

“A Clear Conscience” (Acts 23:12-24:27)

August 21, 2016

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Have you ever been accused of something? If you’ve lived long enough, of course you have. Have you ever been *falsely* accused of something? Perhaps when you were a child, you were accused of hitting your brother or your sister when you really didn’t do it. Perhaps you were accused of eating the last cookie when it was someone else. When you grew up, the false accusations probably stopped for a while. And then you got married. Then, suddenly, you hear things like, “Where did you put my . . . ?” Or, if you’re like me, you say things like that.

I’m sure we’ve all been accused of things that we didn’t do. In most cases, those accusations weren’t serious ones. Yet Christians throughout the world have often been accused of doing things they haven’t done. That’s true of Christians who are persecuted in places where it’s not safe to follow Jesus. And it’s certainly true of the apostle Paul, as we’ll see in the book of Acts.

When we’re accused of something, whether it’s a true or a false accusation, how can we have, as Paul says, “a clear conscience toward both God and man”? How can we move from being accused to being declared innocent? We’ll think about that, as well as persecution, lies people might tell about us, and why such things happen at all.

Today, we’re going to look at most of the twenty-third chapter of Acts 23 and all of chapter 24. This passage starts on page ___ of the Bible provided here the church. I would encourage you to read along with us, whether your brought your own Bible today or not. If you do, you’ll follow what I’m say more easily and you’ll get a lot more out of this message. If you’re not used to looking at the Bible, the large numbers are the chapter numbers and the smaller, superscript numbers are the verse numbers.

As you’re turning to chapter 23, I’ll remind us of where we are. The book of Acts is the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. In the first book, Luke writes about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. In the second book, he begins with Jesus ascending to heaven after he rose from the grave. Then he writes about how the message of Christianity was spread throughout the Roman Empire. It started in Jerusalem. About thirty years later, it made its way to Rome. Most of the book concerns a man named Paul, who was a very religious Jewish person. He was first opposed to Christianity. But after seeing Jesus while on the way to arrest Christians in Damascus, his life

was changed forever. He went from being an enemy of Jesus to being Jesus' greatest messenger. He traveled throughout the Roman Empire, telling both Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) about Jesus.

Last week, we saw that Paul returned to the city of Jerusalem. He did so even though he was warned that he would be arrested. He ignored those warnings because he wanted to bring to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem money he had collected from Christians in other cities he had visited. Paul wanted the predominantly Gentile churches in cities like Corinth to share with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, because the Jewish Christians were poor. Also, Paul said that it was only right that the Gentile Christians should share their material wealth with the Jewish Christians, since the spiritual wealth of the gospel came from Jews. You can read about that in Romans 15:22-29.

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he found out that there was a rumor going around. People were saying that he was teaching against the law of Moses, the law that God gave to the Israelites after he delivered them out of slavery in Egypt. People were saying that Paul said that Jews shouldn't circumcise their sons (Acts 21:20-21). That was a false accusation. Paul taught that people didn't need to follow the law in order to be reconciled to God. He and the leaders of the church taught that Gentiles needed to turn from worshiping false gods. They needed to repent of their sins and put their trust in Jesus. That's true for anyone, Jew or Gentile, who wants to be a Christian. But Paul didn't say that Jews must stop following the law.

In order to put an end to the false rumors, Paul went to the temple to worship, to show that he was still committed to the law. His concern wasn't the law; rather, he was concerned about persuading more Jews to become Christians. When Paul went to the temple, he was accused of bringing a Gentile into the part of the temple where only Jews could worship. Again, this was a false accusation. When Paul was accused, the crowd was stirred up and some Jews wanted to kill Paul. He was protected by the Roman soldiers who occupied Jerusalem and were near the temple complex in order to maintain order in the city. These Roman soldiers didn't care about theological debates. They cared about keeping order in the city. So Paul remained in Roman custody in order to keep a riot from forming.

Finally, while in Roman custody, Jesus appeared to Paul and told him to take courage. Just as Paul testified to the truth in Jerusalem, he would do so later in Rome (23:11).

All of that brings us to Acts 23:12. What I'm going to do today is spend some time explaining today's passage, and then I'll show how we can apply it to our lives. So, let's begin by read Acts 23:12-15:

¹² When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. ¹³ There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. ¹⁴ They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near."¹

When Luke writes, "the Jews," he doesn't mean all of them. After all, Paul was Jewish and there were many Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. But some Jews—more than forty of them—wanted to kill Paul. They wanted to kill him so badly that they made an oath not to eat or drink until they did so. They told the members of the Sanhedrin, the council of Jewish leaders in the city, to have the tribune, the Roman military leader, bring Paul to them again, "to determine his case more exactly." It's reasonable to assume that some were even willing to die to kill Paul. After all, he was guarded by Roman soldiers. These Jews couldn't kill Paul unless they eliminated these soldiers, and that wouldn't happen without someone—or even a lot of someones—dying.

Why would these people want to silence Paul so badly? We don't know much about these particular Jewish people who wanted to stop Paul. It might have been that they thought he was simply a blasphemer, saying false things about God. They might have been threatened by his message. It's often the case that when people are so hostile, it's because they are trying to defend their way of life. Most likely, though, these Jews were opposed to Paul because they knew he had been spending time with Gentiles. He was accused of bringing a Gentile into the temple—something he didn't do, of course. But Paul had been seen with a Gentile in Jerusalem, and he had spent a significant amount of time with Gentiles in different cities. Perhaps these Jewish enemies of Paul couldn't believe that a Jew—and a Pharisee, nonetheless—would be worshiping with Gentiles. Jews weren't supposed to enter into Gentile homes, eat with Gentiles, and marry Gentiles. Perhaps these Jews couldn't bear the thought that Paul was associating with "those people."

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Fortunately, or (to put it more precisely), providentially, Paul's nephew hears about the plot and he tells Paul. We read about this in verses 16-22:

¹⁶ Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. ¹⁷ Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him." ¹⁸ So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, "Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you." ¹⁹ The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?" ²⁰ And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him. ²¹ But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent." ²² So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, "Tell no one that you have informed me of these things."

We don't know much about Paul's family, but he had a sister, and she had a son, who somehow hears about the plot to kill Paul. Paul's nephew then tells Paul. (Prisoners were allowed to receive visitors. In fact, prisoners often relied on family and friends to feed them while they were in prison.) Paul then tells a soldier, who brings Paul's nephew to the tribune.

The information about the plot is handled very carefully, but the end result is that the tribune decides to bring Paul to Caesarea, a city about sixty miles north-by-northwest of Jerusalem. The tribune, whose name is Claudius Lysias, has a large group of soldiers bring Paul toward Caesarea at night, with a letter to give to Felix, the Roman governor of Judea. Let's read about that, as well as the letter, in verses 23-30:

²³ Then he called two of the centurions and said, "Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night. ²⁴ Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor." ²⁵ And he wrote a letter to this effect: ²⁶ "Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. ²⁷ This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen. ²⁸ And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. ²⁹ I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. ³⁰ And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him."

Lysias must have thought that Paul was an important prisoner, for almost five hundred soldiers to protect Paul. Also, they left at night, three hours after sundown. Lysias wanted to make sure the Jews didn't have an opportunity to kill Paul. He also wanted to make sure that Paul didn't get killed on the sometimes dangerous road from Jerusalem to Caesarea. I don't think it's an accident that Paul's nephew found out about the plot to kill Paul. And it's no accident that Paul had such protection. Jesus promised Paul that he would go to Rome. That meant that Paul couldn't die before he arrived there. When Jesus makes a promise, it will come true. We would be wise to acknowledge the hand of God in Paul's protection.

In today's passage, we see a letter and two speeches. In two of these discourses, the writer or speaker twists the truth. Lysias's letter does that a bit. He tries to present himself in the best light. People in positions of power have been doing that for a long, long time. In order to present himself in a positive light, Lysias changes some of the details of what happened in Jerusalem. He says that he rescued Paul when he was about to be killed. That much is true, but Lysias didn't do this for Paul's sake. Rather, he saved Paul in order to maintain order. Also, Lysias says he rescued Paul because he learned Paul was a Roman citizen. That's not true. He only later learned that Paul was a Roman citizen because he was about to torture Paul to get information out of him. Paul reminded Lysias that flogging a Roman citizen without a trial was illegal. Only then did Lysias bring Paul to the Sanhedrin. It is true, however, that the real issue wasn't whether Roman laws were being broken. The issue was about Jewish law. Lysias knew that Paul hadn't done anything to deserve death or imprisonment, and once he heard there was a plot to kill Paul, he went him to the governor.

In the next few verses, Luke tells us about Paul's travel to Caesarea. Let's read verses 31-35:

³¹ So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. ³² And on the next day they returned to the barracks, letting the horsemen go on with him. ³³ When they had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him. ³⁴ On reading the letter, he asked what province he was from. And when he learned that he was from Cilicia, ³⁵ he said, "I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive." And he commanded him to be guarded in Herod's praetorium.

Paul and all the soldiers traveled thirty-five miles in one night to a city called Antipatris. Most of the soldiers returned to Jerusalem after that. Paul was now away from those who wanted to kill him. On the next day Paul went the other twenty-five miles to Caesarea. When Felix, the

governor, reads Lysias's letter, he asks what province Paul is from, to make sure that he could handle this case. If Paul had been from another place, the matter would have been outside of Felix's jurisdiction. But since Paul was from the province of Cilicia, Felix could handle the case. He had him stay in Herod's praetorium, the palace that served as the governor's headquarters, to wait until his accusers arrived in person.

When Paul's accusers arrive, he is put on trial before the governor. First, charges are brought against Paul by the advocate for the accusers. Then, Paul will defend himself. Let's first read about what his accusers say. We'll read chapter 24, verses 1-9:

¹ And after five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and a spokesman, one Tertullus. They laid before the governor their case against Paul.

² And when he had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying:

"Since through you we enjoy much peace, and since by your foresight, most excellent Felix, reforms are being made for this nation, ³ in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude. ⁴ But, to detain you no further, I beg you in your kindness to hear us briefly. ⁵ For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. ⁶ He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him. ⁸ By examining him yourself you will be able to find out from him about everything of which we accuse him."

⁹ The Jews also joined in the charge, affirming that all these things were so.

The high priest and some of the other Jewish leaders from Jerusalem brought with them a man named Tertullus, who was something like a lawyer. He presents the case against Paul. But first, he flatters Felix. This was normal practice for that time. Tertullus says that Felix has brought about peace and has instituted reforms. Things weren't very peaceful during Felix's rule (AD 52-59). The only reason there was peace is that he stopped threats in their tracks with great violence. Felix was a former slave who became governor because his brother had been a slave of the emperor Claudius's mother. Tacitus, the Roman historian, said that Felix "practiced every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of a king with all the instincts of a slave."² So, it's really questionable whether Felix was the kind of governor that Tertullus makes him out to be.

The reason why Tertullus mentions peace is that one of the charges he makes against Paul is that Paul was threatening the peace in Jerusalem. He says that Paul is "a plague," a disease who threatens to spread, who stirs up riots among Jews throughout the world. It's true

² Tacitus, *History of the Empire after Marcus*, 5.10, quoted in M. Rapske, "Roman Governors of Palestine," ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 983.

that Paul had a way of stirring people up, and that Jews often opposed him, but Paul wasn't making trouble in Jerusalem. Tertullus also says that Paul is "a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes," and that he "tried to profane the temple." Paul may have been a leader of Christians, but he didn't try to profane the temple. In fact, he went to the temple to perform a rite of purification.

What's interesting is that in Luke's Gospel, when Jesus is on trial, false accusations were made against him. In Luke 23:1-2, we read,

¹ Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. ² And they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king."

Two of those three accusations against Jesus were false. He didn't mislead the nation of Israel, and he didn't forbid anyone to render to Caesar what is Caesar's. In fact, Jesus only implied that he was the Messiah. We can see here that Paul is being treated the way that Jesus was treated. If Jesus was falsely accused, we can expect that his followers will be falsely accused, too.

How does Paul respond? He tells Felix that he didn't have to stir up a riot in Jerusalem. He only came to worship and to bring gifts to the poor. In fact, Paul worships the God of Israel. He believes in what is written in the Law and the Prophets. He shares the hope of Israel: the resurrection of the dead. Let's read Paul's response in verses 10-21:

¹⁰ And when the governor had nodded to him to speak, Paul replied: "Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense. ¹¹ You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem, ¹² and they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city. ¹³ Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me. ¹⁴ But this I confess 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 and written in the Prophets, ¹⁵ having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. ¹⁶ So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. ¹⁷ Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings. ¹⁸ While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult. But some Jews from Asia— ¹⁹ they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me. ²⁰ Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council, ²¹ other than this one thing that I cried out while standing among them: 'It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.'"

Paul begins with a little bit of flattery, acknowledging that, at this point, Felix has been governor for “many years” (about five, really). Paul says he was only in Jerusalem for twelve days. Since three of those days were spent in the barracks of the fortress, under the guard of Roman soldiers, he really only had a little over a week there, not enough to stir up a proper riot. Paul says he didn’t dispute with anyone. He didn’t stir up a crowd. He says what he has been accused of doing is false and can’t be proven.

But Paul does make a confession. He says he worships according to “the Way,” which is how Christianity is sometimes called in the book of Acts. This “Way” is not a mere sect. Really, it is *the* way to worship truly the “God of our fathers.” All of the Law and the Prophets—the whole Old Testament—pointed to Jesus and are fulfilled by Jesus. So Christianity is really the proper extension of Judaism. Paul says he believes in the resurrection. That was what set off a dispute within the Sanhedrin, because Pharisees believe in the resurrection (see Dan. 12:2), but another sect of Jews, the Sadducees, do not (because it’s not clearly revealed in the Pentateuch).

Paul also says that he has maintained a clear conscience before God and man. I think that means that he was a faithful messenger. He did what God wanted him to do by telling people about Jesus. Since he told people about sin, God’s solution for sin in Jesus’s atoning death on the cross, Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, and the future judgment, Paul did his job. He told people what they needed to hear. If they didn’t want to hear that message, it wasn’t Paul’s fault.

Paul then reiterates that he did nothing wrong. He was in Jerusalem to give to the poor and he was in the temple to purify himself. The Jews from Asia, the ones who said he brought a Gentile into the temple, made a false accusation. In fact, they should be in Caesarea to back up their claims. Of course, they couldn’t do that, so they weren’t there.

The real reason that Paul was on trial was because of a theological claim. He proclaimed the resurrection of the dead. Of course, he told everyone that Jesus had been raised from the dead, which demonstrated that his death paid for sin, that he was more powerful than death, that he is the Son of God, and that when he returns, all the dead will be raised. Those who are made righteous because they have a relationship with Jesus will live with him forever in a perfect world. Those who are opposed to God will be judged for their sins and will be removed from the world, where they will face condemnation.

Paul, we should note, is the only one who told the truth. What would Felix do now? We see that Felix put off a decision until Claudius Lysias could come to Caesarea. We see this in verses 22-23:

²² 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.” ²³ Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs.

Apparently, Felix was familiar with the message of Christianity. He doesn’t seem to be too threatened by it. Before he makes a decision, he wants to hear from Lysias in person. While waiting, Paul was allowed to have his friends visit and take care of his needs.

In the last few verses we’ll consider today, we see that Felix hears from Paul again. Let’s read verses 24-27:

²⁴ After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, “Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you.” ²⁶ At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him. ²⁷ When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

Felix seems to be intrigued by Paul, though not for the right reasons. When Felix calls for a private audience with Paul, to hear about “faith in Christ Jesus,” Paul reasons with Felix “about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment.” This message bothers Felix, who says, “That’s enough. Go away. We can talk later.” Why was Felix bothered? Well, I think Paul told him that all of us are sinners. That is, none of us are righteous. As Paul writes in Romans 3, quoting from the Old Testament,

all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, ¹⁰ as it is written:

- “None is righteous, no, not one;
¹¹ no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one” (Rom. 3:9-10; quoting Ps. 14:1-3; 53:1-3).

Felix is probably bothered by this message because he had wooed his third wife, Drusilla (Herod Agrippa I's daughter and Herod the Great's great-granddaughter) away from her husband, causing her to commit adultery.³ It seems he lacked self-control. And, if he didn't turn from that sin and find refuge in Jesus, he was going to face God in the coming judgment. God would find him guilty and would condemn him.

Felix can't bear to hear that message, so he sends Paul away. But we're told that "he sent for [Paul] often and conversed with him," because he hoped Paul would give him some money. Felix must have thought that Paul was a wealthy man, capable of giving Felix a bribe in order to be freed. But Paul did have self-control and he wouldn't do such a thing, so Felix was disappointed. He let Paul stay in prison for two years, in order to "do the Jews a favor." Paul's Jewish enemies would rather have Paul dead, but they had to settle for having Paul in prison, silenced for a time. Felix let his successor, a man named Porcius Festus, deal with Paul. We'll read about that next week.

So, what does any of that have to do with us? What can we learn from this?

First, this passage reminds us of what the gospel is. The gospel literally means "good news," but before there is good news, there is bad news: We're not righteous. God made us to love him and worship him and live a certain way, but we don't do what is right. We would be doomed if we faced judgment. But for those who have a relationship with Jesus, he is our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30). He is the only person who has walked this earth and never failed to do what is right. All who have a relationship with Jesus also have the Holy Spirit, who helps us to be self-controlled (Gal. 5:23). We can actually start to live in a way that is pleasing to God. We can face the final judgment, when we all stand before God, because our sins have already been paid for when Jesus died on the cross. But those who aren't united to Jesus will face that judgment without being credited with his righteousness. They will have to pay for their own sins, and that is a terrible fate. I urge you all to turn from doing life on your own terms and to follow Jesus. He is the only way to be reconciled to God, to have eternal peace, and to have a life that really matters.

Second, we can learn something about accusations. There's a real sense in which all of us stand accused. There is a supernatural, evil being who accuses us of our sin. I'm talking about Satan, of course. I know that people don't like to talk about the devil much, but I think his

³ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.141-144.

existence best accounts for some of the horrific things that we see take place in the world. Not only is he the father of all liars and murderers (John 8:44), but he also accuses us of our sin. The book of Revelation calls him “the accuser” who “accuses [Christians] day and night before our God” (Rev. 12:10). If you want a picture of this, read Zechariah 3:1-5 later. Satan delights in pointing out our sin, both to God and to ourselves. But everyone who is united to Christ can no longer be accused by Satan because “they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 12:11). Jesus is the Lamb of God who died in the place of sinners. His blood, which represents his life, was poured out in death so that guilty sinners like you and me can live.

However, even though Christians can no longer be rightly accused by anyone—at least not in any ultimate sense—for their sin, they will still be falsely accused, just as Jesus was falsely accused and Paul was falsely accused. Every week, we publish a prayer guide, and each week I add a prayer request or two from the Voice of the Martyrs, a ministry that draws attention to persecuted Christians. These requests commonly feature Christians who have been falsely accused. Here is one story, published a few years ago:

Hindus in Madhya Pradesh, India, have accused Pastor Kamlesh Tahed and three other Christians of murdering a young man who was killed in a fight between two locals, according to Compass Direct News.

On Aug. 8, Roop Singh Baria was killed during violence between the Baria and Tahed clans regarding 1,000 rupees (US \$20), which had been borrowed by one of the Tahed family members. When members of the Baria clan filed a report with the police about the incident, they implicated Pastor Tahed, Kasna Tahed and two other believers, Ramesh Tahed and Vasna Tahed, in the murder. The four men and other locals insist that the Christians were not present when the murder took place.

Following the incident, Pastor Tahed said, “I once was one of them, but in the 20 years since I became a Christian, they have been dragging me into false cases and hate me for my work of evangelism.” In 2001, Pastor Tahed was jailed for 20 days on false charges of “forcible conversion.” He was released after a costly court battle, which proved his innocence. At last report, he was in hiding and the three other accused believers were in police custody.⁴

It’s easy to see this in places like India and the Middle East. We even expect that will happen in those places. But we don’t expect that will happen here. However, I think we’re going to see

⁴ “Pastor Falsely Accused,” The Voice of the Martyrs, September 8, 2009, http://www.persecution.com/public/newsroom.aspx?story_ID=%3D313738 (accessed August 21, 2016).

more and more of this in America as the prevailing culture becomes more and more hostile to Christianity.

That's the third thing we can see in this passage. People are still hostile to Christianity (like Paul's Jewish opponents) and people are still bothered by its message (like Felix). Why do people want to silence Christians? I suppose there are many reasons. Christianity challenges all earthly powers, because it says that the real King is Jesus. But more than that, Christianity points out our sin. It destroys our pride. I often think of what Jesus told his unbelieving brothers. He said, "The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil" (John 7:7). Of course, later in John's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18).

Christians are silenced in violent ways today, and they are silenced in smaller, subtler ways, too. In this year's Olympics, there are a number of athletes whose faith has been instrumental to their lives. Yet the mainstream media won't tell you about this. Terry Mattingly, who writes a syndicated column called "On Religion" and writes a blog called "Get Religion," has pointed out how the media has failed to report on the faith of many prominent American Olympians, including Simone Manuel, Simone Biles, Katie Ledecky, and others.⁵ Faith even played a role in Michael Phelps's life. Phelps has struggled with substance abuse and two years ago he received his second DUI and went to rehab. His friend and mentor, former NFL linebacker Ray Lewis, gave Phelps a copy of Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* when Phelps was in rehab, and this book helped turned his life around. Yet NBC won't tell you about that. They want to silence Christianity, because the message is divisive and it won't sell.

The fourth and final thing we can learn from this passage is how to have a clear conscience. We can have a clear conscience if we know Jesus. The book of Hebrews says that Jesus' death in our place, for our sins, on the cross can purify our conscience (Heb. 9:14). "[O]ur hearts [are] sprinkled clean from an evil conscience" (Heb. 10:22; see also 1 Pet. 3:21). And we can have a clear conscience toward God if we are faithful to do what he wants us to do. Part of being faithful means telling people about Jesus, regardless of how they respond.

⁵ Mattingly writes at www.getreligion.org. One article that illustrates this point is Terry Mattingly, "Hey Reporters: Faith Plays a Key Role for Simone Manuel, Simone Biles and Many Others," *Get Religion*, August 12, 2016, <http://www.getreligion.org/getreligion/2016/8/11/faith-plays-a-key-role-for-simone-manuel-simone-biles-and-many-others?rq=simone> (accessed August 21, 2016).

We can have a clear conscience toward other people if we tell them the gospel. If we tell people about how to be reconciled to God and how to face the final judgment without fear, we have done our job. We can then rest knowing that we have delivered the only message that can give people ultimate hope and peace.

Put a different way, we can have a clear conscience towards others if we tell the truth and if we treat them well. Christians, that means that we cannot repay evil with evil and hate with hate. And we can't make false accusations. I am grieved to see Christians spread rumors and say false things about people they dislike. We cannot do that.

I want to conclude with one more passage of Scripture. I believe this passage shows us how we can respond to false accusations, and how we can act when people hate us and call us names. This is 1 Peter 3:9-17:

⁹ Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. ¹⁰ For

“Whoever desires to love life
and see good days,
let him keep his tongue from evil
and his lips from speaking deceit;
¹¹ let him turn away from evil and do good;
let him seek peace and pursue it.
¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.
But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

¹³ Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷ For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

If people call us names, we cannot respond in kind. We must love and not hate. If we suffer for Jesus, we are blessed. And if our love in the face of hate causes people to ask us what we believe and why we believe it, we must be ready with an answer. But we must answer with gentleness and respect. We must present the truth in love. When we do that, our consciences are clear.