

“PAUL’S TRIAL BEFORE FELIX.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Texts for the Sermon: Acts 24:1-21

Introduction.

On the stage before us are a politician, Antonius Felix, the Roman governor of Judea and a prisoner by the name of Paul. Who does history most remember?

If it weren't for this single story in Acts 24 we would know nothing of Felix from Scripture. Yet his prisoner will go down as one of the greatest influences in the history of the world. Such is the way of God who uses what is weak and foolish to shame the strong and wise in the world.

The fulness of this narrative reminds us of the importance of this story in the life of Paul and in the advance of the truth of the Gospel and its spread all the way to Rome. Luke is showing us the humble means God uses to spread His truth about Jesus.

What happens when the Gospel is put on trial? And consider this, the Gospel is put on trial everyday in our world and even in our own hearts. How am I living? Who am I living for? What do we most trust, politics, man-made and man-centered religion, works righteousness?

What rules your heart, law or grace? Are you in bondage to appearances or are you free from the opinion of man? Is the Gospel good news that sets us free?

Acts 24:1-9, case of prosecution.

Luke paints a court room scene for us, with a judge, lawyers, witnesses and the defense.

The prosecution team comes well prepared and well supported. There is the high priest himself, Ananias. There are venerable elders from the Sanhedrin, and witnesses for the prosecution. And a high-powered and no doubt high-dollar Roman lawyer, skilled in Roman law, Tertullus.

They must have made an impressive showing before the governor. They have stacked the deck, they were superior in numbers and status. Paul was without anyone to come to his defense. And by his own admission he is not eloquent or good with words (I Cor. 2:1-5; II Cor 1:12).

Perhaps you have heard the Shakespearian phrase, “Me thinks the lady doth protest too much.” This looks like a case of that. There is a bad conscience at work here, that they go to these great lengths to try to make their case.

It is a bit like the preacher who puts a note to himself in his sermons notes, “point is weak here, speak louder.”

We can all testify to experiences in discussions or arguments where we can feel ourselves getting defensive because we might be wrong, so be try to double down, talk more or faster or louder.

Why does Luke tell us these details? Remember he is writing to make a case for Christianity, and he wants us to see the Jews really did give it their best shot to discredit Christ and Christianity. They left no stone unturned. They did all they could to disprove and discredit Paul.

Take this to heart, Christianity has withstood the test, the assault of greater numbers, great intellects, fierce opposition.

If you ever feel under attack by a greater numbers or greater intellects, if you feel intimidated by the cultural elites, the experts, the cynics and skeptics, the talking heads who control the microphones, remember this story and take heart, take courage and be without fear. Remember the words of King David in a similar situation when he says,

Psalm 27:1-3 The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
2 When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh,
my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall.
3 Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;
though war arise against me, yet I will be confident.

Though we may feel depressed, discouraged, doubting or defeated, God is with us.

Let's listen as the smooth talking *Tertullus* begins.

He starts with nothing about the case, he starts by flattering Felix for his virtues. In and of itself that is not so terrible, you can thank and praise a judge. What makes this evil is that it is a vicious lie, it is duplicitous, by which I mean dishonest and deceitful.

Felix was the first slave in history to become a governor of a Roman province. The Roman historian, Tacitus, said of Felix, "He wielded his kingly authority with the spirit of a slave, in all cruelty and lust."

Felix was a notoriously wicked scoundrel, a tyrant of the worst kind, murdering people at will. He had killed the high priest Jonathan for standing up to him and disagreeing with him.

Tertullus' words would be like standing before Hitler and praising him for all the great things he had done for Germany. If ever there was a case of calling evil good and good evil this was it.

He calls Felix good and Paul evil. In flattering this evil man, Tertullus was encouraging Felix to do more evil.

Everyone knows how much the chief priests and elders hated Felix, all of this just shows how weak their case was, that they had to go to these extremes to ingratiate themselves to him. It is shameful and embarrassing.

Tertullus brings three charges against Paul, all lies.

First, he said Paul was a political menace, to be lumped in with those troublesome insurrectionist like Barabbas, people who inflamed mobs against Rome. This was meant to get Felix's attention. Palestine was full of agitators, thorns in Rome's flesh.

He wants Felix to see that this man is guilty of stirring up sedition not just in Judea but all over the world. It is true trouble often followed Paul, but he was not the cause.

Remember how King Ahab called Elijah the troubler of Israel (I Kings 18:17). Those who stand for righteousness and truth will be considered troublemakers in the eyes of the world. They will be accused of causing all the problems.

Second, he said Paul was a religious heretic, falsely accusing Paul of being a ringleader of a sect or cult of the Nazarenes.

Third, he accused Paul of sacrilege against God by defiling the Temple. This is a frivolous charge of no concern to the Romans. Tertullus is hoping to get Felix to remand this case back to the Jews in Jerusalem.

After calling several witnesses who join in affirming the charges, the prosecution rests its case.

Acts 24:10-21, Paul's defense.

Have you ever been falsely accused of something? Have you ever had lies spread about you? Has someone ever said that you said or did something you didn't say or do?

What should you do in a situation like that? If you are able there is only one thing to be done. Tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Only by doing that, can you have a clear conscience, no matter what the outcome.

And we would do well to do this in the same manner as Paul. Everything said about him was a lie, grossly unfair, but he replies graciously. Notice his calm and self-control. There is no anger, no hate, no bitterness, no self-pity, no poor me. Nor does he resort to slander or name calling. How does he do that? Is it just his personality? No this is the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

He affirms Felix had been governor over this territory long enough to know the nature of the Jews and how they do their business, so he won't be taken in by their deceptions.

Notice what Paul says about Felix is all true, as opposed to what Tertullus had said. From the beginning he speaks only what is true. Paul opposes their lies with the truth.

He answers the three charges in order.

First, concerning stirring up sedition (11-13), he had only been in Jerusalem twelve days ago, a recent enough time ascertain the truth of their claims, and too short of time start an insurrection.

He was not disputing with anyone in the temple or synagogues or on the streets. He was being falsely and unjustly accused of things for which there was no evidence, they can't be proved.

Second, concerning being a heretic (14-16), he confesses to being a part of The Way. But far from being heresy, Paul worships the God of their fathers and believes the same Law and the Prophets, the OT.

“I worship the God of our fathers just like all of these Jews, I am no different.” He was not a sectarian or divisive, his conscience as clear before God and man.

Notice the marks of a Christian (14). He plainly, clearly confesses he is a follower of the Way, he is a Jesus follower, he is a man of faith. I confess. Then he says I worship God. Then he says I believe the Bible.

Paul was not ashamed to confess his faith, worship God and believe His Word, His Gospel.

This is a godly man, fearlessly defending his faith and boldly declaring it. Because of this he has hope and a clear conscience. Are we willing to be that clear, that bold, that faithful, that fearless? Can we say with Paul as we will sing at the end, “I know whom I have believed”?

Matthew 10:32-33 Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

Third, concerning the charge of sacrilege in the Temple (17-21), Paul reminds them that he had come to Jerusalem only to do good, to bring alms, and to make purification connected with a Nazarite vow. He was not profaning the very place he came to honor as a worshiper of God

Paul plainly proves he is not guilty of any crime or wrongdoing.

In the same way, all charges against the validity, historicity, truth, verifiability of Christianity are all false. Christianity stands up to the strictest scrutiny and hardest tests. Don't be taken in by Satan's lies.

Conclusion.

Why is Paul on trial?

Because there is one charge brought against him that is true. He said it at his defense before the council in Jerusalem and he incriminates himself by saying it again in this trial before Felix.

'It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.'

I said always tell the truth and this is the grandest truth of them all. The resurrection of Jesus validates and proves everything Jesus said and did. Jesus is alive. Christ is risen.

And Paul is further proof. Why does Paul endure everything he endures?

Why does Paul put up with all this nonsense? Why does he endure this constant harassment? The "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger (II Cor. 6:4-5). Why does he suffer the accusations, lies, slander, verbal abuse, hate speech, physical abuse, being hounded and attacked everywhere he goes?

Why? What would any normal man do in those circumstances? What would we do?

You know the line when you are hitting yourself on the head with a hammer, it feels good when you stop. Why doesn't Paul just stop the pain, stop the abuse?

Paul answers that question with one sentence:

'It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.'

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and the hope of the resurrection from the dead for all followers of Jesus at His second coming is the reason for Paul's endurance and not just his endurance, but his endurance with great joy. His hope in the resurrection is why he can sing in prison, why he can leave one synagogue in one city and go into the synagogue in the next city.

The resurrection completely transformed Paul's life and direction and purpose in life. When he encountered the resurrected Jesus in person on the road to Damascus, it radically changed him to the point that he could look at all his suffering in a completely different light.

Romans 8:18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

II Corinthians 4:17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

The reason we can know Paul is telling the truth about Jesus is because no man would ever suffer what he suffered for a lie. At some point he would crack, Paul never does.

What about us? What are we suffering, what are we being called to endure, what hardships are you facing right now, what difficulties have you been walking through for weeks, months, maybe even years?

How do we keep going? What strengthens our faith and our hope?

It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead to eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ that I get up each day, that I face each days challenges, that I not give up, that I not lose my faith, that I fight against Satan's constant assaults and lies and temptations.

It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead, when I fail, fall, sin, I don't stay down, but I confess and repent believing in the forgiveness of my sins and in the hope of the resurrection when I will sin no more.

It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead, that I endure difficult people, mean people, unkind people, critical people, even hateful abusive people, and not just endure them but love them even as Jesus and Paul loved those who persecuted them, being able to say, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing."

It is with respect to the resurrection that I give and serve and help others, and use my time, talents and treasures for the sake of the Body of Jesus Christ and seek to build His kingdom and advance His glorious Gospel.

It is with respect to the resurrection I orient my entire life and find purpose and meaning. What is your purpose in life? What gives your life meaning? In all you say and do, seek opportunities to bear witness to the resurrection of the dead to eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 12:1-2 Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

I Peter 4:13 Rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

The secret to your joy in this life is the same as for Jesus and Paul. The secret to your joy in the hardship of this life is the sovereignty and supremacy of Jesus Christ who has gained for us as the free gift the resurrection of the dead to eternal life through believing in Jesus Christ and following Him.