

Paul Before Felix

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[0 : 00] Our text this morning, as we hear from the living God and his word, is once again in Acts chapter 24.

And Paul is in jail. We've had a week away from Acts, but you'll recall that Paul, at the conclusion of his third missionary journey, was led very clearly by the Spirit of God to go to Jerusalem.

And there he had been arrested after he was nearly killed by the Jews at the temple. And it is that moment that was the turning point in the rest of the book.

Because for the rest of his life, as God's apostle to the Gentiles, Paul would be in Roman custody. And in the events leading up to our chapter today, Paul had been moved now to Caesarea.

You recall the nighttime exit of Paul with half the Roman soldiers of Jerusalem as an escort orchestrated by Lysias himself. Caesarea is about 70 miles northwest of Jerusalem, situated right on the Mediterranean Sea.

[1 : 26] It was the location of the governor's palace. This is where Felix, the governor, lived. And Paul's case is now to be taken before him. We've been in Caesarea before in this book.

Cornelius, the centurion, was baptized there. And Paul himself had passed through this port city at least three times on his missionary journeys. It was the next level up in the chain of Roman political power.

And it was where Paul would spend the next two years of his life. And it's that last detail that I want you to take note of here right at the beginning.

As Luke relates this account in chapter 24, it's a detail we could very easily pass over. You see it there in the very last verse, verse 27 of this chapter.

Luke writes in that last verse, he says, When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

[2 : 34] Two years. I don't know what your reaction is to that detail. I'll tell you my reaction.

Lord, what are you doing? Letting Paul sit there in prison for two years.

There's a whole world out there. This is your apostle to the Gentiles. And you let him sit in prison, spinning his wheels for two years. That's my reaction to this chapter.

At least, that's my reaction at first. That I say to myself when I read this, what a waste. What a pointless episode this seems to be.

If you're the God of history, why don't you just get your apostle out of jail? There's things to be done in the world, right? That's my reaction.

[3 : 36] That's what this chapter makes me think about. That's the problem I've got when I come to this chapter. So we're going to have a look at the events here. And see what it is that Luke and the Spirit of God would teach us this morning.

Teach me. Because Luke thought this whole thing was worth a whole chapter. He spent all of six verses in chapter 20 on most of the third missionary journey.

He spends 27 verses in this chapter. Because it matters that we know what Paul said and how Paul acted and what happened.

And you'll have to wait now until the end when I come back to the problem that I introduced here at the beginning. I'm going to move through the text first because there's some details that I want us to rightly understand as we come to it.

And we'll come back to my question. This is not a very difficult chapter, actually. It divides just simply into three sections. We have first in the beginning verses 1 to 9 the prosecution.

[4 : 38] The charge against Paul. And then secondly from verses 10 to 22 is the defense that Paul gives. And then thirdly from 23 all the way to the end is the aftermath.

The prosecution and the defense and the aftermath. I wish I could call the third section the verdict. But there is no verdict. And there is no justice.

There is no human justice in this chapter. And so you have your Bibles accessible, I trust, if you would do that and be willing to follow along.

We're in Acts chapter 24. And first up is the prosecution. All the Jewish leadership are in a hurry to get rid of Paul.

Look at verse 1. And after five days, the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and a spokesman. One Tertullus. It's only five days after Paul had been placed into Felix's custody in Caesarea.

[5 : 46] And the Jewish leaders already had themselves organized. And they had come down from Jerusalem. And no less than the high priest himself and some of the Sanhedrin elders came.

These are the people of the highest position in Israel. And they are intent to eliminate Paul. And they know what they're doing. Luke says they have a spokesman.

That's the word the RSV uses. The Greek word behind that is *krator*. You can hear the root of our English word rhetoric in that word, can't you?

This spokesman, Tertullus, he was a pro. He was a professional speaker. Who knew how to handle this kind of legal situation. He knew just the right words to use.

He knew just what to say. He'd been hired by the Jews to do this job. So Luke says they laid out their case against Paul before the governor.

[6 : 48] Now Luke doesn't really explain why things happen in the sequence that they do here. And that's because his readers just would have understood. And they would have understood and known that this was not a standard Roman trial sequence.

What you see in chapter 24 is a specific kind of provincial penal procedure. It's a procedure that worked precisely in the pattern that Luke reports.

We know that from other sources that back it up. And here's how it goes. The prosecution comes in before the governor himself and presents the case. And then they call in the accused.

And then the prosecution makes the accusations publicly, directly to the defendant. And then the defendant has to respond. And then the governor is supposed to decide the case.

Those are the steps, exactly as Luke has them in this chapter. And it's always, as he writes, so very careful and precise. And the important point is that these cases were heard by the governor personally.

[7 : 56] And before the governor, the prosecution was simply to make the allegations against the one accused. Without even necessarily having to produce any hard evidence in this kind of legal format.

So that after the defense, after the defender, who's Paul here, makes his defense. Then the governor had complete flexibility. Not only just to decide whether the defendant was guilty or innocent.

But in fact, even to establish for himself what the crime actually was that he was ruling on. And in these cases, the governor could, if he wanted, choose to postpone matters indefinitely.

With no recourse for either side to get the case resolved. He could just put the defendant in limbo. Tuck him away in prison. So as perhaps to avoid any negative repercussions of deciding things one way or the other.

The power in this process rested entirely with the governor. And when you're talking about Felix, that's not such a good thing.

[9 : 04] This is not the way you and I think of justice working in a court of law. But it is where Paul finds himself.

It was a process full of corruption. But it was quick. And it was efficient. And it got problems out of the public spotlight in a hurry. And that's exactly why they're using it against Paul.

And this is exactly what happens to Paul. So the professional rhetorician goes to work. Watch how he addresses Felix. Verse 2. Since through you we enjoy much peace.

And since by your provision, most excellent Felix, reforms are introduced on behalf of this nation. In every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude.

But to detain you no further, I beg you in your kindness to hear us briefly. Now that, friends, is the very definition of laying it on real thick.

[10 : 12] Tertullus is a pro. And in his line of work, the tools of the trade are flattery and outright lies. And everyone knows it.

Everyone would have known that what Tertullus just said wasn't true. Of all the governors leading up to the time of the Jewish war, Felix was the one most responsible for stirring up trouble by his brutal suppression of various Jewish groups.

He was a hated man, especially by Jews. But now here come these Jewish leaders who see a kind of opportunity to use the kind of guy Felix is.

And they hire someone to come in and tell Felix just how wonderful he is. And it's all a lie. You study this guy at all and you discover he was not a man of wise provision.

He was not one who made great reforms and improvements in Judea. He was certainly not known for kindness. Felix was governor only because his brother was buddy-buddy to Claudius.

[11 : 15] And Felix is a figure of historical infamy. He was indecisive. He was a coward. He seduced his wife from another man. And it was his third wife. Everything went wrong in his rulership.

But Tertullus is doing his job. And the words were music to Felix's ears. And to everyone else, they are, as one commentator puts it, nauseating flattery.

Well, such is the beginning of Paul's trial. We come then to the charges themselves, verses 5 and 6. There's three charges brought against Paul. First, Tertullus says Paul is a pestilent fellow, an agitator there, he says in verse 5.

Instead of pestilence, some translations might say Paul was a plague. He's like a disease to be gotten rid of. Maybe your translation has another colorful way of expressing that.

In any case, it's just to say Paul was basically a real pain in the neck. But to call Paul an agitator, as Tertullus does, well, that's something more serious. The word suggests that Tertullus means for Felix to classify Paul with political activists who are deemed threatening to Rome.

[12 : 35] Activists who could be tried on grounds of treason against the empire. To be considered an insurrectionist threat to public order in the Roman Empire was to flirt with execution.

This goes way beyond calling Paul just annoying. It's a serious charge. The second accusation Tertullus raises is also in verse 5.

He says, Paul is a ringleader. A central figure in the sect of the Nazarenes, he says. Using a derisive label for the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

And in describing the Nazarenes there as a sect, Tertullus tries to link Paul in Felix's mind with other messianic fringe groups that came from Judaism.

Some of which Felix dealt with quite harshly in the not so distant past. So once again, the focus is political. Paul seems just like the kind of man Rome would want to do away with.

[13 : 35] Then the third accusation comes in verse 6. Tertullus gets to the charge that Paul had defiled the temple. That's significant not because Felix cares much about the temple.

But since it means that according to Tertullus, Paul not only broke Roman law, he also broke Jewish law. The Romans had given the Jews wide powers in dealing with offenses against the temple.

And so Tertullus makes it sound like they were just doing their part with Paul. We seized him, he says. Well, they were trying to do a lot more than just seize him. And so that's the prosecution.

It's well crafted. It hits all the right buttons. And it just builds up some serious accusations against Paul. And it just might have all sounded rather plausible to Felix.

The rhetorician has done his job very well. And now it's time for the defendant to respond. And so the defense. Paul, once he has permission now from the governor in verse 10, proceeds in his defense to take on those allegations one by one.

[14 : 47] He leaves nothing unanswered. We had three accusations. We get three responses. Against the accusation that he was an agitator, Paul says emphatically he was not.

Verse 11. It's not more than 12 days since I went up to worship at Jerusalem. 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.

I'd had no time. To cause any insurrection, Paul says. And no intention of doing so. He'd gone up to Jerusalem, he says, to worship. It was a groundless accusation.

It can't be proved. And Paul knows it. Second, then, the charge was that he was a ringleader of the Nazarenes. And Paul responds that indeed he was part of the way, he says.

A title we've seen before to describe early Christianity in Acts. But look at verse 14. Paul's more clever about this. This I admit to you.

[15 : 50] That according to the way which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law or written in the prophets.

Paul confesses that he follows Jesus, the one who called himself the way. But he absolutely denies the charge that this made him part of some offshoot sect of Judaism.

And so once again, as we saw a couple chapters ago, elsewhere in Acts throughout all of his letters, you cannot miss the fact that for Paul to follow Jesus, to be one of the followers of the way, is to be part of the way by which the one true God fulfills all that he said in the scriptures.

And so Paul claims in the face of the high priest and the Sanhedrin elders who are standing by, that he himself is the loyal and faithful Jew in the crowd.

He wasn't abandoning the faith of his ancestors. He was penetrating to its very heart. And then thirdly, to the charge that he had defiled the temple, Paul responds in detail in verses 17 to 20.

[17 : 05] And it's so clear, his response, that in the end, there's just nothing left to their accusations. One, two, three.

Three charges, three defenses. Paul answered every one. Felix would not find anything that would lead him to render a guilty verdict.

And so that should have been the end of it. Three charges, three defenses, no grounds for conviction, case closed. But it's not. Because Paul's caught.

Paul's caught in a political machine. With a governor who cares more about himself than any kind of justice. Verse 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. Felix had been around long enough in Israel to know the Nazarenes were not the rabble-rousers they're accused of.

[18 : 11] And he well knew that the charges against Paul were basically bogus. But then this excuse. This excuse to wait for Lysias.

At best, it's just a delay tactic. He already had the letter from Lysias that told him what he thought. Felix is stalling. Because he finds himself in a difficult spot.

On the one hand, Paul's innocent. And he knows it. And Paul's a Roman citizen. So he has to be careful. But on the other hand, he knew he had to placate the Jewish leaders in some way.

To simply dismiss this case would upset them. And that could lead to bigger problems down the road. As it was, things were already tense between the Jewish leaders and the Roman authorities.

In A.D. 58, during the time when Paul would have been in Caesarea, violence broke out between Gentiles and Jews in Judea. And Felix took the side of the Gentiles.

[19 : 09] And the Jews were furious. And they rose up in protest to Rome against his policies. And so, you see, Felix had to be very careful about how he managed this.

He could hardly afford to alienate the Jewish leadership any further. And so Paul just sits in prison. And the long, frustrating aftermath to the court scene then begins in chapter 23.

Verse 23. There is no verdict. There is no justice coming from this coward of a governor. Then Felix gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody, but should have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs.

Though allowed some liberty of movement, Paul would have remained at the prison at the governor's palace, constantly guarded and watched. Felix simply has no interest in a verdict.

And if this is what passes for justice in the world, well, then is the world not headed for some kind of chaos?

[20 : 28] But it gets worse. Luke tells us Felix would send for Paul quite often. And he'd let Paul talk and he'd discuss things with Paul. And perhaps he was just trying to give Paul the impression that he was still considering what to do as he just interminably stalled.

But all along, Luke reveals, it's always involved thoughts about what's in it for Felix. You see, in his defense, Paul had spoken about money that he had collected on his missionary journeys and brought back to Jerusalem.

And so now the corrupt man, Felix, reasons he might be able to get some of that money from Paul. Maybe he'd just get a little bribe out of him. Verse 26 says it all.

At the same time, he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him. And this went on for two years.

For two years, all Paul could do is respond to the summons of this pathetic governor. This is Paul. This is the man who could hold his own in the Areopagus, who could turn whole towns upside down as he preached the gospel day in and day out.

[21 : 50] And now all Paul can do is wait and wait and wait and wait. And he sits only a few minutes walk away from the harbor where he had put out and come in more than once in his life, but he couldn't get there.

And what had happened about going to Rome? I imagine Paul often asked that question. He'd sent a letter to the church there.

He told them he was on his way there after just a brief visit in Jerusalem. And now this. What had happened to Jesus' promise that he would get to Rome in the end?

There seems to be no answer. I think Paul must have prayed something like this. He must have prayed something like, wake up, Lord.

Why don't you do something? Can't you see the pagans are having it all their own way? It's your honor that's at stake here. Do something. I just imagine that Paul had to have felt that way.

[23 : 04] He's not human if he didn't feel that way, at least sometime. Paul knew the Psalms. That's the language of the Psalms. But though Paul must have felt that real frustration, I think Luke also, in this passage, lets us know what it is that got Paul through these years.

It's hidden in the text. I mean, not so much hidden as just easy to miss. But it's there, right in the middle of Paul's defense.

We skipped right past it, actually, because I knew I was coming back. And so, glance there again at verse 15. This is the high point of Paul's defense. Paul says, in this defense, he has a hope in God which the Jews themselves accept.

And then he defines it this way. He says that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.

Now, you can just picture Paul saying those stunning words to Governor Felix. This is Paul's great hope.

[24 : 17] This is what enables him to endure an unjust trial full of false accusation, full of deliberate slanderings. This is what will sustain him through two years of seemingly purposeless detainment with no justice.

It is the hope that in the end, there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. I wonder, actually, if that line strikes you as a bit odd.

If you're familiar with Paul and his letters, it should. Because this is the only certain place in the New Testament where Paul is credited with believing in a resurrection of the unrighteous as well as for the righteous.

For those who do not belong to Christ as well as those who do. Elsewhere, when Paul discusses resurrection in his letters, it's to concentrate on the hope this gives to those who belong to Christ.

Those for whom the resurrection will mean that we are finally conformed to Christ's image, to the one who was himself first resurrected. Normally, when Paul speaks of resurrection, it is the great hope of the Christian faith that we who believe will be resurrected and live with God forever.

[25 : 38] But that is not all that resurrection means. There's another side to the coin. And here, Paul intentionally affirms that the great hope of Israel remains his own.

The hope expressed in the Psalms and the prophets that grew directly out of the belief of ancient Judaism that Abraham's own God was, as Abraham says, the judge of all the earth who will judge justly.

Paul captures the hope of Israel that this creator God will one day sort out the whole world.

He will restore all things. He will overturn corruption. He will overturn injustice and decay and death itself. For Paul to say his hope is the resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous.

Compliments what Paul says elsewhere in his letters that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. All of us. The righteous and the unrighteous together.

[27 : 01] This is the hope that in the end God will be the perfect righteous judge who will finally sort everything out.

And God will not be like Felix. God will not delay. He will act as the ultimate judge of the whole world including all people.

This was the great hope of Israel. This is the great hope of the whole world. The day of judgment in the hope of Israel is the day of all things being put to right.

It is to fill the great need in the world for equity. The need that even if we here in Vancouver don't feel it so very many people in the world realize is needed.

Do you see that that hope that Paul expresses in the middle of his defense of the Lord's perfectly righteous judgment is precisely why Paul can entrust himself to the likes of Felix.

[28 : 14] It is precisely why Paul will carry on for two years in prison not because it is right not because it is fair that he has to do so but because the gospel that Paul proclaims and keeps on proclaiming even while he is in prison to whomever he can is all about God putting the world to right.

doing so in Jesus Christ doing so at the end at the final resurrection and doing so today now for individuals for you and me and anyone else who comes to him in between as a sign of what is to come at bottom it is Paul's hope in the resurrection that got him into trouble in the first place and it's Paul's hope in the resurrection that sustains him all the way through it.

And how do I know that Paul is so sustained through all this? Because it's right in the middle of it all the middle of his time over two years that we have this fascinating picture of Paul being summoned to the governor and told to talk for two years Felix would summon Paul and I'm inclined to think there's something more going on than just trying to get bribes verse 24 says Felix sent for Paul and heard him Luke says speak upon faith in Christ Jesus wasn't a comfortable subject for Felix Luke says Felix left alarmed terrified actually because if what Paul had to say was true Felix's own life was a mess but there Paul is stuck in prison and yet here's the opportunity to make clear to the governor of the whole province of the nature of the faith in the

Messiah Jesus that it would mean coming to terms with justice and with self-control and with the coming judgment Luke says verse 25 Felix must have realized he was doing rather poorly on all of those and yet he sent for Paul again and again and again seems to me that there's something in Felix that needed to hear about the real Lord the one shown to be the Lord through his own resurrection and as the resurrected one the one who will straighten everything out in the end the one who longs to see justice in our public dealings self-control in our private lives and who himself died and was raised as the guarantee of the final judgment to come and so here for two years hidden in a palace in Caesarea the Lord Jesus Christ through

Paul was confronting a Roman governor and setting him straight on matters of truth and justice and the kingdom of God for two years and there's lessons in that for us because sometimes the world seems to win and life is unfair and things are unjust and the enemies of the gospel it's seen just march on and on and so on what basis are you and I sustained in the midst of all that on what basis are Christians around the world today who sit in prison for their faith able to endure it on what basis are those who live in war torn places and get up every day with the uncertainty that they and their children will live one more day able to remain faithful on what basis are you able to take the daily little injustices of our world and keep going on what basis are you able to endure whatever suffering the Lord brings into your life there's only one way to do it it is to set your hope as Paul did on the

[32 : 42] God of resurrection the God whose own resurrection in Jesus is the guarantee that one day the whole world will be put to right about that fact there is no doubt in the mind of Paul oh but it's not easy and I'm sure it wasn't always easy for Paul either as he sat going nowhere for two years with trumped up charges under the thumb of a man who deserved contempt so perhaps part of what God was teaching Paul and what God would teach us this morning is that sometimes this is just how things work in God's plans that we are sometimes going to have to sit facing a puzzling gray world of suffering with only just occasional reminders of divine possibility all the while holding firm as we are able to the same hope that Paul had because sometimes the way

God works is just to let things run their course Felix would eventually be removed but for now Paul had to wait and waiting can be the worst kind of suffering sometimes waiting for the next thing that brings us one day closer to that final resurrection amen would you sit or kneel as you feel comfortable as we take our needs and petitions to God in prayer Lord as we come before you it's a week after Easter have we forgotten yet forgotten the passion that we felt when we realized the depth of the love you showed for us in allowing your only son to die for our sins have we forgotten the seriousness with which we affirmed our faith in the resurrection have we forgotten the reasons we had for giving up part of our life for Lent help us to continue to remember the tremendous sacrifice

Jesus made and to be really thankful for all it means now and forever Lord in your mercy hear our prayer as we think of our place in the world we pray for our civic leaders for the queen and for all that she represents for the prime minister and premier the mayors of our municipalities and all those who choose to serve in governing our communities for the leaders of our church we pray help them each to see your will and to rely on the guidance of your holy spirit to show them your will for the conference coming up we ask your guidance and blessing and for all those who attend we pray especially that your presence will be felt and that a new sense of your will and strength be apparent we pray for the leaders that they may feel the presence of your holy spirit in all they do and that the services will be a really strong sign of your blessing on this group keep keep each one safe as they travel and may they arrive eager to be refreshed by you for our

Anglican church and North America leaders we pray we ask that each will be filled with the joy of your holy spirit as they continue to direct us toward a closer walk with you and as they help us to focus on you in our daily lives Lord in your mercy hear our prayer for those from our church who minister locally we ask your blessing on them and in their ministry for Richie Spidell with the Navigators and Kirsten Rumery with Living Waters give them each the comfort of your spirit as they face obstacles on a daily basis to the spread of the gospel for Jeremy Curry with YWAM for Erica and Jess Cantillon in Jerusalem we pray for direction and cultural understanding as they adjust to their places in a different society and help them and us to pray for strength and guidance for those who minister at

St. John's for the Bible study leaders for the musicians teachers office staff both full time and volunteer give each the strength to continue in their ministry especially at this time when we are short staffed and for our pastoral staff we pray for strength to continue in their ministries and for the continued assurance that they are in your will help us each to support and encourage them we pray especially for David and for Bronwyn and ask you to help David as he heals and give him the strength that he needs and for Keith and for Aaron as they look ahead to their ordination we just pray there again that you would continue to assure them that they are in your will Lord in your mercy hear our prayer and for our world we pray there are so many areas that are in crisis it seems so difficult to us to know how to pray in a lot of ways and at a lot of times we pray for political stability in the world sometimes it seems so volatile tension is able to spread so quickly that peace can disappear in a moment we pray for the families of those minors who have been killed it is a harsh reality something that comes so suddenly but it's more easily faced with the strength of prayer and support and comfort we pray for them and for the

[39 : 50] Christians in their area that they may be able to help them face this time and for those in our church who are bereaved we ask for strength and comfort and help us each to realize that their needs will go far beyond the funeral time and that they will be hurting and in need for some time to come and for those in our church who are sick we pray we think especially of David and Bronwyn of Ken and Gail Rowena and Rosemary we pray for our troops in Afghanistan and pray that you would strengthen them in the resolve to do their duty and their job and for those in our own lives we pray take a moment to remember them especially Lord in your mercy hear our prayer as we face accusations in our daily lives may we have the grace and courage that

Paul had to be able to defend our faith to you thank you that you will give us the strength and wisdom to know how to speak and that you will encourage us as we do as we face temptations in our lives give us the wisdom to know how to defeat them and to stand firm for what is right as we face ourselves in our own lives help us to see that we are still sinners but now made clean by the blood of Jesus Christ and that we can stand before you by his grace and favor Lord in your mercy hear our prayer and as Isaiah wrote why do you say oh Jacob and speak oh Israel my way is hid from the Lord and my right is disregarded by my God have you not known have you not heard the Lord is the everlasting God the creator of the ends of the earth he does not faint or grow weary his understanding is uncertain he gives power to the faint and to him who has no might he increases strength even youths shall faint and be weary and young men shall fall exhausted but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength they shall mount up with wings like eagles they shall run and not be weary they shall walk and not faint teach his Lord to wait for you amen good morning everybody and wonderful springtime morning it is indeed we want to welcome you here if you're new among us we'd like to know about it and there's a blue card in every pew if you fill it out and leave it at the door as you exit we'd like to get in touch with you and get to know you a bit better please come and join us for coffee and tea in the Trendle Lounge which is immediately behind the church in the church hall and women while you're there having coffee it's time to remember to register for the women's retreat that's happening the weekend after next and so you need to get your names and if you're planning to go registration fills up very quickly tomorrow night

I'd like to remind you it's another evening of keeping company with God at 730 here in the chapel a time for some quiet prayer reflection and meditation and an opportunity to be prayed for if you so desire well I have some disappointing news contrary to what you're reading in the parish life notes our visitors from Malawi will not be with us at least right now there have been some visa difficulties and so the missions committee has regretfully had to decide to postpone their visit we will have to give you further word about when they will be coming we do hope that this will still take place so the plans for the coffee house and the barbecue are all put on hold and in regard to the future dates we'll just have to let you know when we know now is Ewan Wilding here would you like to come please and then David

Aberin also has a word to be as for the I I would like to to the I would like to see is that the
would like to if this came to all this was it was I was quiz this first I could have if the