

Homiletics Analysis: Acts 24

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Acts 24 narrates Paul's formal legal defense before Felix, the Roman governor of Judea, at Caesarea Maritima. The chapter opens with the high priest Ananias and the professional orator Tertullus presenting the Sanhedrin's case against Paul, framing him as a pest, a rabble-rouser, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes who also attempted to profane the temple (vv. 1–9). Paul's defense follows in structured, legally competent form: he refutes each charge on its own terms, denies stirring up any crowd, affirms his worship of the God of Israel according to the Way, grounds his case in the resurrection hope shared with his accusers, and notes the conspicuous absence of his Asian accusers who should be present if any charge is to stand (vv. 10–21). Felix, who has some familiarity with the Way, adjourns the proceedings and keeps Paul in protective custody with relative freedom, awaiting the arrival of Lysias the tribune (vv. 22–23). The chapter closes with two private audiences: Felix and his wife Drusilla summon Paul to hear him about faith in Christ Jesus; Paul reasons with them about righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment — at which Felix becomes alarmed and dismisses Paul, hoping also for a bribe; this pattern repeats over two years, at the end of which Felix, seeking to curry favor with the Jews, leaves Paul imprisoned (vv. 24–27).

This Text — Intent:

God is seeking to accomplish two convergent things through this chapter. First, He demonstrates that the gospel of Jesus Christ — and specifically the apostle charged to carry it — is not destroyed, silenced, or discredited by the machinery of political power and legal accusation; Paul's defense is not a desperate survival tactic but a composed, gospel-grounded witness before the highest civil authority in Judea. Second, and with even greater narrative weight, God is confronting the reader with the anatomy of a near-conversion that fails: Felix hears a precise, searching account of righteousness, self-control, and coming judgment; he is genuinely alarmed; and yet he repeatedly defers, allowing appetite for money and political convenience to override what his conscience has already registered. The chapter is a warning to every reader who has heard enough to be disturbed but not yet enough to be transformed — and to every preacher about the cost of softening the message to secure the favor of those in power.

Subject Sentence: Paul stands accused before Felix — and the gospel stands on trial.

Primary Claim: God is showing that the gospel cannot be neutralized by political power or legal pressure, and He is confronting every reader who, like Felix, has been alarmed by the truth but has chosen deferral over repentance.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature of Paul's defense: Some readers, particularly those in the Baptist and evangelical traditions with a strong emphasis on bold witnessing, read Paul's defense primarily as an evangelistic moment — Paul seizing a captive audience to preach the gospel. This reading has genuine warrant: Paul does speak of faith in Christ Jesus, resurrection hope, and coming judgment. However, it risks flattening the legal and apologetic texture of the chapter. Paul is not simply preaching; he is making a carefully structured legal argument, dismantling each charge point by point, and doing so with deliberate rhetorical competence (v. 10: “knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense”). The Reformed reading sees both dimensions as genuinely present and holds them together: Paul's defense is legally rigorous and gospelcentered simultaneously, which is itself the point — the Way is not subversive of justice, it is the fulfillment of the hope of Israel.

Felix as a tragedy or a type? A significant interpretive question concerns how to read Felix. Some traditions, particularly those with an Arminian or revivalist reading of Acts, treat Felix as a tragedy of free will — a man who *could* have responded and *chose* not to. This reading is not wrong as far as it goes, but it tends to locate the drama entirely in Felix's libertarian freedom. The Reformed reading acknowledges the genuine call that came to Felix, the genuine alarm his conscience registered, and the genuine responsibility that attaches to his repeated deferral — but frames these within a larger picture: Felix is functioning narratively as a *type* of the person who has enough truth to be convicted but who allows the deceitfulness of riches and political calculation to harden the will. Luke does not say Felix *almost believed* — he says Felix *repeatedly put off* what his own conscience confirmed. The point is not narrowly soteriological (did Felix have a chance?) but homiletically diagnostic: what does deferral in the face of conviction look like, and what does it cost?

Drusilla's presence: Some commentators (particularly those with Pentecostal/charismatic emphases on signs and wonders accompanying witness) note Drusilla's Jewish background and treat her presence as evidence that Paul is particularly targeting Jewish unbelief. This is a minor point, but it over-reads what Luke narrates. Drusilla is identified by her origin to explain the couple's unusual familiarity with the Way (v. 24), not to make her a distinct evangelistic target. The primary addressee in vv. 24–27 is Felix, whose response (alarm, dismissal, hoped-for bribe, two-year deferral) is the chapter's culminating portrait. The Reformed reading: Drusilla's Jewishness contextualizes the scene but does not redirect its focus.

Bribery and political maneuvering: Dispensational readings sometimes treat the procedural details of Acts (the Roman legal framework, Felix’s corruption, the transition to Festus) as background scaffolding for the primary drama of missionary advance. This misses the theological load Luke is placing on these details. Felix’s corruption — hoping for a bribe, leaving Paul bound to please the Jews — is not merely historical color; it is Luke’s indictment of what happens when a man subordinates a truth he has already heard to the demands of self-interest and political survival. The Reformed reading: the procedural details are themselves the sermon; Luke is showing what human systems do to the gospel and what the gospel does to human systems.

No significant divergence exists on the basic authenticity of Paul’s defense or its consistency with his other speeches in Acts. The historical-critical question of whether Luke has accurately represented first-century Roman legal procedure has been substantially answered in favor of Lukan accuracy by scholars including Bruce, Hemer, and Keener. This is not an active homiletical controversy.

Key Canonical Support

- **Luke 12:11–12** — Jesus promises His disciples that when brought before authorities, the Spirit will teach them what to say; Acts 24 is a fulfillment of this promise in Paul’s composed, Spirit-formed defense.
 - **Proverbs 29:25** — “The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe”; Felix’s entire trajectory in this chapter is a case study in the fear of man overriding the fear of God, and Paul’s composure is the counter-image of freedom from that snare.
 - **Romans 1:18–21** — The suppression of known truth through unrighteousness illuminates Felix’s response: he does not lack knowledge (he is alarmed by what he hears about righteousness and judgment), but he suppresses it through the mechanism of deferral and appetite.
 - **Hebrews 3:7–8, 13** — “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts”; the warning against hardening through deferral is precisely what Felix’s two-year pattern enacts — “a convenient time” (v. 25) never comes, and the habit of deferral is itself a form of hardening.
 - **2 Corinthians 5:10–11** — Paul’s reasoning with Felix about righteousness, self-control, and coming judgment echoes his own statement that “knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others”; the content of Paul’s private address to Felix is not accidental but reflects Paul’s settled conviction about what every person needs to hear.
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Aim: To show that the gospel advances undefeated through political opposition, and to confront the reader who, like Felix, has already been alarmed by the truth but has not yet stopped deferring.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
24:1	Five days after Paul's transfer to Caesarea, the high priest Ananias, some elders, and the orator Tertullus arrive to press charges before Felix	Speed of Jewish delegation underscores urgency of their opposition
24:2–4	Tertullus opens with flattery of Felix — “much peace,” “reforms made” — before presenting the charges	The flattery is rhetorically calculated; contrast with Paul's straightforward opening in v. 10
24:5–6	Three charges: Paul is (1) a plague/pestilence, (2) a stirrer of riots among Jews throughout the world, (3) a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes, and (4) attempted to profane the temple	Note that charges 1–3 are political, designed for Roman ears; charge 4 touches religious law
24:7–8	Tertullus invites Felix to examine Paul directly for confirmation of these charges	Rhetorically clever: inviting Felix's own investigation while implying guilt is obvious
24:9	The Jews present join in affirming the charges	Luke notes their corporate endorsement, underlining the coordinated nature of the opposition
24:10	Felix signals Paul to speak; Paul opens by noting Felix's many years as judge — not flattery but a factual basis for his defense being heard fairly	Contrast with Tertullus's oily flattery; Paul's tone is composed and direct
24:11–13	Paul refutes the riot charge: he has been in Jerusalem	The argument is temporal and evidentiary: Paul

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	only twelve days, not long enough to organize a riot; his accusers cannot prove their charges	demands proof, not assertion
24:14–16	Paul owns his identity as a follower of the Way and as one who worships the God of Israel according to the Law and the Prophets, holding to the resurrection hope — the same hope his accusers hold	Critical move: Paul does not distance himself from Judaism but claims continuity; the Way is the fulfillment of Israel’s hope, not its subversion
24:17–18	Paul explains his presence in Jerusalem: bringing alms and offerings to his nation; found in the temple purified, with no crowd or tumult	The alms reference is significant — Paul’s mission to Jerusalem was an act of covenant solidarity, not agitation
24:19–21	Paul notes the absence of his Asian accusers — those who actually witnessed whatever occurred in the temple — and reduces the standing charge to one: his proclamation of the resurrection before the council	Legally devastating: the witnesses are absent; the one remaining charge is theological, not civil
24:22–23	Felix adjourns the hearing, citing the need to consult Lysias; keeps Paul in custody but orders that he be given liberty and that his friends be permitted to care for him	Felix’s “more accurate knowledge of the Way” is an authorial aside explaining his unusual handling of the case
24:24	Felix and Drusilla, his Jewish wife, send for Paul and hear him speak about faith in Christ Jesus	The private audience changes the setting from courtroom to personal encounter
24:25	Paul reasons with Felix about righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment; Felix is alarmed	The three subjects are precisely targeted: righteousness (Felix’s corruption), self-control (his

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	and dismisses Paul, saying “Go away for now; when I get an opportunity I will summon you”	marriage to Drusilla, taken from another man), coming judgment (his unresolved accountability)
24:26	Felix continued to send for Paul and converse with him, hoping that Paul would offer him money	The repeated summonings are not spiritual hunger but mercenary calculation; Felix’s continued exposure to Paul hardens rather than opens
24:27	After two years, Porcius Festus succeeds Felix; Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, leaves Paul imprisoned	The chapter closes with the double indictment: two years of deferral, and a final act of political calculation that overrides justice entirely

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	24:1–9	The Prosecution’s Case: Flattery, Charges, and Corporate Accusation
2	24:10–21	Paul’s Defense: Legal Precision, Gospel Clarity, and the Absent Witnesses
3	24:22–23	Felix’s Procedural Response: Adjournment and Protective Custody
4	24:24–27	The Private Audience: Alarm, Deferral, and Two Years of Lost Opportunity

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Paul stands accused before Felix — and the gospel stands on trial.

Primary Claim: God is showing that the gospel cannot be neutralized by political power or legal pressure, and He is confronting every reader who, like Felix, has been alarmed by the truth but has chosen deferral over repentance.

Applications (Five)

1. (Mind/Belief) Paul's defense in Acts 24 dismantles the assumption that Christian faithfulness and rigorous engagement with hostile systems are in tension. Paul did not refuse to engage Roman legal procedure on the grounds that the court was corrupt or that spiritual matters transcend legal categories — he mastered the procedure, used it with precision, and engaged it without either naïve deference or cynical contempt. The reader who assumes that faithfulness means disengagement from institutional or professional hostility has not learned from Paul: the gospel does not retreat from the forum; it meets every forum on its own terms, with greater clarity and greater composure than the forum expects.

2. (Affections/Worship) Paul's composure before Felix is not the composure of a man who has suppressed his fear — it is the composure of a man who fears God more than he fears Caesar. Felix had power over Paul's body and legal future; Paul had no anxiety about this whatsoever. The reader who constantly calculates how much truth to share, how much of their faith to display, or how much gospel to import into professional and civic settings based on what it might cost them is worshipping comfort more than Christ. Paul's freedom in this passage is a rebuke and an invitation: the person who has settled the question of whose verdict finally matters is free to speak without calibration.

3. (Will/Behavior) Felix's habit in vv. 25–26 is the chapter's sharpest warning: he kept sending for Paul, kept hearing the truth, kept being alarmed — and kept deferring. The reader who has a “convenient time” they have been planning to deal with God's claims on their life needs to identify that habit by name, today, and break it. “When I get an opportunity” is not a statement of intention; it is a mechanism of evasion that hardens with each use. Whatever specific form deferral takes in the reader's life — the conversation with a family member about faith, the unresolved sin pattern that has been noticed but not repented of, the commitment to regular worship or prayer that has been “almost started” for months — the chapter's verdict is that the pattern itself is the danger, not merely the delay.

4. (Mind/Belief) Paul's summary of his message to Felix — righteousness, self-control, and coming judgment — is not a random selection of topics. These three subjects were precisely targeted at Felix's known condition: a corrupt official who had taken another man's wife and who had never faced accountability for either. The reader should understand that the gospel is not a generic transaction; it is always addressed to the specific shape of a person's actual moral and spiritual situation. This means the reader cannot evaluate Paul's message to Felix as though it were directed at someone else — the question the text presses is: what would Paul reason with *you* about? What are the specific forms of unrighteousness and lack of self-control that the gospel is addressing in your particular life?

5. (Affections/Worship) The saddest line in Acts 24 may be verse 27: “Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul imprisoned.” After two years of access to the apostle of Christ, direct exposure to the gospel, genuine alarm from his own conscience — Felix’s final recorded act is a political calculation to please his opponents. The reader should grieve this, and in grieving it, examine what they fear losing if they stop deferring. Felix could not afford — politically, economically, socially — to be transformed. The reader who is also living with a version of that calculation needs to sit with the image of Felix’s end: two years, a clear conscience alarmed, and the only legacy being a man who used Paul to hope for a bribe and left him bound to curry favor. That is what deferral purchases. Grieve it. Then repent.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Acts 24 teaches that God’s purposes advance not despite but *through* the hostile systems of human power. The legal machinery that Felix presides over is corrupt from top to bottom — a hired orator deploying flattery, absent witnesses, charges that evaporate under cross-examination, a judge angling for bribery, a final decision driven by political calculation rather than justice. And yet Paul is not silenced; the gospel is not discredited; and even the judge himself is brought face to face with the claims of Christ Jesus. This passage teaches that God is sovereign over the precise circumstances in which His gospel is heard, that He orchestrates even the most corrupt human proceedings to place His messengers before the most unreachable human ears, and that the effect of the gospel on the human conscience — alarm, recognition, the sense that one is being seen — is His work, not the preacher’s. Felix’s alarm in v. 25 is not Paul’s achievement; it is the Spirit’s. The theological importance of the chapter is that neither power nor corruption nor the apparatus of human justice can prevent the living God from pressing His claim on any human soul He intends to reach.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Acts 24 is a vivid case study in what the Reformed tradition has consistently identified as the *testimony of conscience* — the internal witness that the law of God is written on every human heart (Romans 2:14–15) and that no amount of worldly sophistication or legal maneuvering can entirely silence it. Felix is not an ignorant man; he is a man with substantial exposure to truth (v. 22: “having a more exact knowledge of the Way”) who is nonetheless unable to repent because he will not subordinate his appetites and political interests to the verdict his own conscience has rendered. The Reformed doctrine of total depravity does not mean Felix cannot think clearly — it means that his moral clarity (he is genuinely alarmed) is not sufficient to overcome his moral bondage without regenerating grace. The chapter also powerfully illustrates the covenant faithfulness of God to His purposes: the Lord Jesus had told Paul

he would testify in Rome (Acts 23:11), and Felix's corruption — far from derailing that promise — is the very mechanism by which Paul is preserved in Roman custody, protected from Jewish assassination, and moved closer to the imperial capital. God's purposes are not frustrated by human sin; they are, in His sovereign wisdom, advanced by it.

Main Takeaway

The gospel of Jesus Christ has never been neutralized by a hostile court, a corrupt official, or a two-year delay — and it will not be neutralized by yours. But Felix's story is also every reader's warning: alarm is not repentance, and "a convenient time" never comes on its own. You have already heard enough to be disturbed. The question Acts 24 presses is whether you will be the kind of person who keeps sending for Paul hoping for a different outcome, or whether today will be the day the alarm does its work.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating Paul's legal defense as merely a model for personal boldness.** The chapter is frequently preached as a how-to for "sharing your faith in difficult situations" — drawing out Paul's composure and precision as a behavioral template. This is not wrong, but it misses the chapter's primary weight. The dominant homiletical weight falls on Felix, not Paul. The passage is less a model of witness technique than a diagnosis of the soul that hears the gospel clearly, registers genuine conviction, and still refuses to act. A sermon that focuses primarily on Paul's boldness has avoided the passage's most searching application.
- **Softening Felix's culpability in the name of sympathy.** Some expositors, sensitive to the pastoral reality that congregation members may see themselves in Felix, soften his portrayal — "he was in a difficult position," "he was a complex man," "he had political pressures." This is pastoral miscalibration. Luke does not offer Felix sympathy; he offers Felix indictment. The text's pastoral purpose is achieved precisely by naming Felix's pattern as what it is — evasion, corruption, and hardening through repeated exposure — because that diagnosis is what creates the warning. A preacher who softens the verdict has removed the text's sharpest instrument.
- **Reading Paul's three topics (righteousness, self-control, coming judgment) as generically evangelistic.** These three subjects are frequently treated as a template for evangelism — "when witnessing, talk about these three things." This misses the targeted precision of Paul's selection. He is not working from a checklist; he is addressing Felix's specific, known moral situation with surgical accuracy. The preaching application should help the congregation understand that genuine gospel proclamation is not generic but addressed — it identifies the specific shape of the

listener's actual condition. The preacher who never mentions righteousness and judgment is not preaching the same gospel Paul preached.

- **Missing the irony of Felix's repeated summonings.** Felix keeps sending for Paul (v. 26) while simultaneously hoping for a bribe. This is not nearness to the kingdom — it is the most subtle form of hardening, where continued exposure to truth is filtered entirely through the grid of self-interest. Preachers who read Felix's repeated summonings as spiritual hunger will misread the passage and miss Luke's authorial irony. The warning is not "he was almost there" but "continued proximity to truth, without submission to it, produces only greater accountability."
- **Neglecting the two-year timeframe as a theological statement.** Verse 27's "when two years had elapsed" is not administrative detail — it is Luke's summary verdict on Felix's stewardship of his exposure to Paul and the gospel. Two years of access. Two years of alarm that never became repentance. Two years of "convenient time" never arriving. The preacher who races past v. 27 to get to Acts 25 has missed Luke's closing indictment of the chapter. The congregation needs to hear what two years looks like at its end.
- **Allowing the political and procedural complexity to obscure the chapter's personal address.** Acts 24 has considerable historical and legal texture — Roman judicial procedure, the identity of Drusilla, the transition from Felix to Festus, the geography of Caesarea. These details can consume a teaching that aims at being thorough and leave the congregation informed but unfronted. The chapter's personal address — its confrontation of the reader who has been alarmed but not yet transformed — must not be buried under historical-critical scaffolding. The governing question the passage presses on every listener is personal: *What are you doing with the alarm you have already felt?*