

Deciding Not to Decide

Acts 24

© March 15th, 2026 by Rev. Rick Goettsche SERIES: Acts

If there's one thing that most Americans feel like we're pretty good at, it's procrastination. Now granted, some of you may be go-getters who are constantly trying to get all of the things checked off your to-do list as quickly as possible, but in my experience, the general principle at play for many people is: Why do today what you can put off until tomorrow?

Now, maybe that's an unfair charge. Most of us understand some decisions need to be made right away and some situations demand an immediate response. And most of us have learned that a little planning and working ahead can help to alleviate a lot of stress in the long run. But still, it's not uncommon for us to put off the things we don't want to do or that we think will be hard. Sometimes we just ignore those things entirely, hoping they'll finally go away. Most of the time, however, that doesn't work.

Today, we're going to look at a story of procrastination. We'll see Governor Felix know what was right to do but decided to put it on the back burner because other things held greater importance to him. We'll see the opposite picture in Paul, who seized upon the opportunities God put before him. He kept doing what he knew was right, even when the temptation to give up would have been tremendous. There is much for us to learn in Acts 24 today.

The Trial

The Roman Commander Claudius Lysias had ordered Paul to be taken to Caesarea to stand trial there before Governor Felix. He had heard of a plot to kill Paul, so he took no chances, moving Paul with great secrecy and with 470 troops to protect him under cover of darkness. When the governor read the letter from the commander explaining the situation, he told Paul he would wait for his accusers to arrive before deciding his case. That's where the story picks up in chapter 24.

Five days later Ananias, the high priest, arrived with some of the Jewish elders and the lawyer Tertullus, to present their case against Paul to the governor.

² When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented the charges against Paul in the following address to the governor:

“You have provided a long period of peace for us Jews and with foresight have enacted reforms for us. ³ For all of this, Your Excellency, we are very grateful to you. ⁴ But I don't want to bore you, so please give me your attention for only a moment. ⁵ We have found this man to be a troublemaker who is constantly stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the cult known as the Nazarenes. ⁶ Furthermore, he was trying to desecrate the Temple when we arrested him. ⁸ You can find out the truth of our accusations by examining him yourself.” ⁹ Then the other Jews chimed in, declaring that everything Tertullus said was true. (Acts 24:1-9, NLT)

The Jewish leaders arrived to make their case against Paul. They desperately wanted to get rid of him at this point, so they had hired a lawyer named Tertullus to argue their case. We can reasonably assume that Tertullus was viewed by many as an excellent lawyer, maybe the best one money could buy.

Listening to Tertullus, he sounds like a lawyer or politician. He began with pure flattery, talking about how Felix had provided peace for the Jews and had enacted many wonderful reforms. He told him how grateful they were for his service. This was complete bluster, however. Felix was cruel, he was evil, and the Sanhedrin hated him. Nothing Tertullus said was true. For all of Felix's faults, I suspect he was adept at smelling flattery when it came. He had to know this guy was full of it.

Essentially, Tertullus leveled three charges against Paul. **First, he was a troublemaker that stirs up riots.** He claimed that everywhere Paul went, there were riots, both in Jerusalem and around the world. In one sense, that's true. But Paul never stirred up the riots, his enemies did as a way to silence him. So, this was a convenient distortion of reality. The word he used to describe Paul suggests that Paul was a plague that needed to be eradicated, lest his influence be allowed to spread.

Second, he described Paul as the ringleader of a cult known as the Nazarenes. This description was intentionally inflammatory. While Paul could be considered a leader in the church, the world ringleader gave the idea that he stirred up trouble. He referred to the Christian faith as a cult, giving the impression that it was strange or should be viewed with caution or disdain. And instead of talking about Jesus, or using the language they use to describe themselves, he referred to their cult as "the Nazarenes". This was a reference to the fact that Jesus was from Nazareth, but the term gave the idea that this was some kind of regional religious cult that had no credibility whatsoever.

Third, he claimed Paul had tried to desecrate the temple. This was a complete fabrication. Paul had done nothing of the sort, nor had he even tried. But this was an important claim, because while normally the Jews were not allowed to carry out the death penalty, Rome had made a special exception allowing them to execute people for desecration of the temple. They were hoping Felix would see things their way and they would be allowed to finish what they started, executing Paul.

Before we move on to Paul's response, I want to point out something that sometimes confuses people. Most modern Bible translations do not include verse 7 in the main body of the text. If you look, it skips from verse 6 to verse 8. Some misunderstand this and assume people are trying to cut out or change portions of the Bible. That's not what's happening at all. Since verse numbers were first introduced, we have discovered many more, and older copies of the biblical texts. Any time you see a situation like this, where a verse appears to be missing, it's because that verse isn't in the oldest copies. Instead of just deleting it entirely, the translators put the text in a footnote at the bottom of the page, noting that it's not in the earliest, and most reliable manuscripts we have. The goal is biblical fidelity, not trying to change the Word of God.

With that said, we can look at Paul's response to the charges in vv. 10-21.

¹⁰ The governor then motioned for Paul to speak. Paul said, "I know, sir, that you have been a judge of Jewish affairs for many years, so I gladly present my defense before you. ¹¹ You can quickly discover that I arrived in Jerusalem no more than twelve days ago to worship at the Temple. ¹² My accusers never found me arguing with anyone in the Temple, nor stirring up a riot in any synagogue or on the streets of the city. ¹³ These men cannot prove the things they accuse me of doing.

¹⁴ "But I admit that I follow the Way, which they call a cult. I worship the God of our ancestors, and I firmly believe the Jewish law and everything written in the prophets. ¹⁵ I have the same hope in God that these men have, that he will raise both the righteous and the unrighteous. ¹⁶ Because of this, I always try to maintain a clear conscience before God and all people.

¹⁷ "After several years away, I returned to Jerusalem with money to aid my people and to offer sacrifices to God. ¹⁸ My accusers saw me in the Temple as I was completing a purification ceremony. There was no crowd around me and no rioting. ¹⁹ But some Jews from the province of Asia were there—and they ought to be here to bring charges if they have anything against me! ²⁰ Ask these men here what crime the Jewish high council found me guilty of, ²¹ except for the one time I shouted out, 'I am on trial before you today because I believe in the resurrection of the dead!' " (Acts 24:10-21, NLT)

Paul did not begin with the outright flattery that Tertullus did. He did acknowledge that Felix had been in power for many years, and was well-acquainted with Jewish affairs, so he was glad to present his case to him. This was true, it wasn't overstated, and it wasn't an overt attempt at flattery either. It was merely a statement of respect and an acknowledgement of his position and experience.

Paul made several points. **First, he had arrived in Jerusalem only 12 days ago!** Felix could do the math. Paul had been Caesarea for 5 days and had been in custody for at least a full day prior. Could Paul really have caused all the trouble they accused him of causing in just 6 days? Paul's implication is that such a notion is ridiculous.

Second, he said he hadn't started a riot, and there were no witnesses who would say he did. Paul said these men weren't there, and the men who started the riot weren't here. They would have at least been eyewitnesses! The notion that he is a riot-starter is patently false.

Third, he affirmed that he was a follower of the Way. Paul used the Christians' preferred name for themselves, the Way. He rightly drew attention to Tertullus' inflammatory language, and that he had described their beliefs as cult-like. Paul emphasized that he worshiped the same God and followed the same scriptures as the Jews. They weren't a cult (a fact which Felix seems to have known).

Fourth, he hadn't attempted to desecrate the temple. Paul says he came to do quite the opposite. He came to Jerusalem to worship during the feast of Pentecost. He wasn't there to demean the temple; he intended to worship there! He pointed out that he was ceremonially clean and had done nothing wrong.

Fifth, he had come to Jerusalem on a humanitarian mission. Paul wasn't coming to cause problems; he came with money collected from the churches in Asia to provide aid to the Christians in Jerusalem who were struggling. Rather than trying to cause problems, Paul was trying to solve them!

Finally, he said the Sanhedrin hadn't brought charges against him. He pointed out that he'd stood trial before the Sanhedrin, and they hadn't brought charges against him. The only thing they were upset about was the time he said he believed in the resurrection of the dead!

All of this reminds us of an important truth—it's imperative to hear both sides of a story before rendering judgment. Solomon said it well,

¹⁷ The first to speak in court sounds right—until the cross-examination begins.
(Proverbs 18:17, NLT)

We should resist the temptation to jump to conclusions in life, whether that is in the community, in politics, or in our families. Before we rush to judgment, we should take time to hear all sides of an issue. Doing so will lower the temperature and probably lead to a much more moderate response than simply running with the first opinion we hear. As Christians, we should be careful and measured in our responses, refusing to simply jump to conclusions because it's easier or aligns with our preconceived biases. We should strive for truth and justice, not expediency.

Felix's Response

After hearing both sides of the argument, Felix announced his decision. He decided he wasn't going to decide! Felix claimed he wanted to wait until Claudius Lysias could come and give his testimony. At first, that seems like a wise and measured choice. But Luke clues us into the reality; this was just an excuse.

Luke doesn't record Claudius Lysias coming to Caesarea to testify, though it seems likely he did. Felix was still unwilling to render a verdict. Waiting for the commander was just an excuse that let him push the issue further down the road.

Luke tells us what happened instead.

²⁴ A few days later Felix came back with his wife, Drusilla, who was Jewish. Sending for Paul, they listened as he told them about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ As he reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the coming day of judgment, Felix became frightened. "Go away for now," he replied. "When it is more convenient, I'll call for you again." ²⁶ He also hoped that Paul would bribe him, so he sent for him quite often and talked with him.

²⁷ After two years went by in this way, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And because Felix wanted to gain favor with the Jewish people, he left Paul in prison. (Acts 24:24-27, NLT)

Felix appeared to have some knowledge about the Christian faith, and was eager to hear Paul speak on the matter. But Paul wasn't interested in just giving an intellectual lecture, he wanted to share the gospel with Felix, because he knew Felix needed Jesus (as does everyone we encounter!) So, Paul didn't hold back. He laid out the gospel to Felix and his wife, Drusilla. He told them about their need for a Savior, and talked to them about righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment.

Luke says Felix became frightened by the things Paul said. To understand why, we should talk a bit about his background. I mentioned last week that Felix was born a slave but then was freed. His brother, Pallas, was a childhood friend of the man who would eventually become Emperor Claudius. As a friend of the emperor, he convinced him to make Felix governor of Judea. His brother continually ran interference for him.

Felix was married to Drusilla, his third wife. Drusilla was at least partially a Jew—she was the daughter of Herod Agrippa I and the sister of Herod Agrippa II. Felix had broken up her previous marriage (which she was ok with) to marry her. At this time she was about 20 years old. Neither were very scrupulous and had no problem using others for their own gain.

Paul's talk about righteousness and self-control jarred Felix. He knew he possessed neither of these things, and quite literally, he had the fear of God put into him. But rather than responding, he simply pushed the feelings (and Paul) away, hoping to ignore it all.

He allowed Paul a significant measure of freedom but kept him in custody for the next two years (until he was deposed), bringing him out primarily for entertainment. Luke says he kept hoping Paul would offer him a bribe. Felix had great power at his disposal but was unwilling to act justly. Instead, he did what he thought would make the Jews happy and left Paul in prison, knowing full well that Paul had done nothing wrong.

Felix is a cautionary tale of those who are presented with the truth of the gospel but refuse to act. He had all the information, he understood his need for a savior, but he suppressed it rather than embracing it. And in so doing, he sealed his own fate.

Conclusion

So as we reach the conclusion of this passage, we are left, as always, with the question "so what?" What practical applications can we draw from what we have seen today?

First, don't believe everything you hear. We live in a world of sensationalism. People do not take time to carefully investigate all sides of an issue or of a story. Instead, most rush to judgment and find others who will agree with them. This is a cycle of craziness. Christians should recognize that there are (at least) two sides to every story, and until

we have carefully looked at all sides, we are not ready to render judgment. If we would take this approach into all our dealings, we would find much less anger, vitriol, and anxiety in our lives.

Second, we must never soften the gospel message. Paul was unapologetic in his talk with Felix. Though what Paul had to say may not have been what Felix wanted to hear, it was what he needed to hear. To remain silent when we have the truth is not loving—on the contrary! We must tell people the truth of the gospel: we are all sinners who cannot save ourselves. Our only hope is to follow Jesus and place our trust in Him. Anything less than this is a distortion of the truth and is wholly unloving.

Third, we mustn't put things off because they are too hard. Doing hard things is never fun, but pushing important things to the back-burner doesn't get rid of them, and it rarely makes them any easier. We should be willing to have hard conversations, to do things that stretch us, to make hard decisions in our lives, and to live according to God's commands. These things may be hard, but they are also good. And the best things are rarely easy. Don't put off hard things; do them now, knowing they are important.

Finally, today is a day of decision. Felix was presented with the truth of the gospel message but did nothing with it. I fear there are many people sitting in churches today who have been given all the information they need but refuse to act upon it. Felix feared what faith in Jesus might cost him. He knew it would require him to change the way he lived, and he was scared that it would be hard. Many today face the same struggle. So, they decide not to decide. They imagine that maybe one day they will turn to Christ. Maybe one day they'll be ready. But as time goes on, the urgency fades and they persist in their state of indecision. Let me challenge you today not to let that happen. Decide where you stand with Jesus! Listen to these chilling words from James Montgomery Boice.

Felix was a judge but he died. And when he died, he appeared before that One who will not postpone his judgments and who does not accept bribes. So far as we know from Scripture, Felix is in hell at this moment. One day we all will stand before that great Judge too. We will have to give an accounting for what we have done and for what our lives have been. How will you stand in that day?¹

Another commentary made an observation that made a significant impact on my mind. Those who are too busy to think about eternity now will have all of eternity to ponder their foolish indecision.²

I hope today you will give careful attention to the message of Acts 24. You may be tempted to put off implementing the lessons we learn from this passage. But I lovingly implore you to learn from Felix's mistake rather than repeating it.

© March 15th, 2026 by Rev. Rick Goettsche SERIES: Acts

¹ Boice, James Montgomery. *Acts: An Expository Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997.

² Barton, Bruce B., and Grant R. Osborne. *Acts. Life Application Bible Commentary*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1999.