can we, who have been giving the greatest gift through the death and resurrection of Jesus want anything else then to give all the glory to the one who has given us such a gift.

James wrote, Count it all joy when you face various trials, and I think that this is why, for it is God working his purpose even through hardship and suffering. Often times it is through such times that we learn to lean and trust him more, and maybe sometimes that is the whole point right? To be come closer to him, to rely more upon him, to rest in him all the more, growing in trust, and faith, knowing and believing that our sovereign Father wants to shower us with blessings, yet sometimes hardships are required to receive them. To be given an opportunity to bless one another through love and support for the one who maybe suffering.

And this is our calling, to love the Lord God, and to love our neighbors, and our brothers and sisters as ourselves. To lift up and support one another, to pray for one another, to fellowship together and bear one another's burdens, for in doing so we are fulfilling God's will, and his purpose, and we can rest that no matter the situation we may be found in, we have this God who is working through it for his purpose and plan, and we can rest in that reality,