

Acts 24:1-27: Life With Jesus vs. Life Without Jesus

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I. Introduction

Is life with Jesus really that different? Don't Christians face the same miserable life with the same miserable results? What hope do they have that non-Christians don't have? They cry, they hurt, they fail, their pain is just as real as everyone else's, so why become a Christian? It's not that you won't hurt; it's that Jesus will always be by your side and even your pain will look differently.

II. Acts 24:1-27: Trying to Get What You Want With Jesus and Trying to Get It Without Him

24:1-9, five days after commander Lysias sent Paul under armed guard to governor Felix in Caesarea, his accusers arrived: Ananias, the high priest and the elders (i.e., some of the Pharisees who didn't side with Paul earlier, 23:9). They brought with them a very slick attorney named Tertullus who was a gentile. He was necessary because he knew Roman law (which incidentally required accusers to meet their accused face-to-face [Acts 25:16]). Luke records a summary of Tertullus' speech, which began with flattery made up of lies. Felix didn't bring peace and prosperity to Judea, in fact, there were many uprisings during his oppressive reign which is why Nero removed him from office two years after Paul's trial. The civil unrest that followed led to the Jews rebelling against Rome and the complete destruction of Jerusalem. As for prosperity, Felix actually encouraged bands of thieves and shared in their spoil.

Notice the charges against Paul; they're serious: he was a public menace, incited insurrection among Jews worldwide, was a ringleader of the Nazarene sect, and tried to profane Israel's temple. Two of these were capital crimes: inciting revolt against the Roman government and practicing an unauthorized religion, which is what Tertullus implies when he says "sect of the Nazarenes." Profaning Israel's temple may've been against Israel's law, but not Roman law, in fact, Israel had permission to kill even Roman citizens who violated their temple. Tertullus also lied when he said that the Sanhedrin arrested Paul: he was seized by a mob and was then taken into custody by the Romans. After his speech, Ananias and the Pharisees echo what Tertullus said.

24:10-21, in his response, Paul refutes each of the charges. He doesn't begin with flattery but a statement of fact about Felix's tenure. He's also happy to answer the charges. Regarding him being a public menace and an insurrectionist, he hasn't been in the country long enough to start and insurrection; it's only been 12 days. Regarding him defiling the temple, when they grabbed him in the temple, he was neither disputing with anyone nor inciting the crowd, in fact, he did no such thing anywhere in Jerusalem. Regarding him participating in an illegal religion, he admits to being a "Nazarene," but what he says about it next turns the tables on Ananias and the Pharisees. Instead of it being an illegal sect, Paul says that it's actually the true Judaism! That is, what Paul worshiped and followed was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and everything written in Israel's holy Scriptures (Old Testament). Paul then points to the central hope of Judaism: the resurrection of the dead, which the Pharisees also believe. One day God will set all things right, the just and unjust will be revealed, which is why Paul seeks to offend no one, neither God nor man. He's saying to them, "I'm the real God-worshipper here; I haven't forsaken my roots nor Israel and especially its God. I follow Him implicitly; I'm not a Law-breaker or a blasphemer. To the contrary, I worship the God of my fathers and He's revealed Himself through Jesus Christ. The Lord will one day judge everything as He promised. My hope is in Him and His future judgment!"

Because Paul argues his case doesn't mean he's trusting the Roman legal system. He trusts the God who put these authorities in place (Romans 13). He knows that God will ultimately get it right.

Not only was Paul not an insurrectionist or blasphemer, he actually came to Jerusalem to worship God with his offerings (at the Feast of Pentecost) and to bring financial aid to God's people from the Gentiles! who likewise worshiped God (Acts 11:27-30; Romans 15:25-27). And while he was worshipping God in the temple peacefully and alone the Jews from Asia who started all this grabbed him. If Paul was indeed guilty, then why weren't they there to accuse him? In fact, why didn't the high priest and the Pharisees, who were at Paul's trial before the Sanhedrin, why didn't they mention the charges they had against him from that trial? Because they had none, in fact the only charge they can bring up is Paul's statement on resurrection, a statement that led many Pharisees to pronounce him innocent (23:9). Thus, he was not guilty of any of these charges.

24:22-23, Felix is in a bit of a bind. By his reaction, it's clear that he believes Paul's broken no Roman laws or any Jewish laws. But he can't let Paul go free for fear that it might cause him problems with the Jewish leaders. So Felix stalls the case. He tells Paul a fairy tale about making a decision on his case after Lysias arrives (he never did). And since Paul was innocent and it was illegal to imprison a Roman citizen without charges, he gives Paul wide latitude and freedom when he tells the centurion to keep him in custody, including allowing him whatever visitors he wanted.

24:24-27, after some days, Felix came with his wife Drusilla and he sent for Paul. Paul explained to him concerning faith in Christ. But when Paul discussed righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, the Lord convicted Felix and he was afraid. So he sent Paul away. Why was he afraid? Because everything that Paul spoke of—righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come—Felix was guilty of. He used his position to fulfill his lust and greed, e.g., Felix got his wife Drusilla (daughter of Herod Agrippa I [Acts 12] and sister of Herod Agrippa II [Acts 25:13ff]) to divorce her first husband and she became his third wife. Felix continued calling for Paul, but it was in hopes that he might get some bribe money from him (since Paul had recently arrived with a lot of money as aid for God's people, Felix thought Paul might bribe him). Two years went by and nothing happened with Paul's case. Eventually Caesar Nero replaced Felix with Festus because of the civil unrest under his rule (e.g., there was a fight between Jews and Gentiles in the Caesarean marketplace. Felix sent his soldiers in and they killed many Jews. The Jews made a formal complaint to Nero who then recalled Felix to Rome. He was let off only after his brother Pallas pleaded with Nero). But if Roman law demanded that a prisoner be released if he hadn't been prosecuted within two years, why didn't Felix let him go? Because he was in trouble with the Jews who complained to Nero. Wanting to curry favor with them, he left Paul in custody. Would you lose your hope in Jesus' promise to get you to Rome after two years in prison?

Life with Jesus vs. Life without Him, there are only two choices in this world, living life with Jesus or without Him. What does it look like to live it without Him? How do Ananias and the Pharisees try to get what they want from Felix? They try to win the judge's favor by hiring a slick lawyer. Who do they appeal to and did it work? They're relying on themselves; they think they know the answer. But "scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" doesn't always work, especially if the power you're trying to scratch is more greedy and wicked than you. Who did Paul appeal to? Jesus. So there's no need to flatter the judge, in fact, if you get the judge alone, show him how wicked he is. But what if Felix kills him? Jesus has Paul whether he lives—Paul was in custody, but had free rein—or dies—Paul knows that Jesus will sort things out between the just and unjust. Without Jesus, even if you're a governor, you're still looking for scraps from a prisoner named Paul. Can anything in this world take your hope? With Satan by your side, yes. But not if you're walking with Jesus in His Kingdom: Gideon without Jesus vs. Gideon with Jesus, Judges 6-8.



III. Conclusion

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, because you may ascertain that it is no more than twelve days since I went up to Jerusalem to worship. And they neither found me in the temple disputing with anyone nor inciting the crowd, either in the synagogues or in the city. Nor can they prove the things of which they now accuse me. 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. 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."