

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

SEPTEMBER 26TH-27TH // THE BOOK OF ACTS

THE PROSECUTION (ACTS 24:1-9)

Chapter 24 opens on Paul as a prisoner in Caesarea under the protective custody of Felix, the governor of Judea.

- He had been transferred to Caesarea after being arrested in Jerusalem and had waited for five days for his accusers to arrive from Jerusalem so he could get a fair trial.
 - His crime? The Romans weren't quite sure, so his imprisonment was a safety measure.
- Finally, the prosecution team arrived: Ananias (the high priest), some of the elders, and a "lawyer" named Tertullus (v. 1).
- Tertullus would've been required to be educated in matters of the Jewish law, so he was most likely Jewish but not necessarily Jewish.
 - As Paul's case was summoned, Tertullus began his prosecution with a captatio benevolentiae—a public praise of a ruler.

Tertullus's praise and flattery of Felix the Governor would have been not only inaccurate but also a bit shameful and difficult for most First Century Jews to stomach.

- During Felix's rule, insurrections and anarchy had increased throughout Palestine.
- The claims that "we enjoy great peace" and "reforms are taking place" were inaccurate and simply empty flattery (vs. 2-3).

1) "WE HAVE FOUND THIS MAN TO BE A PLAGUE..."

The Greek word loimon can mean "pest," troublemaker, or public nuisance among the people.

- Paul was accused of infecting the Jewish people with the message of Jesus.
- The gospel message can be a nuisance to those who don't want it—it calls us to turn from our sin and surrender to Jesus.

2) "AN AGITATOR AMONG ALL THE JEWS..."

Quite literally, Paul was accused of stirring insurrection among the Jews.

- Ancient Judea was filled with would-be messiahs and revolutionaries against Rome.
- Tertullus wanted to put Paul in the same group with these kinds of terrorists—a dangerous, hateful, violent individual. Being misunderstood and falsely accused isn't fun.

3) "A RINGLEADER OF THE SECT OF THE NAZARENES..."

This is the only place in the NT where "Nazarene" is used to describe Christians.

- It's quite likely that Jewish Christians had been nicknamed this as a derogatory reference to Jesus' small, poor, and obscure hometown ("Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" John 1:46).

4) "HE EVEN TRIED TO DESECRATE THE TEMPLE..."

The interesting part of Tertullus's charge against Paul was that he only claimed Paul tried to desecrate the temple (by presumably bringing in a Gentile), unlike the earlier charge that he actually did defile the temple.

- Paul was falsely accused of blasphemy and violating the Jewish law.
- Tertullus's speech concluded with an appeal to the governor to examine Paul himself, and the other Jews who were present affirmed all the things Tertullus was saying.
- We have a group of angry and murderous hypocrites with their slick and dishonest lawyer before a notoriously unjust and brutal government official, all unjustly accusing a man of integrity and character.
- Just because we live a life of integrity and obedience to God doesn't mean we get out of difficulty, being attacked, or even being falsely accused by others.
- Part of the opposition we can expect as disciples is for others to treat us unfairly.
 - False accusations and unmerited abuse towards true disciples are hurtful, but they shouldn't surprise us—Jesus endured them too.

THE DEFENSE (ACTS 24:10-21)

If we live by the truth and simply make a habit out of telling the truth, we're going to be OK.

- When Paul was directed to speak, he began with a brief complimentary remark about Felix, acknowledging his 10-year connection with Israel—not a dishonest flattery designed to manipulate.
- Where Tertullus spoke in general statements, Paul invited Felix to simply check out the facts.

Only 12 days earlier, Paul had gone to Jerusalem to worship for Pentecost, and for most of those days, he had been in Roman custody.

- When would he have had the time to start a rebellion? What kind of evidence did his accusers bring to the trial? (vs. 11-13)
- Having denied the charges, Paul got to the real reason he was on trial—it was a religious disagreement, not a political issue (vs. 14-16).

Paul admitted (and in so doing, testified of) five things quite precisely:

- He worshiped the God of the Hebrews.
- He was a follower of the Way.
- He believed everything in the law and the prophets.
- He had hope in God.
- He believed in the resurrection.

Verse 16 gives us a clear picture of the character of Paul: "I always strive to have a clear conscience before God and men."

- We overcomplicate following Jesus and living a holy life so often.
- True holiness isn't performing grand gestures of sacrifice and religious devotion; it's being obedient and keeping a clear conscience.
- It's being truthful and living with no pretense.

The truth was that Paul's visit to the temple wasn't about stirring up trouble at all—he wasn't even there to evangelize.

- Paul was simply there to worship ("to bring charitable gifts and offerings," v. 17) when Jews from Asia falsely accused him of doing something that couldn't even be proven.
 - But Paul testified that the real reason he was on trial was his faith in Jesus' resurrection (v. 21).
- Paul's willingness to tell the truth, his transparency, and his integrity are not only commendable—they are given to us as an example for how we are ALL to live as Christians.
- Secret sin, dishonesty, relational sin, and "double lives" (where we claim to believe one thing and then live completely differently) are all indicators that we aren't living with a clear conscience before God and others.

WHAT IS OUR CONSCIENCE?

The conscience is that immaterial part of our being that helps us evaluate how our actions, words, and thoughts conform to what's right or wrong.

- Your conscience is only as strong as your understanding of truth. A weak conscience can be a sign of an inadequate or immature understanding of God's Word.

KEEPING A CLEAR CONSCIENCE

A weak conscience can also be a sign of a "seared" or "numb" conscience (1 Timothy 4:2), where we have ignored feelings of guilt or remorse from sin and went our own way.

- We keep our consciences clear by obeying God, confessing and repenting of sin, and keeping our relationship with Him and others in good standing.

OBEYING GOD

Because we're naturally rebellious, we all have a tendency to want to argue with the commands of God that we don't like and to try to justify selfish behavior and disobedience.

- Whenever we do this, we "grieve the Holy Spirit" and take steps to sear our consciences.
- True obedience to God has no conditions and isn't relative or situational.

CONFESSING AND REPENTING OF SIN

- God never requires or expects perfection from you.
- However, your willingness to own your failures, admit your sins, and humbly turn away from them is an indication of your love for God.

- A lost art for many of us is the practice of confession (James 5:16).

- If you can't say, "I'm sorry" and "I was wrong"...

KEEPING OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOD AND OTHERS IN GOOD STANDING

- Paul's "clear conscience" isn't just between him and God—it's between him and other people.
- If we claim to love God but hate others, we're not really loving God.
- If you know that you've wronged someone (or your conscience convicts you that maybe you've hurt them), failing to apologize is a sin.

Keeping your conscience clear isn't a matter of superhuman willpower, perfection, and discipline.

- A clear conscience is a matter of humility and absolute dependence on the blood of Jesus and power of the Holy Spirit.
- What commands of God do you need to obey?
- Is there any sin that you need to repent for or confess? Is there someone you've hurt who you need to apologize to?

THE VERDICT (ACTS 24:22-27)

WHAT'S THE VERDICT IN THIS TRIAL?

No verdict—just a postponement of justice by a seemingly indifferent politician based on additional testimony needed from the Roman tribune Lysias (vs. 22-23).

- The real reason for the postponement was most likely that Felix was simply waiting for a bribe from Paul or the Christians while trying to maintain some favor with the Jews.

So Paul stayed under arrest, but his Christian friends were permitted to visit him and take care of his needs.

- After a while, Felix showed up with his wife, Drusilla (who was Jewish), and called on Paul to talk about "faith in Christ Jesus."
- But as Paul began to share on righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix became "afraid" (v. 25).

THE SCARY TRUTH

Righteousness: God is holy, good, and perfectly righteous. We are not; we need a Savior.

- Self-control: To live according to God's will and plan for us is to live under submission to God's law and to keep our fleshly desires under control (we're not animals).
- The judgment to come: God will judge evil in the life to come. We need a Savior!

When God's Word is proclaimed concerning "righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come," the Holy Spirit convicts.

- That conviction feels uncomfortable and scary, which is why many people want to silence God's Word and distract themselves from its truth.
- Felix sent Paul away so he wouldn't have to listen to any more convicting talk, but for the next two years he called on him often.

Interestingly, the text points out that Felix was "hoping that Paul would offer him money" (v. 26).

- Could Paul have arranged a bribe for Felix and walked free? Absolutely!
- Bribes were quite common, but they were still illegal, and Paul maintained his integrity.
- For the next two years Paul was kept in custody, and even as Felix left his position, he chose not to free Paul (v. 27).

UNCOMFORTABLE CONVICTION

- Christianity/Church can feel like a novelty or a hobby to some of us—some interesting ideas that might help us live better lives.
- The gospel message tells us we're sinners under judgment who need a Savior.
- God's Word calls us to repent, receive Jesus, and live with righteousness and self-control.
- Will you receive this message? Or send it away?

LIVING WITH A CLEAR CONSCIENCE

- God has given you a conscience that helps you know right from wrong.
- If you don't know Jesus, the right thing to do is to follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit on your conscience and trust in Jesus completely.
- If you do know Jesus, the right thing to do is to keep a clear conscience—obey God, repent of sin, and keep your relationships at peace.

CONVICTION VERSUS CONDEMNATION

- We have an enemy much worse than Tertullus—our adversary and accuser, the devil.
- It doesn't matter if you've trusted in Jesus and are doing everything you can to live with a clear conscience; Satan will still condemn, accuse, and attack (floodlight of condemnation).
- We overcome by the blood of Jesus and the Word of our testimony (Revelation 12:11; Romans 8:1)!