

DISCIPLINE OF DELAY

by Ray C. Stedman

We are drawing near the close of our studies in Acts -- this fascinating book which has set forth for us the character of normal Christianity. The book of Acts is given to us as a pattern of what Christianity ought to be in any age. As we have been caught up in the excitement of it, in its rapid movement, and in the triumph and deliverance so evident in the lives of people of that day, we can rejoice that we see something similar in our own day.

How marvelous it is to see so much of the atmosphere we read of in Acts reappearing here on the west coast of the United States today -- the same sense of electric excitement, the same powerful outreach of love and grace, the same bold announcement of the good news in Jesus Christ, with the same wonderful response once again of finding thousands beginning to turn to the faith that can set them free. God is moving in great ways today. What an exciting hour this is in which to live! There have even been reports in some of the newspapers, and on television and other media, of how he is moving -- especially among the youth.

In the 24th chapter of Acts we find the Apostle Paul a prisoner of the Romans, scheduled to appear before the governor of the Roman province of Judea -- Governor Felix. You remember that Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem as a riot was about to break out in the temple courts. He had made two unsuccessful attempts to placate the Jews and to testify to them of Jesus Christ. They refused to listen; and now, after a plot against his life, he has been brought down to the province capital, Caesarea, on the coast. There he will face the governor.

Felix was a successor to Pontius Pilate. He is an interesting character. We know something about him from secular history. He had been governor of the province of Judea for five years at the time this chapter records, and had previously lived for two years in the city of Samaria. So he knew something about the Jews and about their nation.

He was born a slave, but his brother, Pallas, happened somehow to become a favorite of the emperor in Rome. Through the influence of Pallas, Felix had been freed from slavery and somewhat later had been appointed governor of this province. He was the first slave in history to become a governor of a Roman province.

He had been married by this time to three different princesses. The first one we know nothing about, except that she was a princess. His second wife was the granddaughter of Antony and Cleopatra, whose namesake all recognize today because Hollywood has made them famous. The third wife appears with him in this account. Her name was Drusilla. She was a Jewess, the daughter of Herod Agrippa, the king who had put the Apostle James to death. She had been the wife of the king of Emesa, but Felix had seduced her and now she was living with him as his wife.

This man was completely unscrupulous. He was known to hire thugs to eliminate even friends who happened to get in the way of his political ambitions. It is before such a judge that the Apostle Paul must appear.

The first nine verses of Chapter 24 set forth the charges that are leveled against the apostle.

First Luke lists the participants on this occasion:

And after five days the high priest Ananias came down [to Caesarea] with some elders and a spokesman, one Tertullus. They laid before the governor their case against Paul; and when he was called, Tertullus began to accuse him, {Acts 24:1-2a RSV}

Luke is careful to record that the high priest himself is here, because Ananias had been so mortally offended by the apostle when Paul had unwittingly insulted him, not knowing that he was the high priest. Ananias is

thirsting for revenge. With him comes a delegation of elders, probably representing both the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and also an officious little Latin lawyer named Tertullus. We know that he was short of stature because his name is the diminutive of Tertius. It means "little Tertius." Can't you see him in your imagination? -- short, fat, pompous, oily, unctuous, busily strutting around the courtroom, trying to establish the case.

Luke gives us an eyewitness account. We know it is an eyewitness account because he captures the very atmosphere of this scene. As you read it this becomes obvious. He probably wrote the account from notes he took at the scene. We get the introduction to Tertullus' speech in Verses 2-4:

Tertullus began to accuse him, saying:

"Since through you we enjoy much peace, and since by your provision, most excellent Felix, reforms are introduced on behalf of this nation, in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude. But, to detain you no further, I beg you in your kindness to hear us briefly." {Acts 24:2b-4 RSV}

If you read between the lines you can see what is happening. The lawyer begins to praise the governor with very fulsome flattery. He starts out in this flowery way: "Oh most excellent Felix, we know that all these great things are happening in our nation because of you..." Both he and Felix know that this is a bald-faced lie. The governor evidently indicates his impatience, perhaps with a frown or gesture, so the lawyer suddenly changes his tactics. He says, "To detain you no further..." -- i.e., "to be no further tedious to you," -- "I beg you in your kindness to hear us briefly." Then he gets down to the point and sets forth the charges against Paul:

"For we have found this man a pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. He even tried to profane the temple but we seized him. By examining him yourself you will be able to learn from him about everything of which we accuse him."

The Jews also joined in the charge, affirming that all this was so. {Acts 24:5-9 RSV}

Undoubtedly Luke has given us but a brief outline of what this man said. Yet it is clear that it gathered around three particular charges which were leveled against Paul. They are particularly designed to arrest the attention of this Roman governor and to arouse his antipathy against the apostle.

The first charge was that Paul was a revolutionary pest, a troublemaker, stirring up difficulties and riots all through the empire. This lawyer knew that would have an effect upon this Roman judge, because the Romans had a far-flung empire to administer, and the one thing they dared not tolerate was civil disorder. Any uprising could be a spark that would light a fire which would be very difficult to put out, and they knew it. The Romans dealt with a heavy hand with any troublemaker.

Second, Paul was labeled a religious radical, a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. Of course Felix, having been governor, had heard of the Nazarenes. Furthermore, he knew that there were a lot of false messiahs around who were ready to catch up this fanatically religious nation in a wave of enthusiasm which could spell nothing but trouble for Rome. Remember that this was just a few years before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies under Titus. And, as Jesus had predicted, there had come on the scene a wave of false messiahs, false christs, who claimed to be the true one. So the lawyer was implying that Paul was one of them.

The third charge leveled against Paul was that he was a sacrilegious fanatic who had tried to profane the temple, to defile it by bringing Gentiles in. That again was something to which the Romans would pay attention. Do you remember when, a year or so ago, an Australian in a frenzy of religious fanaticism set fire to the Aqsa mosque there in the temple area of Jerusalem? How the nations of the world trembled, lest that single act of desecration precipitate a holy war which would embroil the Middle East, and perhaps the whole world, in conflict! That temple area was just as sensitive in the days of Rome. The Romans knew that it was such a sacred precinct to the Jews that anything which happened to their temple was apt to inflame this entire nation.

So all these charges were particularly designed to be of intense concern to the Roman administration. And yet there was not a word of truth in them. The Jews who came along simply affirmed them. But they didn't offer any proof; they couldn't.

Now, in Verses 10-21, Luke gives us the apostle's masterful defense. What would you say if you were in his shoes? How would you defend yourself? Well, Luke has recorded it for us:

And when the governor had motioned to him to speak, Paul replied:

"Realizing that for many years you have been judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense." {Acts 24:10 RSV}

He begins, you see, with the only nice statement an honest man could make about Felix. "You've been governor here for a number of years." That is about all he could say. "I know you've been around a long time. You know this nation, and I hope you'll listen to me." And he proceeds from there. You notice that he lays aside all the fulsome flattery the lawyer had attempted and simply comes to the point. With that careful, methodical logic we have come to expect from the apostle, he answers these charges one by one:

The first one, you will recall, was that he was a revolutionary troublemaker. To that he says,

"As you may ascertain, it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship at Jerusalem; and they did not find me disputing with any one 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." {Acts 24:11-13 RSV}

His arguments are simply: "First, I have had no time to incite a riot. It is only twelve days since I went up to Jerusalem, and I've been absent from the province for years before that. You can't get a riot going in twelve days. Second, I made absolutely no effort to do so. I've never even been seen disputing with anybody, either in the temple, or in the synagogues, or in the city. I've made no attempt anywhere to stir up any difficulty, arouse a crowd or incite emotions in any way. And third, no proof whatsoever has been offered for any of the claims made against me. You have merely the affirmations of these Jews that I did these things. But no evidence has been advanced at all." And so he completely demolishes this charge, exposing its emptiness.

Next he moves to the charge of being a religious radical. To this he answers:

"But this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law or written in the prophets, having a hope in God which these themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward God and toward men." {Acts 24:14-16 RSV}

To the second charge he pleads guilty. "But," he says, "I want to point out that though I am indeed a follower of this Way, a member of what they call a sect, nevertheless it is most interesting to note that this 'sect' accepts the Law and the Prophets, just as do these members of the Sanhedrin. Furthermore, it stresses the hope which the Old Testament teaches, that of the resurrection of the dead, both just and unjust, and many of these Jews standing here believe it just as well as I. And third, it results in a conscientious life, a life lived in good conscience before God and man. Now what can be so wrong with that?" he argues. "I admit I'm a member of this 'sect,' but so what? It simply agrees with all that these people themselves affirm to be the truth. What violation of Roman law is involved in becoming a member of this Christian group?" And with that he again demolishes the accusation against him.

The third charge was that of profaning the temple. To this the apostle replies:

"Now after some years I came to bring to my nation alms and offerings. As I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult. But some Jews from Asia -- they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, if they have anything against me. Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found

when I stood before the council, except this one thing which I cried out while standing among them, 'With respect to the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you this day.'" {Acts 24:17-21 RSV}

His argument is very simple. "Rather than defiling the temple," he said, "I was bringing gifts of money and offerings to my people." Remember the collection for the saints at Jerusalem that he had brought there from Macedonia. "And," he says, "I also went into the temple and I worshipped there, as any Jew should. That is where they found me. But I wasn't disturbing anyone or profaning the temple. I was fulfilling its purpose."

"Furthermore," he points out, "the men who accuse me are not even present here. Certain Jews from Asia are the ones who brought the charges against me, and they're not even here." He waxes a little indignant. Here you can see how careful Luke has been in recording this. Paul's syntax gets a little mixed up. He starts out talking about the Jews from Asia but loses the trend of his thought, and ends up simply pointing out that they ought to be there to make an accusation, and he never completes his sentence.

Finally he sums it all up, saying, "The most that I have done, the very most that can be charged against me, is that when I stood before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem I said something that divided them among themselves. I cried out to them, 'With respect to the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you this day.' Now if that is wrong then that is what I am guilty of."

You can see how marvelously and completely he has dismissed these unfounded charges against him. What a masterful defense this is, made in a relatively few words, and how unanswerable are his arguments. He completely exonerates himself before the governor.

There is no question but that at this point the apostle legally should be released. But he is not, and as we go on to see, a strange and almost unaccountable delay occurs.

Now, this is where the story reaches out to include us this morning, because this is an account of one of God's inscrutable delays, which often afflict us as well. We think that something we want to have happen is just around the corner. Then as we move toward it we find that it seems to move away from us, recede from us, elude us. Sometimes it takes us months or years to reach a point which we thought was right there. These circumstances raise questions in our minds and hearts.

So with the apostle. Here we begin to see God's discipline of delay. In the remaining section it is brought before us by Luke, introduced in Verses 22-23:

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." Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but should have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs. {Acts 24:22-23 RSV}

He really doesn't need to have Lysias come down. He has already received from him a letter exonerating Paul. But he uses this as an excuse, in order that he might hear something more from the apostle. Felix's curiosity has been awakened and, as Luke tells us, he had "a rather accurate knowledge of the Way." He knows something about Christianity, and he wants to hear more. So he retains Paul in custody, even though he has every legal right to set him free.

Now, don't blame Felix, because he is being used as an instrument to carry out God's purposes with Paul. This is the work of a loving, heavenly Father who is concerned with a beloved son. Remember that Paul, by disobedience, despite the consistent warnings of the Holy Spirit, had chosen the pathway which led to bonds and imprisonment. He had disobeyed the direct command of the Spirit that he should not go up to Jerusalem.

There is a very instructive lesson here for us. It is simply that when we disobey God and are later forgiven, as Paul was forgiven and restored, that forgiveness does not change the pathway we have chosen. God doesn't eliminate the trials and the difficulties we have deliberately assumed. What the forgiveness does is to restore to that pathway all the power and joy and gladness that was our experience before we walked in disobedience.

You find that this is what happens here with Paul. When he was restored to the fellowship of his Lord by the appearance of the Lord Jesus to him in prison in Jerusalem, as we saw in an earlier chapter, that pathway of imprisonment was not canceled. We need to understand this. He remains a prisoner, and ahead of him lie two long, weary years of waiting in Caesarea, and three more in Rome, as a prisoner of the Lord. God doesn't eliminate that, but he does transform it into a fruitful and profitable experience for the apostle.

This is the point this whole passage is making for us. We see Paul now going ahead, bound as a prisoner, yet finding, nevertheless, that the fullness of God's power and glory is able to work in him just as freely through the channel of imprisonment as it did when he was free. The imprisonment was not comfortable. It added a good deal of agony and heartache to the apostle's own experience. But he accepted it as God's provision for him, and found it to be no less the instrument of God's working and power than anything else he had experienced before. The first evidence of that is Paul's continuing opportunity for witness to the governor:

After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess; and he sent for Paul and heard him speak upon faith in Christ Jesus. And as he argued about justice and self-control and future judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, "Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity I will summon you." At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him. {Acts 24:24-26 RSV}

Paul is under "house-arrest," the term we would use today, with access to friends and with some liberty. But he is still in the custody of the Romans and is unable to go about freely. After a few days the governor sends for him. You can see the Spirit of God working in this man's life.

Paul's message had a profound effect upon Felix. Luke tells us that as the governor listened he was, literally, "terrified," he trembled. He felt the impact of the logic of the apostle's presentation. Luke summarizes for us what Paul said. It was again the rational, orderly development you would expect from Paul. He reasoned with him of righteousness (not "justice," the word should be "righteousness"), of self-control, and of future judgment, judgment to come. When he finished, Felix trembled.

Let's take a good look at what Paul said:

He began, first, to talk to him about righteousness, i.e., about God's expectation of humanity, his rightful demand upon us. Here he is dealing, basically, with the purpose of life. Why are you here? What has God put you into the world to do? All through the Gospels, you find Jesus constantly unveiling before men the purpose of human life: It is to produce true manhood and womanhood, the righteousness of God, the proper behavior expected of mankind.

What is wrong with the world of our day? The answer is apparent on all sides. It is that people aren't behaving as they should. In other words, they are not righteous, because righteousness is just the expected, normal, proper behavior of man. It is what God asks of us -- that we behave as men were designed to behave: in love, and understanding, with tolerance and forgiveness, with all the characteristics that we instinctively know belong to manhood and to womanhood.

But the problem is that man is behaving unrighteously. That is why we have pollution, and crime and violence, and war and injustice. The basic problem of human life is the absence of rightfully expected good behavior.

You can see this on the part of all human beings in our view of one another. Ask anybody on the street, "What's the matter with life today? What do we lack?" Everyone will say, "It's because other people don't behave right." They seldom ever point at themselves; it is the fault of "other people." Children blame parents, and parents blame children. They both blame the schools. The schools say it's the government, and the government says it's the hippies, and the hippies say it's the establishment, and so on. Everybody blames everyone else. That is the lack of righteousness! And Paul, with his keen perception of human life, laid all this before the governor.

Then he went on to talk about self-control. Here is a word which appears only one other time in Paul's letters

-- in the listing of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. If the Holy Spirit is in us then he is producing the life of Christ in us, and we will be characterized by love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, self-control {cf, Gal 5:22-23}. That is the word used here. So when Paul talked with Felix about self-control he was talking about the fruit of the Spirit, and of the provision God makes to meet the demand for righteousness. In other words, God not only asks men to behave rightly, but he also makes available to them the power by which to do it.

So as Paul reasoned with Felix of the demand of God, he also told him about the supply available to meet that demand, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and about the self-control which comes by means of the presence of the Holy Spirit in one's life. He didn't just argue with him about what he should have done; he also told him how he could have done it -- how God has made provision in Jesus Christ for the Spirit of God to be released in us so that we can behave ourselves as we know we ought, and as God has designed us to do, i.e., to produce self-control. He told him about God's provision of grace in Jesus Christ, and about God's life in man.

Finally, Paul told him about the judgment to come. There is coming a time when every life is going to be evaluated, when each human being, without exception, will suddenly find himself standing naked before God, with all his life laid out for everyone to see. Then to all will be evident the value, or the lack of it, of that life. That is the judgment to come.

Jesus spoke of this. He said that there will come a time when that which is spoken in secret shall be shouted from the housetops, and that which is hidden shall be revealed. All the hidden secrets of the heart, and everything done in secret shall be openly displayed.

Undoubtedly Paul pointed out to Felix that God is aware of the hearts of men; he does not merely read the outside. We seem to be so content if we can fool people by the exterior of our lives. If we look all right to them, that satisfies us. But Paul laid before the governor the fact that he was dealing with a God who reads the heart.

I have often said to audiences, "Wouldn't it be interesting if we had a television camera which could records thoughts. Suppose that, as you came in this morning it was working on you, and all the thoughts you have had running through your mind this last hour were recorded on videotape. What would you think if we announced that next Sunday morning we would play this back on a screen up here? How many of you would be here to see it?"

But you see, that is exactly what God is talking about, isn't it? -- a time when everyone will see the life of everyone else, exactly as it was, with nothing hidden, nothing covered over, all of it there. Then the great question will be: "In the face of God's demand for righteousness, what did you do about the provision he made to make it possible? What did you do with Jesus Christ?"

When Paul reasoned this way before the governor, he trembled. And well he might! It all came home to him. The logic of it hit him right between the eyes. But this was his response: "Go away, for the present; when I have an opportunity, I will summon you." He procrastinated, put it off.

He did so because he had a problem. The fact that he delayed Paul's release, and then sent for him and even brought his wife to hear him, indicates that this man had a hunger for God. He wanted something from God; but, Luke says, he also wanted money from Paul. He had a double eye. He was looking in two directions.

Jesus said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all other things shall be added to you," {cf, Matt 6:33 KJV}. But you can't put them on the same level of priority. You can't want God and money. That is what destroys men. That is what blinded this man so that he could not see the exceeding importance of this moment.

Think of it! He had one of the most unusual opportunities ever afforded a human being:

- To spend hours with the Apostle Paul,

- To hear the clarity of his revelation of the nature of reality, of the way things really are, and
- To understand the provision God has made to meet it, to understand the truth as it is in Jesus.

But he passed it by, turned his back and walked away. "Go away," he said, "until I have a more convenient season, a better opportunity." Do you know anything sadder, more pathetic, than those words? And though he called Paul to him and talked with him often, he never trembled again.

That is the danger that men face when they are confronted with the reality of Jesus Christ and do nothing about it. Their hearts are hardened.

The last sentence sums it all up for us:

But when two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison. {Acts 24:27 RSV}

There was absolutely no legal reason for this delay, only political expediency. Felix desired to do the Jews a favor, but it wasn't because of his love for them. Rather, as history tells us, he went too far once too often. We know from other records that at this time there was a clash in Caesarea, between the Jews and the Greeks who lived there, over the question of whether Caesarea was a Jewish or a Gentile city. The Jews won the encounter, and Felix therefore sent in troops to aid the Greeks. These Roman soldiers fell upon the Jews, killed thousands of them, and looted the homes of the Jewish leaders and burned them to the ground. As a result, the Jews complained to Nero, and Felix was dismissed and summoned back to Rome to answer for his conduct. He prepared for this as best he could and, in order to retain as much favor among the Jews as possible, he left Paul in prison.

Now, that was a tough situation to accept, wasn't it? Here the apostle is, eager to be on about his ministry, and yet he is in jail through no fault of his own, legally. He ought to have been set free. But remember that Paul had chosen this course. God is simply fulfilling that choice. And now Paul must accept delay in the fulfillment of his hope to get to Rome.

Yet God's delays are always times of learning. Though we are not told any more about what happened to the apostle here, nevertheless, we can surmise that out of this time came many of the great truths which are reflected in Paul's letters. His letters to the Ephesians, the Colossians, the Philippians, to Philemon, were all written after this. And in Philippians there is a passage which I think grew out of this situation. In the fourth chapter the apostle says,

Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me. {Phil 4:11-13 RSV}

That is what you learn in a time of waiting. Dr. F. B. Meyer has written these words:

"So often we mistake God, and interpret his delays as denials. What a chapter might be written of God's delays. It is the mystery of the art of educating human spirits to the finest temper of which they are capable. What searchings of heart, what analyzings of motives, what testings of the Word of God, what upliftings of the soul, 'searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of God signified.' All these are associated with these weary days of waiting which are, nevertheless, big with spiritual destiny. But such delays are not God's final answer to the soul that trusts him."

Are you in prison this morning?

Have you found yourself locked into circumstances which you are helpless to change?

Are you, by your own folly, perhaps, in a situation you cannot get out of?

It may be ill health, or a bad job. It may be a poor marriage, or low finances, or something else. Remember, God has given that to you in order that you might learn the secret which Paul learned: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me."

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, thank you for this lesson again from the life of this mighty apostle. How faithfully you dealt with him! How deeply he learned these truths! How faithfully he passes them on to us so that we might learn in our day to accept your delays, not as denials, but as opportunities for enrichment and advance. Strengthen us and help us as we seek to apply this lesson to the circumstances in which we find ourselves this morning. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

Title: The Discipline of Delay
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: The Prisoner of the Lord
Scripture: Acts 24
Message No: 4
Catalog No: 448
Date: March 7, 1971

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