



Acts 24 No Jesus, No Justice

Summary: Paul receives no justice because the people accusing him and the man judging him both resist Jesus.

This morning, as we turn to God's Word, the Apostle Paul is being held in protective custody by the Roman empire while his fellow countrymen, the religious and political leaders of Israel seek his death.

But has Paul done anything wrong, anything deserving death? That question will be decided by the Roman political leadership as Felix, the governor, asks both sides to explain their case.

We'll hear the accusations made against Paul, listen to his defense, and see what leadership does. We'll discover that Paul is both innocent and guilty *but* he has a clean conscience before God and man. We'll talk about how that's possible and by the time we end this morning I'll be giving you an opportunity to have your own conscience cleared.

We're at church. I'm a pastor not a politician or a professor. This is a sermon, not a speech or a lecture. And so, you should not be surprised, you should even expect some of the things you hear this morning to move and challenge your soul. Don't think it's strange, it's normal - God is at work when we gather, He's here among us providing personal applications during our corporate experience.

So, let's turn to Scripture together and see what the Spirit has to say to the Church.

When we begin Paul, the Apostle, is being held in protective custody by the Roman governor. He was involved in a riot that broke out recently, and the Jewish leadership is furious with him, but the governor isn't clear about why, so he has called both parties to the capital to explain.

Acts 24:1 Now after five days Ananias the high priest came down with the elders and a certain orator *named* Tertullus. These gave evidence to the governor against Paul.

Tertullus is a guy who's good at public speaking. Remember this was in the days before TV, movies, and YouTube, no one had Spotify or Apple Music or even a radio. So, the ability to speak well, to give speeches, was a skill, it was a form of entertainment, and it was highly respected in society. If you're going to make a case before the governor, you want to bring someone like Tertullus who can make your case sound good.

Notice how he begins, by buttering up the governor.

2 And when he was called upon, Tertullus began his accusation, saying: "Seeing that through you we enjoy great peace, and prosperity is being brought to this nation by your foresight, 3 we accept *it* always and in all places, most noble Felix, with all thankfulness. 4 Nevertheless, not to be tedious to you any further, I beg you to hear, by your courtesy, a few words from us. 5 For we have found this man a plague, a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. 6 He even tried to profane the temple, and we seized him, and wanted to judge him according to our law. 7 But the commander Lysias came by and with great violence took *him* out of our hands, 8 commanding his accusers to come to you. By examining him yourself you may ascertain all these things of which we accuse him." 9 And the Jews also assented, maintaining that these things were so.

You can hear his flowery language, and you can see the group of other men standing on the side nodding their heads in agreement, 'oh yes, yes, it's all true.'

The problem is: Tertullus isn't exactly telling the truth about Felix or about Paul. We'll look at Paul's side of the story in a moment, but first remember what we've said about the political situation in Israel at this time.

Tertullus compliments Felix on the "great peace, and prosperity" he is bringing to the nation, and says they are grateful for his reforms. But in truth, various Jewish groups are rising up and banding together in an effort to throw out the Roman invaders, tensions are rising and they're on a course toward all-out war in just a few years.

Felix has been involved in local politics for over a decade and historians tell us he repeatedly crucified the leaders of various Jewish uprisings and put many of their followers to death in an effort to keep the peace. The truth is: these Jewish leaders know what Felix is capable of and they try to cast Paul in a bad light so he's an easy kill.

Well, we said Tertullus isn't telling the truth about Felix. He's also not telling the truth about Paul.

He accuses Paul of actively agitating and causing division. He says Paul is organizing rallies, inspiring people to protest and rebel, and causing religious and political problems that threaten the Pax Romana – the peace of Rome, which Felix was charged with preserving.

Tertullus wants to paint Christianity as a rebellious movement, and Paul as one of its leaders. But Christians weren't fighting against Rome or trying to start any political revolutions; they were calling people into a spiritual kingdom by turning from sin and toward King Jesus.

In fact, when you read through the book of Acts one of the things you notice is how often the early Christians are brought before Roman officials - from military commanders to politicians and judges - and each time they're found innocent.

And so it should be today – Christians should see their primary allegiance is to King Jesus. We should not be known, primarily, for our support of Joe Biden or Donald Trump or Kanye West, if he’s still running – we should be known as loyal, ardent, faithful and fervent followers of King Jesus who also seek the good and welfare of all the people of this nation, or wherever else we may live, because *King Jesus told us to love God and love our neighbor.*

We should be exceptional citizens on earth because of our citizenship in heaven. But it must always be clear: our first loyalty is to Christ.

So, let’s see how Paul explains his recent actions as an ambassador of the Kingdom of God, how does he respond to the accusations made by the Jews?

Acts 24:10 Then Paul, after the governor had nodded to him to speak, answered: “Inasmuch as I know that you have been for many years a judge of this nation, I do the more cheerfully answer for myself, 11 because you may ascertain that it is no more than twelve days since I went up to Jerusalem to worship. 12 And they neither found me in the temple disputing with anyone nor inciting the crowd, either in the synagogues or in the city. 13 Nor can they prove the things of which they now accuse me.

Paul says, I didn’t start any fights. I didn’t organize any rallies. I didn’t do anything to cause a disturbance – these are the facts and it’s easy for you to verify. I didn’t come to cause problems; I came to worship.

As we listen to his testimony, I encourage you to take note of his approach: be innocent where you’re innocent and be guilty where you’re guilty.

Here’s what I mean. Paul says, they accuse me of creating dissension, leading a rebellion, and profaning the Temple. It’s not true. I insist on my innocence.

But they accuse me of something else too – being a follower of Jesus. Of that, yes, I am as guilty, and my goal is to become increasingly guilty because it’s actually a virtue, not a crime.

Listen to what he says next:

Acts 24:14 But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets. 15 I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of *the* dead, both of *the* just and *the* unjust.

Paul makes the case we have seen him make before, he insists: I’m a good Jew. I love our people. I love our Scripture – the Law and Prophets. I love our God. And I share the hope that there will be a resurrection of the dead where true judgment will occur and true justice will be done.

And as a result, I try to live a particular way:

16 *This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men.*

We all have a conscience – that inner voice and judge that points out when we’re in alignment with our values and when we’ve blown it. Are we doing the right thing, or are we doing things wrong? Paul says he strives – so notice this, effort is involved, it’s intentional - he strives, to pay attention to his conscience and live without offense toward God and men.

And the way that He has found to do that is by following the Way of Jesus, which his accusers call a sect, but which Paul understood as the fulfillment of everything God had done and promised.

He’s making the case that following Jesus actually leads him to do good for others, not cause problems or divisions. In fact, it’s just the opposite: the problems and divisions, the protests and violence are caused by people who reject Paul’s message.

17 *“Now after many years I came to bring alms and offerings to my nation, 18 in the midst of which some Jews from Asia found me purified in the temple, neither with a mob nor with tumult. 19 They ought to have been here before you to object if they had anything against me. 20 Or else let those who are here themselves say if they found any wrongdoing in me while I stood before the council, 21 unless it is for this one statement which I cried out, standing among them, ‘Concerning the resurrection of the dead I am being judged by you this day.’”*

Again, be innocent where you’re innocent, and guilty where you’re guilty.

Paul has nothing to hide so he lays out everything, even bringing up exactly what he said that started the argument in the Sanhedrin that led to him being brought here to testify before the governor.

22 *But when Felix heard these things, having more accurate knowledge of the Way,*

Felix knows a few things about Jesus and the early church, this isn’t new to him, he knows this is primarily a religious, not a criminal matter but instead of just dismissing the case, he defers his final judgment.

he adjourned the proceedings and said, “When Lysias the commander comes down, I will make a decision on your case.” 23 So he commanded the centurion to keep Paul and to let him have liberty, and told him not to forbid any of his friends to provide for or visit him.

Remember, Paul is a Jew by birth, but also a Roman citizen, so he has some rights – he’s going to be kept in protective custody, but it’s more like house arrest than solitary confinement.

Felix says this is so that he can hear what the commander up in Jerusalem has to say, the one who originally took Paul into custody, but he doesn’t need to. Lysias already sent him a letter saying (we read it in 23:29) *“I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment.”*

There is no indication that Felix ever sent for Lysias or that Lysias ever came. Felix simply made a decision not to decide. He keeps Paul in jail because he knows releasing Paul will anger the Jewish leaders he’s trying to rule.

24 And after some days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. 25 Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, “Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you.” 26 Meanwhile he also hoped that money would be given him by Paul, that he might release him. Therefore he sent for him more often and conversed with him. 27 But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound.

This is historical fact – Festus replaced Felix in 60 AD and the reason why is kind of ironic in light of what we’ve just read.

All this happened in Caesarea, the Roman capital for Israel. And, as we mentioned earlier, things were getting increasingly tense politically as some Jewish factions insisted on more and more autonomy. Well, not long after Tertullus falsely praised Felix for all the peace they were enjoying under his rule, hostilities finally broke out between Jews and Greeks in Caesarea.

Felix sent in troops to break things up and they retaliated viciously against the Jews who then sent a delegation to Rome to complain, basically making the case that Felix could have prevented all this from happening if he was a better leader.

Emperor Nero then recalled Felix to Rome for questioning. Fortunately, he had a well-connected brother who stepped in and intervened, or he could have lost his life.

So, what are we to make of all this? The accusations against Paul, his own claims of innocence and guilt, and the political maneuvering of a leader when there was an obvious, but difficult decision to make.

I put it this way in the title of the sermon: no Jesus, no justice.

Paul is falsely accused, slandered by people who don't know or serve King Jesus. And when he counters their accusations and proves them false, the man with the authority to release him will not, because the man doesn't know or serve King Jesus. No Jesus, no justice.

We have a group of Jewish leaders and a Roman politician both looking out for their own interests and in between them, a single man, a loyal servant of King Jesus, is trapped.

He's deprived of justice today, but he believes with all his heart that the day of justice will come.

He told Felix he believes there will be a resurrection of the dead, both the just and the unjust when everyone will appear before God for judgment.

There will be a day for justice - it may come slowly, but make no mistake my friends, it will come.

And what will happen then?

God, the righteous judge will charge people with every wrong they have ever done. Big, little, recent, or a long time ago, everything you've ever done will be judged. Things you meant to do and things that were an 'oops.' Things you regret and things you try to justify or explain away. Everything.

How can anyone face such judgment?

They can't. We would all wither before the white-hot purity, and righteousness of the holy God. We would melt in our guilt and shame.

And that is why Jesus came. Paul is accused of following the Way, and remember we said be innocent where you're innocent and guilty where you're guilty, Paul denied most of their charges, but he relished this one. It was true. He believed and followed Jesus who said:

John 14:6 I am the Way, the truth, and the life and no one comes to the Father except through Me.

In other words, no one will pass the final judgment, no one will be declared innocent and free *unless they come through Jesus.*

God says anyone can receive salvation, there are no restrictions, there is no prejudice, there is no discrimination, anyone and everyone can come to God, He is calling people from every tribe, every nation, every people group and language, every imaginable background – perfect little family or completely messed up - but everyone has to come through the same door – the way made possible by Jesus.

Do you believe this?

Do you believe there will be a resurrection of the dead? Of the just and the unjust? Do you believe that God will judge us? Do you believe that one day every wrong done to you will be judged? Every time someone was mean to you, or hurt you, personally or professionally, on the playground or in the conference room; every time they said something to your face or behind your back; every single thing that was wrong, hurtful, unjust, will face the blistering heat of the holy, righteous and absolutely pure justice of God?

Do you believe this? Do you believe there is a judgment to come?

And do you believe it's not just about the wrong done to you, but also about the wrongs you have done? Do you believe that you should face the cries for justice too? Does your conscience ever condemn you? Have you found a place to put your guilt, your shame, your regret, your remorse?

Or do you carry them around with you? Does the voice in your head constantly remind you of what you've done or what you've experienced? Are you able to shove it out at times, or bury it with work or distractions? Does it come back every now and then when you're alone or it's quiet? Does it come back sometimes out of no where and for no reason?

How is your conscience?

Paul says

15 I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of *the* dead, both of *the* just and *the* unjust. 16 This *being* so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men.

Now that's important, super, super important – he says, I always strive to have a clean conscience in my relationships with both God and people *because I believe there will be a resurrection and a judgment.*

Well friends, the only way you can have a truly clean conscience toward God is to know you that you will experience that resurrection and survive that judgement – to know that you have been forgiven - and the only way that you can know you have been forgiven is to receive the promises of God in Christ. To know, and believe, that Jesus really is the Way, the truth, and the life and then - to come to the Father through Him.

Because here's the thing: when you surrender your life to God, when you confess the wrongs you have done and ask for forgiveness in Christ, He hears you. And it's not like you have to work to get his attention - He's actually the One who has been poking and prodding you with all that conviction in the first place. God is more interested in your spiritual condition and final judgment than you are.

The Scriptures tell us, and we know by experience, that we can defile our conscience, we can sear our conscience, we can silence our conscience. We can shut out the voice that is calling us to righteousness, holiness and justice.

That's what Felix did. He had a little bit of spiritual curiosity. He heard about Jesus and His followers. He knew about the Way. And he had some questions. He brought in his wife and they talked with Paul.

And Paul reasoned with them. He had good answers for their questions.

The claims of Christ make sense – they are reasonable. I've said so many times before: even the library charges you a fine for breaking the rules, if you keep a book too long you have to pay for your infraction. Why should God have less authority than the librarian? But, if you break His rules, how will you ever pay His fines? You can't. And so, Jesus offers to pay for you.

Paul reasoned with Felix and his wife about these things. He reasoned with them about the need for righteousness – the fact that we all know there are things we've done and said that we're not proud of. None of us is as righteous as we know we should be, we've all failed, we're all guilty.

And he reasoned them with them about self-control. There are things you should have done, but you didn't. There are things you should be doing right now, but you don't, or you do sometimes, but not as consistently as you should. And sometimes people suffer as a result. You can't control yourself as well or as often as you wish you could.

Paul also reasoned with them about the judgment to come. Knowing what you know about your failures and shortcomings, how will you face the judgment? What's your plea and what's your defense. You're guilty and you know it.

It's all very reasonable. And your conscience agrees. And God is whispering to you. But you have to choose. Will you push it off like Felix and say, 'all right, all right, you've made some good points, maybe we can talk again.' Or, will you surrender to God and come to the moment of decision where you see things His way, drop all your resistance, and surrender?

Paul says you can live with a clean conscience toward God and people. Is that what you experience?

It won't be easy. Notice he says he *strives* to live this way. But it is possible. And when you blow it, forgiveness is easy to find. You just go right back to where you began. You confess what you have done wrong to God, and if necessary, you confess what you have done wrong to anyone you have hurt or disappointed, and you ask for forgiveness.

I want us to take some time this morning to listen to our conscience – is it clean, is it clear? Is there anything we need to address or take care of?

Matt spoke last week, and if you didn't hear it, you need to grab that podcast, it's one you'll want to share with friends – but Matt spoke last week about experiencing conviction vs condemnation and he said, you know how you can tell the difference? God doesn't call you

names. When you are under conviction from God, you have a sense of guilt, a sense of shame, a sense that I should never do that again, but He doesn't call you names.

If you're hearing a voice in your head and heart calling you a loser, a liar, a tramp, a nobody, dirty, broken, worthless, that of course you did that thing because that's just what you are, that's what you've become, all that stuff the pastor is saying, that's for other people but not for you because he doesn't know what you've been through or what you've done – listen, none of that is from God.

I've often expressed it this way – conviction comes from the Holy Spirit and points you to Jesus to find acceptance and forgiveness; condemnation comes from the devil and drives you away from God into further isolation to deal with things on your own. God pricks your conscience, he presses you with a sense of conviction, but only to call you closer to Him.

1 John 1:9 *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

This morning we're going to celebrate communion. We're going to remember the blood that Jesus shed and the body that hung on the cross to make a way for us to have peace with God – we're going to remind ourselves and each other that the penalty for sin has been paid.

We're going to get up out of our seats and come grab a piece of bread and a little cup and publicly declare, 'I'm a sinner. I've blown it. I know it. But I have found forgiveness in Christ.'

You're going to walk over and declare, 'I believe there will be a resurrection of the dead, of the just and the unjust, and I'm pleading Jesus as my defense.'

But listen to me, because this is super, super, important. Don't do it if you don't mean it. Don't get up and participate if you're not convinced. Felix wasn't. He said let's talk more later. And maybe that's someone here this morning.

I want you to get up. I want you to make this decision. There are people all over this room that want you to make that decision. But don't do it if you don't believe. Don't let this be another lie or half truth in your life. Be innocent where you're innocent and guilty where you're guilty. Know where you stand and why.

I'm going to lead us in prayer right now, and then give you a moment for some self-reflection before God, and when you're ready, if you're able to say your conscience is clean, then you come forward and grab the elements and we'll take them together in just a moment.

One last thing – God will clear you – instantly, of anything you ask, but He might also give you homework. He might give you something to do BECAUSE you're clean – not to MAKE

you clean, Jesus does that, but ONCE you're clean, He may give you homework, some reconciliation you need to pursue, some reparation you need to make – be open to that.

Let's pray.