

HOW TO ENJOY YOUR NEXT "PRISON" EXPERIENCE

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

By Ron Ritchie

When I was fifteen years old, I was involved in a serious clash with one of my opponents during a school basketball game. The referees finally had to break us up. As I walked off the floor towards the bench, one of my friends yelled, "Ritchie, duck!" This giant of a kid was coming at me again. Instinctively, I turned in such a way that I was able to hit him and knock him out. I also did quite a bit of damage to his teeth, jaw, and nose. The coach took me to the locker room and told me I was clear because I had acted in self-defense. My team buddies said the same thing. I relaxed, the boy was taken to the hospital, and that was that. Or so I thought.

Two weeks later, around 11:00 at night, two detectives climbed up a fire escape and came through my bedroom window to arrest me. When they took me to juvenile hall to be booked for assault and battery, the woman who ran the hall took one look at my size and said, "No way, take him somewhere else." The only choice they had was to take me to the state penitentiary where they fingerprinted me, took my picture, and put me in a cell without a bed.

After clamoring on the bars and asking for a bed, I was taken through a set of halls and gates to a really nice cell. All night I lay there feeling bitter, frightened and angry. I knew I was innocent. Somehow someone had falsely accused me. The next morning I found out why the cell was so nice. I had slept in a cell designated for death row inmates. Then I really became scared because no one knew where I was.

Later that day when I was brought before the judge, this young man and his parents were there to accuse me. I was found guilty and charged for all the court and medical expenses for the boy. I did not have any money--I was living in an orphanage! As a result, I spent my summer working off the bill and was filled with bitterness and thoughts of revenge. I did not enjoy my first prison experience.

This morning I want to address the issue of how to enjoy our next prison experience. This may seem like a strange topic, but at times the Lord of our lives will directly or indirectly place us or allow us to be placed in a variety of "prison" experiences.

The Webster Dictionary defines "prison" as "a state of confinement or captivity; a place of confinement; a building in which persons are confined for safe custody while on trial for an offense or for punishment after trial and conviction." No matter how we define the word, it is an unpleasant experience in which our lives are socially, physically, or emotionally held captive, when we are cut off from the normal routines and relationships that make life worth living.

I say next prison experience because I have discovered that even as a believer I have not always honored the Lord in my prison experiences. When I was confined by poor health, I did not always express joy in the Lord because I could not see my imprisonment from his point of view. The Lord may have placed you in a state of physical, social, or emotional confinement in the past, or you may be there now. Whatever the case, we can glean some spiritual principles from Paul's experience in Acts 24 that will help us enjoy our next prison experience, if not the one we presently face.

As you recall, in the last chapter Paul was falsely accused with a variety of charges, yet he maintained his innocence. He also maintained a heart full of joy because he realized what being a prisoner meant from God's point of view. Spiritually, he always saw himself as a "prisoner of Jesus Christ." He knew that nothing ever happened to him, no restriction ever bound him, unless Christ allowed it. He never considered Caesar to be his warden.

How can we enjoy our next prison experience? First, we want to listen to our accusers. Look at verses 1 through 9.

I. CAREFULLY LISTEN TO YOUR ACCUSERS, 24: 1-9

And after five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders, with a certain attorney named Tertullus; and they brought charges to the governor against Paul. And after Paul had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying to the governor, "Since we have through you attained much peace, and since by your providence reforms are being carried out for this nation, we acknowledge this in every way and everywhere, most excellent Felix, with all thankfulness. But, that I may not weary you any further, I beg you to grant us, by your kindness, a brief hearing. For we have found this man a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. And he even tried to desecrate the temple; and then we arrested him. And we wanted to judge him according to our own Law. But Lysias the commander came along, and with much violence took him out of our hands, ordering his accusers to come before you. And by examining him yourself concerning all these matters, you will be able to ascertain the things of which we accuse him." And the Jews also joined in the attack, asserting that these things were so.

All of this took place in 57 A.D. Paul was originally brought to Caesarea, the western city of the Roman Empire which was to maintain peace in the land of Jerusalem, because his nephew had discovered a plot in which zealots were planning to kill the apostle for allegedly taking a Greek behind the "wall of partition" in the temple area.

The first thing we need to see is that whenever we are brought into a restricted season, in this case it was an actual prison for Paul, we need to listen carefully to our accusers. Who are Paul's accusers? In this case, Ananias the High Priest represents all the Jewish leaders and the Supreme Court. Unfortunately, of all the people Paul could face, Ananias was not someone who loved him. He had earlier been in the Supreme Court when Paul claimed to be a man who lived blamelessly before God and all men. At that time, the High Priest had him slapped, and Paul had said, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!" That did not go over well in the halls of the Supreme Court or in the heart of the high priest.

You can also imagine the pressure on Ananias; he had travelled over sixty miles to present his charges before a Roman governor. This was indeed an awkward situation, for he had to deal with a man who just a few years earlier had been a mere slave. But because of some political moves in Rome, Caesar Claudius had made Felix governor of Judah. Ananias came anyway because he was intent on getting rid of this pest Paul once and for all. He was going to nail this man to the wall and hang him out to dry.

What are the charges against Paul? After some flowery, false statements directed toward Felix by the Hellenistic Jewish lawyer Tertullus, we are presented with four charges.

The first one is that Paul is a pest. Tertullus claims, "He caused three riots--two in the temple and one in the Supreme Court. And then at tax payers' expense, we had to call on the Roman Guard to keep peace in the City of Peace."

The second charge is that Paul caused dissension among all the Jews in the world. This was a serious political charge if it could be proven. The Roman Empire prided itself in being a government that kept the peace.

The third charge is that Paul is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. At this time, Christianity was still under the sanction of the Roman Empire because it was thought to be a sect of Judaism. This sect was seen as a small group of Jews who believed that Jesus from Nazareth was their Messiah. The Romans dismissed the movement as short-lived because Christ had been killed on a Roman cross some 27 years before for claiming to be King of the Jews. Even though his followers claimed that this Jesus had risen from the dead, the Romans thought the movement would die shortly.

The fourth charge is that Paul even tried to desecrate the temple by bringing a Greek beyond the "wall of partition." This was the religious charge which started the riot, but it was also a political charge because the riot broke the Roman peace. Tertullus gave this latter as the reason for Paul's arrest which was a lie. According to Claudius' letter, the Romans had to rescue Paul because the Sanhedrin police were asleep at the switch.

In conclusion, Tertullus says, "Dear Governor Felix, we are so thankful that under your ruling hand we are experiencing this season of peace and the various reforms, but there is a fly in the ointment--Paul, the peace-breaker. Check this out yourself and you will agree with us." Then all the Jews joined in the attack, asserting that these things were true. This was a tense moment. Paul's life was on the line if any of these accusations could be proven, especially the charge of breaking the peace.

What is a innocent believer to do when faced with false accusers? The Scriptures are filled with stories of followers of Yahweh and Jesus who have been falsely accused. For example, Joseph was minding his own business in the house of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguards, when Potiphar's wife became sexually attracted to him. When Joseph failed to respond to her advances, she falsely accused him of trying to make sport of her. Her angry husband had him thrown in jail without a trial. Since he had no chance to defend himself, Joseph trusted the Lord for his life. Genesis 39:21 and 23 says, "But the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him...and whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper." During this time, God prepared him for being the vice president of Egypt during the impending famine.

What about Daniel in Babylon? The prophet was faithfully serving the Persian King Darius when two other leaders became jealous of his wisdom. In order to eliminate Daniel, they enacted a law stating no man could worship any god other than the king. They knew Daniel would pray to Yahweh. The innocent prophet was arrested, charged and thrown into the lion's den. When the King who loved Daniel came to see what had happened, Daniel said, "My God sent His angels and shut the lion's mouth...I was found innocent before Him; and also toward you, O King, I have committed no crime." Daniel was taken out of the den, and those who maliciously accused him were thrown in along with their families. Daniel was forced to trust God in the midst of the false charges.

Then there is the story of Jesus. The Jewish leaders repeatedly tried to set traps to falsely accuse him of breaking some Mosaic Law in order to have him killed. Finally they found a false charge that would stick. Bringing him to Pilate, they said, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding people to pay their taxes to Caesar and saying that He Himself is a King." Falsely accused without a trial, Jesus "kept entrusting himself to Him who judges righteously"(1 Peter 2:23).

The question that needs to be asked in all of these situations is what is the source of all of the maliciously false and deadly accusations? The apostle John wrote in Revelation 12:9-10 that when Michael and his angels warred against Satan and his angels, the latter were thrown out of heaven.

The passage goes on to say:

...the serpent of old who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth...and I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them before our God day and night.

The source is our enemy, Satan himself, and all of his sons. He will seek again and again to falsely accuse us not only on earth but before God the Father. His voice will come in a multitude of ways, hoping to make us victims of his deceit. His goal is to get us to respond in such a pagan way that our ministry and witness will be destroyed, as well as our lives. Satan longs to make a mockery of our relationship with Jesus Christ. The next time you find yourself being "falsely accused," remember Satan is working behind the curtains of time. Peter wrote to the Christians in Asia Minor in 1 Peter 4:14-16:

If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evil-doer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God.

How are we to enjoy our next prison experience? First, we need to listen carefully to our accusers and understand who is working behind them. The second thing we need to do is make our defense. Look at verses 10 to 21.

II. CHEERFULLY MAKE YOUR DEFENSE, 24:10-21

And when the governor had nodded for him to speak, Paul responded:

"Knowing that for many years you have been a judge to this nation, I cheerfully make my defense, since you can take note of the fact that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. And neither in the temple, nor in the synagogues, nor in the city itself did they find me carrying on a discussion with anyone or causing a riot. Nor can they prove to you the charges of which they now accuse me. But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law, and that is written in the Prophets; having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men. Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings; in which they found me occupied in the temple, having been purified, without any crowd or uproar. But there were certain Jews from Asia--who ought to have been present before you, and to make accusation, if they should have anything against me. Or else let these men themselves tell what misdeed they found when I stood before the Council, other than for this one statement which I shouted out while standing among them, 'For the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you today.'"

The apostle Paul stands before the governor and his accusers and makes the most incredible statement: "I cheerfully make my defense! I am a representative of Jesus Christ." He sees this as an opportunity to tell these men about Jesus Christ and to protect the reputation of the church in Jerusalem and throughout the land.

First, to the accusation that he was a pest, he responds, "Get serious! I went up to the temple some twelve days ago to worship God during Pentecost, like thousands of my brethren do every year. This means all of us are pests."

Second, they accused him of causing dissension among the Jews throughout the world. He defends himself: "While I was in town for this short stay, I visited the city and the Temple. I did not cause any riot."

Third, he was accused of being a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarene. Paul responds, "I admit that I am a member of the Way. I believe in the Law and the prophets, and they both talk about the resurrection from the dead. These elders believe the same thing. If there is a charge against me it is that I believe in the resurrection. If I am guilty, then so are they."

1 Peter 3:13-16 says:

And who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to every one who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence, and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

Paul followed this to the letter! He committed himself to Jesus Christ and trusted him for his defense.

How are we to enjoy our next prison experience? We are to carefully listen to our accusers and cheerfully make our defense. There is a third thing we must do. Look at verses 22 through 27.

III. PATIENTLY TRUST GOD FOR THE VERDICT, 24: 22-27

But Felix, having a more exact knowledge about the Way, put them off, saying, "When Lysias the commander comes down, I will decide your case." And he gave orders to the centurion for him to be kept in custody and yet have some freedom, and not to prevent any of his friends from ministering to him.

But some days later, Felix arrived with Drusilla, his wife who was a Jewess, and sent for Paul, and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And as he was discussing righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix became frightened and said, "Go away for the present, and when I find time, I will summon you." At the same time too, he was hoping that money would be given him by Paul; therefore he also used to send for him quite often and converse with him. But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned.

Governor Felix listens carefully to Ananias's charges and Paul's defense and then does three things. First, he admits he knows about the Way. He had been in power for over three years and would have known about all the different political and religious parties within his jurisdiction. Therefore, he dismisses the Jews and sends for the colonel to get the details concerning the case. He places Paul back under house arrest and allows his friends to minister to him.

Second, several days later, Felix arrives with his third wife Drusilla who was 19 years old at the time. Drusilla was one of the three daughters of Herod Agrippa I. Her father murdered James, the brother of John. Her great-uncle Herod Antipas killed John the Baptist. Her great-grandfather Herod the Great killed the children of Bethlehem. Yet, with all this history and her knowledge of the Scriptures, they still wanted to hear Paul speak of his faith in Jesus--which they needed. They wanted to know who this Jesus was and why he came.

Since Paul had their attention, he threw in the subject of righteousness--which they did not have--and explained that righteousness came not by works but by faith in Jesus as the Christ. He said, "Drusilla, you know that Abraham believed God, and God reckoned it to him as righteousness." Then Paul spoke of self-control--which they did not exhibit. Drusilla had been the wife of a king in Syria when Felix stole her away. By the time she met Paul, she had been living with Felix as his wife for three years. Paul also addressed the judgment seat to come--which certainly would have overcome them with the sin in their lives.

Suddenly the message became too uncomfortable. Felix became frightened. If the message was true, then Felix and Drusilla would have to stand before a King greater than Caesar Nero. They knew they would be held accountable for their lives.

As a result, Felix sends Paul back to his cell and then visits him several times with the hope that Paul might pay a bribe. Paul had slipped in front of this greedy governor when he told him that he had brought offerings and gifts to the Jewish people. Felix thought he might have some funds left over.

Third, Felix leaves Paul in prison. Verse 27 reads: "But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, and wishing to do the Jews a favor..." Felix sounds so accommodating. Actually, there had been a riot in town among the Jews during his administration, and Felix had handled the situation by sending in Roman soldiers who killed many of the Jews. The ones who survived wrote a formal complaint to Rome, and this was why he was being recalled. In other words, he was making one last effort to help his own case.

In closing, let me point out some spiritual principles so that we might be encouraged in our next prison experience, or in the midst of our present one. We need to patiently trust God for the verdict. The innocent

apostle had four things going for him. He knew he was a chosen instrument of the Risen Lord to spread the gospel. Second, the Risen Lord had appeared to him just two weeks earlier and had told him, "Take courage for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also." Third, he had carefully listened to his accusers without disruption. And finally, he gave a cheerful defense.

After all, this was not Paul's first prison experience. He had been arrested, beaten and imprisoned in Philippi only to be released by an earthquake and the kindness of the jailer. When he was in Corinth, he was arrested and dragged before the Judgment Seat only to be quickly released. Then he was arrested and taken before the Supreme Court in Jerusalem only to be saved and sent to Caesarea.

On a human level, you would expect the governor to have sent for Colonel Claudius to obtain the facts, and Paul would have been acquitted. It just seems logical! But the verdict from the Risen Christ was that Paul would stay in Caesarea for two years because he had some people in the government that he wanted Paul to meet. He did not tell Paul that. That is the part we do not like. It would be much easier to sit in Caesarea if we knew what God was doing.

The principle is that as servants of the Living God, Jesus Christ, we need to remember that we are living in a fallen world, surrounded by the enemies of Christ. From time to time, our Lord directly or indirectly is going to place us in a prison experience--social, physical or emotional--so that we are restricted and feel cut off from the normal routines and relationships that make life worth living. Satan will move in and falsely accuse us of secret sins or tell us that God is punishing us. In the midst of this confrontation, we will need to give a cheerful defense.

But it is at this point that most of us become confused. Why? When we are serving the Living Lord, we think that if we line up all our ducks we will eventually get duck soup. We say to ourselves, "If I did this now, God has to do that. In the past when I was in prison, I was released quickly. The same thing should happen again! I did everything according to what I have always done." Isaiah 55:8 tells us that God says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways." God has called us to a life of faith and trust in Him. We need to wait on him for his verdict. And when the verdict comes, we need to sit quietly and wait on him. We do not have the luxury to expect life to be logical when we are walking and ministering with the living God.

How can we enjoy our next prison experience? We must carefully listen to our accusers. There is always a source and his name is Satan. Do not believe anything he says because it is always contrary to the word of God. Cheerfully defend your living hope in the resurrected Lord. Do not defend yourself; defend the living Christ in you. Use your words as an opportunity to witness for Jesus Christ. Let men and women see him alive in you! No matter what happens after you give your defense, trust the Lord for the verdict. When God says this is the way it will be for two more years, take it from the Lord that he is doing much more than you could ever hope for or ask. His thoughts are far beyond our own. Take courage for he will never leave you nor forsake you, for as he said in Matthew 28:20, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

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