

# ACTS—WEEK 22

## PAUL AND THE KEYSTONE COPS



F. Michael Slay  
*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

*Acts 24:10–25:12 — Paul and the Keystone Cops*  
*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.

He'll get there.

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Thank you.

Acts 24:10–25:12 — Paul and the Keystone Cops  
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1 Acts 24:10–21 (ESV)

*And when the governor had nodded to him to speak, Paul replied: “Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense. You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem, and they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city. Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me. But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings. While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult. But some Jews from Asia—they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me. Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council, other than this one thing that I cried out while standing among them: ‘It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.’”*

The internet has changed the way people argue; it’s easy to look stuff up now. Thus, it’s always a good idea to invite people to check the facts and confirm what you’re saying. It gives you credibility.

That’s what Paul’s doing here. “*You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem, and they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city.*” His whole argument just oozes confidence.

But then, right in the middle of his defense, Paul stops. He’s about to bring up the accusation from the Jews in Asia when it hits him that they’re no-shows. “*But some Jews from Asia—*” Paul was going to argue that their accusation is phony, but, noticing their “contempt of court,” he says, “*They ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me.*”

Paul knows that his case is now a slam dunk, so he pokes fun at his accusers while slipping in the gospel. “*Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council, other than this one thing that I cried out while standing among them: ‘It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.’”*

People on trial don’t usually have this much fun.

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Paul’s secret is that he isn’t afraid. He’s not masochistic or something—he hates pain as much as we do—he’s just not afraid. His faith is solid. He knows Who’s in control of events, and he trusts Him. This gives him a huge advantage. He outwits his enemies because he doesn’t react to threats the way they expect.

Great saints are empowered by their willingness to die for Christ, even if they aren’t martyred. That’s the goal of every Christian—not to be a martyr but to act like one.

That kind of courage is lightning in a bottle.

2 Acts 24:22–23 (ESV)

*But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, “When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case.” Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs.*

Remember the vow? *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.* — Acts 23:12-13

When the tribune learned of the plot, he sent Paul to Felix with 470 soldiers to guard his safety, and a letter which included this line. *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.* — Acts 23:30

Felix knows about the plot. His actions indicate he knows about the vow behind the plot too. His delaying tactic is hilarious.

The Jewish law says that when a vow becomes impossible to fill, it’s no longer binding. But Felix frustrated them by neither taking a final action that would break the vow, nor giving them a shot at fulfilling it. He *put them off, saying, “When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case.” Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs.*

So, the conspirators either died or shamed themselves by sneaking a Snickers bar or something. But Felix’s plan is even more mischievous than that. He knows that they don’t know what was in the letter from Lysias (it would have been sealed), and they act like they don’t know that their plot has been divulged. So, by feigning to put his decision on Lysias, he’s cueing the conspirators to race back to Jerusalem to try to get him to come down to Caesarea before they keel over.

Imagine them, still trying to keep their vow, urging Lysias to go to Caesarea ASAP, all the while avoiding mentioning why. Meanwhile, Lysias is watching this (knowing full well the real reason they’re in such a rush) and trying not to bust out laughing.

Oh, to be a fly on the wall.

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Yes, it’s amusing to think about these conspirators getting their comeuppance, but it’s wrong to have that attitude when it involves anyone we know. Personal *schadenfreude* is unchristian.

We’re commanded to love our enemies. Easier said than done, right? Never forget that no matter how bad people are, the world would be a better place if they found salvation.

No one is worse than Saul was.

3 Acts 24:24–27 (NIV)

*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. 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.” At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him.*

*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.*

This magnificent passage tells us two things that join to paint a glorious picture. First, Felix is so corrupt that he’s trying to squeeze a bribe out of Paul. How clueless is that?

Second, Felix and his wife are drawn to Paul’s gospel message. They *sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus*. Upon hearing his message, particularly *about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid*. Still, *he sent for him frequently and talked with him*.

It’s deliciously ironic that it was his corruption, his hope *that Paul would offer him a bribe*, that helped keep the gospel message flowing. Of course, corruption is why he needs the gospel in the first place (not just his bribe-taking, but his overall corrupt/sinful nature).

But, as always, Paul’s seeming lack of interest in getting out of jail is what drives the train. Wherever Paul finds himself, that’s the place God has sent him to preach the gospel.

I think if Paul fell out of an airplane, he’d just preach to the clouds on the way down.

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Paul’s right; we’re called to preach wherever we are. Do you think that to take the gospel “to the ends of the Earth” you have to go somewhere like Japan or Africa? If so, then you must think that the center of the earth is where you are. In fact, America is just about as far away from Jerusalem as you can get.

Has God placed you where you are for a purpose? Could your situation be a calling—even if it’s not great otherwise? Many modern missionaries have seen their ministries grow spectacularly after being imprisoned. The more incredibly bizarre a situation is, the more likely it’s of supernatural origin.

Paul’s attitude is perfect; everything is an opportunity. Life is filled with unexpected delays and changes in plans. Rather than be annoyed by them, we should be wondering, “What is He up to now?”

Actually, we shouldn’t be wondering; we should be asking — “What are You up to now, Lord?”

This attitude is easy to describe but hard to practice. Trying times are distracting. They often force us to act quickly. You can memorize that God is in control until you’re blue in the face, but in the heat of the moment ...

It’s in times like these that I sometimes pray a strange prayer. I look up and scream, “Seriously?!”

4 Acts 25:1–5 (ESV)

*Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. “So,” said he, “let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him.”*

History records that Rome removed Felix from office in 60 AD. Festus appears to be more competent. He’s new on the job and he visits Jerusalem, but while there, he gets an odd request.

Obviously the conspirators haven’t been fasting for two years, but it’s fun to picture these emaciated schemers still trying to figure out a way to assassinate Paul. Festus doesn’t seem to know about the conspiracy (the next passage will show this), but he doesn’t want to disrupt his schedule. So, *Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly.*

Their request is absurd anyway. Transporting Paul to Jerusalem for trial doesn’t make sense. There’s no jury selection involved here; Festus is the sole judge. Why hold the trial in a remote location? “*So,*” said he, “*let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him.*”

Notice the sarcasm in that last line. Festus isn’t even sure there *is anything wrong about the man*, so he insists that *men of authority* make the trip. They foolishly asked for him to be inconvenienced, so he’s making sure that they’re inconvenienced.

Now they’ve managed to get themselves on his wrong side.

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*Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.* — Matthew 10:16b (NIV)

*Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.* — Colossians 4:6 (ESV)

Not all secular wisdom is worthless. Here we see an example of exactly what not to do. The chief priests managed to be stupid, evil, and irritating all at the same time.

We’re called to be clever and sociable while making ethics an absolute. That would be easy if it weren’t for our sinful human nature. If you’re frustrated by the mistakes you make trying to reach or help people, welcome to the club. It’s the people who aren’t frustrated who should worry.

Our standards are supposed to be higher than our performance. That’s a constant nudge to grow in Christ.

Embrace your frustration. It’s sanctification in action.

5 Acts 25:6–12 (ESV)

*After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove. Paul argued in his defense, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.” But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, “Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?” But Paul said, “I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar.” Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.”*

Keeping the Jews happy is a tricky job for a Roman governor. Felix was removed from office for his failures in that area. Festus is sensitive to this and *wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, “Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?”* Paul realizes that Festus doesn't know about the danger in that, and there's no way to tell him without giving away the game.

Paul is between a rock and a hard place. He can argue that he's innocent, but how can he turn that into an argument that he shouldn't be tried in Jerusalem? Paul tries by saying, *“I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. ... But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them.”* Then it hits him; a Roman citizen on trial has the right to appeal to Caesar. He's needs to get to Rome anyway, so he blurts out, *“I appeal to Caesar.”*

It works. Festus says, *“To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.”*

Unfortunately, Caesar means Nero.

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Paul's journey to Rome is a one-way trip. It ends his ministry.

Or does it? In Rome, Paul ministers to a different audience—you and me. It is there that he writes much of the New Testament. He's in jail—and will end up martyred—but his ministry continues at a ferocious pace. Paul's journey to Rome may look like a disaster, but in the grand scheme of things, it's a success.

Does life seem to get in the way of your ministry? Do you make plans to do something for the Lord only to watch those plans go up in smoke? Don't let this get you down. God doesn't redirect the plans of just anyone. You have to be useful to get that kind of attention. The trick is to figure out the message.

Think about the times you've been stopped from doing something for Christ. Make some educated guesses as to what God wanted done differently. Then you can ask better questions.

The more you concentrate on what God is trying to tell you, the more you'll learn.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Have you ever had a moment when you were confronted with the possibility of making a big sacrifice?
2. Have you ever caught yourself not loving your enemies?
3. Have you even been in the middle of a trial and suddenly noticed God's hand in it?
4. What's your biggest frustration in trying to lead people to Christ?
5. Tell about a time when God changed the expected path of a ministry plan. What did you think at the time? What do you see now?