

Paul's Trial Before Felix

Acts 24-25

What comes into your mind when you hear the phrase '*the Lord's timing*'?

Perhaps it's a really positive thing, perhaps you remember a time where he brought something across your path, or someone into your life, just the right time!

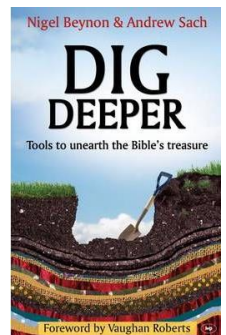
Perhaps in a really dark time, God did something wonderful in your life, and shone the light. It could be big, or small – like catching your train, but only because it was delayed by 2 mins! Or perhaps, what you think of is not so much a positive thing, as a frustration where you have to wait on the Lord. The Lord's timing is not man's timing. Perhaps going for job interview after job interview, and being turned down again and again and again. You're doing everything right, being well prepared and applying for appropriate jobs. You're praying about it, but again and again it doesn't happen. And you're thinking "Lord I know I have to trust you, but what have I got to do? When will this end?"

Our passage today forces us to ask the question: What is your trust in God like?

And crucially, how does your trust in God face up to the test of time, passing time.

You see, sometimes we can be like impatient children in the car saying "are we there yet?"

And, d'you know what, we don't have the map, or the big picture. God is the one who has that, he's in charge, he drives. Now, sometimes a Bible passage contains a certain verse which unlocks the meaning of the passage, or shapes our whole understanding of it. v27 is a bit like that in this passage today, and gives me a good opportunity to remind you about our book of the month, mentioned in the grapevine, which talks through a whole range of tools and ideas to help you when you're reading the Bible. The book is called dig deeper, and it's available on the bookstall. v27 begins "when two years had passed" – two years! Two years! That will have a real impact on how we read and understand everything that's going on here, because that's a really really long time!



Now, before we start to look in detail at today's passage, let me remind you what happened last week, and get you up to speed – like one of those clip moments at the start of the TV series "previously in the book of Acts". Because it is like a TV series!

Paul had come back to Jerusalem where there were lots of Jews, both Jewish Christians who believed in and followed Jesus as their Messiah, and Jews who rejected Jesus. Despite going to great lengths, and observing Jewish purification rituals, Paul is wrongly accused of bringing a Gentile into the temple area (a serious crime, but he didn't do it). A riot begins, Paul is arrested by the Romans, partly just to protect him. Paul is just about to be flogged before even offering his defence! (That tells you about Roman brutality) When he explains he's actually a Roman Citizen, so they stop. Next, the Romans actually release Paul from prison and go with him to the Jewish court, the Romans stay and watch to see what will happen. There's some conflict, and ultimately when Paul shouts out:

“Brother’s I am on trial for my belief in the resurrection from the dead”; The place erupts with more conflict, because the two largest Jewish groups disagree about whether there is a resurrection from the dead!! Next, the Romans rescue Paul and pull him out, they take him back to the barracks and conclude: this is a silly religious squabble, Paul hasn’t actually done anything wrong. That’s nearly the start of our passage, but three more important things happen. Firstly, Jesus appears to Paul in a vision and tells him he must go to Rome to testify about him there – this means Paul is now certain of what Jesus wants him to do. Secondly, there is a plot: 40 Jewish men vow that they won’t eat or drink until they’ve killed Paul. They want him brought to the Jewish court a second time, and they plan an ambush on the way. However Paul’s nephew, who lives in Jerusalem, hears about it and warns the commander. Thirdly, The commander then sends Paul to Felix in Caesarea, to keep him safe – and get him out of Jerusalem. While he is there, Paul is kept in house arrest. And that’s what’s happened so far!

That brings us to this week’s passage and our first point
Paul does his bit – he’s faithful to God

So, in our passage the Jewish high priest Ananias brings a lawyer called Tertullus to Felix, to make accusations against Paul. They described Paul as a ringleader of a sect (Christians) and they accuse him of trying to desecrate the temple. I think the main reason for that is because this is a way to get the death penalty. When this lawyer says this, lot of people join in and cheer and shout their approval. But Paul is faithful to God: In his defence he basically explains that he is a Jew like these others, although he believes something slightly different – that he follows Jesus, in ‘the way’. Look at v14 Paul says “I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets,¹⁵ and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.” He goes on, that he didn’t desecrate the temple – in fact the total opposite! He was just finishing his ritual cleansing! V18 “I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts ~~doing this~~. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance.” So, what happens is, Felix is fair and he decides that Paul has *not* done anything deserving of punishment, let alone death, and he decides to keep him locked up. Felix knows about Christians, possibly because he has a Jewish wife. But then we see the real test of Paul’s obedience to God, and perhaps the real motivations of Felix.

Look at v25. “[Felix] sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. 25 As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, *Felix was afraid and said*, “That’s enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.”²⁶ At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. Two things are going on here – firstly Paul is brave enough to speak about righteousness, self-control and the judgement to come, with a man who has the power of life and death over him. What Paul says makes him afraid! But Paul won’t pull away, he’s honest, he’s clear, he tells him about Jesus and the need to be forgiven – otherwise we face God’s judgment.

But secondly, Paul *refuses* to pay a bribe, and Felix keeps him in prison.

Now, of course, Roman law prohibited officials from taking bribes, but a first century historian named Josephus said “in reality bribe-taking was rampant”.

And I sort of imagine a battle of wills. Felix is determined and happy to wait, he thinks that it’s just a matter of time – eventually Paul will pay up for his freedom, they always do. So he keeps holding him prisoner. But Paul won’t pay a bribe. He’s honest and faithful to God.

We might imagine though, what **could** have gone through his head: “Lord I know you want me to go to Rome to tell people there about Jesus. If I just pay up, Felix will even help me find safe passage to Rome. Surely it’s worth it – it’s only a bit of money?”

“Lord it’s been so long, it’s getting on for a year now!” And then another month, and another, and then two years!

And that’s a second point: **He waits and waits and waits...**

You see, although they really want him dead, the Jews must really feel like they’ve won this one. After all, Paul was a travelling preacher. He travelled around telling people about Jesus and starting up churches. Well he doesn’t do any travelling now does he! Even though he hasn’t done anything wrong, the Jews have managed to get him locked up.

Paul knows that he has to keep honouring God, and if that means going through this ordeal, and if that means waiting – then he will wait.

Now, I don’t know what your experience of waiting is like? I don’t know if you had to wait for anything for months or even years? But I do know that our world is increasingly bad at waiting. Even at the dinner table in conversation, I can just whip my phone out, look on Google, and find out anything I want! Everything is so instant these days! People talk about how our kids are growing up as the generation can’t wait, and have no patience – and even have no concentration spans! But God is not like a smart phone, working instantly to serve our wishes, faith has always involved trusting God and waiting, waiting on him, and it still does. Now of course, waiting is only **really** hard when you don’t know how long you’re waiting for, you don’t know what the outcome is going to be, and it’s not in your hands! And Paul did know what Jesus has planned for him was – and that he would go to Rome and testify about in there.

He didn’t know how long this would last, and he didn’t have power to change it, he was trapped. But there must have been times where he wondered whether God’s plan for him wasn’t going to come true?! Would he go to Rome? I bet you wonder that sometimes too? Is God’s plan for me going to come true, is it frustrated? What even is it? We might think... “God, what are you doing? Why are you allowing this? It’s such a waste of time!” For Paul, he was such an effective evangelist! We think “What are you doing?” But Paul kept waiting, and waiting. He prays and he waits. He writes letters and he waits. I have no doubt that some of the New Testament letters which we have now were written during these two years. Patience is a virtue – our role is to keep being faithful, keep serving the Lord, and entrust ourselves to him. The first thing Paul himself writes about love in 1 Corinthians 13 is “love is patient”

And Paul loves the lord! What about you – will you wait on God, do you trust him?

Well how does it end?

Actually, Felix never gives in, *and* Paul never gives in – Paul remains faithful to God throughout. But two years later, Felix gets a promotion or something and he is replaced by someone called Festus v27 (of ch 24).

And get this, as soon as Festus comes to power, within three days Jews are petitioning for Paul's death again! And in the end, Paul appeals to Caesar – which means, because he's a Roman citizen, he is going to be taken to Rome and tried there. The wait is going to come to an end – although if you want to, you can read on and find there's still another trial or two before he makes the journey! The wait will eventually end. But what about us? How should we respond to this? Well, I want you to think that your own faith, and your patience.

Waiting is hard.

Just think of that sinking feeling which hits you when you find there's a long queue! That's the success of online grocery shopping! No one likes to queue! It seems to me that from my parents' generation to mine, the transition is complete from a time when people saved up to buying something, to a time when people just get it now, on credit – and pay off or don't pay off later. We've had such a rise in control and power to the individual – we're so used to having it our way, right away, we're just really bad wait-ers. We can be really impatient. All this instant gratification leads us to overblown expectations of all of life – and particularly with God

You see, **waiting takes faith.** If we trust God, and know he's in charge, then we will be able to cope when things don't happen as we want right away. Paul kept trusting God while he sat in prison. For many of us, we don't face anything like that.

We need to remember God's patience. Remember how he *has been* patient with you, and how he *is* patient with you. Paul did! He writes in one of his letters "Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent of Jesus. . . . But I received God's mercy so that in me, as the worst of all, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life."

Paul says, God was patient with me. I opposed him, and he didn't judge me, but showed me mercy, he changed me, turned me around. I'm grateful for his patience. I want people to know this about God, and to trust him and follow him.

So how could Paul be impatient with God?

And the same is true for us. do you think about that. God is patient with you. You test his patience! And he's passed the test, he hasn't been put off, he still loves you, and his patience, if you're a Christian, has paid off – you've come back to him.

If we have faith, if we know what God is like, if we know his amazing patience with us – I mean we make some real clangers don't we? And He's so patient with us.

That means we *ought* to wait on him, we ought to trust him. But it also means we can.

Having faith gives real power to our patience with God, and our patience with life. We trust him... Waiting takes faith.

I want to stop, and I want you to go away thinking about these ideas.

But I want to finish with the idea that we see in Paul.

We need to fulfil what we're called to do.

I can remember talking to a Christian friend who was feeling victimised at work. He felt colleagues were being cruel, unsupportive and that the whole environment had become pretty toxic to him. Some of the people he was upset with were Christians. He wondered why God was allowing this, he wanted to go and give those others a piece of his mind. Now in some ways he may have been being over-sensitive. I encouraged him to take care of what he was in control of. Not to run around telling people off, and pointing them to what they ought to be doing, here and there and there. God has given you this challenge, be faithful in what you're called to do. Take care of your own responsibilities! There's a moment in the CS Lewis book *The Horse and His Boy* – it's one of the *Narnia Chronicles*. Aslan is talking to a young girl Aravis – and he explains to her that he was the one who brought a certain hardship into her life, and he did it for her good, and for another girl too. She pauses thoughtfully, obviously finding it slightly hard but beginning to understand. And she asks, what about her...Lewis writes this:

"Child," said the Lion, "I am telling you your story, not hers. No one is told any story but their own." And it stuck in my mind. If you like, we have our hands full dealing with God and living our own lives faithfully... worry about that. We need to leave *God* in charge of others, and trust him with that. Each of us needs to fulfil what we're called to do.

And we could do with following in the footsteps of Paul, and his patient trust of the lord Jesus, even when he was unjustly kept under arrest.

Father, help us to trust you, give us faith, and give us patience to follow you truly, in the ways and the timings which you set for us. Amen