

THE LYIN' LAWYER

ACTS 24:1-23 FEBRUARY 3, 2021

We find ourselves in another courtroom drama tonight. This section of Paul's life is full of them, each with its own particularities and characteristics. In this section, a prominent feature is the attorney brought in by the prosecution to build a case against Paul. His name is Tertullus and he's a ringer.

Joe Jamail was, perhaps, the most successful trial lawyer in history. They called him the "king of Torts." Before his death, *Forbes* estimated his net worth to be \$1.7 billion, winning hundreds of million dollar rulings for his clients and five verdicts for over \$100 million.¹ The crown jewel of his career was winning a \$10.5 billion ruling against Texaco. Though Joe was charitable in some ways (he donated hundreds of millions to education, medical research and the performing arts), he also had quite a mean streak. "Salty language" doesn't *begin* to describe the way he talked and he once defeated a client so soundly he demanded the opposing attorney give him the suit he was wearing. He said, "I've got your money. Now I want your clothes." Joe hung it on display in his office.²

What do you do when Joe Jamail comes through the door? Paul was facing a guy like that in Acts 24. And yet, in his opening statement, Paul will testify that he was "cheerful" to present his defense. He was in good spirits. He knew that characters like Tertullus or Joe Jamail are flashy, well-paid, and often win a lot of temporary victories, but no matter how effective they may seem they cannot compare to our Advocate in heaven. And it is in the *eternal* courtroom where the case really matters.

Acts 24:1 - Five days later Ananias the high priest came down with some elders and a lawyer named Tertullus. These men presented their case against Paul to the governor.

Paul appeared alone in this scene. He had been whisked away by hundreds of Roman soldiers when they heard about an assassination plot against him in Jerusalem. In contrast, these enemies of the Gospel show up with pomp and authority. The high priest himself makes the long trip, along with an entourage of Israel's leadership and this attorney. We don't know a lot about him. Based off his name it's possible he was, in fact, a Roman and not a Jew at all. He was a skilled orator and understood the complexities of Roman law. Though he had been hired only a few days before he does a remarkable job putting together a case against Paul. It's especially remarkable when we remember there was no evidence for any wrong doing. Yet, after hearing him speak you'd have to think Paul was public enemy number one.

Acts 24:2-4 - ²When Paul was called in, Tertullus began to accuse him and said, "We enjoy great peace because of you, and reforms are taking place for the benefit of this nation because of your foresight. ³We acknowledge this in every way and everywhere, most excellent Felix, with utmost gratitude. ⁴But, so that I will not burden you any further, I request that you would be kind enough to give us a brief hearing.

Commentators point out that, in the text, Tertullus spends as much time flattering Felix as he does presenting a case against Paul. Makes sense - win over the judge and you're much more likely to win the case. But, man is he going overboard! You look at all he's ascribing to Felix. He's acting like he's a god among men! "Because of you we have peace! Because of you the whole nation is

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/profile/joe-jamail-jr/?sh=742df05442e0>

² <https://www.texasmonthly.com/the-culture/the-greatest-lawyer-who-ever-lived/>

benefitted! In every way and everywhere we should be worshipping you with thankfulness!” In fact, where we read ‘foresight,’ Tertullus actually uses the word for *providence*!

Unfortunately, none of this was true. Felix is remembered by historians as a brutal and deeply corrupt politician. Robert Girard writes:

“Few periods in Judean history were marred by more unrest and terrorism... The years of A.D 52-59 when Felix was procurator were years of unparalleled government corruption!”³

So, Tertullus is laying it on thick. Maybe *too* thick. Some think his quick shift in verse 4 when he says, “so that I will not burden you any further,” may have been due to even Tertullus getting annoyed at how much he’s being buttered up.

Before we move on, a quick reminder for us: Real peace and reform and providence comes from the Lord, not from the world. Right now our culture is obsessed with politics and administrations and figures in government. The good news for us is that, whether we’re talking about a born again, Spirit filled politician like Sergius Paulus (the governor of Cyprus) or a monstrous killer like Felix, the Lord is the One in charge and He is never hamstrung. Our hope is never built upon a certain law or a certain administration or a certain system. Our hope is built on *nothing* less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness. He is the source of peace and transformation and His providence cannot fail.

Acts 24:5-8 - ⁵For we have found this man to be a plague, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the Roman world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. ⁶He even tried to desecrate the temple, and so we apprehended him. By examining him yourself you will be able to discern the truth about these charges we are bringing against him.”

Wiersbe points out that they brought 3 charges against Paul: One personal, one political, one theological. All of which were meant to pressure Felix into promptly executing the apostle.

First, the personal: They said, “This guy is like a deadly virus spreading throughout the entire empire. He causes trouble everywhere he goes!” It’s interesting because you could go back through his travels and see that there was, indeed, trouble and rioting just about everywhere he went. In multiple instances he would arrive somewhere and violence would break out. But we know the whole story. Paul never *set out* to agitate anyone. His hope was revival in the hearts of one or many. And, in opposition to the Gospel of grace, the enemies of God would rally and riot and try to destroy.

Christians are not meant to agitate. Now, it’s clear that the Gospel *will* be offensive to people and our message *will* be the savor of death. But our mentality is always supposed to be rooted in love and compassion. If our mindset is, “I want to go *wreck* some opponent of God,” well, that’s not the way that the Lord and His disciples behaved. We’re not called to behave like disturbers of the peace, but to be peace *makers* in a hostile environment.

Tertullus made a political charge against Paul, calling him a “ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.” The term he used was full of connotations. It was a word used of a man who stood before soldiers. He means to paint Paul as a revolutionary who threatened Rome. This argument, perhaps, fell a bit flat since this so-called “ringleader” stood alone in the courtroom that day. No soldiers there to support him. No mob protesting outside.

³ Robert Girard *The Book Of Acts*

Now, anyone who listened to Paul would know he didn't call for political uprising. His message was so much higher than that. And what a good thing that Paul wasn't constantly political in his message because, not only would that distract people from a much more important issue (the salvation of their souls), it may have led to his ruin in this trial. No, Paul didn't lower himself to the level of political revolution, but instead, like his Lord, his life was dedicated to personal transformation. And what's been proven again and again is that it is personal transformation which leads to real and lasting social change.

Third, Tertullus made a theological accusation: Paul had tried to defile the temple. There was absolutely no evidence of this, but the prosecution was trying to heap as much kindling on the fire as they could. Felix had frequently crucified uprisers in his jurisdiction⁴ and so their whole point was, "If you don't get rid of this guy and quick, revolt is going to break out on your watch.

Acts 24:9 - ⁹The Jews also joined in the attack, alleging that these things were true.

Reading Acts and the Gospels we quickly learn to not expect good behavior from the Jewish ruling class, but what a sad thing to read here. Remember, these were the people who were supposed to be the closest to God. The ones most acquainted with the Scripture. The ones who claimed to have dedicated their lives to honoring Yahweh. But what do we see? In order to protect their personal status, their traditions and their bigotry, they took money donated to God and paid this greasy, lying attorney to come in and manufacture a case against a man who was simply teaching people that the Messiah had come and was offering them forgiveness of sins and entrance into heaven. They *knew* these things weren't true, but they had decided to go all in on worldly methods to accomplish what they thought was best.

It is becoming more and more common for Christians to be suing each other in open court in blatant defiance of God's word. There are prominent cases all the time and more that we hear about through the grapevine. Churches suing each other. Church members suing each other. Usually for money or property or some other worldly thing. It is an affront to the commands of God and His callings.

But, even beyond that direct comparison, the terrible example of these Jewish leaders in verse 9 reminds us of the folly of using worldly methods to try to accomplish spiritual goals. They *thought* they were honoring God. Or at least *some* of them did. They weren't, of course, but part of the reason why they had gone so far off track was because they were willing to take the world's methods, the world's way of doing things and try to apply it to their spiritual endeavors. They were using flattery and pressure and manipulation to try to get what they wanted.

If we find ourselves buttering people up so that we can get them to do something for us, that's Tertullus. If we find ourselves doing things that are un-Christlike in an effort to hang on to our wealth or position or security, that's what the Pharisees and Sadducees did. These worldly levers ruin our relationship with God and we should avoid them. Which is exactly what Paul does in his defense.

Acts 24:10 - ¹⁰When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied, "Because I know you have been a judge of this nation for many years, I am glad to offer my defense in what concerns me.

⁴ <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/dcc/acts-24.html>

On first glance it might *look* like Paul is trying to compliment Felix, too, but that's not what's happening. Unlike what Tertullus said, what Paul says here is true! And he's exampling for us something that we're commanded in First Peter:

1 Peter 3:15-16 (NLT) - ¹⁵You must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. ¹⁶But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ.

Paul demonstrates this in a patient, faithful way as he stands before Felix.

We are to always be ready to give a defense. Hearing that, I often have the connotation in my mind of a courtroom - of persecution. But, even when we live in a free land we're to keep ourselves ready to explain our hope. And, if we're ready, it doesn't really matter if we're on trial or just in conversation with a loved one. Our conduct can be the same. And, in either situation, we can be full of good cheer, like Paul was, because we know that the Lord is with us and He has filled our lives with hope!

Here's what Paul testified:

Acts 3:11-13 - ¹¹You can verify for yourself that it is no more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem. ¹²They didn't find me arguing with anyone or causing a disturbance among the crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or anywhere in the city. ¹³Neither can they prove the charges they are now making against me.

So, first of all, instead of flattery he's bringing facts. "Here's what happened. You can follow up and see these things are true." Paul didn't live a secret life. He was an open book, whose pages were full of Godliness. His goal wasn't to get a crowd around himself or to agitate people. Instead, this is what he was about:

Acts 3:14-21 - ¹⁴But I admit this to you: I worship the God of my ancestors according to the Way, which they call a sect, believing everything that is in accordance with the law and written in the prophets. ¹⁵I have a hope in God, which these men themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection, both of the righteous and the unrighteous. ¹⁶I always strive to have a clear conscience toward God and men. ¹⁷After many years, I came to bring charitable gifts and offerings to my people. ¹⁸While I was doing this, some Jews from Asia found me ritually purified in the temple, without a crowd and without any uproar. ¹⁹It is they who ought to be here before you to bring charges, if they have anything against me. ²⁰Or let these men here state what wrongdoing they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin, ²¹other than this one statement I shouted while standing among them, 'Today I am on trial before you concerning the resurrection of the dead.' "

His defense centered around the truth of the resurrection - that there is a life after this one. He not only proclaims it as a great hope, but uses it evangelistically. He points out that the unrighteous *also* will rise in the end and they will face judgment.

Now, since the resurrection was the motivating factor in his life, his life was characterized by certain things. I see six in these verses: I worship, I hope, I strive, I came, I stood, I shouted.

He begins in verse 14 saying “I worship God...according to the Way.” Our *first* goal is worship. We want to have vision for ministry and goals for serving, but our primary objective is to worship God. Because as we draw near to Him He is able to more and more fill us with Himself and then give us *His* leading for those good works He has prepared beforehand for us to walk in.

In verse 15 Paul said, “I have a hope...that there will be a resurrection.” It can only benefit us to fill our thoughts with our future hope. One day, all will be made right, all will be made well, we will be completed. And any present troubles we face are small and momentary when compared with the eternal weight of glory.

In verse 16 Paul said “I always strive to have a clear conscience toward God and men.” The Christian life is a life of selflessness and harmony. We don’t accomplish it perfectly, nor are we responsible for how others react to us, but *our* part is to carry out our duty as much as we can to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength and all our mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves. To strive indicates effort and exercise. One dictionary describes it this way: “to work up raw material with skill.”⁵ We’re to be about the business of Christian living.

In verse 17 Paul said, “I came to bring charitable gifts.” Far from being a trouble-maker, Paul was one who brought help and assistance to those in need. He brought this gift to people he had never met. And he did so at considerable expense and danger to himself. While the Jews were taking holy contributions and paying for a slick attorney, Paul was making tents to pay his own way to bring relief to people suffering in Jerusalem.

In verse 20 Paul said, “I stood before the Sanhedrin.” Paul made a stand for his Savior. His job was to testify and he took those opportunities when they came his way. He upheld the truth of the Gospel and didn’t buckle or shrink when the pressure was on.

In verse 21 Paul said, “I shouted.” Even though few were listening, he kept proclaiming the resurrection. Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The truth that God is alive and He is coming back. That God is willing to save *anyone*. Jew or Gentile, slave or free, rich or poor. He loves them all and wants to give them life more abundantly, everlasting life through Jesus Christ the Messiah.

As Paul dismantled the Jew’s case against him piece by piece, he also revealed what the Christian life is full of. A living faith that operates in all sorts of ways in any sort of climate.

Here was the result:

Acts 24:22-23 - ²²Since Felix was well informed about the Way, he adjourned the hearing, saying, “When Lysias the commander comes down, I will decide your case.” ²³He ordered that the centurion keep Paul under guard, though he could have some freedom, and that he should not prevent any of his friends from meeting his needs.

It’s clear Felix didn’t actually believe any of the charges against Paul, but we find out later that he was hoping someone would pay him a bribe. Had the Jews realized this, instead of paying Tertullus his retainer they could’ve just slipped some money to Felix and had Paul dispatched. But the Lord providentially protected His servant. We’ll see more about the games Felix was playing next time.

⁵ *Vines Complete Expository Dictionary*

But we're told he was "well informed about the Way." He knew what Christians were about. Thank goodness Paul filled his days with *real* Christianity. He *really was* like Jesus. The Jews couldn't say that about their God. But Paul could. And it showed. And so he was *ready* to give this defense. Because his life was lived in ongoing preparation. A life overflowing with Godliness and truth and love for others. So it was obvious when Felix looked at Paul what a good life he lived because he belonged to Christ.

That's what we get, too. Along the way trouble is sure to find us, so let's not make it for ourselves or others. Instead, let's glorify God as we worship, hope, strive to keep a clear conscience, stand and proclaim to the world around us that Jesus is alive and He is coming and because *He* lives, *we* will live.