

Caught in the Crucible

Acts: More than a Movement, Part 2

Acts 22:30-24:27

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Have you noticed how Josh arranged the preachers during his sabbatical? He made sure there was some age and maturity interspersed among the youth and vitality of his regular preaching team. Jeremy and Lucas were followed by Dr. Bryan and Tom Macy. And I was sandwiched between Jordan and Curt Romig. Actually I think that's good because our whole congregation is a wonderful balance between youth and old age. Every Sunday there are scores of little children in our services, and at the same time we have a wonderful representation of senior citizens. I'm glad to represent the geezers and geezerettes this morning as best I can.

I've entitled my sermon, *Caught in the Crucible*. When a craftsman wants to make a piece of gold jewelry from a mold, he first melts a bar of gold and burns all the impurities out of it. To do this he uses a crucible, which is a vessel for melting substances that require a high degree of heat. The term crucible has symbolically come to refer to a severe test. In the 23rd and 24th chapters of Acts we find two very different individuals being tested by God in two very different crucibles for two very different purposes. The apostle Paul passes his test; Governor Felix fails his. I trust that as we examine these chapters the Spirit of God will teach us something about how to handle the crucibles in our own lives.

Let's start with a brief review of where we are in the book of Acts. Paul arrived in Jerusalem at the end of his second missionary journey and was gladly received by the believers there. However, some Jews from Asia where he had been planting churches followed him there, trumped up charges against him, and started a riot. A Roman commander rescued him at the last minute and granted him the privilege of speaking to the crowd. As Jordan shared so well last Sunday, Paul's defense consisted essentially of his personal story (what we would call his testimony). The Jews listened attentively until he mentioned his ministry to Gentiles. Then they lost it, taking their clothes off, throwing dust in the air, and shouting, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live" (Acts 22:22). They simply couldn't handle the notion that God could care about those pagan Gentiles. Of course the whole reason we celebrate missions is that God does care about the nations.

Again the Roman commander rescued Paul, but this time he ordered him to be interrogated to discover why the Jews hated him so. The standard method of interrogation was by torture, so Paul was stretched out to be flogged, i.e. beaten with whips embedded with bits of bone and metal. But Paul protested on the grounds of his Roman citizenship. The commander refrained from further mistreatment, opting instead for Paul to be brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin to ascertain what the charges were against him.

That's where we begin today and we will be examining most of chapters 23 and 24. This is a long passage, and we will be reading it in sections. Let me say that the reading of the Scripture should not be viewed as preliminary to the sermon; it's the most important part of the sermon. I trust that what I have to say by way of explanation is helpful, but only the Word of God is inspired and inerrant. Let's begin with 23:1-22.

Acts 23:1-22¹

¹And looking intently at the council, Paul said, “Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.”² And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. ³Then 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?”⁴ Those who stood by said, “Would you revile God’s high priest?”

⁵And 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.’”

⁶Now 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.”

⁷And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. ⁹Then 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?”¹⁰ 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.

¹¹The 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.”

¹²When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. ¹³There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. ¹⁴They 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. ¹⁵Now 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.”

¹⁶Now the son of Paul’s sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. ¹⁷Paul called one of the centurions and said, “Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him.”¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹ The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, “What is it that you have to tell me?”²⁰ 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. ²¹But 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.”²² So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, “Tell no one that you have informed me of these things.”

THE APOSTLE PAUL IS CAUGHT IN THE CRUCIBLE OF SUFFERING.

The first crucible we will examine is the crucible of suffering. Suffering is part and parcel of the human condition, even for Christians. Maybe I should say *especially* for Christians. Someone has said that a Christian is like a tea bag—not worth much until it has gone through some hot water. That may be, but it’s important to recognize not all suffering is of the same kind or of the same value spiritually. Sometimes we suffer because of our sin or stupidity or mistakes. The only value in that kind of suffering comes from learning not to repeat it. At other times suffering is outside our control and is used by God to perfect us and make us more like his Son.

The apostle Paul was legendary in respect to suffering for his faith, but *even he* at times suffered unnecessarily. For Paul, too, made some mistakes that produced negative consequences in his life.

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

By the way, I don't think we should be too reticent to acknowledge that the apostles were human and therefore mistake prone. Our doctrine of inspiration tells us that the Holy Spirit superintended their writing of Scripture so it was inerrant, but in their personal lives they certainly were not above making mistakes.

One example is found here at the beginning of chapter 23 when Paul lashes out in anger at the high priest, calling him a whitewashed wall, which in our vernacular might be "an empty suit." That's exactly what he was, but Paul has to acknowledge that it wasn't for him to say it. God calls upon his people to respect their leaders, at least the office if not the person. Then in verse 6 when Paul learns that there are Sadducees as well as Pharisees present in the Council, he identifies himself as a Pharisee and specifically mentions his faith in the resurrection. He apparently does this to pit the one group against the other because he knows the Sadducees don't believe in the resurrection. If he can get them to fight with one another, maybe they'll leave him alone. But the strategy backfires and the Roman commander once again has to step in and rescue him as he is about to be torn limb from limb.

My point is simply that sometimes we get caught in a crucible of suffering of our own making. But the majority of the suffering Paul endures in this passage is not his own fault; it comes from four sources.

Physical Pain (23:2, 10): In verse 2 the apostle is struck in the mouth and in verse 10 he is mauled by the crowd, as he had been back in chapter 21. And throughout these two chapters Paul is in custody. Just being a prisoner in those days meant automatic suffering from neglect and mistreatment. Ancient prisons were no Club Gitmo.

Fearful Threats (22:24ff; 23:12ff): At the end of chapter 22 Paul was threatened with scourging. Then in the early part of 23 he is threatened with being torn limb from limb by the rioters. But the main threat is this conspiracy against his life. When forty men vow to eat nothing until they have killed you, you know you're in trouble.

Loneliness (24:27): Loneliness must have been a trial for him as well. In the last verse of chapter 24 we learn that Paul was kept in prison for over two years. In the early days of his detention his friends were allowed to visit him, but there is no proof this continued, and even if it did, he undoubtedly spent many lonely hours wondering what was in store for him.

False Accusations (24:1-9): Paul had to deal with false accusations everywhere he went. We saw it last week in chapter 21 as the crowds accused Paul of stirring up dissension against the Jews and defiling the temple by bringing a Gentile, Trophimus, into the Holy Place, which he had not done. But in the opening verses of chapter 24 the false charges are lodged, not by a rioting crowd but by the legal system itself. We're jumping ahead in the story here to 23:23.

When the plot by the forty hungry men is revealed, the Roman commander spirits Paul out of Jerusalem, accompanied by four hundred soldiers, and they take him to Caesarea, the seat of the Roman government in Palestine. There Governor Felix agrees to hear Paul's case once the Jewish accusers arrive from Jerusalem. In the meantime, he is kept under guard in Herod's palace, no doubt in the dungeon. In Acts 24:1-9 we find Tertullus, an attorney of sorts, heaping false accusations on Paul while heaping flattery on the judge.

Acts 24:1-9

¹And 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. ²And 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,³ in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude.⁴ But, to detain you no further, I beg you in your kindness to hear us briefly.⁵ 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.⁶ He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him [and we would have judged him according to our law.]⁷ [But the chief captain Lysias came and with great violence took him out of our hands,]⁸ [commanding his accusers to come before you.] By examining him yourself you will be able to find out from him about everything of which we accuse him.”

⁹*The Jews also joined in the charge, affirming that all these things were so.*

Now as we consider these four ways in which Paul suffered, there is probably no one in this congregation who can match him, but there are some who have been tested to a considerable degree in the crucible of suffering. In fact, I know of individuals in this church who have been tested in each of the four ways Paul was tested in our text.

Take **physical pain**. Some people I know have chronic pain that even pain specialists have been unable to control. It can be excruciating. But, friends, we must understand that physical pain is not without spiritual value. In his brilliant book, *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis addresses the question of God’s use of pain in our lives for good. Sometimes it is a megaphone he uses to get our attention. At other times it is a vivid reminder of the consequences of disobedience so that we don’t continue down that path. In still other cases pain is the tool of the wounded surgeon. Dorothy Sayers has expressed that concept so well. She writes,

For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—he had the honesty and courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with his creation, he has kept his own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that he has not exacted from himself. He has himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death.

Jesus dignified pain. Of all the kinds of lives he could have lived, he chose a suffering life, and therefore, we can never say about a person, “He must be suffering because of some sin he committed.” That may be true but not necessarily. Jesus, who committed no sin, also suffered.

Sometimes **threats of suffering** are harder to handle than actual suffering. We often fear the unknown more than reality. That is why a person who fears losing his job will often feel more stress than the one who has already lost his. The one who is awaiting the pathology report can suffer more than the one who has already received the bad news.

Loneliness is a kind of emotional pain caused by social or emotional isolation from intimate relationships. It is not necessarily to be equated with aloneness, for some people feel lonely even when they are around people they know. By the way, the solution to loneliness is not found in being active on social media. Quite the opposite! We need live, personal contact with real people, people with skin on.

Regarding **false accusations**, I don’t know about you, but I don’t even like it when people accuse me of things I’ve actually done, much less tell lies or misrepresent my motives. I have a friend in this church who has been under a constant barrage of false accusations from a former spouse. These are not just irritating; they also do great damage to other relationships.

Yes, the crucible of suffering is a common and difficult experience in the lives of believers. But the real issue is how we respond to it. Someone has said that a person can respond to suffering like an egg or like a potato. An egg goes into the water soft and comes out hard. A potato goes into the boiling water hard but comes out pliable. The apostle Paul was more like the potato in that he learned to cope while in the crucible of suffering.

PAUL COPED WITH THE CRUCIBLE OF SUFFERING.

The Promises of God (23:11): In 23:11 we read, “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.”” Paul may have been in danger in Jerusalem, but God promised him he would not die there. He had work to do in Rome. So Paul persevered by means of the promises of God.

Charles Spurgeon, the great nineteenth century London preacher, wrote, “Suffering is meant not only to burn out the dross but to burn in the promises.” Promises like, “I will never leave you or forsake you;” “My God shall supply all your needs;” and “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

Simple Acts of Self-preservation (23:17; 24:10ff): Paul also coped by means of acts of self-preservation in chapter 22 when he appealed to the fact that he was a Roman citizen to avoid being tortured. Then in chapter 23 he tried to prevent further suffering by directing his nephew to report the plot that had been conceived to murder him. Paul could have said to his nephew, “Don’t worry son, God is in control and those forty men don’t have a chance until God says my time is up.” And that is true, in a sense. But one of the ways God uses to protect his children is by use of rational behavior. Paul reported the incident through his nephew and was spared, at least for the time being.

Faithful Witness (23:1; 24:24-26): A third way Paul coped with the crucible of suffering is by means of faithful witness. Paul spoke freely everywhere he went about his faith in Christ. We saw it last week in front of the crowds in Jerusalem, we see it in chapter 23 before the Sanhedrin, and we will see it in chapter 24 before Governor Felix. Nothing is more powerful than the personal witness of a person who has suffered greatly but remains faithful to the Lord. Joni Eareckson’s book, *A Step Further*, is very solid theologically and could well have been written by a pastor or seminary professor, but the reason the book is so powerful is that it comes from the heart of one who has suffered as she has. And not only do the people who read it gain strength, but the one who witnesses also is strengthened.

We have seen Paul caught in the crucible of suffering and we have seen how he coped with it in a godly manner. But quickly I want to turn to the other principal character in our text today, the Roman governor Felix, who was also caught in a crucible of sorts. I call it the crucible of conviction.

GOVERNOR FELIX IS CAUGHT IN THE CRUCIBLE OF CONVICTION.

We’ve already noted the false accusations lodged by the prosecutor Tertullus against Paul in the early verses of chapter 24. Now I want us to read Paul’s response.

Acts 24:10-27

¹⁰ *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. ¹¹You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem, ¹²and 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. ¹³Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me. ¹⁴But 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, ¹⁵having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. ¹⁶So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. ¹⁷Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings. ¹⁸While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult. But some Jews from Asia-- ¹⁹they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me. ²⁰Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council, ²¹other 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.'"

²²But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, "When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case." ²³Then 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.

²⁴After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, "Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you." ²⁶At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him. ²⁷When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

First a word about this man Felix. He was the successor to Pontius Pilate and had already been governor of the province of Judea for five years at the time these events occurred. He was born a slave, but through the influence of his brother, who had become a friend of the emperor, he was freed from slavery and eventually was appointed governor, the first slave in history to become governor of a Roman province.

Felix was completely unscrupulous. By the time he enters our story he has been married to three different princesses, the third being the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I, Drusilla, who was still a teenager. He was known to hire thugs to eliminate even friends who happened to get in the way of his political ambitions. In fact, he was so corrupt that when Paul stands up to speak he can think of nothing kind to say about the man. In contrast to the flattery Tertullus had heaped on Felix, Paul simply says "for many years you have been a judge over this nation" (verse 10). That's all that could be said without exaggeration.

It is before such a judge that the apostle finds himself. And it is such a man whom God puts into the crucible of conviction. Four factors serve to convict Felix: the facts, his own experience, Paul's testimony, and the truth of God's Word.

The Facts (24:10-21): Tertullus, you will recall, had made essentially three charges against Paul: a *personal* accusation to the effect that he was a pest; a *political* accusation that he had stirred up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world; and a *religious* accusation that he was the ringleader of a cult.

Paul's defense is simple: First, he claims he hasn't had time to be a pest. It's only been twelve days since he arrived in Jerusalem. Second, he hasn't been seen disputing with anybody, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city. And no one has any proof otherwise. But Paul *does* admit to being a ringleader of what they call a cult but he calls "the Way," i.e. the way to God! The heresy he is being accused of is actually the fulfillment of the Old Testament Jewish faith. He believes the entire Scriptures and especially that there will be a resurrection of the dead. He tries daily to have a

conscience void of offense to man or God. Is he anti-Jewish? How could he be, when he himself is Jewish and now is bringing a gift of love to his nation to help them in their time of trial! No, the charges are all trumped up by foreign Jews who haven't even shown up for the trial (verse 19)! If he made a mistake, Paul admits in verse 21, it was trying to divide the Pharisees and Sadducees by shouting about the resurrection.

Now these facts are clear as presented by Paul. And Felix is obviously convinced that Paul is innocent of the charges brought against him, just as his predecessor Pilate was convinced that Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against him. In other words, he is convicted by the facts he hears. But that is not all that convicts him.

His Personal Experience (24:22): In verse 22 we learn that Felix had a “rather accurate knowledge of the Way.” So this apparently is not the first contact Felix has had with Christians. Perhaps he had some personal contact with some early disciples. We do not know, but he is certainly not ignorant of Christianity.

Paul's Testimony of Faith in Jesus (24:24): In verse 24 we learn that both Felix and Drusilla listen to Paul's faith story. What an opportunity for Paul to speak to this political leader and his wife about the most important thing in life—one's relationship with Christ. But Felix also hears something else from Paul.

The Truth of God's Word (24:25): In verse 25 we learn that Paul seizes the opportunity to speak boldly to Felix not only about faith in Jesus but also about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come. These subjects all relate to salvation in Christ and the solution to human sin. Felix needed righteousness in contrast to the injustice which had constantly characterized his regime. He also needed self-control, especially in the area of sexual immorality, and the judgment to come was something he would have to face unless he repented.

The combination of Paul's defense, Felix's personal experience with the Way, Paul's personal testimony of faith in Christ, and the truth of God's Word is so powerful that Felix is alarmed. The Greek term indicates he actually trembled! The wise course of action, of course, would be for him to surrender to the truth and put his faith in Christ. After all, that is why the Spirit of God convicts us. But Felix foolishly tries to escape from the crucible of conviction.

GOVERNOR FELIX TRIED TO ESCAPE THE CRUCIBLE OF CONVICTION.

Procrastination (24:22, 25-27): In verse 22 we are told that after hearing Paul's defense and being convinced of his innocence, Felix nevertheless “put them off, saying, ‘When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case.’” More importantly, when clearly under the conviction of the Spirit he says to Paul, “Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you.”

Let me tell you that if you're trying to escape the conviction of your conscience nothing works like procrastination! If you put God off and wait him out, I can almost assure you that eventually the conviction will pass and your conscience will no longer bother you. But it won't be because your conscience has been cleared but rather because it has been dulled. Eventually God will quit convicting you, but that is not a positive thing; in fact, it is the most dangerous place you can possibly be.

Materialism (24:26): An added factor in Felix's refusal to respond to the convicting work of God's Spirit was greed, or materialism. Verse 26 indicates that Felix was looking for a bribe from Paul and that is why he would send for him quite often and converse with him. Now why would a Roman

governor be looking for money from an itinerant preacher? I think the key is Paul's testimony in verse 17, "Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings." When Felix heard about the money Paul was bringing from the churches in Asia Minor for the poor people in Jerusalem, he could think of nothing else. He wanted a piece of that action.

Desire for Human Approval (24:27): The last phrase in the chapter says, "desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison." Felix makes the same mistake his predecessor, Pilate, made in the trial of Jesus, and it's the same mistake that thousands make today—postponing a decision about Christ or making the wrong one because of the desire for human approval. I fear especially for young people, for whom peer pressure is so very strong. How tragic that some are willing to sell their spiritual birthright for a mess of temporary popularity.

Conclusion

Paul and Felix both found themselves in crucibles that were hard to endure. Paul coped with his and received a crown. In 2 Timothy 4:6-8 at the very end of his life, Paul speaks of his suffering: "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing."

I would say to those of you who find yourselves in the crucible of suffering: learn to cope by means of the promises of God, rational behavior, and faithful witness. Suffering is hard to endure, but its glorious purpose is to produce purity and maturity and ultimate vindication. In fact, finding yourself in the crucible of suffering is an indication that God isn't through with you yet.

Whereas Paul coped with his crucible and received a crown, Felix tried to escape his and received condemnation. We don't hear anything further about Felix, but we can ascertain his end by reading John 3:16-18: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God."

Felix was close to becoming a Christian, but as you have always heard, "close" counts only in horseshoes, hand grenades, and nuclear war. It sure doesn't count in the spiritual realm. Felix escaped the very crucible that was designed to bring him to the point of eternal salvation.

Satan will probably not try to convince you that there is no heaven or that there is no hell. But he will surely try to convince you that there is no hurry. The Bible says *now* is the accepted time; *now* is the day of salvation.