



## When I Find it Convenient

### Acts 24

By Pastor Paul Hudson

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*\*This original sermon was not written by A.I.*

We're nearing the end of our series, "Acts, Church Afire!" We've been going through most of the book of Acts, and we're skipping over much of the final few chapters of Acts. Chapters 21 to 28 are dedicated to the story of Paul's imprisonment. That's 8 chapters-- nearly a third of the book of Acts-- devoted to Paul's imprisonment. The author was clearly making a theological statement about that. So, before we get to today's scripture, I'd like to quickly look at why Luke made Paul's imprisonment story such a prominent feature in Acts.

First, let me quickly summarize the main points of the last 8 chapters. Paul is arrested in Jerusalem, and then he appears before both Roman and Jewish rulers during his imprisonment. Paul defends his convictions about the truth of the gospel by recounting his own dynamic conversion experience two times. He highlights his divine call to bring the gospel to both the Jews and the Gentiles. Just like Jesus, Paul insists that he is innocent of all the charges brought against him. Just like with Jesus, the Jewish rulers could not agree on the charges, and the Roman rulers find no wrongdoing in Paul worthy of imprisonment or death. Just like with Jesus, the Roman rulers want to please the Jews by keeping Paul imprisoned.

Now, once Paul gets to Rome, he finds considerable freedom to preach the Gospel. The Gentiles were far more open to the gospel than the Jews. In fact, the ending of Acts says, "He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ— with all boldness and without hindrance!" That is how Acts ends.

In my own estimation, the final 8 chapters of Acts are meant to tell us that the gospel is intended by God for the whole world, and nothing can stop it. When Paul was converted way back in chapter 9, Jesus said of Paul, "This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel." Jesus called Paul to be his messenger of the gospel to the world, and no manner of rejection, suffering, imprisonment, beatings, stoning, shipwreck, natural disasters, rioting crowds, or political corruption could stop the spread of the gospel because God is behind it. Just like Jesus, the gospel stood trial and could not be convicted of any legal wrong, showing that the real opposition to the gospel is spiritual, not legal. So, Luke is writing these last chapters to prove that Christianity is not an illegal rebellion of any kind; rather, it confronts and convicts those who have rebelled against God.

Also, I think it is helpful to remember that Luke is writing this book to 'most excellent' Theophilus. We don't know who Theophilus is, other than he must have been a high ranking official. It is clear from the way Acts ends that Luke's intention is to prove that Christianity is not a crime. Opposition is a manner of spiritual rebellion, seen very clearly in the Jewish religious establishment. The spread of the Gospel beyond Israel is unstoppable because Jesus is the Messiah of the whole world, not just the Jews.

So, once again, to summarize in one sentence, these final 8 chapters prove that the gospel is not a criminal insurrection, opposition is spiritual rebellion, and its spread throughout the world cannot be stopped because Jesus is the savior of the whole world.

Let's move on to our passage this morning, I invite you to open to Acts 24. Paul has just been captured and sent to Caesarea to be tried before Felix the Roman Governor. He is being kept under guard in Herod's palace until his Jewish accusers arrive. Now, the Jews and the high priest bring a lawyer with them, so they fully intend to make a legal case against Paul that would hold up in a Roman court. One note about that, the ancient Roman legal system shaped our modern legal system, and it was based, like ours, on the premise that the accused is innocent until proven guilty. In the first century Roman courts, the accused were given a fair, equitable trial based on legality. The accused needed to be proven guilty of breaking a Roman law with sufficient corroborating evidence from several witnesses.

Let's read chapter 24.

Acts 24 (NIV).

24 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.

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. [7] 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.

10 When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: "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.

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.' "

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.

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.

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.

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ac 24:1–27.

The Word of God for the people of God.

### **The Contrasting Approaches of Tertullus and Paul to Felix**

Tertullus was a highly trained lawyer who knew how to manipulate a judge to get a harsher sentence than a crime warrants. That is exactly what he was trying to do as the court convened. Tertullus opens with a flattering attempt to win over the goodwill of Felix, but everyone in the court living under his rule knew that this man was a barbaric brute with a history of extreme violence in putting down insurrections. Tertullus was feeding into Felix’s blind hunger for power, hoping to get him to smell blood and a new opportunity to exert his brutal might by killing Paul and all Christians. It was courtroom shenanigans from the beginning.

Paul’s defense, on the other hand, opens with a simple, “I know you... and here’s my defense.” You’ll lose Paul’s bravery and conviction if you don’t know who Felix was and how he governed. As I said, Felix had a reputation for being ruthless and heavy-handed. The first century historian Tacitus wrote that Felix governed with the mind of a slave because he was once a slave himself. He ruled as if he was avenging the bondage of his own slavery, and there was nothing peaceful or reforming about Felix’s corrupt rule.

Paul refused to follow the same slimy route as Tertullus. Instead of appealing for goodwill, Paul simply said, “I know you’ve been judge over this nation.” So, Paul was pretty much saying, “uh... yeah... I see right through you.” He would not deceptively flatter to gain an advantage. Instead, Paul’s words brought a tinge of conviction to the heart of Felix. How do we know that? After Paul gave his defense, Felix and his Jewish wife, Drusilla, sent for Paul to hear him speak about the Christian faith.

### **Conviction**

Paul’s speaking conviction is a key I want to hang on for a few minutes. One of the most important works of the Holy Spirit is bringing conviction to the sinful heart. In John 16:7-11, Jesus says, “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you—(the Helper is the Holy Spirit)— But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.” The Holy Spirit is given to us to bring conviction to our own hearts and to speak conviction through us. To bring conviction of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment.

Let’s look at the word “convict” for a moment. The Greek word is “ελεγχω” (elengko), which means “to bring to light.” It also means to bring a person to the point of recognizing wrongdoing. This word is meant to carry a very positive, constructive meaning. To convict someone is to convince them of their wrongdoing.

Today, the constructive meaning of the word ‘convict’ has turned destructive. First of all, a ‘convict’ is another word for a criminal. To convict someone is to accuse them. To convict someone is to judge them; to prove their guilt. As a result, the church no longer really preaches convicting messages. You won’t really hear too many preachers attempting to ‘bring the sinner’s heart to light’. If you do find preachers with those types of messages, they’re typically preaching to a lot of empty pews.

So, instead what the church brings is a lot of flattering words to the ear. Much like Tertullus, too many messages today are built to earn goodwill with the listener. Instead of bringing a message of conviction, people are made to feel comfortable in their sin. Some churches refuse to acknowledge that sin even exists. Or that if it does exist, it’s something that Jesus died for and you don’t have to worry about it in your life.

### **The Holy Spirit’s Role in Conviction**

Well, I don’t want to drive anyone away, but I do want to talk about the conviction of the Holy Spirit. I hope that we can be a church that brings back the constructive meaning of conviction. I love this meaning of “elengko” (convict), “to bring a person to the point of recognizing wrongdoing.” The Holy Spirit brings us to the point of recognizing our wrongdoing. He brings us to the point of recognizing our need for righteousness. He brings us to the point of recognizing that our wrongdoings lead to judgment if we don’t have Jesus. He brings us to the point of recognizing why we need Jesus.

This is not harsh judgment. This is not condemnation. This is not destructive criticism or exposing wrongdoing to bring shame. The fruit of the Holy Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The Holy Spirit’s work is founded upon the fruit of the Spirit. In the conviction of the Spirit lies love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and every fruit of the Spirit. His conviction is meant to lead you to the fruit of the Spirit. He wants to replace the destructive fruit of wrongdoing with the life-giving fruit of the Spirit. He wants to bring light to the darkness to show the way out of that darkness.

The conviction of the Spirit comes in many different ways. You might have a sudden awareness come up that something you’ve done or are about to do is wrong— it can feel like a little flick behind your ear. Pay attention to that. It’s the Spirit bringing wrongdoing to light. Conviction could come through a Scripture you read in the Bible. It can also come through the words of another, your friend, your spouse, your children, your pastor. You might feel conviction in your own heart when someone else does something wrong.

### **The Importance of Embracing Conviction**

How important it is for us to embrace the Spirit’s conviction in our own hearts. If we understand conviction to be a loving work of the Spirit, we will respond with repentance. If we believe that the Spirit is bringing to light our wrongdoings not to harm us or put us in a cage but to prune us that we might bear fruit, we will respond with faith and repentance. The Spirit’s conviction makes us aware of our need for repentance.

If we understand conviction to be condemnation, then we will shut down. If conviction feels like assigned blame, we will plug our ears. If conviction breeds fear and we turn away, it’s because we don’t want to take responsibility for our own wrongdoing. All of us have shunned conviction.

All of us have turned a deaf ear to the wisdom that came in and said, “Hey, what you’re getting yourself into here is wrong.” What we all need is better receptivity of the Spirit’s conviction when it comes to us.

### **“When I Find it Convenient”**

Back to the Scripture. Paul began his defense with an opening statement that undoubtedly brought conviction to Felix’s heart. He looked at him and said, “I know about your governing rule.” Later, probably out of conviction, Felix sent for Paul to listen to him speak about faith in Jesus. Verse 25 says, “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.”

What a tragic end for Felix. I feel sorry for Felix because this was a former slave turned absolute brute who was very nearly convinced. Paul had his ear for a moment. The convicting opening in the courtroom exposed his dark soul. He heard Paul’s messages of faith, and he didn’t argue, mock, or ridicule him. Instead, he was afraid.

This description of fear is the same description as the jailer who Paul and Silas converted when the earthquake broke their chains. For the jailer, fear resulted in salvation... “What must I do to be saved?” he cried out. For Felix, this same fear resulted in a complete shutdown. The conviction came across as judgment.

Felix said, “that’s enough... we’ll talk again when it’s convenient for me.” He delayed God’s work in his heart with one word: “convenient.” The conviction of the Spirit meant inconvenience to his life, and that one word has destroyed more souls. Postponed obedience out of inconvenience. How many have postponed obedience out of inconvenience to the point of personal ruin?

The Word comes, the nudge comes, the conviction comes, the need for change is felt... then the delays come... not right now... I’ll deal with this later... I deserve this little bit of pleasure right now... I’ll work through it when it’s more convenient. And the Spirit stands by and says, “I love you, and I’m waiting for you...”

Felix had these conversations with Paul for over two years. He kept delaying his response until it was too late. It wasn’t that Paul stopped talking to him about Christ. He just ran out of time. He died in his convenience.

My friends, if you feel that conviction, it is the loving grace of God coming to you. Every nudge, every little flick behind the ear is the Holy Spirit pulling you in, not pushing you away. He brings your wrongdoing to light to save you not to shame you. If you’re listening to this right now and you know what I’m talking about, think about Felix— don’t put a timeline on obedience. Respond with repentance, embrace the inconvenience because that inconvenience will lead you to the fruit of eternity. Amen.

Let’s pray.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Study Questions</b> <i>Read Acts 24</i></p>
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**Observation**

- 1) What charges did Tertullus bring against Paul?
- 2) How did Paul defend himself against these charges?
- 3) What did Felix say after listening to Paul's defense?
- 4) How long did Paul remain in prison under Felix's rule?

**Interpretation**

- 1) Why did Tertullus flatter Felix before presenting the charges?
- 2) What does Paul's response to Felix reveal about his character?
- 3) How did the Holy Spirit's role of conviction affect Paul's interaction with Felix?
- 4) What was the underlying reason for the Jewish leaders' accusations against Paul?

**Application**

- 1) How can we recognize the constructive work of conviction in our lives?
- 2) In what ways might we be tempted to delay spiritual obedience due to inconvenience?
- 3) How can we respond to the Holy Spirit's conviction with openness and repentance?
- 4) What practical steps can we take to avoid the trap of seeking convenience over spiritual growth?