

Acts 24 – Paul’s Third Defense

This chapter opens and closes with Paul, a prisoner in Caesarea. As we have seen, he was brought here secretly from Jerusalem to elude the Jews who had plotted his murder.

Candidly, Paul had failed in gaining the sympathies of his brethren for the gospel ministry in which he was engaged. I suspect that this was a time of mental depression and discouragement for him, because the Lord came to him in the night to give him encouragement (Act_23:11). He told His faithful servant that he would witness Him in Rome also. The Lord did not promise him that it would be easy. Many trying experiences and hardships were immediately before him. In fact, from here to his final martyrdom there was nothing but peril and danger—actually that had been the pattern since the day he was let down in a basket over the wall at Damascus.

In this chapter we will learn that the high priest Ananias and the elders come down from Jerusalem to accuse Paul before Felix. Paul is accused of sedition, rebellion, and profaning the temple. - McGee

Paul Before Felix at Caesarea

Act 24:1 Now after five days Ananias the high priest came down with the elders and a certain orator named Tertullus. These gave evidence to the governor against Paul.

The accusers didn't waste time. They came down after five days in order to press charges against Paul. They brought with them a man named Tertullus who would act as the prosecuting attorney. He was a clever and well-prepared man. The charge he brought was very well prepared, too. It was brief and to the point. I think he did the best he could with the charges he had. - McGee

Act 24:2-4 And when he was called upon, Tertullus began his accusation, saying: "Seeing that through you we enjoy great peace, and prosperity is being brought to this nation by your foresight, we accept it always and, in all places, most noble Felix, with all thankfulness. Nevertheless, not to be tedious to you any further, I beg you to hear, by your courtesy, a few words from us.

Tertullus opened the case for the prosecution by showering the governor with flattery. Of course, there was a measure of truth to what he said. Felix had maintained rule and order by suppressing riots and insurrections. But Tertullus' words went beyond a mere acknowledgment of that fact, in an obvious effort to ingratiate his cause with the governor. – Believers’ Bible Commentary

Act 24:5-8 For we have found this man a plague, a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. He even tried to profane the temple, and we seized him, and wanted to judge him according to our law. But the commander Lysias came by and with great violence took him out of our hands, commanding his accusers to come to you. By examining him yourself you may ascertain all these things of which we accuse him."

He then proceeded to specify four distinct charges against the Apostle Paul:

1. He was a plague, that is, a pest or a nuisance.
2. He was a creator of revolt among all the Jews.
3. He was a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.
4. He tried to profane the temple. – Believers’ Bible Commentary

Act 24:9-11 And the Jews also assented, maintaining that these things were so. Then Paul, after the governor had nodded to him to speak, answered: "Inasmuch as I know that you have been for many years a judge of this nation,

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I do the more cheerfully answer for myself, because you may ascertain that it is no more than twelve days since I went up to Jerusalem to worship.

After Tertullus had expressed confidence in Felix's ability to determine the accuracy of the charges against Paul, the Jews who were present added their voice in support of Tertullus' charges.

Paul, in response to a nod from the governor, rose to his own defense. First, he expressed satisfaction at being permitted to appear before a man who, because of many years of experience, had familiarity with the customs and manners of the Jewish people. This might sound like flattery, but actually it was merely a courteous statement of the truth.

The apostle then answered the charges that were made against him, one by one.

As to his being a public nuisance, he replied that only twelve days had passed since he went up to Jerusalem, and that his purpose in going was to worship, not to cause a disturbance. – Believers’ Bible Commentary

Act 24:12-13 And they neither found me in the temple disputing with anyone nor inciting the crowd, either in the synagogues or in the city. Nor can they prove the things of which they now accuse me.

Next, he denied the charge that he incited the Jews to rebel. At no time, either in the temple, ... the synagogues or in the city, had he disputed with the people or attempted to stir them up. These were the facts, and no one could disprove them. – Believers’ Bible Commentary

Act 24:14 But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets.

In substance he says, “I am in agreement with my nation. Only I must confess that the way in which I worship God is to them heresy.” But Paul makes it clear that the way he worships is according to the message to the fathers, that is, the Old Testament. - McGee

Act 24:15-16 I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust. This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men.

Paul did not deny the third charge, namely, that he was a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. But what he did say was that in this capacity he served the God of the Jews, believing all things which are written in the OT. He shared the expectation of all orthodox Jews, especially the Pharisees, that there would be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust. In the light of that coming resurrection, he sought to preserve an unclouded relationship with the Lord and with his fellow men at all times.

Act 24:17-19 "Now after many years I came to bring alms and offerings to my nation, in the midst of which some Jews from Asia found me purified in the temple, neither with a mob nor with tumult. They ought to have been here before you to object if they had anything against me.

Far from stirring the Jews up to insurrection, Paul had come to Jerusalem to bring alms to the Jewish people. He was referring, of course, to the collection from the churches of Macedonia and Achaia, earmarked for the needy Hebrew Christian saints in Jerusalem.

With regard to the fourth charge, namely, that he had profaned the temple, Paul made this reply: While he was in the act of bringing offerings to the temple, in the performance of a Jewish vow, certain Jews from Asia found him and accused him of taking unclean Gentiles into the temple. This, of course, was not true. The apostle was alone at the time and had been purified from ceremonial defilement. These accusing Jews from Asia who caused the riot against

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him in Jerusalem ought to have come to Caesarea to accuse him, if they had anything against him. – Believers’ Bible Commentary

The real accusers, if there were any at all, are not even present. The charge that Tertullus makes is that Paul had been stirring up people in the temple. Why don't the people who were being stirred up testify against Paul? They aren't there, and Paul calls attention to it. - McGee

Act 24:20-21 Or else let those who are here themselves say if they found any wrongdoing in me while I stood before the council, unless it is for this one statement which I cried out, standing among them, 'Concerning the resurrection of the dead I am being judged by you this day.' "

“Let them tell you about my appearance before the Sanhedrin. Did they find that I had done anything evil? Let them give testimony about that.”

He tells Felix again that the real issue is the Resurrection. The Resurrection is the very heart of the gospel message. Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised again on the third day. In fact, I think of Christianity as an arch supported by two pillars. One pillar is the death of Christ, and the other pillar is the resurrection of Christ. Without one or the other the arch would fall. - McGee

Paul Kept in Custody

Act 24:22 But when Felix heard these things, having more accurate knowledge of the Way, he adjourned the proceedings and said, "When Lysias the commander comes down, I will make a decision on your case."

Felix had been hearing about “that way”; he knew the death and resurrection of Christ was being preached. He realized that Paul was the expert, that Paul was the man who could tell him all about it. So, he deferred the Jews because he wanted to have another hearing with Paul about this matter. He told the Jews he would wait until Lysias could come down, and then he could get the real story about what had happened to Paul. Apparently, he could make no decision from the contradictory testimony that was offered here. Tertullus was making certain accusations. Paul said the real issue was the Resurrection. So, he defers judgment. - McGee

Act 24:23 So he commanded the centurion to keep Paul and to let him have liberty and told him not to forbid any of his friends to provide for or visit him.

Actually, Felix should have freed Paul. However, he was a politician, an astute politician. He does give Paul a great deal of liberty while still keeping him a prisoner. - McGee

Act 24:24-25 And after some days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, "Go away for now; when I have a convenient time, I will call for you."

A sinner will never have “a convenient season” to hear the gospel.

This man Felix already knew something about the gospel, or “the Way,” which is synonymous with what we today call Christianity or the Christian faith. I personally would like to see the name “the Way” restored because Christianity, as it is used today, is a most abused word and has lost its real meaning.

I heard a man, actually a good preacher, say the other day that we live in a Christian nation. My friend, we don't live in a Christian nation! This country is not Christian by any stretch of the imagination. We have a lot of church members, but the number of real Christians composes a small minority today.

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Felix called Paul in to explain to him the gospel which had induced this entire situation. He called Paul in “and heard him concerning the faith in Christ.” Some Bible teachers caption this section “Paul’s Defense Before Felix.” I disagree with that. Paul was not defending himself here. What he was doing in this second appearance before Felix was witnessing to him, trying to win this man for Christ.

The scriptural record does not present this man Felix in the bad light that secular history does. I would like you to know what a rascal he really was. To know the man, we must turn to the record of that day. Felix was a freed slave who through cruelty and brutality had forged to the front. He was a man given to pleasure and licentiousness. By the way, his very name means “pleasure.” The Roman historian, Tacitus, says this concerning him: “Through all cruelty and licentiousness he exercised the authority of a king with the spirit of a slave.” This was the man into whose hands Paul was placed. Yet Scripture does not condemn him.

His wife Drusilla sat there alongside him. Again, secular history turns the spotlight on her for us. She was a daughter of Herod Agrippa I. Her father killed the apostle James—we have already seen that in Act_12:1-2. The great uncle of this woman had slain John the Baptist. Her great grandfather tried to kill the Lord Jesus Christ.

These couple of rascals, Felix and Drusilla, are in an exalted position. They probably would never have attended a church in which the gospel was preached, nor would they have gone to hear Paul the apostle if he had come to town to preach. Yet here are these two who have this great opportunity given to them under the most favorable circumstances. They have a private interview with the greatest preacher of the grace of God that the world has ever known. God gives them a private sermon. Their palace becomes a church and their thrones become almost a mourner’s bench. Oh, the wonder of the grace of God to give these two a chance! The hour of salvation struck for them. The door of the kingdom was opened, and they had their opportunity to enter. This is in fulfillment of the verse in the second psalm: “Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth” (Psa_2:10). It appears that they listened to Paul with a great deal of interest. I think Felix would have liked to have made a decision for Christ. But he didn’t make that decision. He wanted to wait for a convenient season. My friend, the sinner will never have a convenient season to hear the gospel. Man does not set the time; God does.

Paul reasoned with him of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come. This makes a very good sermon, by the way. Righteousness here is, I think, the righteousness of the Law, which man cannot attain. In other words, the Law reveals that man is a sinner, and he cannot even present a legal righteousness that would be acceptable to God. A sinner must have a standing of legal righteousness before God, and he cannot provide it for himself. So, God provides it for him in Christ Jesus. That is the “robe” of righteousness which comes down like a garment over those who put their trust in Christ. That is the righteousness “Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all of them that believe: for there is no difference” (Rom_3:22). Paul reasoned with this man about the righteousness of the Law which he could not meet and the righteousness which Christ provides the sinner who puts his trust in Him. Then Paul talked of temperance, which is self-control. Felix was a man mastered by passion and cruelty. These two, Felix and Drusilla, great sinners, living in sin, did not know what real freedom was. Then Paul spoke about the judgment to come, which is the final judgment at the Great White Throne of Rev_20:11-15.

Friend, today your sins are either on you or they are on Christ. If your sins are on Christ, if you have put your trust in Him, then He paid the penalty for your sins over nineteen hundred years ago. They do not lie ahead of you for judgment in the future. But if your sins today are still on you, then there is yet a judgment to come. People don’t like to hear about judgment to come.

Felix and Drusilla did not like to hear about it either. But if your sins are not on Christ, that is, if you have not trusted Him as your Savior, then you are going to come up for judgment. You can close this book right now, but that doesn’t alter a thing. You cannot escape the fact that you are coming up for judgment.

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Very few preachers touch on this subject. Those who still teach the Bible are the only ones who mention it at all, and most preachers soft-pedal it. I received a letter from a college professor in Virginia who wrote, “I listened to you, and I was about ready to tune you out when I found out you were a hellfire and damnation preacher. But I noticed that you didn’t handle it in a crude way, and then I noticed that you did offer salvation; so, I continued to listen to you.” Hell-fire and damnation is a pretty good subject if it is used to lead one to Christ, friend. But it should never be used alone without the message of salvation which we have in Christ Jesus.

It is interesting to observe Felix here. When Paul had to appear before Felix, Ananias the high priest, the elders, and the great orator Tertullus came to bring their charges against him. Felix could immediately see that they had no real charge. He should have let Paul go free. But Felix was most of all a politician and did not want to antagonize the Jews. He did not do what was right, but did what was politically expedient. Then Felix had this private interview with Paul, and Paul apparently really touched him. Yet he delayed his decision and postponed the day.

It has been proven out in the history of the human family for nineteen hundred years that folk can keep postponing making a decision for Christ until they come to the place where they cannot make a decision for Him at all. That is the reason that most decisions for Christ are made by young people—we ought to try to reach young people for Christ. Also, this is the reason a person need not think that because he is getting older, he is becoming smarter. Older people just become more hardened to the gospel. Years ago, I heard the late Dr. George Truett, a great prince of the pulpit in Dallas, Texas, tell an incident that illustrates this fact. It was at the celebration of his fiftieth anniversary that a lawyer friend, who was not a Christian, came to him. He said, “George, you and I came here to Dallas at the same time. You were a young preacher, and I was a young lawyer. I must confess that when I first heard you, I was moved a great deal by your sermons. Very frankly, there were nights when I couldn’t sleep. As the years wore on, the day came when I could listen to you and enjoy hearing you. Your message didn’t disturb me at all. And you’re a much greater preacher today than you were at the beginning.” The lawyer chuckled about it. He didn’t realize how tragic it was. He didn’t realize the place to which he had actually come. “Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee,” said Felix. That time never came for Felix. That time never came for the lawyer in Dallas. That time does not come for a great many people who postpone receiving Christ. - McGee

Act 24:26-27 Meanwhile he also hoped that money would be given him by Paul, that he might release him. Therefore, he sent for him more often and conversed with him. But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound.

He was a clever politician and also a crook, by the way. He hoped that he would be bribed and then he would let Paul go free.

Felix played politics to the very end. He left Paul in prison. Again, we say that Roman justice was no better than the men who executed it. Either Paul was guilty, or he was not guilty. If guilty of treason, he should have been put to death. If not guilty, he should have been freed. One or the other should have been done. Under no circumstances should he have been left in prison for two years. - McGee