

Paul Before Governor Felix

New Testament Survey - Lesson 25

I get songs stuck in my head. Sometimes I go to sleep to a song, and when I wake up, I have the same song repeating. (I then wonder if the song was playing all night in my brain or whether I hit the pause button once I went under, and it started playing from the place where it left off).

Some songs are prompted by my circumstances. When I am playing racquetball, and the score becomes 7-6, I hear the instrumental start to the song from The Music Man, “76 Trombones in the big parade!” A bit more appropriate example often comes on Sunday. It is not at all uncommon for me to have John Michael Talbot’s refrain, “Come, worship the Lord. For we are his people, the flock that he shepherds. Hallelujah!” repeating in my mind as I drive to church.

Maybe this is another example of my weirdness, but I suspect many people operate similarly. I think it is something about our brains. It makes you wonder what Psalms or songs Paul might have in his mind while he lived. I suspect for Paul, or most anyone else steeped in the Psalms, one likely candidate for those days when headed to the temple might have been Psalm 84. For decades, Psalm 84 has touched my heart and guided my thoughts.

*How lovely is your dwelling place,
Oh LORD of Hosts!
My soul longs, yes, faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and flesh sing for joy
to the living God.
Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O LORD of Hosts,
my King and my God.
Blessed are those who dwell in your house,
ever singing your praise!*

*Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.
As they go through the Valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.
They go from strength to strength;*

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each one appears before Zion.

*O LORD God of Hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob!
Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed!*

*For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of wickedness.
For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
the Lord bestows favor and honor.
No good thing does he withhold
from those who walk uprightly.
O LORD of Hosts,
blessed is the one who trusts in you!*

This psalm is wonderful on many levels. It is a psalm designed around the splendor of coming into the temple to worship our Lord. The temple was deemed, poetically, as the dwelling place of God. The temple courts were a place of anticipation, fellowship, security, and worship. No wonder the Psalmist longs for the temple courts. Vision of a nesting sparrow shows delight even by creation at being in the temple.

The Psalmist recognizes the blessing on those who spend time in the temple. These are people who “go through the Valley of Baca” and “make it a place of springs.” We lose the beauty of the line if we fail to understand the Hebrew behind it. “Baca” is Hebrew for “weeping” or “crying.”¹ The verse recognizes that time in God’s presence and in worship takes our tears and turns them into something useful and beneficial. Paul would later say that we find God’s strength in our weakness, echoing the Psalmist that we go from “strength to strength” and that our tears become springs.

It is for good reason the Psalmist would rather be a doorkeeper at the temple than live in the most luxurious dwellings of the wicked. God bestows favor and honor; he withholds no good thing from his followers who walk uprightly. Why would we not want to be constantly in the presence of such a God?

This Psalm has particularly ministered to me during the rougher times of life. It is

¹ Botterweck and Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans 1977) Vol. 2 at 116ff. The Hebrew root is בָּחַח and can take the form בָּחַח.

a Psalm that would compel me to worship and seek God. It was a Psalm of encouragement that God would turn tears into life-nourishing springs.

I wonder how Paul might have considered the psalm in light of the events we are studying. This is surely a Psalm Paul knew well. We read Paul quoting the Psalms often (Rom. 3:4, 10; Eph. 4:8, etc.). When we last left Paul, he had awakened one morning and followed through with the plans set up by the church leaders. He went to the temple, to the “lovely courts” referenced by Psalm 84.² This was the “blessed place” where even a sparrow found a home. The Psalmist said, “better is one day” in the temple courts “than a thousand elsewhere.”

Yet, this turned into one of the more difficult days of Paul’s life in Jerusalem. Jewish enemies in the temple accosted Paul. They dragged him physically from the temple and began to kill him before a Roman tribune intervened. The tribune had Paul bound in chains before interrogating him. Paul was given the chance to make a speech to the Jewish crowd, only to have them begin to riot and pelt him with dirt and stones. The tribune then ordered Paul to be tortured by flogging, a most horrific and often lethal torture, which Paul avoided only by invoking his rights as a Roman citizen.

Paul was then hauled back before the Jewish ruling council for further interrogation. The tribune wanted to know the real reason the Jews were accusing Paul. It was there that Paul was slapped, which provoked Paul to announce a curse on the instigator of the slap. Paul found out he had cursed the High Priest, which was a sin before God, causing Paul to apologize to those abusing him. Then, a violent brawl among the council broke out concerning Paul. The tribune hauled Paul back under arrest into the Roman barracks for the night. Paul was not returning to his friends for dinner. It would be years before Paul would be free again.

This could not have been the day Paul had hoped for when he went into the lovely courts of God, yet the real beauty of Psalm 84 is not the beauty of the courts. It was not architecture or GPS coordinates that made the courts so wonderful. It was the presence of God. The worship of the God of Hosts is what turns tears to springs. Being in the presence of Almighty God is the blessing. So, while Paul ended his wretched day in captivity, he ended it strong because the Lord stood by Paul that night in the Roman barracks. Luke was quite clear with the encouragement,

² We should note this was likely a rebuilt temple from the one at the time of Psalm 84’s composure. Most scholars date Psalm 84 to the time of Solomon’s temple as opposed to the rebuilt temple after the exile. Nevertheless, the Psalm was still used in worship and the rebuilt temple was considered as important and no less of God than that of Solomon.

The following night [the start of the next Jewish day] 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” (Acts 23:11).

The Lord ministered to Paul saying, “Take courage.” It was God himself who told Paul that night to prepare for going to Rome to testify of the gospel.” With the presence of God, Paul was ready for the next day.

THE PLOT

While Paul was sleeping in the Roman barracks, assured by God of his safety in anticipation of a trip to Rome, Paul’s Jewish enemies were wide awake. A group of at least 40 took a mutual oath to avoid all food and drink until they had succeeded in killing Paul.³ These men had a plan. They went to the Chief Priests and elders and informed them of the vow, urging the rulers to alert the tribune to bring Paul back for another conference. The plan was to ambush Paul on the way. We should interrupt the narrative here to point out the contrast between someone who commits horrible evil in the guise of piety or holiness and someone who seeks true holiness. We live in a day where regular media reports detail some atrocity of violence that is perpetrated in the name of devotion or religion. Preaching on this passage John Chrysostom⁴ (c. 347-407) added, “For such are the devil’s (ways): under the pretext of piety he sets his traps.”⁵

While Luke does not give details, Paul’s nephew (the son of Paul’s sister) somehow found out about the plot. The nephew went to the barracks where Paul was being held and told Paul about it. Paul called over one of the centurions and, without divulging details, told the centurion to take his nephew to visit with the tribune. The tribune took the nephew aside and privately found out what he had to say. Paul’s nephew repeated the story and the tribune told him to leave and speak

³ The oath was not quite as severe as it might sound. The rules at the time (recorded later in the Mishnah) stated that, “Four [types of] vows did sages declare not binding: (1) vows of incitement, (2) vows of exaggeration, (3) vows made in error, and (4) vows [broken] under constraint.” J. Neusner, *The Mishnah, A New Translation* (Yale University Press 1988) *Nedarim* 3:1. Under the fourth category, if someone took a vow but circumstances precluded him from fulfilling the vow, then he would be released from the terms. In other words, if these guys, through no fault of their own, were unable to see Paul dead, then they could resume eating and drinking.

⁴ See Church History Literacy lesson 30 at http://www.biblical-literacy.com/lessons/CHL/Handouts/CHL30-St_John_Chrysostom.pdf.

⁵ *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Eerdmans 1989 printing) Vol. 11 at 293. John Chrysostom Sermon 49 on Acts.

of it no more to anyone. It is apparent from the way Luke wrote, that the information of Paul's nephew was highly reliable and likely fairly specific. Both Paul and the tribune took it very seriously.

The tribune called in two centurions and told them to gather a force of nearly 500 men to leave by 9 or so that night. They were to take Paul to Caesarea, although the full force was needed only to secure Paul away from ambush range. Paul was to be given a mount to ride so they could move quickly.

The tribune also sent a letter to the governor in Caesarea explaining things. Through this letter, we learn the name of the tribune, Lysias.⁶ The letter described Lysias's version of events he wished to convey about Paul. The letter is interesting (and believable) because Lysias clearly altered the details of what happened in ways that made Lysias look ultra-competent before his superior. For example, the implication was that Paul was moments from death when Lysias rescued him from the Jews. Lysias also wrongly stated that the reason he saved Paul was that Paul was a Roman citizen. Additionally, Lysias failed to mention that he had bound Paul (illegally) and almost had him tortured (also illegal).

The soldiers gathered and took Paul on the march that night making it to a military outpost called Antipatris. This post was a little over half way from Jerusalem to Caesarea.⁷ Part of the troops returned to Jerusalem because the danger of an ambush was minimal at that point. The terrain no longer lent itself to an ambush, and Gentiles inhabited the region more so than Jews.

Once Paul made it to Caesarea, the soldiers delivered the letter to the governor, Felix. Initially, Felix questioned Paul very little. He basically wanted to verify jurisdiction and asked Paul where he was from. Paul told him "Cilicia" and Governor Felix agreed to give Paul a hearing, but the hearing would not take place until Paul's accusers had a chance to come to court. Until then, Paul would just have to wait in custody.

PAUL BEFORE FELIX

Governor Felix was an interesting man. He had three wives who were all better bred than he was. Felix was a freedman whom many Romans looked down upon. The Roman historian Tacitus, born about this time, would later write of Felix:

⁶ Luke usually has a reason for giving names, typically as a source of documentation or as a way to signpost an event or time. I suggest it quite reasonable that Luke was not giving Lysias's name because it would mean anything to anyone unless Lysias later became a believer. If so, it makes the story of Paul's experiences even more fantastic.

⁷ Caesarea was about 60 miles from Jerusalem. Antipatris was slightly over 35 miles from Jerusalem. The group still had 25 miles to cover the next day.

Antonius Felix, practiced every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of a king with all the instincts of a slave; he had married Drusilla, the granddaughter of Cleopatra and Antony, and so was Antony's grandson-in-law."⁸

We should note that Tacitus missed a bit of his history here. Felix had three wives. The first of his three wives was the granddaughter of Queen Cleopatra from Egypt. The third wife, taken from another engagement when she was only 16, was a Jewish woman named Drusilla. She was the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I and as such, sister to King Agrippa II and Bernice who will figure into our story next week.⁹

Before considering the charges brought against Paul, we need to consider the other historical events that are related by sources outside of Scripture. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote of this time and provided several details that further illuminate Paul's trial. Josephus began his discussion of this time with the negative insight,

In Judea, matters were constantly going from bad to worse. For the country was again infested with bands of brigands and imposters who deceived the mobs.¹⁰

Felix's response as governor charged with keeping the peace was not unexpected as one who "practiced every kind of cruelty." Josephus noted that,

Not a day passed, however, but that Felix captured and put to death many of these.¹¹

For some lengthy period of time, these thugs would roam the city wreaking havoc.

From that time forth the brigands with perfect impunity used to go to the city during the festivals and, with their weapons concealed [under their clothes], mingle with the crowds. In that way, they slew some because they were private enemies, and others because they were paid to do so by

⁸ Tacitus, *Histories*, Book 5.9. Loeb Classical Library (Harvard 1931) translated by John Jackson.

⁹ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* Ch. 4.132. See the analysis on Tacitus's error in the notes of Maier on pages 651 and 652. *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, translated by Whiston, commentary by Maier (Kregel 1999).

¹⁰ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* Ch. 20.160, translation by L. H. Feldman, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard 1965), vol. 456 at 89.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

someone else. They committed these murders not only in other parts of the city but even in some cases in the temple.¹²

Josephus further detailed that many of these were brought before Felix for punishment. (And at least once Felix seemed to have used the criminals to kill for him). As for the Egyptian that Lysias had originally mistaken Paul for (Acts 21:38), Josephus explained that Felix's soldiers attacked the "Egyptian who declared that he was a prophet and advised the masses of the common people to go out with him". Felix's men captured 200, and killed 400, but the Egyptian escaped.

The discontent in Jerusalem continued with,

The brigands once more incited the populace to war with Rome, telling them not to obey them [the Romans].¹³

This was the political and local situation into which Paul was thrust. Paul's enemies certainly knew these things as they set Paul up to be one of the leaders of the brigands and thugs that were inciting riots, fomenting rebellion, and murdering in the city. It took five days before the lawyers came to see Paul punished by the cruel Felix.

After Paul waited for those five days, his Jewish accusers came in ready for the hearing. They brought with them a lawyer named Tertullus. The lawyer laid his case before Governor Felix, but not before some schmoozing!

Since *through you* we enjoy much peace, and since *by your foresight, most excellent Felix*, reforms are made for this nation, in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude (Acts 24:2-3).¹⁴

This compliment was layered carefully, as a good lawyer would. There was clearly much discord and little peace in Jerusalem, particularly around festival times. Felix was consistently taking action to minimize the violence and mayhem. Tertullus was in effect saying, "You are the only reason any peace can be found. You have worked to establish peace even with the thuggery present, and we thank

¹² *Ibid.*, at 20.165.

¹³ *Ibid.* 20.172.

¹⁴ Flattery was no more approved of in Paul's day than it is today. Plutarch (c. AD 45-120) wrote an essay entitled "How to Tell a Flatterer From a Friend." The essay is found in vol 197 of the Loeb Classical Library (Harvard 1927) translated by Frank Babbitt. Plutarch set a flatterer as an enemy of truth and of the gods. Flattery was evil and flatterers were "those self-ministering trencher slaves...whose tongue will be wagging." *Ibid.* at 3.

you deeply for this.” Tertullus then painted Paul as simply another verse in the same song. Paul was one of the thug leaders, or so Tertullus would have Felix believe.

The actual case against Paul hinged on two or three charges (scholars differ in how they divide them):

1. Paul was a troublemaker (“this man...stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world” Acts 24:5).
2. Paul was the ringleader in a fringe religious group (“this man...is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” Acts 24:5).
3. Paul was a desecrater of the temple (“this man...even tried to profane the temple”)

The Jews who came in from Jerusalem were echoing and adding their assents to these charges.

After Tertullus finished, Governor Felix motioned for Paul to begin. Paul began by making a play on the Latin name of Felix. In Latin, Felix comes from *felicitas* meaning “happiness” or “cheerfulness.” While Paul was most likely speaking Greek, he does still make a play off Felix’s Roman (Latin) name as he begins,

“Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I *cheerfully* make my defense” (Acts 24:10).

From there, Paul proceeded with a clear, precise, and dead-on accurate rendition of the facts in his defense. Felix may or may not have smiled at Paul’s use of play on his name (it certainly showed Paul had some dexterity in Latin), but Felix must have been impressed at how Paul dealt straight with the facts. Paul did not resort to flattery; nor did he twist the truth to make himself look better. In fact, Paul even admitted to making one statement that caused discord among certain Jews.

Paul gave verifiable facts for his time in Jerusalem. Paul testified that no one saw him fussing with anyone or stirring up any crowd in the temple or the city. Paul pointed out Tertullus’s absolute lack of proof, including his inability to muster even one eyewitness to back up any of the charges against Paul. Paul underscored that he had always walked the Jewish faith with integrity. Paul would not concede that his Christianity (called “the Way”) was any kind of a sect. He believed it to be the true fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, of what we would call the Old Testament. Paul pointed out his purpose in coming to Jerusalem was to bring a contribution to the people there. Paul went to the temple to purify himself. That was it, plain and simple. Paul could not have been the brigand leader! Paul had not been there long enough. He had been overseas for years, and had only recently arrived.

Paul pointed out clearly that all Tertullus could offer was hearsay. There was no evidence behind the accusations. Paul committed no wrong. Paul did admit, at the end, that he cried out in the Sanhedrin that it was over a belief in the resurrection of the dead that Paul was on trial, but that was no crime. New Testament and Pauline specialist F. F. Bruce wrote that, “Paul’s lawyer-like speech is more than a match for the ineffective rhetoric of Tertullus.”¹⁵ As a trial lawyer, I say, “Amen!”

The governor was obviously not swayed by the speech of Tertullus. Not only did it conflict with Paul’s account, but it also violated common sense, was fluff more than substance, and was contradictory to the letter Lysias the tribune had already sent. Governor Felix declared the hearing over and held his ruling until he heard from Lysias.

Luke lets us know that Felix had “a rather accurate knowledge of the Way” no doubt because, at least in part, of his connections through his Jewish wife Drusilla. In fact, after a few days, Felix sent for Paul to discuss some religious matters with himself and Drusilla. They discussed faith in Jesus and the implications of righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment. These discussions “alarmed” Felix, but his reaction was to send Paul away, planning to discuss things again. Luke wrote that Felix was also hoping Paul might offer an appropriate gift (*i.e.*, “a bribe”) for his freedom, but Paul did no such thing.

So, Paul and the governor became frequent talking companions but the governor never got his bribe, Paul never got his freedom, and the governor never decided Paul’s case.

We add that Josephus tells us that Felix finally took prisoner the brigand chief (“Eleazar”) who had “ravaged the country for twenty years. The number of people that Felix crucified as accomplices “was incalculable.”¹⁶ So Felix got his man, and God got his. Paul was destined for Rome, as God promised, not for deliverance. We see this in the next lesson where, after two years, Porcius Festus succeeded Felix. Felix left office without freeing Paul as a parting favor to the Jews.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “*I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive*” (Acts 23:35).

¹⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text With Introduction and Commentary* (Eerdmans 1951) at 424.

¹⁶ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2.253.

With that announcement, Paul began the waiting game. I hate to wait. I hate waiting for lights to change or traffic to move. I hate waiting for events to begin. I hate waiting to make decisions. Waiting is not my strength. Yet it is, all too often, part of God's plan. God is not a fast food restaurant. He has timing, and his timing is perfect. The waiting game is important in God's timing and also in God's preparation for his children. Isaiah taught clearly that "they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint" (Is. 40:31). Let us not mistake that there are times God says, "Now!" But, there are also times he says, "Wait!" We should listen for him and find strength in his plan, even when it includes waiting!

2. *"And when the governor had nodded to him to speak, Paul replied"* (Acts 24:10).

Paul told his story with meticulous honesty. The tribune exaggerated his importance and covered his errors. Tertullus told a story contrary to the known facts, but Paul never shaded the truth, minced words, nor dispensed fake flattery. Paul deliberately and carefully explained exactly what happened. There is a testimony here. A testimony that is multi-fold. We see Paul living as his master lived. Jesus was the way and "the truth" (Jn 14:6). Satan is the liar and the father of lies (Jn 8:44). Paul knew who his Lord and master was and acted accordingly. We need to take this to heart. This is part of the promise in the Proverbs that if we "acknowledge him" in all our ways, "he will make" our "paths straight" (Pro. 3:6).

3. *"Take courage"* (Acts 23:11).

How was your day? Many times my wife asks me this very question when we both have some down time toward evening. I have had many great days, many good days, many so-so days, and a few rough ones. But I have never had a day as rough as Paul's. Not even close. Paul handled his day with aplomb, never losing sight of God and God's purposes. God spoke encouragement to Paul, telling him to "take courage." God was at work, even in the most miserable of days. From that, Paul made it to the very end, never losing sight that the same God who purposed him, also empowered him. I need to remember that each time I am asked, "How was your day?"