Acts: The Fear of the Lord
Acts 24

As we return to our journey through Acts, the Apostle Paul is once again on trial. We’ll zoom in to examine his trial and what happens next in Acts 24, but before we do, I want to ask you to look for something throughout this story. I want you to look for what I will simply refer to as, “The fear of the Lord.” The fear of the Lord is exactly what it sounds like: it is a moment when the presence of God draws close to us, and we are convicted of truth. The fear of the Lord demands a response from people…we either repent and obey, or we reinforce our sinful position and disobey. So…watch for the fear of the Lord in this story, and I’ll circle back and speak to that as we approach the end of our time together.

As we enter into Acts 24, remember that Paul was transferred from Jerusalem to Caesarea because of an assassination plot against his life. Paul is now in the custody of Governor Antonius Felix, who has promised to hear Paul’s case when his accusers arrive from Jerusalem. Let’s pick up the story now, beginning with vs. 1:

And 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. And 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, in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude. But, to detain you no further, I beg you in your kindness to hear us briefly. 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. He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him. By examining him yourself you will be able to find out from him about everything of which we accuse him.” The Jews also joined in the charge, affirming that all these things were so.

Let’s notice a few things here. First, notice that the high priest, Ananias, has “lawyered up!” This “spokesman” Tertullus has been hired as a legal gun to bring the case against Paul. Although Tertullus is sympathetic to his clients, we get the sense that he is probably not a Jew, or at best he is a Gentile convert. The presence of a Gentile lawyer elevates the formality and seriousness of this trial. The Jewish High Priest, Ananias, is going in for the kill. Remember…the Jewish leaders are not content for Paul to be arrested…they want him dead.

We get the sense that Felix first gives the high priest and his counsel a private hearing. As Luke records in vs. 1, “They laid before the governor their case against Paul.” In good Roman form, however, the judge was not to render a verdict without the accused having the opportunity to
have a face to face encounter with those who were making the accusations. So that’s what happens next when Paul is brought into the room.

Tertullus begins by kissing up to the judge, flattering Felix for his amazing reforms that were supposedly applauded by the Jews “everywhere and in every way.” What a bunch of bunk! Felix was no more loved by the Jews than any other occupying official that lorded his authority over the people of Israel. In fact, Felix was famous for crucifying any Jew who spoke out against his authority, which led to dozens upon dozens of crucifixions according to ancient sources. But Tertullus is no dummy. When the lawyer glorifies the “reforms” of Felix, he’s applauding the way that Felix has kept the peace—by crucifying the leaders and agitators who caused trouble. And of course, Tertullus will now make his case that Paul is one of those leaders/agitators that should be crucified along with the rest.

Tertullus introduces his case against Paul by describing Paul as a “plague,” one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world! Leave it to the lawyer to come up with such a dramatic word picture. And that’s not all: Tertullus accuses Paul of being the ringleader of a sect called the Nazarenes. Tertullus is playing his ace card here, because he’s banking on the possibility that Felix is unaware of who the Nazarenes are or what they are known for. Tertullus is using inflammatory language to somehow link the Apostle Paul to the dangerous factions and sects associated with the Jewish Zealots.

Remember, the Zealots led many violent insurrections against the Romans in first century Israel. Tertullus is trying to convince Felix that Paul, like other zealots, is a danger to Rome even as he is a danger to the Jews who are under Rome’s rule. How is Paul dangerous to the Jews? Look at vs. 8, where Tertullus states, “He even tried to profane the temple…”

So…there you have it. The case against Paul can be summarized this way: Paul is an agitator, a sect leader, and a blasphemer…he represents a clear and present danger to the sovereign power of Rome and the cohesion of Israel…and as such, he should be crucified.

Now, where is the evidence of all these things? Tertullus points to Paul and says, “Examine him yourself,” and you’ll see what I’m talking about. The evidence is Paul himself. Just ask him.

So, Felix looks at Paul and gives him the nod, and Paul begins his defense. Let’s pick up the story beginning with 24:10-21

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

Paul begins his defense by acknowledging that Felix has been in the position of judge now for several years, so Paul is happy to present his defense, confident that the governor will be able to make a reasonable judgment.

Paul then refers to his recent arrest in Jerusalem that happened just weeks ago. Paul testifies that at the time of his arrest he was in the temple, but he was not disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd, nor had he been stirring up a crowd anywhere else in the city. Thus the accusation of being an agitator or one who stirs up crowds is both untrue and without any shred of proof.

Notice Paul does not shy away from his association with Jesus and the accusation that he was part of the “Nazarenes.” Paul states in vs. 14, “But 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, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.” Paul is building his case that the Way is not a departure from what it means to be a faithful Jew. Unlike various sects of Judaism, followers of the Way believe EVERYTHING laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets. Paul’s point is very clear: anyone who takes the law and prophets seriously could hardly be called blasphemous. Once again, Paul appeals to the resurrection of the dead because his accusers hold that same doctrine in common, and it is the possibility of the resurrection of the dead that allows for the claim that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. The resurrection is
central to Paul’s faith and theology, but the resurrection of the dead is not unique to Christianity…it is an expression of faithful Judaism as well.

Paul goes on to say that he “always takes pain to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.” Not many of us could say those words, but Paul could.

I want you to note here that Paul has the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord led Paul to repent and he received a new identity in Christ. As a result, he lives his life above reproach. Paul’s conscience was clear. Paul feared God, so consequently Paul feared no one else. Such is why Paul could confidently say before the judge, “I have nothing to hide.” The fear of the Lord is always behind a changed life…a life that no longer fears the opinions or judgments of men. Paul exhibits that kind of courage and confidence…so that’s the first place in this story that I want you to observe the fear of the Lord.

Now Paul goes on to say that he actually came to Jerusalem with the resources and the intent to bless the citizens of Jerusalem. Beginning with vs. 17, Paul explains that he returned to Jerusalem after being gone for several years in order to “bring alms to my nation” and to present offerings. Paul was on a mission of generosity and worship…he was certainly not intending to stir up a riot against Rome. Paul then recounts the day that he was arrested, emphasizing that they found him “purified in the temple.” In other words, Paul was in no way profaning the temple…he had made his offerings, he had followed Jewish rules and customs, and he was fully within his rights as a Jew to be in the temple worshipping God. There was no crowd or tumult around him…he was by himself.

Paul then plays his trump card. Paul points out to the judge that the actual men who initially accused Paul of wrongdoing were not even present in the courtroom. If you recall, the initial accusers were some Jews from Asia who accused Paul of defiling the Temple by bringing Gentiles into that sacred place of worship. Their accusations were not even true, but more importantly to Felix at this moment is what Paul just pointed out…the original accusers were not even in the courtroom to make their case. The prosecution’s case is all hearsay, with not even one person present who could testify to what actually happened on the day that Paul was arrested. Rest assured, the High Priest and his high-dollar lawyer were looking at the floor and avoiding eye contact with Felix at this moment. In a Roman courtroom…not unlike an American courtroom…it was poor form and generally frowned upon for the accusers to be absent when their case was being tried.
Paul then recalls the trial before Claudius Lysias and the Jewish Council, reminding them that the only thing he actually said before the chaos broke out was this: “It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.”

Paul does a wonderful job of presenting his defense. So…how does Felix the Governor respond? Let’s pick up the story beginning with vs. 22-23: 22 But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, “When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case.” 23 Then 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.

Felix is not buying the prosecution’s case because, according to Luke, he has a “rather accurate knowledge of the Way.” In other words, Felix has heard of these “Nazarenes,” and he knows that they pose no threat to Rome or Rome’s interests in Israel. This brief observation from Luke is historically noteworthy. This reference regarding Felix’s knowledge of “the Way” here in Acts 24 is one of many ancient references that help us to understand the widespread growth of Christianity in the first century. Note also that Tertullus the lawyer didn’t need to explain who the Nazarenes were…he assumed Felix would probably know (although he was probably hoping that Felix did not know so that he could frame the Nazarenes as part of the Zealot uprising). Luke observes that Felix was not fooled…he was already briefed on the Christians, so he knew they were not part of the Zealot resistance movement. Felix knows Paul is not a political agitator PRECISELY because Paul was a “ringleader” of the Nazarenes…you see that, right? Which means that by AD 57, the followers of Jesus were already well known for their cooperative spirit, their respect for authority, their admirable morality, their contribution to society, and so on.

Now, having said all that, Felix is a classic politician, and he’s in a pickle. As a judge, Felix is not the least bit impressed with the prosecution’s case…he gets that these are bogus charges and that Paul is an innocent man, just as Claudius Lysias had stated in his letter. However, as a politician, Felix needs the support and cooperation of the High Priest in order to maintain control over the capital city of Jerusalem. If Felix renders a verdict of “guilty,” he will never be able to justify his ruling to a higher court should Paul, a Roman citizen, appeal to Caesar. If Felix declares Paul to be innocent, he will create enmity between his office and that of the High Priest in Jerusalem, which would be a political nightmare. So, Felix takes the cowardly way out…he delays his ruling until Claudius Lysias comes to town to give his version of the story. Now…that may seem like a reasonable delay, but here’s what we know: Claudius Lysias never makes it to Caesarea, and I’m sure we all know why. Felix surely sent a private message to the Tribune that said in no uncertain terms… “Don’t come here…ever.” Thus…Paul gets stuck in limbo…again.
Now, there’s a little postlude to this trial story that we find in the last four verses of chapter 24, and it’s there that we’ll see the fear of the Lord once again. Let’s pick up the story beginning with vs. 24: After 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. And 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.” At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him. When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

Luke records that some time after the trial, Felix summons Paul to have a private meeting with him and his wife, Drusilla. Let me give you a little history about Felix and Drusilla. Felix was a colorful character in Roman history. I learned this week that Antonius Felix was the first slave in the history of the Roman Empire to become the governor of a Roman province. Now...how did that happen? As a child, Felix, along with his brother Pallas, had been freed by Antonia, the mother of Prince Claudius—a young prince who would eventually go on to become Claudius Caesar. Pallas and Claudius grew up together and became good friends, so when Claudius became Caesar, Pallas talked the young ruler into appointing his brother Felix to a government position under the governor in Caesarea named Cumanus. When Cumanus was deposed, Felix obtained Cumanus’ office through dishonest means. And, as I mentioned last week, Felix turned out to be a ruthless governor. The Roman historian Tacitus described Felix as “a master of cruelty and lust who exercised the powers of a king with the spirit of a slave.” One author writes, “Antonius Felix was an unscrupulous, avaricious, brutal, scheming politician.”

Enter now...Drusilla, the wife. Drusilla was the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I. At the age of 16 her father arranged her marriage to a man named Azizus who ruled a small kingdom in Syria. According to legend, Drusilla became bored with her stuffy, arranged marriage. She put her sights on Felix and won Felix’s affection with the help of a magician named Atomas, eventually becoming Felix’s illicit lover and “wife.” Drusilla was barely 20 at the time. Drusilla was famously beautiful, and it was well known that she had all but walked away from the Jewish faith in which she had been raised.

So... Felix and Drusilla have requested that Paul come and talk to them about faith in Christ Jesus. It’s hard to know why this “colorful” couple invited Paul to talk to them about Jesus. Maybe they thought Paul would be interesting...maybe they thought he would be entertaining...or maybe they really wanted to know. Whatever the motive, Paul doesn’t waste
the opportunity to share the gospel with a “power couple” who desperately needed Jesus. Luke records their meeting this way: As [Paul] 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.’

Did you hear how Paul went right to the heart of the Gospel? Paul begins with the law…with righteousness…and he paints the picture of how we all fail to live up to the righteousness that the law requires (Romans 3:23). Paul talks about self-control, which these two young people lack in very obvious ways! And then Paul drops the hammer…he talks about the judgment…the fact that we will all be held accountable. No doubt Paul talks about the resurrection of the dead…how those justified in Christ will be resurrected into everlasting life in the presence of God, and how those who remain unjustified will be resurrected into everlasting torment in hell.

Like so many people, the mere mention of the judgment of God makes Felix extremely uncomfortable. The Greek verb Luke employs here suggests that Felix was not just fearful, he was extremely fearful and agitated.

Why? Because the Holy Spirit accompanied Paul’s message, and Felix is allowed to see his sin and the very real consequence that awaits him should he fail to repent and seek forgiveness in Jesus Christ. I know that feeling…it’s pretty horrifying. I suspect many of us can relate with the fear and apprehension that Felix is having at this moment.

So what does Felix do? Does he repent? No. He sends Paul away. He doesn’t want to hear it anymore. He promises Paul, “Maybe later.”

But the fear of the Lord passes, and Felix resumes the status quo. Luke records that Felix continues to meet with Paul on occasion, but always with the angle and the hope that Paul will pay him a bribe in order to get out of jail. This goes on for two years until which time Felix is deposed and replaced by a man named Festus. And once again, in order to further his future career among the Jews, Felix leaves Paul in prison.

Listen friends, don’t underestimate the fear of the Lord, and don’t avoid it. The fear of the Lord is a good thing. Proverbs 9:10 states, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” The fear of the Lord comes upon us when we enter into the presence of God and we see things as they actually are. The fear of the Lord is necessary for us to see our sin and repent, which is exactly what Isaiah did when he gazed upon the glory of God in Isaiah 6. The fear of the Lord is what led many of us to repent and our lives were forever changed as a result.
Don’t miss this: Felix had an opportunity to be saved by the blood of Jesus when the fear of the Lord came upon him…that’s what just happened there in Acts 24. The fear and alarm that Luke records is exactly what we would expect when a man of such horrific character comes face to face with a Holy God through the truth of the Gospel. But Felix did not act…he did not repent…he did not fall to his knees and ask for God’s forgiveness as given freely in Jesus Christ. Instead, Felix did what many of us do…he invited the messenger of God to leave, and he pacified his own horrified soul by saying to Paul and his wife and even himself, “Maybe later. Maybe later I will consider this conviction that now stirs in my soul. Maybe later I will repent when I’m old. Maybe later I will look more deeply into the things of the spirit and the eternal. Maybe later.” Friends, later doesn’t cut it. As C.S. Lewis once said, “An untended garden only gets worse with time.”

Listen: God loves you. He loves you enough to give up His only Son, and He loves you enough to tell you the truth. He will make sure that you hear the truth over and over again through many people and in many ways so that you have ample opportunity to repent. And God loves you enough to pursue you…I don’t care who you are or what you’ve done, God is pursuing you even now. And here’s a newsflash: God loves messed up people! Clearly God loved Felix and Drusilla. He loved them enough to send his very best messenger named Paul to meet with this young couple and speak truth into their lives. And then God demonstrated His love by pressing down hard on Felix…His presence pressed down upon the governor with a power that should have led to a changed heart. But Felix resisted…Felix feared the consequence of losing his earthly status quo more than he feared God…so he rejected the offer of salvation. As a result, Felix is now without excuse. He was given the opportunity to be saved, but he rejected Jesus. Friends…in the end, there is no middle ground. We either repent and seek forgiveness in Christ, or we have rejected Jesus and we remain unforgiven. Those are your two options when you breathe your last. I would ask you to consider which best describes where you are this morning.

Please hear what I’m about to say, because I say it in absolute love for you all: This morning, or some day, when your heart pounds within you because the Gospel has been presented…when every word of a Gospel message sounds like it was tailored just for you…when you see the stain of your sin for what it actually is…when your soul is convicted that should you die today, you would be condemned to an eternity in hell…it is precisely that moment that you should act. Don’t wait until tomorrow…don’t delay. Repent at that very moment, turn from your sin, turn from the path that you are on, and run as fast as you can in the other direction and don’t look back. Call on Jesus to save you…and He will…He absolutely will. Jesus will not only save you, He will set you free. And if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed, amen? It begins with the fear of the Lord…it begins with His presence. Let’s pray for
His presence right now, and I would encourage us all to take action as we are led by the Holy Spirit this morning. Let’s pray.