

# Acts 24

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[ 0 : 00 ] Acts chapter 24. Andrew Cray is beginning a new series on Ephesians 2 tonight.! It's one of the mountain peaks of Scripture, isn't it?

It's a great chapter. And so, do come this evening. We meet at 6 o'clock and Andrew will begin this series, which he's going to take through other kind of summer weeks. I'm preaching in Cambridge this evening.

I think it's fair to say that one of the hardest things in the world is to live with injustice. That things aren't fair. All of us have to face it at times, don't they?

People behave in ways that we regard as unjust and yet they seem to get away with it or the consequences are too light. It's just not fair. You think of a Christian pastor, a Christian pastor in jail suffering from ill health.

He's being treated unjustly. That's happening all over the world. I think of the teenager with life before him in a glorious future who's killed in a roads traffic accident. It's not fair.

[ 1 : 09 ] A friend of mine wanted to pay £150 into the bank account of his daughter and he accidentally put in the wrong account number. It went to someone else. He couldn't get his money back.

Somebody else had spent it. It seemed just so unfair. There are thousands of Christians this morning in North Korea who are living in labour camps. They've done nothing wrong but they're there because they trust in Jesus as their king and saviour.

It's not fair. It's not fair. And if you felt hurt and despair and concern and anxiety about the way things have turned out in your life, if you're living with disappointed hopes, it feels unfair.

And it is very, very common. And yet it's far from being a modern problem at all. It's right here. It's right in the New Testament. It's right in the book of Acts. It's in chapter 24. And we discover a man who's caught in the centre of a storm of injustice. And we are allowed to eavesdrop on his behaviour and his conversation.

[ 2 : 18 ] We've seen the gospel of Jesus Christ move throughout the known world. And in these closing chapters, we're seeing it in Rome and getting to Rome and getting to the ends of the earth.

And Paul, in many ways, is giving us a great model for ministry. But here it's about a man caught in the storm of injustice. And I think we get to observe what's going on in his internal world a little bit. I want you to notice, firstly, the petrifying speed of change. The petrifying speed of change. And they say, don't they, a week is a long time in politics.

You can often feel like a week's a long time in sport. In the space of a week, things can change radically, can't they? Do you remember Brexit?

You went to bed in the European Union. You woke up to carnage. Do you remember that? Do you remember lockdown week? You were free by the end of the week you were locked down.

[ 3 : 27 ] And it can come, can't it, as something of a shock. When you read Acts 23 and 24, you discover it's only 12 days or so since Paul went to Jerusalem to worship. The actual start and end time is 12 days.

It's the course of academic discussion. Scholars differ, but it seems to me the time is pretty clearly 12 days. It's a petrifyingly short period. Petrifyingly changing circumstances.

It's five days since the riot and arrest on public order, his asbo in Jerusalem. And we find him now in Caesarea, about 60 miles northwest of Jerusalem.

It's been an interesting fortnight. Caught up in a riot during which the mob almost beat him to death. He's saved by the intervention of the Roman security forces. He's brought to the Jewish parliament in Jerusalem.

And a riot breaks out in the chamber. And Paul has got to be rescued again. It was decided to take him north to Caesarea. But a contract is taken out on his life.

[ 4 : 30 ] 40 men, a mob, the mob, take a religious vow. They're not going to eat until they've assassinated him. It's a pretty interesting five days. And the plot was foiled because of an overheard conversation.

And because the Romans provided security. They provided a security guard. Heavily armed security guard. 470 soldiers and cavalry. It's extraordinary stuff.

Just put your mind imaginatively into the situation. And so in chapter 24, he has his first hearing. A preliminary hearing with the authorities in Caesarea.

It's been 12 days since he set foot in Jerusalem. And now he's located into the justice system. And he will get justice. Or will he? Well, justice prevails.

He stands before the governor, Felix. The Roman proconsul. And the process begins. Now these are the days of the Roman Empire. Judea is a little country.

[ 5 : 33 ] About the size of Wales. And it's ruled. It's part of the Roman Empire. Ruled by Rome. Ruled from a thousand miles to the east. The centre of power.

A lot of the citizens know. They don't like their membership of the Roman Empire. They feel oppressed. They feel trodden down.

They don't like being part of the Roman Empire. Sometimes that agitation breaks out in periods of violence. Sometimes people lost their lives. Because they fought against the Roman Empire.

But there were others who loved being part of the Roman Empire. One of the most famous is a man called Herod the Great. King Herod the Great. He came to power a generation before the birth of the Lord Jesus.

And one of his great achievements was to transform the ruined trading community of Caesarea. And he transformed it into a prosperous city with an impressive trading harbour.

[ 6 : 33 ] He built Caesarea into a European style city. And to demonstrate his loyalty to Rome. And interestingly enough when Judea entered the empire.

It was from Caesarea. The census that was organised. That determined how many Jews. How much Jews would pay tax. The census from Luke 2 at the start of Jesus' life. It started in Caesarea. It was as if Caesarea is a suburb of Rome. And Paul has been transported here. And he appears on the eastern coast of Israel.

And it's this splendid city. This Roman city. It's there that this little battle scarred Jew. With Roman citizenship. It's taking a face trial.

All in 12 days. It's incredible speed. Incredible speed of change. Imagine 12 days ago. You went to church in Birmingham.

[ 7 : 35 ] But today you find yourself. On the steps of the Old Bailey. 12 days. 12 days. And you're on the steps of the Old Bailey. Because you're charged with sedition and treason.

Imagine that. 12 days. And you've made the journey from Birmingham to London. In an escorted van. Because the mob has taken a contract out on you.

That's what's going on here. It is a terrifying speed of change. It's a terrifying speed of change. It's lovely isn't it in life. When things go steadily. It's lovely when life is.

Well just even and steady. When we run our course with even joy. As Charles Wesley wrote. With undue complications. And everything is rosy in the garden. But things happen so fast in life.

Don't they? Astonishing speed of change. Things can change. And it's like that isn't it? Your life sometimes goes from calm to crazy. In no time at all.

[ 8 : 40 ] I was reading again this week of Joni. Joni Erickson Tarda. She was out on a boat on a holiday. Completely carefree. She was 17 years old. She's on this boat in the ocean. Having the time of her life.

And she dives into the sea. And her neck hits a rock. She is in a moment. A quadriplegic for life.

A few minutes earlier. She is enjoying life. As a carefree teenager. On a boat. With not a care in the world. And then she is staring at the ceiling.

In a hospital. Unable to move. With a paralyzed body. A petrifying speed of change. I think of some of you.

Here. And your life has been changed. In an instant. It's been changed by a phone call. It's been changed by a doctor's appointment.

[ 9 : 39 ] And it has gone from calm to crazy. In a matter of moments. And how we need the one who says. I am the same yesterday. Today. And forever.

I am the Lord. And I do not change. There is one who never disappoints our hopes. Who is a rock. And a refuge. In a time of trouble.

Who will not fail us. In a time of trial. And that is the first thing I want you to notice. A petrifying speed of change. The second thing. This sermon doesn't hang together. In the way that I thought it did.

But the second thing I want you to notice. Is the power of the opposition. The power of the opposition. In verse 1. After five days. The high priest Ananias came down with some elders. And a spokesman. A lawyer. One to tell us. And they laid before the governor. Their case against Paul. It seems as if. Paul's Jewish opponents. Have now realised that the stakes are higher.

[ 10 : 34 ] Paul is to appear before the highest official. In the province. In a Gentile Roman court. So they hire a top notch barrister. Called to tell us. Who seems to be skilled in both Jewish and Roman law.

And they've hired him to present their case. Before the procouncil. Before the high priest. It's big potatoes. This is huge. The high priest is there.

He himself comes. With his bevy of solicitors. And this clever barrister. They employ. It is all with the aim.

Of changing the mind of Felix. Of showing Felix. There's a case to answer here. It's a preliminary trial. And they're arguing.

Felix. There needs to be a proper trial. There's a case to answer. And they say. Don't give this. Prisoner bail. Remand him in custody.

[ 11 : 29 ] So the opening speech. Speech of the prosecution. sets out the acquisitions. Can you see it? Verses 2 to 9. There's the customary remarks. My Lord. He praises the character.

And the attributes of the governor. He speaks very politely. But he's about to spew out poison. He's about to spew out lies. He's about to spew out unjust statements.

But he begins by spewing out flattery. And he says. Paul is a social menace. He's a disease. He's a plague. We have found this man to be a plague.

He is an unhealthy influence in society. We would be better off without him. And the only way that you can deal with a man who's a plague like this. What do you do with the plague?

You've got to eradicate it altogether. Secondly, he says. The man's a troublemaker. He causes riots everywhere he goes. Wherever he goes to a town. The Pax Romana is undermined.

[ 12 : 28 ] The word translated riots in some of your Bibles. He stirs up riots. It's sedition. He's working on the inside against the powers of state.

It's insurrection. And so it's not just a public issue anymore. This man has a malevolent influence at the heart of government, he says. And Paul may have been accused of stirring up a riot.

But now before the governor, he's being accused of treason. And sedition. He's accused of undermining the great Roman Empire. And so can you see that these people are intent?

They are seeking to destroy this Christian man. They're not seeking for justice to be done. You want to feel the seriousness of what is being said in the speech to tell us it's making?

You need to import the kind of Western feeling, what we feel for the word domestic terrorist. That's the kind of thing they're saying about this man. He's a domestic terrorist. This man is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect.

[ 13 : 39 ] Goodness me, it's only a few years ago, isn't it, that the infamous Nazarene man, Jesus of Nazareth, was executed. And here is his successor. Here is the ringleader.

Here is the ringleader of that nest of vipers that are trying to carry on the Nazarene's name. He might present himself, this man, as one who cares about religion.

But only recently he profaned the temple in Jerusalem. That is the power of the opposition. It is skilled misrepresentation. It is skilled distorting of the facts.

And it is all wrapped up in beautiful language. He is a barrister of outstanding intelligence. And this can happen to a Christian.

One of the finest men that I know of was suspended from his work for year after year after year. He had to fight a long legal battle to clear his name of charges of unprofessional conduct.

[ 14 : 42 ] Because of his witness to Jesus Christ. Some of the cleverest minds in the country spoke against him. And took up the case against him. His professional life was effectively destroyed.

The power of the opposition. And that is why we prayed this morning. I hope you pray every morning. Lead me not into temptation. Don't lead me into the time of testing. Because when clever and powerful people misrepresent your character and your behaviour with a view to destroy your reputation. And if it's possible to destroy you. That is a grievous trial. The horror of false accusation. The power of the opposition. Pray that you don't ever have to enter into that kind of unjust treatment. Let's look thirdly at the strategy of a man of God. The strategy of a man of God.

[15:48] Verses 10 to 23. The apostle Paul either can't afford or doesn't need an expensive lawyer. He acts in his own defence. And he begins, doesn't he, with a respectful acknowledgement of Felix's office.

And the man's personal experience. He doesn't engage in any insincere flattery. He doesn't engage in flowery words. But there's a proper respect for the office of the proconsul of the empire. Of Rome. And the first thing he does. The strategy of the man of God. Is he refutes the charge of profanity. Look at verse 11. And you can verify, Paul says. Check it out. You can go and look at the evidence. That it's not more than 12 days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem. And you did not find me there disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd. Either in the temple or in the synagogues. Or in the city. Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me. He points out that it's only been 12 days since all this stuff kicked off. In Jerusalem.

[16:52] And this so-called profanity in the temple. It would be so easy, he says. It would be so easy to provide witnesses. Where are the witnesses? You're making charges.

Where are the witnesses to the charges? Paul rejects the suggestion that he was in Jerusalem for any other reason. Than to worship God. In the same way that any other Orthodox Jew would want to worship Yahweh.

Verse 12. They did not find me disputing with anyone. Or stirring up a crowd. Where are the witnesses? Where are the Asian Jews that accuse me of doing wrong? They could be here themselves. They should be here themselves. And the Apostle describes himself in these verses as an Orthodox Jewish person. who worships the God of their fathers. He believes everything laid down in the law of Moses and the prophets. He has a hope like the Pharisees in the resurrection of the body. He sought to live before the Lord with a clear conscience. He came to Jerusalem in the first place.

[17:50] To give money to the poor. The very kind of behavior that the law of Moses required from the people of God. I came to Jerusalem with money for the poor. In other words, Paul is saying before Felix, I love the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And I love my neighbor as myself. And so if we're going to be criticized for our faith, let it be against the background of a life lived in conformity to the word of God.

Can you see Paul's conscience here? That if people come to ransack your life and look at your computer and talk to the people who know you in order to find a way of undermining your character, would they discover that you have lived a life of faithfulness to the Lord Jesus?

Would they see by looking at your diary and looking at your bank balance that you are a person who wants to be generous to the poor and care for the needy? When large numbers of the Karen tribe in Nepal converted to Jesus Christ, they fell under the opposition of the authorities. Hundreds and hundreds of them came to the Lord Jesus Christ. They were hated by the communists in particular. Communist officials were trying to destroy the Christian church.

[19:09] But one important communist official confided to a reporter, the strange thing about these Christians is that they are doing what we communists ought to be doing but aren't doing. The Christians built a mill to grind flour and in grinding the flour of everyone who came to that mill, Christian or non-Christian, they reserved 10% of that flour in case of a time of famine and need.

And when there was a time of famine and need, they took the 10% and they distributed it freely to Christian and non-Christian alike. And this communist said that these Christians, we hate them, we do not like them, but they are doing what we communists should have been doing.

And if people come to your home and they pick up your laptop and they look at your internet searches and they talk to your friends and your line manager at work and your customers, would they discover enough evidence?

Would they discover enough evidence there for you to be convicted of Christian behavior? The Apostle Paul was able to defend himself from every accusation of bigotry and narrow-mindedness and hypocrisy.

As he describes himself, what do we see about the Apostle Paul? We see a big-hearted man, a generous man, caring for the poor, loving people, honest, and loving belief.

[ 20 : 39 ] He refutes the charge of profanity. But the last thing he does is preach Jesus and the resurrection. Can you look at verse 21? Verse 21, he says, Other than this one thing that I cried out while standing among them, it is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.

And verse 24, After some days Felix came with his wife, Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and he heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And as he reasoned with Felix about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed.

And said, Go away. Go away to the present. And when I get an opportunity, I'll summon you. Not now. In the course of two appearances before Governor Felix, the proconsul, Paul speaks about the resurrection of the dead, the resurrection of the body, and about righteousness, self-control, and judgment to come.

You see, Paul is not really eager just to defend himself. He isn't really motivated by that. But he is motivated, more importantly, to preach Jesus to a sinner.

And he applies the good news of the Lord Jesus, the gospel, in such a way that it flies like an arrow to the heart and conscience of this governor. Felix had seduced another man's wife to become his spouse.

[ 22 : 09 ] Felix was motivated by sexual desire. It had got the better of him. Felix was not a man under self-control. He was motivated by greed. You can see that at the end of the chapter. He was hoping to get his hands on some of that money that the Apostle Paul had brought for the poor in Jerusalem.

He was hoping that Paul would give him money. He was motivated by greed. He was motivated by political expediency. And after two years, two years of meeting one-to-one with the evangelist, he leaves Paul in prison because he wants to curry favor with the Jews.

Political expediency, it's motivated by unbelief. And when the application of the good news of the Lord Jesus went to his heart and made him tremble, he quickly sent the preacher away.

And he put off having dealings with the living God. Because Felix had come to understand, he'd come to understand that he had no righteousness before God.

He wasn't in the right before God. He'd seen it. He'd seen that the only way to be right before God was to embrace Jesus Christ, to trust in him.

[ 23 : 17 ] To acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord and King and my Saviour. He'd seen that he'd lived in the grip of his desires and his appetites with little self-control and the Holy Spirit applied the truth of the gospel to his conscience.

He'd got a glimpse of the fact that without the Lord Jesus there was no hope for him. There was no hope for him apart from Jesus on the day of judgment. And he trembled.

And he was offered the opportunity to trust in Jesus Christ alone. To believe and rely on the grace of Jesus Christ alone. But he refused to even contemplate it.

And he sent the preacher away and then he called for him again. There's something about that isn't it? He came and he heard again. He's moved. He's convicted. And yet he sends him away.

And he sends him away. And he sends him away. He sends him away until ultimately his heart is hardened. And he didn't call for him anymore.

[ 24 : 24 ] And he leaves him to rot. I've told you this story before but in the house that I grew up in we moved house when I was 14 and we lived in a bungalow.

It's kind of a bit more countryside and I went to bed early and I was lying in bed trying to go to sleep and then suddenly the whole kind of back started to shake.

It felt like there was an earthquake just outside Swansea. I kind of crawled out of bed opened the door looked around and it passed and my brothers were laughing at me and said there's a train that goes on the back of the house.

Following day I went to bed and go to sleep and I hear the noise again you wake up with a child and then you remember oh no it's the train. Third time again a little bit of a ah it's the train don't worry about it.

And then I never hear the train anymore. Can't even tell you when it goes past. Because you get used to it don't you? And it's like that with the preaching of the gospel. It was like that for Felix he heard the gospel he knew he had to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved but he said later later later and so when you come to church let me tell you it is it is it is a beautiful thing it is a wonderful thing it is a terrifying thing.

[ 25 : 49 ] It's a terrible thing to hear the gospel. It's a terrible thing to grow up in a church like this to hear the gospel and to sometimes feel the impact of it and then to walk out of church saying I don't want it.

I don't want it. And I don't want you to do that if you're here this morning. And if you're thinking about Christianity and you're considering the importance of life and death and the future world and you're thinking about your relationship with God I want to say to you this morning with all the tenderness that I can muster up in my heart I want to say to you that if you say no to Jesus this morning you are making the biggest and the most dangerous decision that you will ever make. There will come a time when you say no to the Lord Jesus for the last time. Jesus says okay it's a wonderful thing to hear the gospel it's a terrible thing to hear the gospel because the gospel of God you hear it this good news and you say no I don't need it I don't want it and you harden your heart. So here is the child of God in the midst of injustice with really clever people the culturally elite bringing false charges without witnesses to damn his character to undermine his ministry and Paul behaves with grace and dignity and he preaches Jesus and he pleads his innocence but the main thing on his heart for his judge and his accusers is that they might hear and understand and accept Jesus Christ that he saves and so the child of God can face injustice because in the midst of the injustice that you're facing and I am facing we can display something of the glory of God we can face unfair treatment by the power of the Son of God because when the Son of God the Lord Jesus Christ when he was reviled he did not revile in return but he entrusted himself to the one who judges righteously and when Jesus was taken to be tortured and to the cross he faced it with dignity and grace because his priority was not self-preservation but it was the creation of this gospel his eye was on the world's salvation not on his own well-being and so in the midst of the most unfair treatment that any man has ever experienced the Son of God behaved himself with dignity and grace and faith and trust in his Father and was it unfair?

It definitely was unfair but he trusted his Father and when we face things and we will face things that are unjust and unfair we can behave with dignity and with grace for the gospel's sake that we might have the opportunity to explain the gospel and to point people to the gospel because that is more important than anything else in this crazy world speed of change terrible opposition but a heart to preach Jesus and the resurrection let's pray and let's pray