

Acts 24:1-27: To Rome; “Ends” Continues I: Roman Trial in Caesarea

Paul the Problem:

Friends!

We're moving on in Paul's story. He was arrested; we talked about it a little. What we didn't really discuss is what happens after. He's taken to the Sanhedrin, the high Jewish court, starts a sectarian fight, has his life threatened, hears from Jesus, who tells him, ““Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.”

Forty guys vow to kill him; the High Priest and elders tell them to give it a shot, we hear about his family a little, and he's prepared to be transported by an enormous Roman military contingent.

That's, like, a day and a half for Paul. It's nuts.

Then he's transported by dozens of cavalry and soldiers to Caesarea, down to the coast, but far northwest of Jerusalem.

On Caesarea:

Caesarea is not a weird contagious disease, of course, but a city built by Herod the Great, and it's the place where his son, who we call King Herod, died back in Acts 12 because he didn't give praise to God when he was honored. Caesarea was Judea Province's capital, so that's where they take Paul the Roman Citizen to see the Roman Governor of Judea, Felix, and have Felix decide what to do about Paul the problem.

On Felix:

We know as a historical fact that Felix was governor of Judean Province for eight years, from 52 to 60 AD. We have all sorts of archaeological and historical witnesses to this. His wife, Drusilla, who was his second wife and Jewish, was killed in Pompeii when Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD. Today's scene begins in in 58 AD; it ends in 60, at Felix's retirement. You can put a dot in history's timeline, and say: "Here is the time when Paul was led by guard to Felix's Court." Just a decade after the end of today's passage, Jerusalem will be sieged and turned into rubble, the Temple torn down, the Jerusalem Church scattered. Today's stuff happens in time; not in some unimaginable, pre-historical place, but...1,961 years ago. Bloop! There, in Caesarea.

For our purposes, we're in the last part of Acts, the beginnings of the end. Paul has Rome in his sights, and God is beginning to move Paul away from Jerusalem, West to Rome. Much of today's passage summarizes what we skipped past last week, but there is a point I want to bring to the fore about what we expect from, and give to, others.

Let's pray.

Prayer:

Arriving:

So Paul's arrived in Caesarea. Felix waits on his accusers to arrive before he hears the case. It takes five days.

Five days later the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus, and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor. 2 When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented his case before Felix: "We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight

has brought about reforms in this nation. 3 Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude. 4 But in order not to weary you further, I would request that you be kind enough to hear us briefly.

It's always good to butter up the Proconsul, right? Tertullus knows this. So he reveals the charges they have against Paul. He says:

5 "We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect 6 and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him.

And in some manuscripts Tertullus pokes the Military Leader in Jerusalem a bit, here, in others he doesn't. Our best, oldest manuscripts leave out that little jab.

He continues, and everyone else agrees with him. These are valuable, valued witnesses, here:

][7] [a] 8 By examining him yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges

we are bringing against him.” 9 The other Jews joined in the accusation, asserting that these things were true.

But we see Tertullus paint Paul as an enemy of peace, a rabble-rouser, and a leader of what he calls “the Nazarene Sect.” And look, as far as Rome goes, sectarian-driven politics have been a thorn in their side. They’ve continually had to put down Jewish revolt movements that start with sectarian thinking. In twelve years the problem will become so bad that they’ll wipe out Jerusalem. So in all of this, Paul’s presented as an enemy of the state, not as an enemy of God. Tertullus knows his audience, and he’s playing to Felix’s very Roman sensibilities. But Paul is a Roman Citizen, born into his rights; Paul has rights that others in the room don’t have.

Paul, With A Clean Conscience:

And so it’s Paul’s turn to speak. And notice as he does the way he also leans on etiquette and rhetoric, the way he speaks about his belief, and his claim of integrity:

“I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make

my defense. 11 You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. 12 My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. 13 And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me. 14 However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, 15 and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. 16 So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.

Paul presents himself as he is and has he has been. He has nothing to prove, because he's done nothing wrong. So he explains himself:

Paul, Explaining:

17 "After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor

and to present offerings. 18 I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance. 19 But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me. 20 Or these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin— 21 unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence: ‘It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.’”

Paul admits only that he did, *maybe*, inaugurate a big fight in the middle of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Court. We read that passage, saw that scene, but didn't discuss it. This is all Paul will admit: That he shouted something he maybe knew would cause a scene. But even those in the room with him, who seem to be Pharisees, wouldn't have disagreed with this statement, because it was the Sadducees who didn't have resurrection in their theology. Honestly, Paul doesn't give much ground here. And Felix responds:

Felix Responds:

22 Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings. “When Lysias the commander comes,” he said, “I will decide your case.”
23 He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs.

Paul is under a kind of house arrest. He’s got freedoms, but limited ones. It’s parole before ankle bracelets. That said, he’s staying in Herod’s palace, so there are privileges that come with this privilege. And Felix knows Paul isn’t broke, isn’t without resources and connections and power. We read this:

24 Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. 25 As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, “That’s enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.” 26 At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him.

Two Years: Bribe

What I love about this passage is that it paints Felix in a fairly realistic light. He is a Roman Official with enormous power, overseeing something like a trial of another Roman Citizen, Paul, who himself has a good name and something to offer Felix.

But what Paul is offering Felix isn't what Felix wants. What Paul is offering isn't what Felix wants.

Felix wants a bribe: probably cash, maybe just a the promise of a favor, which Felix could call on Paul to repay in the future. The Roman Empire ran on favors like this, on networks of mutually-indebted people, on a mafia-like reality of obligations and debts, protectionistic-exchanges of honor and esteem and wealth. It was rare to be someone's friend, because "friend" was a technical term, a word that meant you and the individual could give and take from each other without keeping track of who owed who what. Felix wants a bribe from Paul; Paul wants to give him something else.

Felix knows about The Way. And the fact that Luke uses that term here shows that he doesn't buy the "Nazarene Sect" language Paul's antagonists were throwing at him. Felix knows what's going on in Judea;

maybe that's why leaves soon after this, because he sees how bad things are going.

Two Years: Theology, Ethics, Future

Instead of obligating himself to Felix, giving him a bribe or a favor, Paul gives Felix Bible Studies. Or he gives him theology. Or he gives him a story. Or he gives him...you get the idea. He gives him stuff about God. He gives him theology, ethics, and the future.

For two years Paul lives in Herod's Palace, while Felix and Drusilla visit him frequently, we're told. The first time they visit, Paul talks about the faithfulness of Jesus. He tells Felix about what God has done through Jesus the Messiah. During that conversation Paul scares Felix. Paul talks about "righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come." He talks theology, ethics, and the future. Luke specifically tells us that Felix is scared by what Paul says, and so dismisses him.

But again and again Felix and Drusilla will come back to Paul, and they'll hear about these things--theology, ethics, and the future. The reality is that Felix had to have known very early on that Paul was not going to be bribed...but he still keeps coming back.

Felix is no here, though. Whatever he finds valuable in these visits with Paul, they aren't more valuable than him keeping his own obligations to the Jewish People. He's leaving Judean Province, and decides one of his parting gifts will be to keep Paul imprisoned.

27 When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison.

In about seven years from this moment Jerusalem will revolt, in AD 66. They fight against the Roman Empire for four years, before Rome, in 70 AD, comes in and razes the Temple and the city. Porcius Festus won't oversee this; a few more proconsuls come and go before then. We'll see how Paul and his antagonists respond to Festus over the next couple of weeks.

Mining:

If we're mining these passages for more than historical time-lines and cause-and-effect, there are things we should notice. And I'm not against mining them for things, you know? Scripture is useful for all sorts of

reasons.

Let's focus on this, today. Just one point:

Getting What You Don't Want:

How often do you not get what you want from other people? Felix doesn't get what he wants today. He wants a bribe; Paul gives him theology, ethics, and notes on the future. Theology, ethics, and warning about the future, we could say. Felix wants one thing; Paul gives him another. And I'm going beyond the text, here, but I can't help believe that after, say, the first 12 months Felix had to have known the bribe wasn't coming. But he and his wife continue to pursue Paul. Felix is no hero, no role model; he leaves Paul under fancy-house arrest instead of releasing him, caving to some desire to appease the Jewish leaders who have set themselves up as Paul's enemies. Felix isn't a hero; but he does keep listening to Paul, which is something.

And if we are going to people wanting things from them, let's examine our own motives. What do we want out of the people we go to? What do we want from the posts we make online, from the church we gather with, the playdates or meetings or meals we schedule? What are we wanting from people? How do

we respond when we don't get what we want? Felix at least knew what motivated him; we barely know that. And while we have no insight into why Felix and Drusilla kept going to Paul when he wasn't giving them what they wanted, we could ask ourselves what we do when we don't get what we want from people?

So what motivates us to go to other people? The answer will be different in all our relationships, both with people and groups of people, but we ought to know what motivates us? If it's some need we're wanting to be met, what is it? And what do we do when we don't get what we want?

Giving What's Not Wanted:

Maybe it's better to flip the question: How often have we given what people don't want, because what they want is no good for them? Or what they want is bad and wrong, sinful or destructive to us? Under what circumstances do we give people what they don't want? Under what circumstances do we give people what they don't want? Because...Paul gives Felix what he needs, here. He needs theology, ethics, and a warning. And Felix at least grows used to getting them, even if what he wants all along is a bribe. Who are we giving theology, ethics, and warnings to?

People will always come to us wanting things, just as we always go to others wanting something. But can we offer Jesus, theology, ethics, and a warning to people? And if not, why? If we could offer this up to people, and have them linger the way Felix does, it wouldn't be wasted effort.

Conclusion:

So these two things, I think, linger: Felix wanting something, Paul not giving it; Paul giving something-- Jesus, theology, ethics, a warning--and Felix still taking it, even though it's not what he wants. What motivates us to go to others? What do we want from them? And what motivates us to withhold what others want? What can we offer them instead.

Again: What motivates us to go to others? What do we want from them? And what motivates us to withhold what others want? What can we offer them instead.