

Acts 24-26 - An Overview

Paul, on the last day of a vow in Chapter 22, entered the temple for ceremonial cleansing and was taken into custody by the Romans because some Jews from Asia had made accusations against him and stirred up a mob who wanted to drag him out of the temple to kill him. In Chapter 23, the Roman commander, Lysias, heard of another Jew's plot to kill Paul so he sent him to the governor, Felix. Chapter 24 picks up with Paul's trial before Felix.

Paul on Trial Before Felix - 24:1-26

In 23:11, Christ told Paul that He wanted him to testify about Him in Rome as he had done in Jerusalem. Chapters 23:2 to 28:14 describe the process by which Christ took him there.

At that time Jerusalem and Rome were incredibly strong centers of the civilized world. The faith of Jerusalem went back a millennia to Abraham. The rule of Rome extended approximately 3 million square miles around the Mediterranean Sea. From a human perspective, Paul had no chance of surviving if they set themselves against him. But such an outcome never entered the mind of Paul as a possibility.

24: 5 "For we have found this man a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.

24:6 "And he even tried to desecrate the temple; and then we arrested him. We wanted to judge him according to our own Law.

In Acts 24:1–9, Tertullus (a lawyer who represented the case of the Sanhedrin against Paul to the governor Felix) brought three charges against Paul. First, he said that Paul was a troublemaker, causing riots among the Jews and all over the world (24:5a). Secondly, he said that Paul was a ringleader of the Nazarene sect (24:5b). And thirdly, he said that Paul had tried to desecrate the temple (24:6). The life of Paul continues to be placed over the life of Jesus as a pattern for Paul to follow. Jesus was accused of subverting the nation, opposing Caesar, and claiming to be a King himself (Lk. 23:1–3). Paul's enemies laid similar charges against him; they said that he was against the law, against the temple, and against Caesar (25:7–8). Paul, however, was innocent in these areas just as Jesus was innocent.

In Acts 24:16, Paul states that he is not hostile toward Judaism. In fact, when his accusers found him at the temple, he was worshipping, not stirring up trouble there, nor in the synagogues nor anywhere else in the city (24:11-12).

In response to the accusation of being a ringleader of the sect of Nazarenes, Paul admitted that he was a follower of the Way, but he insisted it was not a *sect* as the Jews called it, for Christians followed the God of the fathers and believed in the teachings of the Old Testament (24:14-16).

Furthermore, in Acts 24:17–21, Paul denied that he had desecrated the temple. He was ceremonially clean when the crowd began making such an accusation and those who had accused him of bringing a Gentile into the temple area were not even present to bear witness against him.

Paul's public confession of faith consisted of four affirmations: (1) he worshiped the God of his fathers, (2) he believed everything in the Law and the Prophets, (3) he had the same hope in God as his accusers did, and (4) he always tried to have a clear conscience before God. In other words, he worshiped the same God, believed the same truths, shared the same hope, and cherished the same ambitions as other Jews.

After hearing from both sides, Felix found himself in a dilemma. He could not convict Paul because the Roman commander had not found fault in him (23:29), nor had the Sanhedrin produced any real evidence against him (23:9). At the same time, he didn't want to release Paul because he wanted to remain in favor with the Jews (24:27). He also was hoping that Paul would bribe him (24:26). The only option he saw was to postpone the verdict. So Paul was kept in custody, which was appropriate for a Roman citizen who had not yet been convicted of any crime; he was never left unguarded but was treated humanely and his friends were allowed to see him.

There was no further public hearing for two years (24:27); however, during that time Felix conducted a private investigation of his own, probably at the request of his wife, Drusilla. She was the third wife of Felix and the daughter of Herod Agrippa I, whose opposition to Christianity and whose death Luke had described earlier in 12:1–23. She also had been previously married. This helps explain why Paul spoke on the topics which he did (24:15, 25).

Paul on Trial Before Festus – 24:27-25:12

Felix was succeeded by Festus.

According to Josephus, Felix was recalled to Rome in order to explain his savage suppression of a dispute between Jews and Syrians over their respective civil rights in Caesarea. He would have been severely punished had it not been for his brother Pallas' appeal to Nero.

In 25:1–5, the Jews appealed to Festus to send Paul to Jerusalem where they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way. Even though two years had passed, the hatred of the Jews toward Christ's representative had not subsided; it had grown. It was no longer a band of 40 men who wanted to kill him (Acts 23:13); it was now the members of the Sanhedrin itself. Festus, perhaps aware of their animosity, refused to send Paul to them but told them to meet him in Caesarea. Once again, God was effortlessly bending the imperial system so that the murderous plot of the Jews was frustrated.

The Jews agreed and they brought many serious charges against Paul which they could not prove (25:6–7). Paul made his defense in response (26:8). The trial resulted in Festus asking Paul if he was willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before him. This left Paul with no option but to appeal to Caesar. It

was Paul's appeal to Caesar that would finally send him to Rome. Paul's trust in God aligned with common sense; God used ordinary means to direct Paul.

Paul on Trial Before Agrippa - 25:13–26:32

Herod Agrippa II was the son of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12) and the great-grandson of Herod the Great. Bernice was his sister, and there were rumors that the relationship was incestuous.

25:23–26:32 is Paul's trial before Agrippa, and is the longest and most elaborate of Paul's five trials.

In 25:24–27, Festus introduces the case. It is a mixture of truth and error. It was true that the Jewish community had petitioned for Paul's death two times and that Festus had not found him guilty of any capital offense. It was not true, however, that Festus had nothing to write about Paul to "his majesty" and that he could not specify the charges against him; Festus had numerous charges brought against Paul but no evidence to support them. Festus later died after only two years in office.

As Stott says, "It was a dramatic moment when the holy and humble apostle of Jesus Christ stood before this representative of the worldly, ambitious, morally corrupt family of the Herods, who for generation after generation had set themselves in opposition to the truth and righteousness" (Stott, 370).

Paul was brought before Agrippa II whose great-grandfather was Herod the Great; Herod the Great had tried to kill the infant Jesus by murdering the babies in Bethlehem. Agrippa II's father was Herod Agrippa I. He had killed James, the brother of John with the sword (Acts 12:2) and was intending to execute Peter had he not escaped from prison by means of an angel (Acts 12:3ff.). In Acts 12:21ff, Herod Agrippa I was struck by an angel and eaten by worms for failing to give glory to God when the crowds started to proclaim that his voice was the voice of a god. Herod Antipas was also related to Agrippa II. He was the son of Herod the Great and the tetrarch of Galilee who beheaded John the Baptist, and was called "the Fox" by Christ. Needless to say, the line of Herods did not have a favorable disposition toward Christians.

Paul's defense was not defensive. The apostle begins his story by describing his upbringing as a Pharisee (Acts 26:4–8), but in Acts 26:6 Paul gives the reason why he is on trial. He says, "I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers." The hope of Israel included a number of things; it meant that God would be their God and they would be His people and that he would dwell with them forever. But this hope was integrally related to the resurrection of all men, for resurrection meant that believers would be God's people forever. This, of course, was tied to Christ's resurrection, as well, and Christ's resurrection opens the door for many truths. First, His resurrection vindicates Him as the Anointed One, the One chosen by God. It also provides evidence for our resurrection; Christ is the first fruits of all who will rise; He is the evidence that the resurrection of others will follow (I Cor. 15:20ff.)

But resurrection also implies death. Perhaps this was the real problem. If one acknowledged the resurrection of Christ, he acknowledged that the Messiah had been crucified. To the Jews this was

utterly inconceivable. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:23, “we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness.” Surely, one reason the Jews hated Paul so vehemently was because Paul was proclaiming that the Jew’s Messiah was crucified. That was why Paul was on trial.

But most importantly the resurrection also points to the necessity of Christ’s death - without the shedding of blood there could be no atonement for sin, and without atonement for sin there could be no relationship with God. The Old Testament system included sacrifices, but the blood of bulls and goats could not achieve propitiation in reality; the sacrifices were only a shadow of what was really needed. Paul believed that God had sent his Messiah to rescue and redeem his people and that the resurrection was the evidence that the death of Christ was accepted by God; it was through His resurrection that Christ’s death was accepted. This was not a new teaching created by Paul. The gospel did not begin with the incarnation of Christ. Paul said it was “the promise made by God to our fathers.” Paul concluded by saying, “So, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, *stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles*”(Acts 26:22-23). No wonder Paul asked, “Why is it considered incredible among you people if God does raise the dead?” (Acts 26:8).

Secondly, Paul describes his persecution of Christ (26:9–11). Paul was once convinced that the claims of Jesus were the claims of an imposter. Therefore, he began persecuting the disciples of Jesus, sentencing them to death and punishing them in the synagogue.

Lastly, Paul describes his conversion and his commissioning as an apostle (26:12-18). The words closely parallel the calling of the OT prophets. He recounts his experience in meeting Christ on the road to Damascus. It was there that Christ commissioned him to be a witness to the Gentiles, to open the eyes of those who are in darkness (those in spiritual confusion and ignorance of the true God) and deliver them from the power of Satan to God that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance. Paul then turned from his commission to his response to it (26:19-23). Paul then began to preach to the Gentiles, telling them that they should repent, turn to God, and prove that their repentance was real by their deeds. Paul did not insist that they become Jews, which was why the Jews tried to kill him. However, Paul maintained that he was saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses had said, namely, that Christ would suffer, rise from the dead, and proclaim light to His own people and to the Gentiles.

This is the third time that Luke records Paul’s conversion. It clearly has an importance in Luke’s narrative, but not because Paul is so important; rather, it is because Paul’s conversion testified of the truth and grace and power of the risen Christ. In 1 Timothy 1:15-17 Paul said, “It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.” The great thing about Paul’s conversion was the display of the greatness of the grace of God in his life.

In chapters 24 and 26, Paul was both a defendant in relation to the charges that were leveled against him, and a witness who testified about Jesus Christ to Felix, Festus, and Agrippa.

Paul was not just interested in saving himself physically; he was interested in the spiritual salvation of others. Three times Luke recorded Paul repeating the elements of the Gospel in the King's hearing. In verse 18, he described Christ's commission to him to bring light, power, and forgiveness. In verse 20, he told Agrippa that all men should repent, turn to God, and do good works. Then in verse 23, he told how the Scriptures foretold of Christ's death, resurrection, and the new age.

God's ways with His children are often unfathomable. There is always perfect wisdom and purpose in God's ways, but until we die we will always see in a mirror dimly. This side of eternity we live by faith, not by sight. The life of faith is not an easy life.

In these chapters, Paul's circumstances seem to be against him. He is either going to be given to the Jews who want to kill him or he is at the mercy of the Roman government. Paul hadn't anticipated the things he was experiencing. In Romans 15:30-32 he wrote to the believers in Rome, "Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company." Although humanly speaking things weren't going well, in reality God was at work; He was accomplishing His purpose in taking the gospel to the "uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8) and was using the Romans to take Paul to Rome (Acts. 23:11). Even in his confinement Paul has opportunity to proclaim Christ. Paul was not sidelined; his life was not useless to the kingdom of God.

What Paul wrote to the Philippians (probably while imprisoned in Rome) is remarkable.

He said in Philippians 1:12-14, "Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear." "I want you to know" might imply that he is correcting misunderstandings. It could be that others were thinking that Paul's imprisonment in Rome was a setback and hindrance to the gospel. Paul, however, was convinced that his imprisonment had not hindered the spreading of the gospel or the working of God in his life. Paul made it clear that his imprisonment was due to his relationship to Christ. Instead of falling into self-pity and harboring bitterness due to his circumstances, he continued to put the gospel first.

The mindset of Paul is portrayed by the Psalmist in Psalm 69:

1 Save me, O God, for the waters have threatened my life.

2 I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and a flood overflows me.

3 I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched; my eyes fail while I wait for my God.

4 Those who hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of my head; those who would destroy me are powerful, being wrongfully my enemies; what I did not steal, I then have to restore.

...

13 *But as for me, my prayer is to You, O LORD, at an acceptable time; O God, in the greatness of Your lovingkindness, Answer me with Your saving truth.*

...

30 *I will praise the name of God with song and magnify Him with thanksgiving.*

It's Paul's confidence in God that allowed him to keep life in a proper perspective. Although he was on trial for his life, he never stopped believing that God was sovereign. This gave him the freedom to think of the needs of others, not just himself. Paul could honestly say to Agrippa, "I would wish to God that not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains" (Acts 26:29).

Furthermore, Paul's belief in God's absolute sovereignty gave Paul hope for his own future. When Paul appealed to Caesar, he recognized that though Caesar was an authority, he was not autonomous. In Romans 13:1 Paul said, "There is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God." He believed as the Psalmist who declared, "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes" (Prov. 21:1). Paul thought and spoke out of a life that had been invaded and captivated by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was unashamed of the salvation God had brought to him.

Lastly, we see in these chapters that God is not limited in using His people to further His purposes. He used Balaam's donkey (Num. 22:28), the king's insomnia (Esth. 6), an unbelieving and arrogant nation (Isa. 10), and the persecution of His own people (Acts 6) to accomplish His will.

Our God is the same today as He was then. He works in the same way. His will and plan are coming to pass, resulting in His glory and our good. Just as Christ faithfully proclaimed the truth in the midst of suffering, so did Paul . . . and so must we.