

M. Paul's Trial Before Felix (23:33-24:27)

Jesus' purpose for Paul included his testifying to Him in Rome, and toward that end He'd provided a remarkable providential deliverance for His servant. In an ironic twist – but one that highlighted a divinely ordained development in the salvation history, pagan Gentiles were intervening on the Lord's behalf against the opposition posed by the historical sons of the covenant. Jerusalem's resolute rejection of its King and Deliverer was prophetic; the kingdom of God was indeed being taken from its disobedient heirs and being given to those who would bear its fruit (cf. Matthew 8:5-12, 21:23-24 with Luke 13:22-30).

Paul was delivered to the procurator Felix along with the Roman commander's letter of explanation, and when the governor inquired further of him he determined to hold Paul in custody until his case could be heard. Lysias' letter noted that he had informed the Jews in Jerusalem of what he'd done with Paul and their need to present their charges against him to Felix (23:30), and five days later they arrived in Caesarea for that very purpose. Because the venue was to be a Roman civil court rather than the Sanhedrin, Paul's accusers brought a lawyer whom they believed could best make their case and prevail in that Gentile setting.

Luke is silent as to whether Felix interviewed Paul during the days leading up to his trial, and so no one can say exactly what he understood about the situation that now confronted him. What is clear is that he was aware that the accusations against Paul pertained to alleged violations of the Jewish law (23:28-29). The Jews, however, were absolutely determined to win Felix over and secure Paul's release to them, and that in itself indicates how highly they regarded Tertullus' legal capabilities and competence. Luke's record of Tertullus' presentation shows that the Jews' confidence wasn't misplaced; he was indeed a skilled lawyer. It also shows that, even as human nature hasn't changed in the last two millennia, neither has the practice of courtroom law: Wealth, power, agendas and manipulation – not truth and justice – are still lords of the court.

1. In the real world, justice isn't blind and judges and juries are quite human. Winning over those who will pass judgment is therefore a normal part of bringing a legal case. In this setting, judgment rested with Felix himself, and so Tertullus began by attempting to sway the governor through disingenuous flattery (24:2-4). Respectful salutations were proper and expected when appearing before dignitaries, but Tertullus went beyond that by baldly misrepresenting Felix's actions as Judea's procurator. Judea had indeed "attained much peace" through Felix, but not because he was a wise and benevolent reformer. Under his rule Judea was relatively free of social and political unrest, but only because Felix was a cruel tyrant who quickly and mercilessly crushed all opponents and dissidents.

Being a good courtroom lawyer, Tertullus left nothing to chance; every statement in the structure and flow of his argument was carefully crafted for maximum effectiveness toward realizing his goal. So it was with the way he articulated the Jews' charges against Paul. Rather than focusing on Paul's alleged violation of Jewish law – which was of little import to the Roman ruler, Tertullus framed the charges in terms of Paul stirring up dissension among the Jews throughout the provinces. He knew that Felix would ignore this sort of charge only at the peril of his own life (cf. 19:23-40 with John 19:1-16).

Tertullus presented Paul as a troublemaker whose activities threatened to incite insurrection among the provincial populaces. This was something Caesar could not and would not tolerate; the security of his empire depended upon order and stability being maintained over a vast geographical realm comprised of countless distinct people groups, cultures, national allegiances, etc. Keeping the peace throughout the Roman Empire was no small feat – one which Rome would eventually not be able to maintain.

Felix needed to understand that Paul was a dangerous dissenter, but all the more so because he was a “*ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes*” (24:5). The imperial authority had already tasted the bitterness of Jewish-Christian conflict, and that in its own backyard. It had been so unbearable that Emperor Claudius had felt compelled to remove all Jews (and probably Christians, who were viewed as a Jewish sect) from Rome several years earlier (ref. 18:1-2). Felix was doubtless aware of the trouble and expense Rome had incurred over this Nazarene issue, and Tertullus made sure that he put a human face on that thorn – the face of the man standing trial that day.

The final piece of Tertullus’ strategy was to paint his Jewish clients as just men whose actions honored Rome’s directives and interests: When the Jews found Paul stirring up trouble in Jerusalem they had attempted to deal with him themselves according to their own law. And had they been allowed to do so, the Roman authorities – and now Felix himself – would never have had to endure this bothersome situation; the only reason for the nuisance of the present proceeding was Lysias’ interference in a matter outside his rightful jurisdiction. (Tertullus was indirectly reminding Felix of Rome’s policy of allowing the Jews wide latitude in dealing with matters involving their own law and religion; cf. John 18:33-19:8.) Lysias had clearly erred and his error had resulted in this unfortunate outcome. However, the matter could yet be easily resolved and Felix relieved of his undue burden: Tertullus’ clients remained ready and willing to fulfill their legal and moral responsibility to Rome and Judea by returning Paul to Jerusalem to be tried and justly sentenced as he ought to have been from the start.

When Tertullus completed his argument, the high priest and elders joined their voices to his, affirming to Felix that the things he’d stated were precisely according to fact. Luke doesn’t indicate the protocol for allowing their corroborating testimony, but one thing is certain; the violent uproar and cacophony of voices that previously filled the Sanhedrin didn’t reappear that day in Caesarea. Felix would never have tolerated such disrespectful behavior; more importantly from the Jews’ vantage point, any sort of outburst or demonstration of disorder would only serve to undermine their efforts to win over the governor and secure a favorable verdict.

2. Felix let the prosecution and its witnesses fully state their case and then he nodded to the accused to make his own defense (24:10-21). Unlike the Jews, Paul had no skilled lawyer advocating on his behalf; he had a far greater advocate in the truth. Thus he gave his defense by refuting, in order, each of the three charges leveled against him. He had done none of the things he was accused of, and none of those present could demonstrate that he had. Neither were they able to present the alleged eye-witnesses whose outcry on the temple grounds provoked Paul’s arrest in the first place (cf. 24:17-19 with 21:27-28).

Paul declared himself innocent of all charges, including the assertion that he was a ringleader of the Nazarene sect. He freely admitted, however, that he was an adherent to the Way; if that's what Tertullus was referring to, then Paul was guilty as charged. He was indeed a follower of Jesus the Nazarene, but this didn't make him an agitator. More importantly, it didn't show him to be a dissenter from the Law or the Jewish Scriptures; *quite the contrary, Paul was guilty only of believing and promoting all that the Law and Prophets revealed and promised*. What his accusers ascribed to themselves Paul claimed as his own. However, it wasn't his devout Pharisaism, but his adherence to the Way that showed him to be a faithful servant of God and of His people (24:14-16).

Paul was not a follower of some aberrant sect; he embraced the same God, same Scriptures and same eschatological hope his accusers and their forefathers did. In a word, he was guilty only of promoting Yahweh's word of hope to Israel – and through Israel to the world – that He has appointed a day of judgment and restoration of all things.

- The Sanhedrin rulers present in that room acknowledged the scriptural promise of a day of reckoning when God was going to resurrect the righteous and wicked and bring the whole human race into judgment (24:14-15; cf. Daniel 12:1-4 with John 5:26-29 and Matthew 25:31-46).
- What they failed to recognize is that the hope of resurrection at the end of the age now stood on a “more sure word” than that of Israel's prophets: God's promised day of resurrection and final reckoning will judge and winnow men according to what they've done with the resurrected and enthroned Messiah. More narrowly, the resurrection life upon which the Pharisees (and other Jews) had set their hope has its legitimate ground in the resurrection life of Jesus of Nazareth; *it is precisely and solely because He is “the resurrection and the life” that men can look with confidence to their own future resurrection to life* (John 11:20-27).

Paul's accusers didn't recognize that the hope of future resurrection stands upon the fact of *present* resurrection – first and foremost, Jesus' own resurrection, but also that of all those who share in His resurrection life. *A person's assurance that he will be raised to life on the last day resides in the fact that he has already been raised*. Faithful obedience to Torah doesn't afford that assurance; sharing in Jesus' resurrection life does. Indeed, a resurrection did await Paul's accusers, but not the sort they hoped in. On that great day, and confronted with their rejection and opposition of Israel's Lord and King, they would find their resurrection hope dashed by His pronouncement of condemnation.

Paul's only crime was believing the Scriptures and clinging to the hope they proclaim – the hope his accusers also embraced. The difference between him and them lay in how each conceived this hope, its referents and its relationship to the messianic person and work. At one time Paul had stood in solidarity with his Pharisee counterparts, but divine intervention changed that. The hope of resurrection took on new meaning as Paul now discerned it to be bound up in Jesus Christ. Resurrection to life isn't Yahweh's reward to Jews and proselytes who remain faithful to the Law, but His pledge to the whole creation as it finds life in union with the Living One (Ephesians 1:9-10; Colossians 1:19-20).

3. Lysias had found himself perplexed when confronted with Paul and the Jews' accusations against him. He was a foreigner to Palestine and had little or no understanding of either the Jewish religion or this new quasi-Jewish sect; all he could surmise from his inquiry was that the dispute involved a disagreement regarding the Jews' religious laws.

Felix, on the other hand, was accurately informed concerning the Way (24:22a), and that may have been the reason Lysias decided to send Paul to him and have him sort things out. More likely, he was merely following protocol for moving issues up the chain of command. Certainly Luke's account gives no indication that Felix was surprised by the arrival of a prisoner with Lysias' letter of explanation. Whatever the case, (and however it was that Felix became so familiar with the Way – ref. 24:24), the Lord providentially saw to it that Paul's defense came before a man who was familiar with Jesus Christ and the gospel His disciples were promoting. At least two important outcomes resulted from this providential oversight:

- First, the misrepresentation and guile of Paul's accusers were not able to prevail. However much Felix's heart was drawn in by Tertullus' smooth and flattering words, he wasn't convinced by the Jews' charges. Their accusations rang hollow, and Felix's doubts about them would have only been heightened by Paul's rebuttal and explanation of his message and practice as a Christian.

The extent to which Felix understood Jesus' person and work and how they correlate with Judaism and the Hebrew scriptures is a matter of speculation. He clearly didn't have the insight that Paul did, but he knew enough to be suspicious that the Jews' charges fell short of the truth. Thus Felix decided to withhold judgment until he could directly inquire of Lysias (24:22b) – though that seemingly noble action belied his true, self-serving design (cf. 24:17, 24-26).

- The second outcome was that Felix – a man who already was familiar with the Way and its gospel – was afforded the great privilege of hearing a more thorough “evangel.” And not just from any Christian, but from the mouth of the apostle who arguably understood the Christ event and its import and implications better than any man living at that time. For the span of two years Felix had Paul available to him as his private tutor, yet ultimately to no avail (24:26-27).

Felix is a case study in divine privilege spurned. Set free by the emperor Claudius and appointed procurator of Judea as a favor to his brother, Felix was providentially given rule over the Roman province that was “ground zero” for the emerging Christian faith. Beyond that indirect exposure, the Lord saw to it that he was personally instructed by His apostle to the Gentiles. Felix heard enough of God's accomplishment and ultimate purpose for the world to become frightened for his own estate, and yet that concern failed to yield true repentance (2 Corinthians 7:1-10). Instead, and consistent with his recorded legacy as an ignoble, self-serving man whose rule epitomized the “procedure of the king,” Felix seized upon this divine privilege as an opportunity for earthly gain (24:25-26). Though his motives differed from those who came to him seeking to extinguish Paul's gospel, Felix also “trampled under foot the Son of God”; and like them, his latter state was worse than the first (cf. Hebrews 10:26-31; Matthew 12:38-45; Luke 11:23-26).