

ACTS—WEEK 21
PAUL DELIVERED TO FELIX



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Acts 22:30–24:9 — Paul Delivered to Felix
*The Cover Picture is “Paul” by Masaccio (1401–1428),
on display at Museo Nazionale di San Matteo, Pisa.*

Paul is now defending himself in court. His defense is often clever, but that doesn't matter.

The only thing that matters is getting Paul to Rome.

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Thank you.

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1 Acts 22:30–23:5 (ESV)

But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them.

And looking intently at the council, Paul said, “Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.” And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?” Those who stood by said, “Would you revile God’s high priest?” And Paul said, “I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.’”

The high priest Ananias ordered Paul to be struck *on the mouth* just because he said, “*Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.*” It sounds like Ananias was not an honorable man. Historians condemn him in much stronger terms than that.

<http://biblehub.com/commentaries/acts/23-2.htm>

Ananias was deeply and justifiably hated. Josephus Antiquities XX 9:2 describes Ananias and his subordinates as so wicked that their theft of food from lesser priests caused some of them to starve.

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/josephus/works/files/ant-20.htm>

But Paul gave a fearless response, “*God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?*”

Paul backpedaled when it was pointed out to him that Ananias is the high priest, but his response turned out to be prophetic. In AD 66, some of Ananias’s many enemies find him hiding in a sewer and kill him.

<http://biblehub.com/commentaries/egt/acts/23.htm>

Paul has a thing about injustice. So does God.

All Christians have a thing about injustice. It’s the signature of evil.

But injustice is rampant around the world. It’s one of the things that makes the news so painful to watch.

Christians are, like Paul, persecuted for their beliefs. Women are treated like cattle. Slavery is common, even sexual slavery. If you didn’t know better, you’d think that evil was winning.

Ask the Lord to turn the tide. I know this sounds like a Miss America contestant wishing for “world peace,” but, seriously, we need supernatural help, and the Lord calls us to ask for “whatever we wish.”

We need the Lord to send an army of angels to bring the hammer down on the forces of evil—and set the captives free.

2 Acts 23:6–11 (ESV)

Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.” And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, “We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?” And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.

The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”

Here we go again. This time the tribune has to remove Paul because he's afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them. Now Paul is imprisoned, just as prophesied. Paul had been led by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, against everyone's advice. Paul went, knowing that prison awaits.

But this time we learn why. *The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”*

As usual, we see that God's agenda is not about pain avoidance. The purpose of all this is for Paul to testify. God has no problem with Paul going to prison if it gets the testimony out. God warned Paul that he would be imprisoned to prepare him. Earlier, God warned Paul that *he must suffer for the sake of my name*, (Acts 9:16) for the same reason. God wanted Paul to know what to expect.

But there's another point here. Recall that going to Rome was already on Paul's agenda.

Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, “After I have been there, I must also see Rome.” — Acts 19:21

The Lord is telling Paul that he'll make it.

We often think about, and pray about, what God is calling us to do. But we rarely think about, and pray about, what God is preparing us to do.

Can you see a training or preparation pattern in the roads God has put you on (especially the trials and challenges)? What have you learned? How have you grown? What might this be preparing you for?

This could be something as straightforward as a job in the church. For example, struggling with a difficult child could be preparing you to help with Sunday School. Something surprising could be in the works.

Ask the Lord to help you see your trials and your growth in context.

3 Acts 23:12–22 (ESV)

When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. They went to the chief priests and elders and said, “We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near.”

Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. Paul called one of the centurions and said, “Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him.” So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, “Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you.” The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, “What is it that you have to tell me?” And he said, “The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him. But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent.” So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, “Tell no one that you have informed me of these things.”

Wow. That's really creepy—and not unlike some of the psycho things that we've seen in the news lately.

Last we saw, *a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.* The Pharisees were even saying, *“We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?”* Now there's a conspiracy to murder Paul, presumably by the Sadducees. Where'd that come from?

This extreme escalation is puzzling. One would guess that after the Soldiers rescued Paul from the mob, they dispersed. The theological disagreement between the Pharisees and the Sadducees wasn't settled, but that pre-dates Paul anyway. This conspiracy is about Paul, not their theological division.

There just isn't a natural explanation for this. This kind of murderous hatred isn't natural.

Bingo. That's what's going on here, and that's what's going on in the news.

Okay, so this is the devil's work, but beware of a basic error. We look at something idiotic like this and think, “I could never do that.” In a way that's true; we're a long way from doing something that stupid.

Good, but don't kid yourself about your ability to take the hundreds of baby steps it takes to get most of the way there. The forces of evil are far more clever than we can imagine. They know how to trick us.

Our only defense is the Lord. People who trust in their own wisdom take those baby steps without even noticing what's happening. Depend on God and His word to keep you on the right path.

These devotionals are just one of the ways to stay connected to His word.

Use others.

4 Acts 23:23–35 (ESV)

Then he called two of the centurions and said, “Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night. Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor.” And he wrote a letter to this effect:

“Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen. And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him.”

So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. And on the next day they returned to the barracks, letting the horsemen go on with him. When they had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him. On reading the letter, he asked what province he was from. And when he learned that he was from Cilicia, he said, “I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive.” And he commanded him to be guarded in Herod's praetorium.

Wait. The tribune sent 470 men with Paul to guard him as they spirited him away to the governor? That's too many even for a favorite nephew. How come Paul rates?

This is an example of how the Roman government works. If the tribune were to lose one of his prisoners to a mob, he would lose his job, if not his head. The Jews have been on the brink of revolt for quite some time now (and will actually get around to revolting soon). A Roman tribune must keep the peace—the Pax Romana. He doesn't just want to protect Paul; he wants to intimidate the rabble with a show of force.

<http://www.unrv.com/early-empire/pax-romana.php>

This tension between the Pax Romana and the Jewish revolutionary attitude explains a lot. It underlies their misunderstanding of what kind of messiah God sent.

It's also explains how they got Jesus crucified.

The first century Jews made the mistake of assuming that God thinks the way they think. They hated being ruled by the Romans. They felt their worship was hindered and they assumed that God was insulted.

But God had bigger plans. Roman rule was just one piece of a larger puzzle. God even used it (e.g., the roads) to advance His purposes.

We make the same mistake. We worry about elections as if they have cosmic significance. Sure, you should vote and even get involved at even higher levels—but don't kid yourself about how that relates to what's really important. If you're placing your hope in politics, you're sure to be disappointed.

5 Acts 24:1-9 (ESV)

And after five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and a spokesman, one Tertullus. They laid before the governor their case against Paul. And when he had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying:

“Since through you we enjoy much peace, and since by your foresight, most excellent Felix, reforms are being made for this nation, in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude. But, to detain you no further, I beg you in your kindness to hear us briefly. For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him. By examining him yourself you will be able to find out from him about everything of which we accuse him.”

The Jews also joined in the charge, affirming that all these things were so.

What a load of obsequious baloney. Tertullus thinks that his fawning praise of Felix can make up for a lack of evidence. He obviously knows little about the case and so he makes a number of crucial errors. Does he really think that Felix doesn't know what's been going on in his own province?

In fact, the tribune's letter to Felix spelled out who the real trouble makers are—but Tertullus doesn't know that. His case is blown right from the start.

But his big mistake is inviting Felix to examine Paul for himself. Tertullus actually thinks that will go well. He's the one guy in the room who buys the accusations against Paul.

Just imagine the face-palm by Ananias and the elders when Tertullus made that slip. They're trying to nail Paul on trumped up charges, so they bring in a lawyer who specializes in courtroom antics.

And they thought they could get away with keeping him in the dark.

If the facts are on your side, pound the facts. If the law is on your side, pound the law. If neither the facts nor the law are on your side, pound the table. — Old Law School Proverb

Christianity has the facts on our side. Pound facts—but take care to stick to facts that you know.

Beware, people often get baited into speaking about things they aren't prepared to discuss. This happens because, “I don't know,” is a wrong answer in school. Thus, we're taught to never say things like, “Sorry, I'm not an expert on that subject,” or even, “How would I know?”

This is a standard reporter's trick. They can often get someone to say something stupid by pressing them on a subject they know little about.

Evangelism and apologetics are skills that every Christian should develop. The right way to do that is through a training program.

It's a big job, but it's worth the work.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Do you usually pray any “grand” prayers—that go beyond blessing individual people?
2. What is God preparing you for?
3. Do you see spiritual forces in current events?
4. Should Christians limit their involvement in politics?
5. Do you feel competent to defend Christianity based on the facts?