

SPEAKING ABOUT FAITH IN CHRIST JESUS

Acts 24:1–27

Key Verse: 24:24

“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.”

Are you ever confused about the grace of Jesus? Some people think that because of his grace, if we just believe, what we do doesn't really matter. Others ignore his grace and are always stressing what we need to do. Is Christianity all about totally free grace? Does how we respond to his grace matter? Today's passage touches on this issue. The Book of Acts has so much variety. Paul visits such historic places, lives through such dramatic events, and meets such interesting people. Several times he's almost killed. Now he's on trial. After two years in prison, he'll be left there, his life hanging in the balance (27). There's courtroom drama, injustice, attempted bribery, and a scandal fit for the tabloids. Compared to the Apostle Paul's, our lives may seem boring. But the climax of this passage is not the trial, but Paul speaking personally with a couple about faith in Christ Jesus. His words to them clarify what faith in the grace of Jesus means. It may seem like an old story, but it's very relevant in helping people living in today's culture. And once again, Paul displays some key traits of a real witness of Jesus. May God speak to us through his word.

Part 1: Paul's trial before Felix (1–21)

Overnight, Paul was taken away hurriedly by a large Roman army force from Jerusalem to a place called Antipatris, then on to the provincial capital, Caesarea¹ (map & image). Caesarea is a large, Roman-style city on the Mediterranean Sea. Now Felix the Roman governor calls for Paul's accusers to come here for a trial. Read verse 1. Even the high priest Ananias has to come. He brings some elders and a spokesman called Tertullus, who's a prosecuting attorney hired to present the Jews' case against Paul in a Roman court. This is serious. Tertullus has been trained to speak well at trials, and for this, he's paid well, too. To such a person, winning the case and making money are more important than truth or justice. The Roman Empire was famous for the justice of its legal system. But it managed its provinces by giving governors the power to sit as judges, which led to bribery, legal incompetence, and systemic injustice.

How does Tertullus begin? Look at verses 2–4. He's a master of flattery. Who is this “most excellent Felix”? History tells us Felix was born a slave, but through his connections with Caesar's family, he's now the high-ranking governor of Judea (Prov.19:10). What a flip! But just a few years before meeting Paul, Felix was involved in the assassination of former Jewish high priest, and his personal

¹ 23:23–24,31–32.

sponsor-turned-critic, Jonathan. Jonathan was stabbed right in the temple, which made everyone furious. Over the next two years in Caesarea, Felix will side with the Greeks who will end up killing and pillaging many Jewish residents. For this, Felix will be sent back to Rome and dismissed.² Still, Tertullus calls him “most excellent Felix.” Look at verse 5. In contrast, Tertullus labels Christ’s servant Paul a “plague.” He accuses him of stirring up riots among all the Jews throughout the world. He labels him a “ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.” Jerusalem Jews despised those from Nazareth. And many knew Jesus of Nazareth was executed by Rome for claiming to be king instead of Caesar. Tertullus is trying to paint Paul in such a threatening light, so he accuses him of even profaning the Jerusalem temple (6). He’s confident that a thorough examination will prove all this to be true; so are all the Jews there with him (8–9). Paul has no power, no position, no wealth, and no defense attorney. It’s scary. But he does have faith in Jesus and the Holy Spirit in him. His response to these accusations is simple, clear and effective. He refutes them with facts, points out how his accusers aren’t following legal procedures, and defends and even promotes his faith, and the faith of all Christians, all at the same time. Amazing. But how?

He begins by saying in his recent visit to Jerusalem, there are no facts of him stirring up crowds in the temple, in the synagogues, or in the city (11–13). He identifies with those who follow “the Way,” but says it’s no sect. He says following the Way means believing everything in the Law and the Prophets and worshipping God (14). He says he has the same hope in God as his accusers, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust (15). Read verse 16. Because of his faith, Paul always takes pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. This is what his opponents, and all of us who claim to believe, should also be doing. Next, he mentions his real purpose in visiting Jerusalem, to bring alms for his people and offerings to God (17). He was not profaning the temple, but was purified in it, without any crowd or tumult (18a). Then he mentions some Jews from Asia, the ones who actually started that riot in the temple (18b–19; 21:27). As his accusers, he says they should be at this trial. It was against the law to present accusations without evidence or witnesses. Then Paul addresses the high priest and elders, who heard what he said in the Sanhedrin. When he spoke about the resurrection, they’re the ones who became violent (20–21). After his words they have nothing to say.

Part 2: Paul speaks to Felix and Drusilla (22–27)

Look at verse 22. This is an escape tactic. Felix already has the letter from Lysias the tribune, stating he could find nothing in Paul deserving death or imprisonment (23:29). Felix also knows enough about “the Way” to know that it’s no threat to Judaism, the Jerusalem temple, or Rome. Look at verse 23. To

² Tacitus, *The Histories*, Book 5, Chapter 9; Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 20, Chapter 8, Sections 5, 7 and 9, and *The Jewish War*, Book 2, Chapter 13, Section 7.

appease the Jewish leaders, he instructs the centurion to keep Paul in custody, but to quietly give him some liberty and allow his friends to care for his needs. And he doesn't stop there. Read verse 24. Can you imagine being brought to a private interview with such a high-powered couple? There may be many reasons why they ask to meet with Paul: he's sort of a celebrity, well-traveled, very intelligent. Maybe for them, speaking with him is a kind of entertainment. But we'll grasp what's really going on here if we know more about these two. By now, Felix is in his mid-50s, but Drusilla is only 19 years old. Four years before this, she began an arranged marriage to a local Syrian king, who underwent circumcision to marry her. But when Felix saw Drusilla, he somehow persuaded her to leave her new husband and marry him. In Jewish society it was scandalous.

The name "Drusilla" was popular for Roman princesses. Felix's first wife, also named "Drusilla," was the great-granddaughter of Mark Antony and Cleopatra. But this "Drusilla" is a Jewish princess. On her mother's side, she comes from a long line of royal Jewish women. On her father's side, she's the great-granddaughter of Herod the Great. He's the one who had all the baby boys in Bethlehem killed, to try to eliminate the baby Jesus. Drusilla's great uncle, Herod Antipas, had liked to listen to John the Baptist, but eventually had him beheaded. Her own father, Agrippa I, had James, the brother of John, executed, and Peter put in prison. But Drusilla, the younger sister of Agrippa and Bernice (Acts 26), is known as a great beauty. Her older sister Bernice, also beautiful, is envious of her and has been torturing her. So Drusilla saw the chance to marry a Roman governor as her way out, and a way to gratify her ambition and get to live in an elite city.³ But now, facing the quiet scorn of her Jewish people with strict morals, her conscience may be bothering her. Drusilla has likely heard of Paul's message, that we are saved not by the law, but only by faith in the grace of Jesus. It's highly probable she's wondering about it. Could this grace relieve her own guilty conscience and even restore her to some public respect? So she asks her husband to bring her to Paul, to hear him in person.

What does Paul say? He speaks to them "about faith in Christ Jesus" (24b). Paul doesn't hesitate. Faith in Christ Jesus gives anyone access to his grace. His grace is for the worst of sinners, including this couple. In his grace, all our unforgivable sins can be forgiven, wiped clean. It's amazing. But if we really receive it, the grace of Jesus also changes us. His grace doesn't leave us to continue in our sins; his grace saves us from our sins. And when it says "faith in Christ Jesus," Paul is proclaiming that only Jesus is "King." Through his death and resurrection, Jesus is still our true Spiritual King and Lord. By his grace, we belong to him, love him, worship him, and serve him with our whole lives. Paul

³ Matt. 2:16–18; 14:1–12; Mark 6:14–29; Acts 12:1–5. See also Suetonias, *The Twelve Caesars*, Chapter 28; Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 19, Chapter 9, Section 1 and Book 20, Chapter 7, Section 2.

goes on. Read verse 25. Luke again uses the verb “to reason.”⁴ Faith in Christ Jesus not only is reasonable; it’s also very practical. Paul reasons with this couple, to show them how and why faith in his grace changes our practical lives.

He first mentions “righteousness.” Faith in Christ Jesus gives us righteousness as a gift from God, by his grace.⁵ Only by his grace are we made right with God. Only his free, one-sided, amazing grace changes our hearts, our motivations. It’s why we cry to him to create in us a clean heart and a right spirit (Ps.51:10). We begin to hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt.5:6). And if we set our minds on the things of the Spirit (Rom.8:5–6), we’re filled with the fruit of righteousness, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil.1:11; 2:13).

Next, Paul talks about “self-control.” In his letters he often mentions self-control.⁶ It’s the grace of Jesus that leads us to self-control. Paul explains it in Titus 2:11–12, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age...” This self-control is essential for both men and women. A lack of self-control is what got Felix and Drusilla into this marriage. But after marriage, self-control becomes crucial for us all. The grace of Jesus doesn’t set us free from self-control, but helps us gain it.

Finally Paul turns to “the coming judgment.” Faith in Christ Jesus means believing not only his grace, but also that he’s coming again as Judge.⁷ Only the grace of Jesus and his shed blood reconciles us to God and saves us from his wrath due to our sin (Rom.5:8–10). But it’s faith that he’s our Judge that gives us the healthy accountability we need to grow in righteousness and self-control. Those in high positions may think they’re accountable to no one, but Christian faith shows us we’re all accountable to Jesus our King. Even Paul applied this “coming judgment” to himself, saying, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Cor.5:10).

The Bible warns us about abusing the grace of Jesus. Jude 1:4 says, “For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were destined for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” When they hear Paul’s words about righteousness, self-control and the coming judgment, Drusilla is silent, and Felix is “alarmed.” He tells Paul, “Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you” (25b). Again he’s being evasive.

Look at verse 26. Felix is a sick soul. He’s governor of a Roman province, but he’s begging from poor Apostle Paul. At the same time, he likes to hear him

⁴ 17:2,17; 18:4,19; 19:8–9.

⁵ Rom.3:21–24; 4:3–5,22–24; 5:17; 1:17; Phil.3:9; 2 Cor.5:21; Titus 3:5–7.

⁶ 1 Cor.7:5,9; 9:25; Gal.5:23; 1 Tim.2:9,15; 3:2; 2 Tim.1:7; 3:3; Titus 1:8; 2:2,5.

⁷ Acts 10:42; 17:31; cf. Matt.25:31–32; 2 Tim.4:1; Rev.19:11,15.

speak, so he sends for him often and converses with him. And Paul keeps coming. He shares the good news with this man in obedience to Jesus. But he patiently, consistently refuses to give him any bribe. What do we learn from Paul?

First, a witness of Jesus is always on duty. Paul is on trial; his life is at risk. He defends himself, but also uses this moment to share his faith in Jesus. He's ready any day, any time, to share his faith, even with a man who keeps coming with the wrong motives. We're all called to be witnesses of Jesus every day. At home or work, in a crisis, or even in injustice, every situation is a chance to be his witness, whether with our words or in our character.

Second, a witness of Jesus speaks truth to power, with both respect and courage. While on trial in public, Paul is not insulting or needlessly harsh; he speaks truth respectfully. And while speaking with Felix and his wife in private, he tells them the grace of Jesus is available even to them, by faith. But he doesn't soften the message; he points it right at their known sins. As witnesses of Jesus, we're called to respect those in authority, and to share grace, but not to water down its spiritual and moral challenge, even if it makes people uncomfortable.

Third, a witness of Jesus has a godly character. Paul says, "So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man" (16). This is the source of his integrity. Paul is a prisoner, but his integrity before God makes him free, more free than the governor. And he never gives in to paying him a bribe. When we speak about Jesus, people may like our words. But they're convicted by our character, especially when it's tested over time under pressure.

Fourth, a witness of Jesus applies the gospel to people we're with. Paul doesn't lecture Felix and Drusilla on abstract theology; he reasons with them to show how faith in Jesus' grace relates to their practical lives. Likewise, we need to know and understand the people we meet—their hopes, their fears, their needs, their problems, and share with them how the gospel of Jesus is the real answer.

Fifth, a witness of Jesus is faithful. Paul spends two years speaking with Felix. But Felix remains enslaved by his fear and greed. From a results perspective, it's a failure. But Paul's responsibility is not to change Felix; it's to witness Jesus to him. Likewise, witnesses of Jesus don't focus on immediate, visible success. Jesus calls us to faithfully pray and share our faith with people. We plant and water the seeds of the gospel, but only God gives the growth (1 Cor.3:6–7).

So, how do we respond to the grace of Jesus? We're living in times of severe moral relativism. Even many who think they're Christians succumb to it. Honestly, are we trying to abuse the grace of Jesus? Do we allow his grace to train us in self-control? Do we truly believe in his coming judgment? Read verses 24–25 again. May God help us live as clear and faithful witnesses of Jesus, who share his life-changing grace with all kinds of people.