
*This character study / commentary into Apostle Paul is based mostly on Charles Swindoll's "Great Lives in God's Word" series on Paul and FF Bruce's "Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free." Main source materials are based on contents in these books unless otherwise noted.

Sunday August 13, 2023

Lesson 17: The Trials of Paul – Part II: From Caesarea to Rome

Reference: Acts 24-26

When we last saw Paul, he was in the temple presiding over the purification rituals of the Nazarite vows for four Jewish men when troublemaking Jews from Ephesus stirred the crowd into a riot against him. Paul was dragged out of the temple and beaten severely, leading to the Roman commander Lysias to pull him out of the riot seeking to bring about peace in the city. After finding that Paul had committed no crimes worthy of death and learning of a plot to assassinate Paul, Lysias decided to send Paul to Caesarea to be tried again by Felix, the Roman governor over Judea at the time. The year is AD 58.

Timeline – Acts 24-26

After Felix received Paul and the letter from Lysias, he made some initial inquiries about Paul's background, then decided to hear Paul's case and ordered Paul to be under guard in Herod's palace (Acts 23:34-35). Though technically still a prisoner, being held in Herod's palace rather than in a prison cell meant that Paul was held with light custody within the palace grounds. He could receive visitors and move more freely among the palace guards.

The Trial before Felix (Acts 24:1-27)

Five days after Paul arrived in Caesarea, the high priest Ananias, along with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus arrived to present their case to Felix. The lawyer's opening flattery to Felix sets the tone for the presentation / strategy of their case against Paul, especially given that Felix was not at all a peaceful governor to the Jews. Under his watch, the region was certainly not "...a long period of peace" (24:2-3).

Antonius Felix was the Roman procurator for the Judea region for roughly eight years (AD52-59). He was appointed procurator at the request of Jonathan, the interim high priest at the time, only to later arrange to have Jonathan assassinated by the Sicarii¹. He was an opportunist who uses people and circumstances to gain greater power and accumulate more wealth. He was also corrupt, taking bribes and decided disputes based on political expediency instead of justice. Many of his actions stimulated unrest among the Jews – which would later contribute to the Jewish war (AD66-73). He was ultimately removed by Nero after his inept handling of a riot in Caesarea between the Jews and the Syrian inhabitants that took place in AD59.

For his part, Tertullus didn't just put Paul on trial. He effectively also put Christianity on trial, calling the Christian movement "...the sect of the Nazarenes" (24:5), implying that the movement is dangerous to Rome. He also accused Paul of stirring up dissension among the Jews (24:5) and desecrating the temple, implying that Paul brought Trophimus into the inner courts of the temple which, if proven, would be justified for death according to Jewish custom. However, no witnesses were able to corroborate that this actually happened.

Tertullus then deceptively altered the timeline of events when he introduced the notion that the Jewish leaders tried to arrest him, but was prevented from doing so by the Roman commander Lysias (24:6). He even implied that it was the Roman guards who created the riots and unrest (24:7).

In summary, Tertullus and the Jewish leaders charged Paul with three charges worthy for Felix to hand him over under Roman law in order to receive just punishment according to the Jewish Law. Paul's response to each of the charges can be broken down as follows:

¹ Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.162-164

- Acts 24:11-13 – responding to charge that he is a troublemaker who stirs up dissension (24:5a)
- Acts 24:14-16 – responding to charge that he is the leader of a dangerous anti-Rome cult (24:5b)
- Acts 24:17-21 – responding to charge that he desecrated the Jewish temple (24:6)

To the first charge, Paul noted that he only arrived in Jerusalem “twelve days ago” (24:11), and for the first seven days, he was inside the temple leading the purification ceremony before he was dragged out. After he was dragged out, the rioting had already begun, so he had no opportunity to speak to anyone to have caused a riot (24:12); and the accusers cannot find anyone as witnesses to prove otherwise (24:13).

To the second charge, he first rejects the claim that Christianity is a cult (24:14), then defended this belief with four points:

- That he serves the God of the Old Testament Scriptures, same as their ancestors (24:14)
- That he believes everything that the Old Testament stated and as spoken by OT prophets (24:15)
- That he places his hope in this God of the Old Testament, same as the Jews (24:15)
- That he expects a resurrection and final judgment before this God (24:15)

The Jewish audience would be hard pressed to reject any of these points – except for possibly the fourth point on the resurrection of the righteous and the wicked to face judgment, which the Sadducees would’ve rejected (but supported by the Pharisees). In effect, Paul is stating that what he is preaching is no more dangerous than what the Jews believe in as it relates to being a danger to Rome. If Rome have no objection to the Jews, then Rome should have no objection to the Christians.

To the third charge, Paul reminded the audience that he brought in offerings from Macedonia and Corinth, and that he was in the midst of a purification ritual when the riot started. Someone who is intent on desecrating the temple would not be giving an offering to the temple, much less be a participant in a Jewish purification ritual (24:17-18). Paul then noted how the *real* troublemakers who started the unrest – Jews from Asia – are not there in Caesarea to present their case against him. If he was truly guilty of violating any Jewish laws, those who accused him of such and started the riot should be there to present their case. Paul closes his argument against the third charge by highlighting the root reason for why the Jewish leaders were acting as they were, citing that it is ‘for the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you today’ (24:21). The implication of this point with previous points being that this is a theological disagreement within the Jewish doctrine that should not concern Rome or fall under Roman law that is punishable by death.

Felix’s Response (Acts 24:22-27)

Luke informed his readers that Felix has more knowledge about the Christian movement than the Jewish leaders (24:22). This likely is due to the thousands who have become Christians in Jerusalem and the many Christian communities that have come about throughout Judea and Samaria (cf Acts 1:8). As the Roman procurator of this region, he had to be fairly knowledgeable in order to assess the risk to Rome’s security.

Felix effectively called for a recess until he could hear more evidence from Lysias, the commander from Jerusalem. Luke does not document whether this was a genuine attempt to issue judgment on the case, or if this was a ploy to delay, hoping that Paul would pay him a bribe (24:26), or delay for other reasons (see Festus below). There was no evidence that Felix ever intended to decide this case as he said he would (24:22b). However, he did allow Paul some freedom within Herod’s palace (24:23). Since Rome does not take responsibility for the needs of those in custody, this practice allowed friends of Paul to bring in needed food and clothing. Luke informed his readers that Felix kept Paul in custody for two years. Luke apparently stayed in Caesarea with Paul during this time (27:1). This extended time with Paul may have helped Luke gather the needed information for his Gospel and for the book of Acts.

The Trial before Festus (Acts 25:1-21)

Porcius Festus (24:27) was described by Josephus as an honorable and capable leader. Emperor Nero installed him as procurator over the region in AD59, replacing Felix after yet another mishandling of a conflict involving the Jews. His rule would be short-lived, however, as he died prematurely in AD62. Festus inherited a mess left behind by Felix, to include the ongoing strife between the Jews and the Gentiles, the terrified villagers who were terrorized by the Sicarii (setting villages on fire), the continued fallout with the handling of the Egyptian false prophet, and other matters that would all contribute later towards the Jewish War.

Another matter left behind by Felix for Festus to resolve is the issue with Paul. Felix was already in a precarious position with the Jews given his mishandling of various events involving the Jews at the time. To release Paul would have inflamed the Jewish leaders even more. To extradite Paul to the Sanhedrin would have certainly led to Paul's death – which would be difficult for him to justify over how he allowed a Roman citizen to receive this fate without violating Roman law. This is likely why he left Paul in custody, delaying until such time hoping for the Jews to forget and move on.

As it turns out, the Jews did not forget. With the change of procurators, the Jerusalem leaders exploited the situation by asking Festus – as a favor – to extradite Paul to Jerusalem. Given the recent mishandling of the Jew-Gentile uprising caused by Felix, it would benefit Festus to repair the relationship by granting favors (25:3). Luke also noted how there were men preparing an ambush to kill Paul should the favor be granted, meaning that it is possible that Festus may also be aware, leading him to instead call for a trial in Caesarea where Paul was in custody. It is more likely that Festus simply wanted to hear the case for himself (25:4); and given his background, he does not entertain tit-for-tat favors in exchange for justice (25:16-17).

Festus reopened the trial, inviting the Jewish leaders to Caesarea to present their case (25:6b-7). Again, Paul declared his innocence against the Jewish Law, against the temple, and against Rome (25:8). Paul, as a Roman citizen, has a right to appeal to Rome's authority, which supersedes the authority of any nation that had been conquered by Rome. Since Paul committed no crime against Rome (25:18), he is under no obligation to submit to the lower nation's authority. This was why Festus could only ask Paul if he would be willing to stand trial in Jerusalem (25:20) – rather than to extradite Paul to Jerusalem (25:9). After Paul invoke the name of Caesar – which is his right, Festus declared that, to Rome he will go (25:12; 21). This fulfilled what the Lord revealed to Paul over two years ago, that he will be witnessing to Rome (23:11).

The Witnessing before Herod Agrippa II (Acts 26)

Marcus Julius Agrippa (Herod Agrippa II) was the eldest son born to Herod Agrippa I, who was struck by an angel of the Lord in Caesarea in AD44 (Acts 12:23). Though a Jew, his loyalties were more aligned with Rome than with the Jewish cause. However, he has established goodwill within the Jewish community. He was an instrumental figure to dissuade Jewish aggression during the Jewish War (AD 66-73) and was one of the key sources for Josephus' historical account about the Jewish War.

When Agrippa visited Festus to pay his respect, Festus confided in Agrippa, seeking advice on how to handle this situation given that he is unfamiliar with Jewish culture. At issue is that Festus could find no charges against Paul (25:18-19). He could not send Paul to Rome as a prisoner without an accompanying letter stating why Paul is a prisoner (25:26-27). Making up charges is not in his nature; thus, by his own admission, he is at a loss on how to proceed (25:20). In response, Agrippa agreed to hear Paul's case himself.

Paul's presentation to Agrippa was the third recording of Paul's salvation experience documented by Luke (cf Acts 9:1-30; 22:3-21). In Acts 22, Paul recounts his salvation experience to both encourage / uplift himself and to appeal to a rioting / unwilling-to-listen audience. Here in Acts 26, Paul will appeal to a more cultured audience. In Agrippa, Paul knew that he is talking to someone who is well versed with the traditions, culture,

and controversies of the Jews (26:3). Although Paul directed his testimony to Agrippa – whom Paul finds to be worthy of respect (26:2), his presentation was delivered in a manner for all who were listening (26:29). It was clear – especially to Agrippa – that Paul’s presentation was delivered with an evangelical bent (26:28).

Analysis – Acts 23-26: Making Tough Decisions in Ministry Leadership

As Paul is now set for his journey to Rome to face the same charges yet again, let’s take a quick inventory of the verdicts for all of the trials of Paul up to this point. Paul have been found to have committed no crime worthy of the death penalty ...

- By the Roman commander Lysias in Jerusalem (23:29)
- By Felix the procurator in Caesarea via his inaction (24:27)
- By Festus the procurator in Caesarea (25:25)
- By Herod Agrippa II in Caesarea (26:31-32)

The takeaway is to ask ourselves how, if everyone in authority – and with authority – have found Paul to be innocent of any charges worthy of the punishment demanded (death), then why is it so hard to make the right decision? Based on these biblical accounts, making the right decision in leadership is not always about courage, or lack thereof. All of these leaders wanted to make the right decision, but all had to take other considerations into account – namely, Paul’s safety, Paul’s rights, and to some extent, impact on society as a consequence of their decisions. From Paul’s perspective, however, the issue is clear, and his response is consistent – stick to the facts, and let it take you where it takes you. Though this position is easy for Paul to embrace (he is not responsible for maintaining peace in the society, and he doesn’t care for his life for the sake of the gospel), for other leaders with greater responsibilities, things are not as simple.

In this context, the following principles can be observed as it relates to “making tough decisions in ministry leadership.” When confronted with a tough decision in ministry leadership...

- **Be respectful and understanding to those in authority or with authority.** This first principle models after Paul’s reaction to this situation. He could have made things more difficult for leadership by demanding his innocence be acknowledged. He could have demanded for the authorities to do something about the real troublemakers. But these were not the paths he took. He was respectful to the Roman commander who didn’t know he was a Roman citizen, he was respectful to Felix, Festus, and Agrippa – allowing them to have their space to make decisions they deemed appropriate, even if he may not agree with them. When we encounter situations in ministry where we recognized that leadership is caught between a rock and a very hard place, model after Paul by sticking to the facts and give leadership space to deliberate on the best possible outcome.
- **Be courageous and have integrity as those in authority or with authority.** The second principle models against the actions of Felix. Putting aside Felix’s character issues as a corrupt leader, on the matter of making tough decisions, Felix was overly concerned about the reactions of the people in his decision making calculation. Moreover, unlike some of his other decisions, there was no clear win as it relates to how to handle Paul’s situation with the Jews. As a result, he lacked the needed courage to make any decision on the matter, prolonging the drama of indecision for over two years. Leadership involves making difficult decisions. It does not take a leader to make easy decisions; it takes a leader to make hard and difficult decisions. The direr the consequences, the more difficult the decision-making process becomes. In difficult decision scenarios, leaders must acknowledge that there will always be people who will not agree with the decision, whatever that may be. But the burden of making such decisions correctly is on the leader with the given authority to make them. Leaders who lack the courage to make difficult decisions correctly are not “leaders” by definition.

- **Be humble and wise among those in authority or with authority.** This final principle models after Festus and Agrippa. Festus, as an upright leader, was humble enough to recognize that he is at a loss for what to do, and wise enough to consult others for advice. Festus could have taken the easy route by elevating his position of authority, forge a good relationship with the Jewish leaders and make Paul a casualty of a process that can lead to a win-win. However, he was wise enough to know that the issue is beyond his depth and could have greater implications. His focus is to pursue what is true, what is factual, and what to report to his higher authority (Rome). If this leads him to lower any pride he may have, recognize that he does not have all the answers and needs help to make a wise decision, so be it. When we are put in positions of authority to make difficult decisions, we should likewise lower our pride, pursue truth, seek any needed wisdom, and be more concerned about our report to our higher authority – which is God.

Reflecting Upon the Word

Read 1 Samuel 13:1-15. This is the event where Samuel rebuked Saul for his leadership.

1. What can we observe about Saul's decision making process as a king ordained by God?
2. What was it that Saul did that is worth condemnation by Samuel?
3. What are some principles we can learn about what God expects from His leaders from this episode?

Reflecting Upon our World

Society in Paul's days seems to have leaders who are more concerned about people's reactions than they are about doing what is right.

1. Compare and contrast our world leaders today with Felix, Festus, Agrippa, Lysias, or even Paul. What are some similarities and differences that are easily observable?
2. Compare and contrast our church leadership with the Jewish leaders in Paul's days as it relates to how we interact with society's leadership on our goals and agendas.
3. Review your observations from the previous two questions. How does this inform us about how we engage with society to achieve the Great Commission mandate?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

As today's lesson demonstrates, making tough decisions is what leaders should do. The focus has more to do with the process and issues to consider rather than the decision itself.

1. Reflect on a time when you were put in a position of leadership and confronted with making a tough decision where whatever decision you make will be unpopular with many. What were the issues and how did you handle it? Did you punt (defer to later) or confront it with courage? Did you ever make any decision? How did God play a role in your decision making? Journal your reflection.
2. Reflect on a time where you were NOT in position of leadership having to make a difficult decision where whatever the decision made would be unpopular with many. How did you contribute or not contribute to that process? How would you rate how that decision was made? Journal your reflection.
3. Go back and reflect on your experience from the previous questions. If you could do things over and knowing what you know now, would you do things differently? Journal your reflection to help facilitate your thinking process for future encounters, then take your journal entries to prayers.