

### THE BOOK OF ACTS

#### Lesson 51, Chapter 24

As we continue with Acts chapter 24 (and we're going to go into depth in chapter 24 today due to some seriously important faith issues in these passages), we find Paul standing before the Roman governor, Felix, in the provincial capital city of Caesarea Maritima. The Jewish High Priest **Hananyah** and some elders (no doubt meaning other members of the Sanhedrin) have come to bring charges against Paul. Some unnamed Judean Jews were also present as a show of support for these charges. However the crimes that Hananyah's hired **rhetor** presents (a **rhetor** is a professional speaker who uses glorified and flowery words to present a case in a trial) are so non-specific that Felix is having as much trouble understanding them as did Commander Lysias of the Roman guard who had initially arrested Paul.

The primary charge seems to be that Paul is a "pest" and an agitator, and that he is the ringleader of a sect of Judaism called The Way. Inherent in the accusation is that The Way was seen as something of an aberration among Judean Jews, and the Jewish aristocrats, especially, find the Believers bothersome and non-conformist and therefore a constant source of trouble. The secondary charge that is of special interest to the Sadducees and the High Priest is that Paul attempted to profane the Temple, but they were able to stop him just before he actually did. Exactly what that attempt to profane amounted to is left out, although we know from Acts 21 that it allegedly involved Paul bringing a gentile into areas of the Temple courtyard where gentiles were prohibited. Luke implies that this charge was the result of a bogus rumor that had been spread by some unbelieving Diaspora Jews who had come to Jerusalem from Asia for the Feast of Shavuot.

Let's recall that the reason that Paul was here in Caesarea standing before Felix, rather than this trumped-up affair being handled back in Jerusalem by the Jews themselves (under the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin) was because while Paul was under arrest and being held in the Antonia Fortress (which was a barracks and guard house located in the northwest corner of the Temple Mount), Commander Lysias got word of a plot by about 40 Zealots who intended to free Paul in order to assassinate him. Since Paul was a Roman citizen and had demanded his rights as such, it took the Sanhedrin out of the picture as the authority to try Paul and instead made it a Roman governmental matter. Paul was taken to Caesarea, under the cover of darkness, by a large contingent of well armed Roman soldiers in order to thwart the murder plot and to assure his safe transfer to the custody of Felix, the governor over Judea.

Before we re-read part of Acts 24 I would like to emphasize something that we have discussed in the last couple of lessons that has great bearing on our understanding of this story: this entire matter against Paul had almost nothing to do with his Messianic theology. We do not find his belief that Yeshua was the Messiah, or that Christ was the Son of God, brought up. Rather the hatred against him was because Paul was spending much time with gentiles in foreign lands and offering them a form of membership (if you would) in Israel's covenants with God but without these gentiles first being circumcised (converting to Jews). Second, Paul was at

one time a trusted member of the Sanhedrin. Even though he was a Pharisee and so not part of the ruling class that the High Priest belonged to (the Sadducees) he was nonetheless enthusiastic and dedicated and seemed to be the High Court's willing point-man to hunt down and arrest members of The Way wherever they could be found. But on his way to Damascus, Syria to arrest some suspected Jesus sympathizers Paul had an experience with Christ that turned him against the Sanhedrin; it went so far that he becomes an outspoken leader of the very group that the High Court wanted stamped out. This was a huge embarrassment for them and the best solution to end the shame was to eliminate the traitor. And finally, and probably most significantly, Paul's credentials as a Jew were being challenged. That is, to many Jews Paul was not behaving "Jewish" enough (or at least that was what was being rumored about him), and so they thought him a turncoat who had decided to embrace gentiles and befriend the Jews' Roman occupiers. Thus the issues against Paul were mostly cultural and nationalistic as opposed to being theologically based.

Let's re-read part of Acts chapter 24.

### **RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 24:10 – end**

Here begins Paul's defense.

Paul demonstrates his understanding of the expected decorum in a trial conducted in the Roman system of justice by using some flattering words (fully expected) about the judge, Felix. But Paul doesn't lie; it is true that Felix ought to be adept at getting to the truth because he's been governing the province of Judea for some years, now, and so has an understanding of the social and political climate of the region as well as the unique concerns of Jews.

First of all Paul explains that he'd only been in Jerusalem for a period of less than 2 weeks and that his purpose for coming to Jerusalem was to "worship". In other words, he came peacefully for religious reasons; he had no ulterior motives such as coming to agitate either against the Jewish ruling class or against Rome. Coming right to the point Paul also says he did nothing against the Temple, he did nothing against the synagogues, and nowhere in the city did he go to argue or sow seeds of discord, and neither did he collect a crowd to speak to. But even more, says Paul, his accusers offer nothing but unsubstantiated complaints and bring not even one witness to back-up their claims.

I know we've discussed the issue of the separation of Temple and synagogue on several occasions, but I also know how hard it can be to grasp new concepts that fly in the face of old entrenched ones. I ask you to see this matter not as some arcane fact that only Bible scholars ought to concern themselves with; but rather as essential knowledge for every Believer and especially for serious students of the Bible. What you're learning is what most Jewish families, whether living in the Holy Land or in foreign lands, knew in those days as just a matter of everyday life. Frankly, if your goal is to hang on tightly to long held and cherished Christian traditions about Jews, Jewishness, Paul, the early Church and the New Testament in general, now would be a good time to take a nap. But if you truly want to know what God is telling us in His marvelous use of inspired humans to recount and record the heady days of the beginning of our faith, then put down your Bibles for the next few minutes, clear your minds of other

thoughts, and listen carefully to what I have to tell you.

Notice how Paul makes separate mention of the Temple and of the synagogue, and this is because they *are* separate issues. They operated independently of one another, had no official connection with one another, and their leadership was different and separate in every imaginable way. As regards the Temple, it is the High Priest and the Sadducees who are protective of the Temple and all of its ritual and ceremonial activities because that's what they are in charge of. Even before New Testament times the Temple had become a lucrative business operation in reality, even though it masqueraded itself as God's authorized spiritual institution on earth and therefore above reproach. It is not at all unlike the Prosperity Doctrine TV ministries that most modern Believers are aware of; they purport to be godly, deeply spiritual, and have in mind your best interests, but everything is about you making more money, or about you sending money.....to them. In fairness not everything that happened at the Temple was wrong, nor was it all fake or a deception, anymore than it is for these TV ministries. For the average Levite priest and Temple worker, their service was a selfless labor of love and a blessed opportunity to live out the high honor that God had given to the tribe of Levi to be His priests and instructors of God's Word to the people. They did not profit from it. It was only the higher ups, the High Priest and his family and his friends and some of the senior Priests that benefited monetarily and they fully intended to enrich themselves as much as possible in both wealth and power. A good analogy would be how most modern politicians who eventually leave their offices somehow come away considerably more wealthy than when they went in while, on paper, making only a modest salary. Yet all the time they extol the virtues of their selfless leadership and appear on the surface to just be dedicated government servants, their true motives for attaining that office were not and are not pure; it was simply a means to an end.

Let's remember that originally at Mt. Sinai the Priesthood and the Temple (the Wilderness tent sanctuary to be accurate) were commanded by God to be established and operated solely by the tribe of Levi. So the Temple with its Priests was, according the Torah of Moses, a legitimate and God-ordained institution that would be, quite literally, the heart and soul of God's chosen people, Israel. The Temple was the one and only location where God would place His Name for the purpose of communal worship, sacrifice, and observance of His 7 Biblical Feasts. But that heart and soul of the people, the Temple, was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar just after 600 B.C. The Priesthood that survived the destruction became meaningless without it and thus went defunct. The remaining Priests also seem to have had little if any actual influence or power over the Jewish people in their exile and the Priesthood never fully recovered to its original state even after Ezra and Nehemiah managed to rebuild the Temple and get it functioning again a few decades after the Jews were released from their Babylonian captivity. Part of the reason that it was never quite the same again was that their authority and their duties had become diluted due to the birth of a second Jewish religious institution; an institution created by the Jews during the Babylonian exile: the synagogue.

The synagogue was created not as a God-ordained vessel of His power and authority on earth but rather out of unpleasant circumstance and human desire. Because the Temple had been destroyed, the Jewish people living in exile in Babylon had no way to purify themselves from uncleanness, no way to atone for sins, and no direction or authority structure to enforce God's

laws upon them. They couldn't celebrate the Feasts as they were supposed to. They couldn't mark the Sabbath with sacrifices by the High Priest at the Jerusalem Temple. The core of their Jewish identity was wiped out when the Temple was leveled and so they found themselves spiritually adrift in a foreign land. Their captors' intentions were for the Jews to become simply another people they lorded over, and assumed that in time the Jews would accept the Babylonian gods and god-system. So while the synagogue was neither God-authorized nor was it necessarily meant to be a replacement for the Temple, it did serve a practical purpose. The synagogue became the new symbol of Jewishness. In my opinion it should have been only a temporary institution (assuming it should have been created at all) until the Temple was rebuilt. However (as is typical of humans) once the synagogue was created and an authority structure set up, a liturgy of service was established, traditions were created, and some time passed, the genie was out of the bottle and there was no putting it back. The common Jew now centered his or her daily faith and religious activities in the synagogue institution.

We must always keep in mind that the synagogue is a manmade invention; a creation of human thought and will that was really the consequence of God intentionally punishing His people by taking away what He had much earlier given to them: the Temple and the Priesthood along with all of its benefits. In a certain sense the synagogue, at least at its inception, was mankind trying to find a way around God. But I don't want to paint the synagogue as something evil or wrong or instituted with wicked intent. Gentile Christians should always remember that the Church institution was also created as a manmade endeavor; it was not God-commanded. The Church institution as we know it today was designed as a purely gentile organization, by and for the benefit of gentiles and backed by a Roman Emperor. Many of the Church's ways and traditions were borrowed from the synagogue system (even though most people don't know it); things like establishing many local facilities (churches) all over the landscape and declaring a certain day of the week as set apart for a communal worship gathering (something the Bible does not command, but also does not prohibit), tithing, singing praises to God, and much more.

Thus while the Temple was originally God-ordained and directed to be maintained by a specifically named line of Levite priests, in NT times the Temple was run by the social/religious party of the Sadducees (a class of wealthy aristocratic Jews). The synagogue that was purely manmade as of late had become run mostly by the social/religious party of the Pharisees (although not in any official capacity). However don't get the idea that the many synagogues all over the world were somehow joined together under a uniform authority structure of Pharisees; that didn't exist. Each synagogue was, generally speaking, independent. Their commonality was the result of Traditions and customs that developed over time. The Temple and the synagogue were indeed rivals; there were jealousies and disputes between them but they were not opponents. The synagogue leadership and congregation members fully understood that certain rituals and observances had to occur only at the Temple, and only the Priests could supervise or perform these rituals. And the synagogue recognized the authority of the High Priest; but only insofar as it concerned what went on at the Temple.

All indication is that the Priests (and thus the Sadducees) weren't terribly happy at the existence and influence of the synagogue; but it was a fact of life that they couldn't alter because it was too deeply embedded into the Jewish consciousness. Nearly every Jew,

whether living in the Holy Land or out in the Diaspora, had an attachment to one synagogue or another so compromises were made between the Temple and the synagogue authorities and they managed to co-exist. I feel confident in asserting that even if a High Priest or the Sanhedrin had ordered that the synagogue system was to be abandoned that the people would not have obeyed. They were comfortable with this idea of the synagogue serving some of their local, daily religious needs, and the Temple serving other, mostly ceremonial parts of their religious needs. So this is what Judaism looked like at the time of Yeshua and then Paul, and we need to take notice that the synagogue was in no way described by Christ or any of the Apostles as an illegitimate institution but rather as just a reality of Jewish culture. The Temple, too, was not depicted by Messiah or any of the Apostles as being a hopelessly corrupted institution that had lost its value, but rather as something that needed reform.

Thus getting back to verse 12, hypothetically speaking Paul could have offended the Temple, but that would not have affected his relationship with the synagogue, or vice versa; every Jew knew that (and no doubt so did the Roman Felix as well), and so Paul needed to make it clear to Felix that he committed no wrong against either of those 2 standard Jewish religious institutions, one of them being the province of the wealthy and the Sadducees, the other the province of the common folk and the Pharisees (you can pick up those Bibles again!)

Now we come to one of the most significant and telling declarations of Paul in the Book of Acts, as well as in all of his writings. For those Christians who immediately run to Galatians and a few other passages that seem to say that Paul has no regard for the law and that he sees no value in his Jewish heritage, let's look closely at verse 14.

**Acts 24:14 CJB** *"But this I do admit to you: I worship the God of our fathers in accordance with the Way (which they call a sect). I continue to believe everything that accords with the Torah and everything written in the Prophets.*

Just so that we can be intellectually honest and not cherry pick between Bible versions to find the one we like best, here are two other standard familiar Bible version translations of the same verse.

<sup>KJV</sup> **Acts 24:14** *But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets:*

<sup>NAS</sup> **Acts 24:14** *"But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law, and that is written in the Prophets;*

It is pretty clear that most standard English Bible versions agree that Paul is saying that he believes, or agrees, with everything written in the Law and the Prophets. But because this statement directly flies in the face of standard Christian doctrine that Paul is anti-Law and no longer accepts that the Law even exists for Believers, let's take some time with this verse as there is more here than meets the eye.

First, Paul says he worships the God of his fathers. He hasn't given up Yehoveh, the Father, the ancient God of the Hebrew Bible, for the new God, the God of those who live in the first part of the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., God's Son, Jesus. But he also says he believes EVERYTHING written in the Law and the Prophets. Not some things but *all* things; not the slightest bit of change in the written law is contemplated by Paul. So the challenge for us is to discover what he means by the term "law" in this instance. We've talked extensively about this term that in Greek is **nomos**. But what we've found is that the term is broad and it can mean several different things depending on the context. It can mean any law or custom, pagan or Hebrew; it can mean Jewish Law (**Halakhah**), or it can mean the Law of Moses (the Biblical Torah Law). So which of these can we know with any assurance that Paul means here? Actually this is one of the easier instances to determine because he uses the same phrase that Christ used in Matthew 5:17 – 19 to announce his position regarding the Law of Moses. He speaks of the law and the prophets as a connected phrase. When the two terms law and prophets are used together, tied together, it has a specific meaning; it is speaking directly of Holy Scripture. The Law (the Torah) and the Prophets are 2 of the 3 named sections of the Holy Scripture as defined by the Jews. In Hebrew those 3 named sections are **Torah, Nevi'im** and **K'tuvim** (Torah, Prophets, and Writings). The Greek language has no direct word equivalent for Torah so they use the rather generic term **nomos**, which means a law or a custom or a tradition.

Another proof that Paul is speaking of the Biblical Torah and not of Jewish Law (**Halakhah**) is that he says he believes that which is "written". In Greek the term is **grapho**, which means things that are formally written down using an alphabet. In New Testament times Jewish Law (**Halakhah**) was NOT yet written down. One of the many names for **Halakhah** is Oral Law. Another name is Tradition, and yet another is Traditions of the Elders. Jewish Law, **Halakhah**, only existed in NT times in oral form; it had not been written down yet and wouldn't be until **Yehudah HaNasi** (Judah the Prince) did so for the first time early in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., around 175 years after Paul's time in a work called the **Mishna**. So for certain with these two pieces of evidence staring at us, Paul is speaking of the Biblical Torah, the Law of Moses, as what he believes everything that has been written down.

Let me sum up this verse like this: Paul says that He is a Believer in Yeshua, he is a member of The Way, that He worships the God of his Fathers (the OT God, so to speak), and that he believes all things that are written in the Torah and in the Prophets. Folks, if that's what Paul believes in then so do I (and so should you). And I believe this of Paul because that is fully consistent with what Christ says (and without our having to do back flips to make the statements compatible).

### Matthew 5:17-19 CJB

***17 "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete.***

***18 Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened.***

***19 So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be***

***called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.***

Why do I harp on this matter of the Law and bring it up constantly? Because in this context neither Christ nor Paul are telling us HOW to be saved. They are telling us how to **live** AFTER we are saved. Just as there is no option A and option B on how to get saved, there is no option A and option B on how to live after we are saved. We are to look to the Biblical Torah, the Law of Moses, as our written guide for living a righteous life. Where are we NEVER to look is to our hearts (but I can't tell you the hundreds of Christians who gleefully tell me that where they look as their guide to right and wrong is their hearts).

**Jeremiah 17:9 CJB<sup>9</sup> *"The heart is more deceitful than anything else and mortally sick. Who can fathom it?"***

And in the Gospel of Mark we read:

**Mark 7:21-23 CJB<sup>21</sup> *For from within, out of a person's heart, come forth wicked thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,*<sup>22</sup> *greed, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, arrogance, foolishness....***

**<sup>23</sup> *All these wicked things come from within, and they make a person unclean."***

So I pray that we can agree: go to the Torah Law if you want to know how to live the redeemed life that Christ has won for us, and that we have obtained through grace by faith in Him.

Then in verse 15 Paul gives us his doctrine on a theological issue that would have had the Sadducees of the Sanhedrin that were sitting there listening to his defense, grinding their teeth. In fact when a few days earlier Paul was being questioned by the Sanhedrin (in Acts 23) the assembly quickly devolved into bedlam when he brought up the issue of resurrection such that Lysias had to remove Paul to keep him from being attacked. Paul says that on the matter of resurrection from the dead that he not only believes in resurrection, but also that both the wicked and the righteous will be resurrected. And, says Paul, this belief is how he continues to have "hope" in God. Once again what Paul states is in full agreement with his Master, Yeshua.

**John 5:24-29 CJB**

**<sup>24</sup> *Yes, indeed! I tell you that whoever hears what I am saying and trusts the One who sent me has eternal life- that is, he will not come up for judgment but has already crossed over from death to life!*<sup>25</sup> *Yes, indeed! I tell you that there is coming a time- in fact, it's already here- when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who listen will come to life.***

**<sup>26</sup> *For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has given the Son life to have in himself.***

**<sup>27</sup> *Also he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.***

***<sup>28</sup> Don't be surprised at this; because the time is coming when all who are in the grave will hear his voice <sup>29</sup> and come out- those who have done good to a resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to a resurrection of judgment.***

The Pharisees would have agreed with Paul (likely some Pharisees were there in this hearing before Felix because a goodly portion of the Sanhedrin was Pharisees) but only to a point on this matter of resurrection; the Sadducees would have rejected it outright. The Pharisees believed in some form of resurrection of the dead for the righteous, but complete annihilation of the soul in the grave for the wicked. Actually, what the bulk of Pharisees seem to have believed in as "resurrection" more resembled what we today would call reincarnation. But the Sadducees believed that the soul was no more immortal than the body; both ended their existence, never to be resuscitated, at death.

I don't want to debate a doctrine of resurrection; I just want you to note that both Yeshua and Paul say that EVERYONE, whether they die in their sins or as a saved person, will be resurrected. The difference is that one will be resurrected to judgment and the other resurrected to eternal life. So immortal souls are for the evil and the good; it's only what happens to those souls after death that is different.

Then Paul ties this all together by saying that as a consequence of 1) worshipping the God of his fathers, 2) being connected to The Way (being a Believer in Yeshua), 3) continuing to believe everything written in the Torah and the Prophets, and 4) having hope in God to raise everyone who dies from the dead, therefore he has a clear conscience before both God and man. If you want something resembling a systematic theology from Paul, this is likely the closest you will come (and Paul does NOT ever create a systematic theology in any of his writings).

Let me say this in modern language: 1) Trust Yehoveh God, the God of the Bible. 2) Be connected to the assembly of Believers in Yeshua, based on your faith in Him as Messiah and as the Son of God. 3) Believe everything written in the Torah and the Prophets. That's right, trust the Law of Moses to tell you what is right and wrong; it doesn't vary person to person. And trust the Prophets to be God's Word to us not only about the future, but also His warnings about what happens when an individual, a people, a nation, or a national leader refuses to obey Him. And 4) know for certain that upon death you will live again. But what happens upon that resurrection from the dead depends on the decisions you make before you die. Will you do the first 3 things and thus be saved and follow the holy blueprint for a redeemed life? Or will you not and die as the unrighteous?

I'll leave you to ponder that and we'll continue in verse 17 next week.