

July 5, 2020

TESTIFYING BEFORE GOVERNORS AND KINGS

Acts 24:1-26:32

(16 of 17 in a series through Acts)

As we are coming near the end of our series in Acts, we're now coming to the end of Paul's five legal trials that Luke records to fill these last chapter of the book. This morning in particular we're looking at chapters 24-26, which record Paul's trials before two governors and a king. Here's what happens. In chapter 24 Paul has a hearing before Felix, who was the Roman-appointed governor of Judea. The Jews bring in their prosecuting attorney named Tertullus, who makes the case against Paul. He tells Felix, "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" (24:5). In other words, he is saying that Paul is not only one who disturbs the peace but is leading a religious sect that shouldn't be recognized or protected under Roman rule. Then Paul makes his defense, noting both of those charges are untrue. And at the end, Felix decides to leave Paul in jail for two years, not because he thinks Paul has done wrong, but (as Luke says) because he was "desiring to do the Jews a favor" (24:27).

Then two years pass, and now there's a new governor in the area named Festus. And once more, Paul has a trial before him. We read in 25:7, "When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove." Once more Paul makes his defense, noting that he's done nothing to violate the law of the Jews nor against Caesar, but once more Festus—like Felix before him—"wishing to do the Jews a favor" (25:9), acted unjustly and asked Paul if he would like a trial in Jerusalem. Now, Paul knew he couldn't get a fair trial in Jerusalem, so he once more took advantage of his Roman citizenship and appealed to Caesar. Thus Festus replied, "To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go" (25:12).

But Paul wasn't transported to Rome immediately, and after some days passed, a more highly appointed leader—Agrippa—came to Caesarea, where Paul was being held, and as he was there, Festus told him about this case with Paul. His description of the case is actually humorous. He says to Agrippa in 25:18-21, "When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar."

Now to that, Agrippa decides that he wants to hear Paul, which pleases Festus because Festus admits that he's found nothing deserving of death in Paul's actions but feels odd sending him to Caesar without being about to articulate reasonable charges against him. And so chapter 26 is Paul's defense before Agrippa, in which he shares of his conversion on the road to Damascus and Christ's commission of him to go preach the gospel to the Gentiles. And it ends with Agrippa

declaring, “This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment. . . . This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar” (26:31-32).

So that’s our text, and it’s straightforward enough, the story is easy enough to follow, and understand, but I have found it an incredibly difficult text to preach. I’ve written and re-written sermon drafts. Again, the difficulty isn’t because the text is difficult to understand. It’s actually easier to follow than a number of texts I’ve preached. In fact, maybe that’s why I find it so difficult. I think Luke’s point is simple. I think the main thing Luke wants us to see is that Paul is innocent. He’s innocent in regards to the Roman government. He’s done nothing against Caesar and nothing to violate Roman law. And he’s innocent in regards to violating Jewish law. That is, he’s not violated the Old Testament Scriptures in anything that he’s done or taught. But how do you preach a text where that’s the point?

So I was in the office by myself on Thursday morning and I finally just thought to myself, feeling as if I were getting nowhere, “I guess I could just say, ‘If you find yourself in court, being charged of violating religious law and state law, just make sure you’re innocent,’” and the odd thing is that the more I thought of that statement that seemed ridiculous to utter the more it seemed that this is exactly how this text should be preached. Well, not exactly. My point today isn’t if you find yourself in court, make sure you’re innocent. But I do think the point of the text is about how you and I should live in preparation for the kind of suffering and persecution that the Scripture tells us will come to followers of Christ. Let me explain what I mean.

In 1 Peter 4:12, Peter writes, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” In other words, believers should expect suffering. Not only will we go through the suffering that occurs simply by living in a world on this side of Genesis 3, but the Scripture repeatedly tells us to anticipate persecution. Jesus even said that if they called him the ruler of demons, we should expect them to do worse to us as his followers. Therefore, the call to follow Christ—Jesus makes clear—is a call to deny ourselves, follow him, and be willing to suffer and die if necessary. But, here’s the thing. After Peter tells us that we shouldn’t be surprised by fiery trials when they come, as though they’re something strange, he adds, “But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler” (1 Peter 4:15). In other words, if I can paraphrase, he’s saying, “If you find yourself in a position like Paul, make sure you’re standing trial because you follow Christ and not because you’re someone who simply breaks the law and abandons the commands of Christ.” Or, we might say, make sure the only charge the world can bring against you is that you’re obedient to Jesus. And I think that’s what so helpful about Acts 24-26. As Luke shows us that Paul is innocent in the face of all of these unjust charges and trials, he is showing you and me how we can prepare now for affliction, suffering, and even abuse from the state that may well come our way simply for being followers of Jesus. What then does Luke show us that we need to do in order to prepare for persecution as believers? I’ll list two things. The first is that we should live as law-abiding citizens.

We live as law-abiding citizens

I've already stated that I think this is the note Luke sounds most consistently in his recording of Paul's trials. It's as if he wanted to make clear that if ever any governing official read this book of Acts, they would have to come face-to-face with the fact that Paul had done nothing worthy of legal punishment. Let me show you how Luke says this again and again. Before Felix, after the Jews had brought their charges that Paul was stirring up riots in the temple, Paul says in 24:11-13, "You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem, 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. Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me." Then Luke tells us that the only reason Paul sat in prison for two years after his hearing was because of a governor playing politics, "desiring to do the Jews a favor," which is the same reason Felix suggested sending Paul to Jerusalem (25:9). Then, once more as Paul makes his defense, he stresses his innocence, saying in 25:8-11, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense. . . . I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar." And as I noted earlier, when Agrippa came through to greet Festus and hear Paul, not only did Festus confess Paul had done nothing deserving of death, but Agrippa admitted that not only had Paul done nothing deserving of death but nor did he deserve to be in prison. And so time after time, Luke makes clear that Paul is innocent. Paul was a law-abiding citizen.

And I don't think it's a stretch to exhort us to the same thing because this very Paul who would write the letter to the Romans, wrote to the believers in Rome, "Let every person be subject to governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment" (Romans 13:1-2). Moreover, Paul wrote that in the second half of the book of Romans. He writes a theological masterpiece in the first eleven chapters, and then he focuses on Christian living in chapters 12-16, framing all of those exhortations under the heading that he writes in 12:1, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." In other words, Paul is saying, "If you want to know what living a life of worship looks like, one aspect of it is obeying your governing authorities." So, the portrait that the Bible gives is that believers are law-abiding citizens. That way, if we ever suffer the persecution that Paul is suffering and are dragged into courts, it'll be clear to all that we're not there because we deserve it but simply because we're followers of Jesus.

And yes, there are exceptions to this and difficulties with it. One difficulty is actually a blessing. It's that in the U.S., we live in a constitutional republic with representative government. In other words, we're ultimately governed by our constitution. Theoretically, we can push back on any governing official who is commanding us to do something or not to do something that is unconstitutional, and the courts should rule in our favor. Now, we all know that doesn't always happen, but we do live in a country where the constitution recognizes many rights we have. We can vote, peacefully protest, and on and on. For most of our governing authorities, if we don't

like them, we can vote them out of office. And so it gets a little tricky to work out Romans 13 in our setting. But we see this complex reality even with Paul when those over him at times try to abuse him in violation of what can be done to a Roman citizen. This is why Paul keeps pointing this out to people. So, I'll acknowledge that obeying governing authorities in our setting can get a little complex.

Also, I'll note the exception that we are never to obey governing authorities when their commands are in competition with the commands of Christ. We've already seen earlier in the book of Acts where Peter is told to stop preaching the gospel and he responds that he's bound to obey Jesus, not man.

But, with that caveat and exception, the Bible pictures believers as law-abiding people. Don't pride yourself on being a follower of Christ and someone who looks to rebel against governing authorities. Those two things simply don't fit together. Let me say it this way, in most situations following Jesus and obeying the law line up well together. Paying our taxes, obeying traffic laws, nor even wearing masks—if that's demanded of us—in any way come into competition with obeying Jesus, for it is Jesus who tells us to obey our governing authorities as those appointed over us by God for our good. That's the first way we prepare for persecution. We live as law-abiding citizens. That way, when suffering comes to us at the hands of government, it may not be said of us that we are suffering justly but unjustly, indeed, simply for our obedience and commitment to Christ. And in that we will be able to bear witness to the glory of Christ. Second, we teach and obey God's Word.

We teach and obey God's Word

Luke is recording in these chapters Paul's legal trials, and Paul would eventually be killed under Roman rule, but the reality is that the charges against him came from religious leaders. They clearly saw Paul as violating the OT Scriptures. But just as Luke makes clear that Paul was innocent of violating any Roman laws, so he also makes clear that Paul was not violating the OT Scriptures. In fact, Paul was preaching Jesus—and his life, death, and resurrection—as *the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures*. Let's look at this.

First, in his defense before Felix, Paul says in 24:14-16, "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 hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man." Then, in Paul's defense before Agrippa, he returns to this theme again and again, saying, "And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? . . . To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by

being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles” (26:6-8, 22-23).

You see, Paul wasn’t departing from the OT Scriptures in preaching Jesus as having died and been raised from the dead. The OT Scriptures actually foretell that Christ would come, suffer, die, and be raised. We can see it again and again, and we attempt to show it again and again as we preach through OT books. But the point is, Paul is at this point unable to be shaken in light of these charges because he knows that he’s simply proclaiming the Word of God.

Even when Paul tells Agrippa about Christ’s commission to him when he appeared to him in the sky, listen to the language he uses. Paul tells us that Jesus said to him: “I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (26:16-18). What’s interesting about this language is that all the way back in Isaiah—written hundreds of years before the coming of Christ—the Lord had said through the prophet Isaiah that his servant (i.e. the Lord) would come as “a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (Isaiah 42:6-7). In other words, the OT promises are being fulfilled in Jesus and through Jesus’ working in his church. Again, remember the beginning of this book where Luke noted that this was a description of all that Jesus continued to do through his Spirit in the church.

And, brothers and sisters, this is instructive for us. We’re likely to be the object of more and more persecution, especially in light of the sexual revolution and other things going on in our country. But no matter what comes to us, we need to make sure that we are able to say that we are simply obeying God’s Word in its every detail. In other words, as believers, we do not believe or do what we’ve simply all agreed is best from our own minds; we believe and do what God’s Word commands us. We believe what we do about life, marriage, sex, money, and the like simply because that’s what the Bible teaches, and we are servants of Christ Jesus. And if we should suffer for it, that’s fine. But let us not suffer for that which is a departure from God’s Word.

I don’t know what the future holds, but it is completely reasonable to think that following Christ in our current setting may lead to more situations like we see in Acts 24-26 than we like. Jesus told us that we should expect the world to approach us as they approached him, and he was ultimately unjustly convicted and killed. But if or when that day comes for us, may it be said of us that the only charge that they can bring against us is that we have been obedient to Jesus. That’s how we live now in preparation for persecution that may well be ours. Let us then once more by faith commit our hearts to obedience to our crucified and risen Lord as we come to the table. Amen.