



WHEN JUSTICE IS DELAYED...ENDLESSLY

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 24:1–27

47th Message

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This week we are in the concluding chapters of Acts where Paul the has become Paul the *apologist*, defending his teaching (i.e., what Paul teaches is not apostasy from Judaism, but rather its fulfillment), and the integrity of his character (i.e., he is not a revolutionary, but a law-abiding Roman citizen) against his implacable enemies through five trials. Luke's primary purpose is to authenticate Paul as a primary witness of the resurrection, but on a secondary level, Paul gives us a stellar example of how we ought to relate to governing authorities and how God's kingdom advances in the midst of the corrupt kingdoms of men.

For the past weeks we have seen Paul miraculously escape death three times, thanks to the levelheaded and justice minded Roman Tribune, Claudius Lysias. Twice the commander dispatched troops to rescue Paul from a lynch mob in the Temple and once to extricate him from of a violent tug-of-war between warring factions in the Sanhedrin. But the enemy doesn't go down so easily. After their failure to kill Paul in the temple, a group of assassins strengthened their resolve and conspired with the high priest and the leading members of the council to lure Paul out of the protective custody of the Fortress Antonia in order to ambush and kill him. But Paul's nephew was at the right place and time to overhear the plot to kill his uncle. The boy immediately went to the fortress and revealed the plan to his uncle. Paul then called one of the centurions to take him to the tribune, who listened attentively and considered the testimony credible. With surprising speed and resolve, the tribune dispatched nearly 500 troops (almost half his garrison) to escort Paul under the cover of night from Jerusalem to Herod's coastal palace in Caesarea.

The tribune also sent an official letter to the governor Felix absolving Paul of any crime deserving punishment. Upon learning Paul came from the Roman province of Cilicia, Felix determined he had the authority to hear Paul's case. So he kept Paul safely guarded in Herod the Great's retreat while they waited for his accusers to arrive. Having been officially declared innocent by the tribune and escorted safely to Caesarea by half a Roman garrison, Paul must have slept well that night. For the wheels of justice were finally turning in his favor and God's promise that he would testify in Rome seemed close at hand.

But as many of you may have experienced, God's call to us on the mountaintop is often followed by deep descents into the valley of the shadow. The experience can be unnerving and often takes the uninitiated by surprise. If it drags on and on, even the most mature can begin to doubt their calling. How many of you can identify with David's cry in Psalm 13?

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I take counsel in my soul

and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Ps 13:1–2 ESV)

But as the writer of Hebrews explains, God's promises are inherited by faith *and* patience (Heb 6:12). A huge dose of patience is what Paul will need, for the political situation in Caesarea is far different than Jerusalem. In sharp contrast to Lysias, who did everything by the book, the governor Felix has no inclination toward justice nor serving the public interest. Richard Longenecker describes his dark rise to power.

Antonius Felix was born a slave and freed by Antonia, the mother of the emperor Claudius. He was a brother of Pallas, who was also a freedman of Antonia and became a good friend of the young prince Claudius in the imperial household. Through the influence of Pallas, in A.D. 48 Felix was appointed to a subordinate government post in Samaria under the provincial governor Ventidius Cumanus. In A.D. 52 Claudius appointed him governor of Judea when Cumanus was deposed. During his governorship, insurrections and anarchy increased throughout Palestine. Try as he would to put down the uprisings and regain control, his brutal methods only alienated the Jewish population more and led to further disturbances. Tacitus described him as “a master of cruelty and lust who exercised the powers of a king with the spirit of a slave.”¹

It is before this judge that Paul must make his defense.

I. The Prosecution Speaks: Flattery and Lies (24:1–9)

A. Effusive flattery

1 And after five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and a spokesman, one Tertullus. They laid before the governor their case against Paul. 2 And when he had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying: “Since through you we enjoy much peace, and since by your foresight, most excellent Felix, reforms are being made for this nation, 3 in every way and everywhere we accept this [most excellent Felix] with all gratitude. 4 But, to detain you no further, I beg you in your kindness to hear us briefly. (24:1–4)

Heading up the prosecution is Ananias, the high priest, who had Paul struck without cause. When Paul publicly reprovved him and then took control of the debate, the high priest was further humiliated. Fueled by rage, Paul's accusers waste no time hiring a skilled orator (“*rhētor*” – “a skilled orator” used as a legal advocate) to spin the facts and prepare a case in five days time. On the other side of the bench sits the apostle with no counsel or friends to support him.

Wanting to make a good impression on the judge, the *rhētor* appeals to Felix's vanity with effusive flattery that both he and governor know are bold-faced lies. Judaea was anything but at peace, his foresight was non-existent, and there were no reforms or improvements to his credit, so it is doubtful *anyone* in Judaea felt an ounce of “gratitude” for their governor. Perhaps sensing the governor

is growing impatient, the *rhetor* changes his tune and promises to brief.

B. Three false accusations

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. (24:5–9)

Craig Keener describes Tertullus as “a cunning orator, fitting the worst stereotypes of seductive sophists...[he] not only dismisses Paul with the derisive ‘this man’ (instead of naming him) but lambasts him as a dangerous plague.”² When logic fails, throw mud. Tertullus’s charges are designed to create the impression that Paul, as the ringleader of the Nazarenes, is a dangerous threat to Roman law and deserving of the death penalty for attempting to desecrate the temple. The western text of verses 6 and 7 adds, “and we would have judged him according to our law. But the chief captain Lysias came and with great violence took him out of our hands, commanding his accusers to come before you.” This gives the impression “Paul was being arrested in an orderly manner when Lysias’ troops violently forced the Temple police to hand him over to them.”³ Knowing that “Felix had repeatedly crucified the leaders of various uprisings and had killed many of their followers for disturbing the Pax Romana,”⁴ Tertullus hopes Felix, being ignorant of the facts, will be easily swayed by his testimony, especially with the backing of the chief priest and elders. As N. T. Wright observes, “Truth is a casualty in war, and a law court can be, and was in this case, the continuation of war by other means.”⁵

II. A Defense of the Hope (24:10–21)

A. Paul refutes the charges

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. (24:10–13)

When Paul is asked to respond, he also begins with a word of praise, but unlike his opponent, he is appropriately brief and truthful. The only nice thing one could say about Felix’s reign is that it had been a long one (over a decade). To this he adds that, rather than being intimidated by his accusers, he is “encouraged”⁶ to once again have the opportunity to make his defense to the court.

In refuting the charges, Paul counters Tertullus’ melodramatic oratory with a simple summary of facts. First, as to a being a troublemaker who incites crowds to riot, Paul had been away from Jerusalem for six years. Having arrived only twelve days earlier, he certainly did not have enough time to organize and stage a revolt. Second, when his accusers pounced upon him in the temple, he was alone worshipping God according to the ancient traditions. Third, his accusers have no witnesses or evidence to prove any of their accusations.

B. The “Way” is the orthodox way

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. (24:14–16)

Just as in his previous defense, Paul asserts that what his accusers call a “sect” is actually the fulfillment of everything Israel’s forefathers were promised, what the Psalms prayed for, and the prophets dreamed about—that “there will be a resurrection of both the just and unjust.” One day Abraham’s God will be the judge of the whole earth overturning corruption, injustice decay and death itself. As Wright argues,

The resurrection is not only at the heart of the Christian faith. It is also the driving force behind a Christian understanding of what magistrates, at every level, are there for...And this explains, too, why Paul...always does his best to live with a clear conscience. There will come a day when everything is put right, so you need to live without shadows on the conscience now, in the present.⁷

Paul’s bold statement is directly aimed at his accusers who are “hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron” (1 Tim 4:2). Paul bravely pushes the envelope even further when he says, it is even the hope “which these men accept,” when in fact, the high priest and the Sadducees do not. “But by this time it was part of Jewish orthodoxy,”⁸ and thus, if the high priest and his cronies choose to make a public disavowal of the position, they will demonstrate that they have forsaken the faith of their forefathers and are in fact the “sectarian” minority—an utterly brilliant move on the part of the apostle!

C. The real cause for the Jews violent reactions

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.’” (24:17–21)

Paul closes his refutation by explaining the real reason for his return to Jerusalem. It was not to start a revolt, but to bring gifts; to benefit the city with relief, not to cause trouble; to sanctify the temple through worship, not to desecrate it. In fact, he categorically declares, “At the moment I was apprehended, I was ceremonially clean and pure.” How embarrassing it would be to discover that the one you have beaten and bound is the one who taught the Gentiles that they had a divine obligation to bless the suffering Jews in Judaea with financial gifts in appreciation for the privilege of being equal heirs of the promises to Abraham. It would be like beating up the paramedic who revived after you almost died in a car accident.

Just as Paul is about to elaborate on those who are responsible for the riot, he stops mid-sentence, as if to say, “Where are they?!” Keener explains this was a typical way to effect intense emotion. “In this way he insinuates his accusers’ guilt. They have illegally abandoned

the case—which should require its dismissal—most likely because they have good reason to fear appearing in court themselves.”⁹ But though they aren’t here, we do have eye witnesses who can confirm the reason for the violent reaction after Paul spoke to the Sanhedrin had nothing to do with Roman laws, but everything to do with the hope of the resurrection. By demonstrating that the grounds of their accusations were not political but theological, Paul has exposed the deception underlying the *rhetor’s* arguments. With all the legal evidence in his favor, Paul clearly has the upper hand. Tom Wright gives Paul’s speech 5 stars:

The speech is stunning, rhetorically, historically, theologically, politically, personally. It ranks with anything Paul himself wrote in his letters... It gives, not just a series of glittering themes, but a full picture of the man. It stands as a testimony, an example, a promise.¹⁰

III. The Witness Convicts the Judge (24:22–27)

A. Felix postpones his ruling

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. (24:22–23)

After serving eight years as Procurator of Judea, Felix has an “accurate knowledge of the Way,” and he knows it poses no political threat to peace in the province. The right thing to do would be to dismiss the case, but that would not go down well with the Jewish authorities under his control. On the other hand, it would not be in his best interest to pronounce guilt upon on a Roman citizen who was officially exonerated by the Tribune.

So not to offend either party, Felix “postpones” (*ἀναβάλλω* = “adjourn”¹¹) his ruling under the guise that he needs more evidence. Since “Lysias is the only independent witness of significant rank,”¹² he will wait for his arrival before deciding the case. Paul is placed under protective custody in Herod’s spacious palace, which is located about 400 yards from the inner harbor and adjacent to the theater. As a Roman citizen Paul was given the freedom of visitation so that his friends could attend to his needs. Apart from very meager rations that might keep a person from starving, Roman prisoners were responsible for securing their own needs, which relieved the system of the need to sustain prisoners. Knowing this fact gives Paul’s appeals for brothers and sisters to visit him in prison greater significance.

B. Felix puts his salvation “on hold”

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. (24:24–26)

With an eminent Christian in his custody, Felix took the opportunity to increase his knowledge of the Way. The Western text adds that it was his Jewish wife who was particularly interested in the opportunity to meet Paul. Drusilla was Felix’s third wife, all of whom were princesses. She was the youngest daughter of Herod

Agrippa, who put the apostle James to death (Acts 12:1). She was six when her father died and fourteen when Felix took office. At fifteen her brother, Agrippa II, married her to Azizus, the king of Emesa, a small kingdom in Syria. But Drusilla not happy with the arrangement, and when she was nineteen Felix seduced her and took her as his wife.

Longenecker writes, [She was] as captivated by Felix’s ruthlessness and power as he was with her beauty... Neither his birth as a slave, his Roman paganism, nor her Jewish scruples deterred her from what she considered a higher station in life. The relationship between Felix and his young wife seems to have been based upon greed, lust, and expectations of grandeur. Yet they apparently still had some qualms of conscience and therefore took the opportunity to send for Paul and hear his message.¹³

If this couple expected to be entertained with intriguing theological niceties, they were in for a surprise. Engaging in a face-to-face encounter with the apostle can be unnerving to put it mildly. Paul remained true to his character, offering the hope of the gospel to everyone he met. But there is no hope without repentance, and no repentance without conviction of sin, something which this couple had denied and buried since childhood. Beyond the conviction of sin is the deeper revelation that we are slaves to sin and without God, our lives are a twisted wreckage of corruption. It is then that the beauty and light of the gospel breaks in upon us to let us see the glory of Jesus the Messiah, who was condemned for us and saves us from the judgment to come. And now raised from the dead, he reigns as the world’s Savior and Lord and pours out into our hearts the Holy Spirit that writes the law in our hearts, giving us self-control to live a holy and pure life.

Paul seems to have exercised a kind of fearful fascination upon Felix. The light of Paul’s eyes and his extraordinary presence attracted him, yet his words were terrifying. Like Adam, hearing the Lord’s inescapable voice searching for him in the garden, for the first time in Felix’s life, he is conscious that he is naked and consumed with shame. Felix grabs the last vestige of his authority and orders the apostle to leave. But to Paul’s surprise, he is soon summoned back to converse with the governor. Drusilla isn’t mentioned, which suggests she was deeply offended at having her modern ways judged by this overzealous moralist. But Felix came back again and again and again. While Paul certainly made good use of these opportunities, Felix had other things on his mind. F. F. Bruce comments,

In spite of stern and reiterated edicts prohibiting bribery, the wheels of Roman law in those days ran more smoothly and rapidly if they were judiciously greased; and provincial governors were deplorably venal.¹⁴

From Paul’s testimony about collecting money around the empire, Felix had the impression that he had access to significant wealth and thus hoped for a bribe. It’s been my experience in sharing the gospel, that it is not difficult to discern whether or not an individual is genuinely interested. I suspect Paul saw right through Felix and knew he was motivated by greed. On and on it went, Felix arriving with his hand out and leaving empty handed. Felix would not quit, and Paul would not compromise. We wonder how long can this cat and mouse game continue before one of them capitulates?

C. Felix puts justice “on hold”

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. (24:27)

The tug-of-war lasted two years and ended in a stalemate. Felix was recalled to Rome to face the music for his brutality in handling the outbreak of hostilities between the Jews and Greeks at Caesarea. Instead of doing the right thing and setting Paul free, he abdicated his responsibility and left Paul in prison for his successor to deal with. Paul never ever compromised. Tom Wright reflects how difficult this must have been for Paul.

The two years in custody must have been pure torture for Paul. Like an eagle with its wings clipped, he could see the wider world out there, the sea coast and the harbor, where he had put in more than once, were just a few minutes' walk from where he was confined, but he couldn't reach them. What happened to his own sense of vocation of going Rome? He had sent a letter to the church there, telling them he was on his way after a brief visit to Jerusalem...and now this.¹⁵

What do the godly do when justice is delayed and put on hold... endlessly?

IV. Reflections: When Justice is Delayed...Endlessly

A. The soul learns to lament

Paul knows he has been called to preach the gospel in Rome. His eventual arrival there is not a question, but a fact. But like all events, it must occur according to God's timing, not Paul's. Waiting and desperation force us to surrender and heighten our awareness of our need for God. In prison, Paul doubtlessly prayed the psalms, but when no answer seems forthcoming, the psalms of lament gain a whole new level of significance and become intensely personal. For example, is not difficult to see how David's lament in Psalm 142 gave shape to Jesus' voice in his sorrow, and now becomes Paul's voice:

**Look to the right and see:
there is none who takes notice of me;
no refuge remains to me;
no one cares for my soul. (Ps 142:4)**

Tom Wright further suggests that, as we pray the psalms personally and angrily, it allows us to enter in to "the place where much of the human race is for much of the time, facing a puzzling, grey world, with only occasional little flashes of a divine possibility, and can bring that unspoken sorrow, that dull ache, into speech, into prayer, into the presence of God. Perhaps that is how Jesus is straightening the world out."¹⁶

B. God is at work without you

Just because Paul was in prison, didn't mean that God had stopped working. In his letter to the Philippians he wrote concerning another imprisonment,

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel...And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. (Phil 1:12–14)

Many have also suggested that Paul's anonymous friend and traveling companion made good use of his forced "vacation," gathering research and interviews in Palestine to lay the groundwork for the first volume of his two-part work, which we know as Luke-Acts.

C. God is at work within you

God can redeem any circumstances and give us opportunities, even when we are forced off the main stage. When imprisoned later in Rome, Paul used his time to evangelize the Roman guards who supervised him and minister to the church—and us—through his epistles. I'm reminded of Martin Luther who, after refusing to recant his writings at the Diet of Worms, was kidnapped and forced into seclusion for ten months at the Wartburg castle. Luther called the Wartburg his Patmos, the island where the apostle John was exiled and wrote the book of Revelation. Similarly, Luther poured his energies into translating the Greek New Testament into German, releasing it from its Latin prison.

Looking back on this entire story, we see God as the master storyteller using a "drawn-out legal process, with all its false starts and delays" to slowly unfold "Paul's true identity and integrity."¹⁷ Inspired by the Spirit, Luke unfurls the plot gradually, hooking us with cliffhangers. In the best literary tradition, he doesn't tell—he shows. All the events he shows are instructive, revealing again and again Paul's unimpeachable character and gradually building his witness. Had Paul not had humility and upheld God's values while imprisoned, if he had bought his freedom by bribing Felix, how hollow the rest of the story would ring, and how diminished would be his character and witness! Instead, his loss and suffering is our gain, our hope, fulfilling the psalmist's prayer:

**Turn away from evil and do good;
so shall you dwell forever.
For the LORD loves justice;
he will not forsake his saints.
They are preserved forever,
but the children of the wicked shall be cut off.
Psalm 37:27–28**

1. Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts, EBC 9*; ed. Frank E. Gaebelien and J. D. Douglas; *Accordance electronic ed.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), paragraph 52367.

2. Craig S. Keener, *Acts, An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 4:3373.

3. https://accordance.bible/link/read/FFB-Acts_Commentary#1174

4. Longenecker, *Acts*, 52370.

5. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part Two, Chapters 13–28* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 180.

6. "Cheerfully" – (εὐθύμως) "pertaining to being encouraged," L&N.

7. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 189.

8. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts, NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 469.

9. Keener, *Acts*, 4:3413.

10. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 189, 90,

11. "Put off" (ἀναβάλλω) is a legal term meaning "to adjourn a court proceeding until a later time," L&N.

12. Keener, *Acts*, 4:3424.

13. Longenecker, *Acts*, 52379.

14. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 473.

15. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 194.

16. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 194.

17. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP5 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 415.