

A lengthy lockdown: Acts 23 and 24



The Roman troop commander in Jerusalem was still none the wiser about what crime the Jewish Temple officials were accusing Paul of having committed. He arranged for him to have a hearing before them, but Paul, who had been trained as a Pharisee, cleverly managed to set the Pharisees and Sadducees against one another. The argument became heated and Paul once again had to be rescued by the Roman soldiers.

At this point in the story, a young man, Paul's nephew, makes an appearance. He had heard on the Jerusalem "grapevine" that a plot was being hatched against Paul by some of the most fanatical of his enemies, who had taken a vow not to eat until they had killed him. They may have been Zealots, who would have been quite happy to take a few Roman soldiers down with him. Paul arranged for the young man to see the commander, who decided that for Paul's safety and the peace of the city, he needed to get him away from Jerusalem as soon as possible. Paul was taken with a heavy guard to Caesarea, which was not only a busy port but the centre of Roman rule in Judaea.

Felix, the governor, arranged another hearing for Paul before the Jewish leaders, who came from Jerusalem with a well briefed lawyer, Tertullus. He accused Paul of stirring up riots among the Jews throughout the Roman Empire, an offence the Romans would have taken very seriously if it could be proven to be true. Paul however, put up a good defence, and

Felix adjourned the meeting, saying he would decide the matter when he had spoken personally to the Roman commander from Jerusalem.

In fact, Paul was to remain a prisoner in Caesarea for a further two years. The conditions under which he was kept appear to have been tolerable, and his friends were allowed to visit and bring him supplies. Felix and his Jewish wife seem to have had a genuine interest in Paul's beliefs, and Felix would send for him and converse with him from time to time. Luke tells us that Felix was also hoping Paul would give him some money; Paul's friends could probably have raised enough funds to pay Felix an acceptable bribe to have him released. Paul, however, had no intention of supporting corruption in order to obtain his freedom. Instead, he took advantage of his meetings with Felix, using them as opportunities to talk to him about Jesus Christ.

Writing later from prison to the church in Philippi, Paul declared, "I am content, whether I am full or hungry, whether I have too much or too little. I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me." (Philippians 4: 12 & 13). May you know that same power in your life today.

A prayer:

As the rain hides the stars, as the Autumn mist hides the hills, as the clouds veil the blue of the sky, so the dark happenings of my lot hide the shining of Thy face from me.

Yet if I may hold Thy hand in the darkness it is enough... Since I know that, though I may stumble in my going, Thou dost not fall. AMEN

(An ancient Gaelic prayer)

- Rev John Barnett

Image: Paul before Felix (William Dent, around 1790, after the style of William Hogarth, 1697–1764)