

LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS ABOUT CIVIL GOVERNMENT (#3):
PAUL AND DEALING WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM
ACTS 21-28

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Theodore Roosevelt was President of the United States between 1901 and 1909. After he left office, he went on a safari to Africa. After that he made a tour of Europe. On April 23, 1910, 121 years ago this week, he made a speech at the Sorbonne in Paris. (PROJECTOR ON--- THEODORE ROOSEVELT) The famous French university was founded in 1253. I have read excerpts from this speech, but this week Bob connected me with an online copy of the whole speech.

At one point Roosevelt says this about representative democracy: **“...in the long run, success or failure will be conditioned upon the way in which the average man, the average woman, does his or her duty, first in the ordinary, every-day affairs of life, and next in those great occasional crises which call for the heroic virtues. The average citizen must be a good citizen if our republics are to succeed. The stream will not permanently rise higher than the main source; and the main source of national power and national greatness is found in the average citizenship of the nation. Therefore it behooves us to do our best to see that the standard of the average citizen is kept high; and the average can not be kept high unless the standard of the leaders is very much higher.”** (PROJECTOR OFF)

We have been considering the subject of “A Biblical View of Civil Government.” If we want to know the standards to which we should hold our leaders accountable, and if we Christians wish to make a positive contribution to our representative democracy, we need to look at the directions which our Divine Manufacturer has left us concerning civil government. In the last couple of weeks we have been looking at the circumstances in which the early church leaders disobeyed government and/or claimed their citizenship rights. We are going to finish that up today. Next week we will look at what the perfect civil government looks like when Jesus establishes His rule upon the earth. After that I plan to begin a study of the Book of Colossians.

I.

So we are going to begin this morning in Acts #21 (PROJECTOR ON--- I. SERVING GOD IS NOT A GUARANTEE...) as we find that SERVING GOD IS NOT A GUARANTEE OF PROTECTION FROM CIVIL GOVERNMENT. We left off last week in Acts #19. We saw that the central incident in Paul’s third missionary journey was his stay at Ephesus in western Asia Minor. (THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY) Following that two year stay, Paul and his fellow travelers visited the churches in Europe which had been established during Paul’s previous missionary journey.

During this part of his trip Paul collected money for the Christians back in the Jerusalem area. The Book of Acts does not specifically describe that. But Paul makes mention of it in Second Corinthians, especially Chapters 8 & 9, and in several other epistles. In Romans #15 vv. 25 & 26 Paul tells the Christians in that city (ROMANS 15:25-26), **“At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.”**

All of the first Christians were Jews. When Gentiles started to believe in Jesus, the first church leaders were astonished to see that these believing Gentiles were receiving the Holy Spirit like they did on the Day of Pentecost. It was difficult for them to believe that Gentiles could be right with God without becoming Jews. All of the religious Jews had been raised to believe that Gentiles were unclean. Jews were not even supposed to enter the home of a Gentile. Yet Gentiles were becoming followers of Jesus. Some of the early Jewish Christians complained that the Gentile Christians should be circumcised and should follow some of the Jewish rituals. The apostles resisted that idea. But it was still difficult for the early Jewish Christians to accept the notion that Gentiles could be right with God simply by faith in Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The churches that Paul and his companions were establishing in Asia Minor and Europe were predominantly Gentile in character. Paul became aware that there were a lot of Jewish Christians in and around Jerusalem who were struggling financially. Some of them may have been cut off from support from their Jewish families. Some of them may have lost their jobs because of their Christian commitment. So Paul saw an opportunity for these largely Gentile churches to help their Jewish Christian brothers by providing financial aid for them. This would also do a wonderful job of uniting the church. How could Jewish Christians be negative toward Gentile Christians when they found that they were providing financial contributions to help them out? It was a beautiful thing. Paul was clearly serving God in carrying out this charitable project.

Serving God, however, is no guarantee of protection from bad things in general or intrusive and antagonistic civil government in particular. In Acts #21 Paul and his companions make their way to Jerusalem. A prophet at one stop along the way warns that Paul is going to be taken into custody by the Jews in Jerusalem. Paul insists on going anyway. When he arrives in Jerusalem, he meets the leaders of the church and hands over the financial gift. He describes the results of this third missionary journey. The church leaders rejoice to hear the good reports.

In vv. 21-24 of #21 the Jerusalem church leaders say this: **“You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, 21 and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. 22 What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. 23 Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; 24 take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their**

heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law.” Thus the attempt is made to show that Paul is still a kosher Jew.

But in vv. 27-29 there is a problem: **“When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, 28 crying out, ‘Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.’ 29 For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple.”** A crowd wanting to have a riot only needs a rumor to get worked up.

This is what happens (vv. 30-32): **“Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. 31 And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. 32 He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.”**

The Romans always brought extra troops to Jerusalem from the provincial capital of Caesarea for the big Jewish feast days. They knew that if there was going to be trouble in Judea, it would probably happen on these occasions and in, or near, the temple. (TEMPLE 05) The Romans had an outpost on the northwest side of the outer wall of the Jerusalem temple. This was called the Fortress Antonia. (FORTRESS ANTONIA) Troops were stationed there. If there was any trouble in the temple, they could quickly intervene.

We find out what happened in vv. 33-39: **“Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. 34 Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. 35 And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, 36 for the mob of the people followed, crying out, ‘Away with him!’ 37 As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, ‘May I say something to you?’ And he said, ‘Do you know Greek? 38 Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?’ 39 Paul replied, ‘I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.’”** Paul then proceeds to address the crowd.

The simple thing to be reminded about here is that serving God is not a guarantee of protection from trouble in general and civil government in particular. Paul was serving God, but he ran into trouble. Initially the Roman military officials protected him from

being killed by the mob. But they then would become involved in his persecution and prosecution.

Jack Phillips (JACK PHILLIPS) has a bakery in Colorado. He is seeking to serve God as a Christian businessman. When a gay couple came to him and asked him to make a cake for their wedding, he explained that his Christian faith would not allow him to do that. So he was sued and a state rights committee tried to fine him. Eventually his case went to the US Supreme Court, which decided in his favor. But the day on which the Supreme Court agreed to hear his case, someone came into his shop and asked for a cake to honor their gender transition. So that began another legal case that is still in litigation.

On a larger scale there are Christians in other parts of the world where persecution is more direct and widespread. In places like China and Hong Kong there are thousands and millions of Christians seeking to serve God who have to deal with civil government that is coercive and evil.

II.

In Acts ##22-24 GOD'S REPRESENTATIVE WISELY USES HIS RIGHTS IN DEALING WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM. (II. GOD'S REPRESENTATIVE WISELY USES....) In #22 Paul addresses the large crowd gathered in the temple for the Pentecost celebration. He gives the story of his early life and his persecution of Christians. He describes his encounter with Jesus. The crowd listens quietly until Paul says that Jesus commissioned him to go to the Gentiles.

We read what happens in vv. 23-25 of #22: **“And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, 24 the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this. 25 But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, ‘Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?’”**

The word for “tribune” is “chiliarch,” which means “commander of a thousand men.” It was not legal for this Roman military official to even tie up a Roman citizen like this. His assumption is that Paul is not a Roman citizen. Not many Jewish people in this part of the world had that status. So Paul claims his right as a Roman citizen. He has a right to require a legal hearing, His motivation in claiming that right is perhaps twofold. He is protecting himself from physical harm, and he may have further opportunity to present the gospel and defend the cause of Christ.

So on the next day this military commander brings Paul to a meeting of the Sanhedrin, which would probably have taken place in the southern wall of the temple. (SANHEDRIN 428) The Sanhedrin had no legal authority over Paul. But the commander could use this Jewish council to help him decide the merits of the case.

In #23 Paul speaks to the council and uses a clever tactic to create some support for him and to create division within the council. According to vv. 6-10, **“Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, ‘Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.’ 7 And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. 8 For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. 9 Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, ‘We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?’ 10 And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.”** Probably it is to the Fortress Antonia to which he is taken.

Verse 11 adds, **“The following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.’”** Thus Paul receives a divine directive that he is to tell the message about Jesus in Rome.

A plot is hatched by forty men who have connections with the Sanhedrin to have Paul brought down to another meeting with that body and to kill him before he gets there. That plot is uncovered, and the army commander sends Paul off to Caesarea with soldiers to protect him on the way. (JERUSALEM TO CAESAREA MAP) It is about 65 miles to this capital of the Roman province of Judea.

The commander sends a letter along with this contingent. According to vv. 26-30, the letter reads, **“Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. 27 This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen. 28 And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. 29 I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. 30 And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him.”** His story is not quite right. He did not find out that Paul was a citizen and then tried to rescue him. He had him tied up, and then he found out that Paul was a citizen. Claudius Lysias is trying to protect himself.

(CAESAREA 2) So Paul arrives safely at Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast. There he is delivered to the palace occupied by Governor Felix. (CAESAREA PALACE) That was then a beautiful structure on the edge of the sea.

In #24 we find out that representatives from the Sanhedrin show up five days later. Their lawyer accuses Paul before the governor of stirring up dissension among the Jews and trying to desecrate the temple. Desecration of any temple in the Roman

Empire was regarded as a serious crime. Paul then defends himself. It is a weak case against him, and none of the original accusers are present to support the prosecution's case. Felix is an experienced administrator. He has to recognize the weakness of the case. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In vv. 22-23 we are told, **“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.”** So Paul appears to be put in a situation of house arrest. He has a certain amount of freedom. There is no evidence that Commander Lysias ever shows up to move the legal case along. It seems that Felix recognizes the weakness of the charges against Paul, but he finds it politically expedient to just keep Paul locked up and to avoid offending the Jewish leaders.

According to vv. 24-26, **“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. 25 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.’ 26 At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him.”**

Thus Paul has a further opportunity to share the gospel with Roman leaders. But the important thing to notice here is that Felix is looking for a bribe, but he doesn't get one. This could have been a significant temptation to the Christian community. Paul is locked up here for two years. He was probably the most important Christian leader in the world at this time. Yet he is locked up. Could he not have been much more effective if he was released? Was it not worth a financial investment to get him out of jail? Could they not have at least started a Go Fund Me page? Apparently that was not the right course of action for the Apostle Paul.

This may not seem like a big deal to us, but in many parts of the world Christians are faced with pressure to bribe government officials for a variety of reasons. Missionaries often run into problems with things like visas. Often they appear to be delayed and sometimes denied because Christians are unwilling to give bribes. But the example of Paul seems to tell us that we should not participate in bribery.

III.

In #25 through the middle of #28 we find that GOD'S REPRESENTATIVE USES HIS INVOLVEMENT WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL. (PROJECTOR ON--- GOD'S REPRESENTATIVE USES HIS...) Verse 27 of #24 tells us that Governor Felix kept Paul in custody until he was replaced two years later by Governor Festus. Festus is a less experienced administrator.

Festus shows up in the province and first goes to Jerusalem. There the religious leaders complain about Paul. He invites them to come to Caesarea. There another hearing

takes place. In v. 9 of #25 we are told, **“But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, ‘Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?’”** Paul remembers that the Jewish leaders earlier tried to kill him when he was going to show up at the Sanhedrin,

Thus in vv. 10-12 he says, **“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. 11 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.’ 12 Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, ‘To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.”** Besides fearing an ambush along the way, Paul does not trust the integrity and wisdom of this new administrator to conduct a fair trial, and he remembers the vision in which he was told that he must go to Rome. So he exercises his legal right to appeal his case, which means going to Rome and appearing before a court there.

In the rest of #25 a king from a nearby small Jewish state shows up. Festus asks for his input in formulating charges against Paul. This king and his wife listen to Paul in #26 and hear his testimony. In v. 28 of #26 King Agrippa says, **“In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian.”**

In v. 32 Agrippa gives his opinion that Paul should have been freed if he had not appealed to the emperor. Thus the author of Acts notes that all of the important government officials, except members of the Sanhedrin, find Paul to be innocent of any real crime.

Chapter 27 describes the trip to Rome. According to vv. 1 & 2, **“And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius. 2 And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica.”**

(PAUL'S TRIP TO ROME) They set out in the fall and make it as far as the island of Crete. Paul advises the leaders of the trip to stay in the first bay which they reach. But they try to go a bit further, and they encounter a storm. They are caught in this storm for two weeks. They finally reach the shoals of the island of Malta. (MALTA) There the ship breaks up. But all 276 passengers make it safely to shore. There they spend the rest of the winter.

In vv. 7-10 of #28 we get a glimpse of the ministry which Paul has on Malta: **“Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. 8 It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him. 9 And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had**

diseases also came and were cured. 10 They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed.” Thus Paul has more opportunities to tell people about Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Our church has had some experience with knowing about the opportunity which involvement in the criminal justice system affords to proclaim the gospel. Men and women in jail and prison are often at a low point in their lives and are open to the gospel message. At one point we were receiving several hundred Bible correspondence courses every month from prisoners throughout Nevada. We have also had volunteers and chaplains leading Bible studies behind bars. The pandemic has restricted our access to those opportunities. But we have also found out that some of our prisoner contacts are leading Bible studies on their own.

IV.

In the second part of Acts #28 we learn that THE CHURCH IS INITIALLY VINDICATED BECAUSE OF THE PURSUIT OF LEGAL RIGHTS BY GOD’S REPRESENTATIVE. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE CHURCH IS VINDICATED...) When spring arrives, the contingent of prisoners and guards are finally able to make it to Italy. They travel part of the way by road. In v. 16 of #28 we learn, **“And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.”** The use of the personal pronoun “we” indicates that Luke, the author of Acts, is present with him.

This verse also indicates that Paul is able to have his own rented quarters. At the same time he is always chained to a Roman guard. These guards are members of the elite Praetorian Guard. Paul witnesses to all of them. In his letter to the Philippians Paul writes in #1 vv. 12 & 13, (PHILIPPIANS 1:12), **“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, (PHILIPPIANS 1:13) so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial [Praetorian] guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.”**

Back in our text we learn in v. 17 of #28 about the response which Paul received from the Jewish community (PROJECTOR OFF): **“After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, ‘Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.’”** Obviously Paul has some freedom. He gets his typical mixed response. Some Jews believe. Many do not. Paul then directs his attention to the Gentiles.

The last two verses tell us about how things worked out in Rome: **“He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.”**

What was the outcome of his criminal case in Rome? Apparently he was found innocent of any crime. Second Timothy seems to have been written after his release from imprisonment. In vv. 16 & 17 (2 TIMOTHY 4:16) Paul writes, **“At my first defense no**

one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! (2 TIMOTHY 4:17) But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth."

The implication is that Paul's release from imprisonment won a certain vindication for his message and his mission. The scholars estimate that he was released from this Roman imprisonment in 62 AD. We know that in 64 Rome suffered a big fire. Nero went on to blame the Christians for it. This seemingly led to a persecution of Christians. Second Timothy was written when Paul was a prisoner in Rome a second time. That was to lead to his execution somewhere around 68 AD. (PROJECTOR OFF) But this initial vindication of Paul's ministry and the legitimacy of Christianity must have been a blessing, even though it may have lasted only for a short time.

The lesson here is that there is a role to play for Christians who pursue legal relief when civil government intrudes upon the freedoms of Christians. During this pandemic there have been many cases where churches have been restricted more severely than secular businesses. So it seems to be a good thing that some churches have spoken up and sought vindication for their freedoms.

There are several Christian legal groups who have been involved in defending the rights of Christians. One of them is the Alliance Defending Freedom. That is the group which has defended the rights of Jack Phillips, the cakemaker from Colorado. They generally take on these cases without charge. The Alliance Defending Freedom has a network of over 3700 Christian lawyers. Their mission is to advocate for religious liberty, the sanctity of human life, freedom of speech, and the protection of marriage and the family. The organization's lawyers have been involved in nine cases which have appeared before the US Supreme Court. They have won all nine of them.

As I was finishing up my message on Friday, I checked my e-mail and found a message from ADF. They told a story about a nine year old girl from Mississippi. When her school required students to wear a face mask, she chose a mask that says "Jesus Loves Me." Fellow students chose masks with other sayings, including "Black Lives Matter." But Lydia was singled out by her teacher and told not to wear the mask again. If she did, she would be subjected to disciplinary action. ADF has taken the school to court because of this.

We have an agreement with the Alliance Defending Freedom whereby we give a relatively small amount of money every year to them. In turn, if we ever become involved in a legal situation involving freedom of religion, they promise to defend us in court without charge. When we revised our church bylaws a few years ago, a lawyer from that group looked over our constitution and bylaws and made several suggestions without any charge to us. So it is a blessing to have groups like that around.

Ultimately we know that our rights and freedoms come from God. We need to pray and vote and advocate for government leaders who will promote our Biblical freedoms.