

Paul's Defence Before Felix

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, November 2nd. My name is Kent Dixon and it is my joy to be the pastor here.! So this morning we're continuing in our ongoing sermon series, Acts to All the World.

And guess what? Three left. Bum, bum, bum. Today, next Sunday, and the Sunday after that. And so we've been digging through the history of the early church together. We've been trying to see what we can understand and learn from the people, places, and events that we read about in Acts.

So we're skipping ahead a bit in the text I mentioned a few weeks ago, months, years, whatever it is now, it's all a blur. But I mentioned, I have mentioned in the past that we need to jump ahead periodically.

So this is one of those times. So Acts 23, verses 11 to 35, I'll just give us a quick summary of that section. So last week we talked about Paul appearing before the Sanhedrin, and you probably remember that, I hope.

[1 : 07] So then he was taken back to the barracks by Roman soldiers, and more than 40 Jewish men at that time made a serious pact to not eat or drink until they had killed Paul.

It's heavy, right? The men petitioned the Sanhedrin to try and get Paul, bring him back from the barracks under false pretenses, so that they could get to him and kill him in the process.

So somehow, Paul's nephew, if you're a nephew, I hope you're a good one like this, Paul's nephew caught wind of this plot. He let his uncle know, went to the barracks to let him know, what a great nephew, right?

You're about to be killed, Uncle Paul. So fortunately, the Roman commander that we've been talking about over the past few weeks, we'll be talking about him again today, He took this warning seriously.

He swore the young man to secrecy, Paul's nephew, and Roman troops relocated Paul from Jerusalem to Caesarea at night.

[2 : 19] So when they arrived in Caesarea, Paul was handed over to the Roman governor, Antonius Felix. And then Paul was kept under guard at Herod's palace. So there's a quick summary of the end of Acts 23.

So we're picking up the story again this morning in Acts 24, verses 1 to 27. So go ahead and turn to that in your Bible, and I'll read it for us as well.

Acts 24, verses 1 to 27. And if you don't have a Bible, there's one in the pew in front of you. Five days later, the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus, and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor.

When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented his case before Felix. We've enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation.

Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude. But in order to not weary you further, I would request that you be kind enough to hear us briefly.

[3 : 34] We've found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect, and even tried to desecrate the temple.

So we seized him. By examining him yourself, you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him. The other Jews joined in the accusation, asserting that these things were true.

When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied, I know that for a number of years, you've been a judge over this nation, so I gladly make my defense. You can easily verify, no more than 12 days ago, I went up to Jerusalem to worship.

My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues, or anywhere else in the city. And they cannot prove to you that the charges they are now making against me.

However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the law and that is written in the prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.

[4 : 52] So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man. After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings.

I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance. But there are some Jews from the province of Asia who ought to be here before you and bring the charges if they have anything against me.

Or these who are here should state what crime they found me in when I stood before the Sanhedrin. Unless it was the one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence, it is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.

Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the way, adjourned the proceedings. When Lysias the commander comes, he said, I will decide your case. He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard, but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs.

Several days later, Felix came with his wife, Drusilla, who is Jewish. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, that's enough for now.

[6 : 17] You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you. At the same time, he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with them.

When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Portius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison.

Our sermon this morning is titled, Paul's Defense Before Felix. So despite being transferred from Jerusalem to Caesarea, Paul faced his similar adversaries, Ananias the high priest, and the Jewish elders from the Sanhedrin, again.

But this time, the reunion would happen in front of this Roman governor, whose name was Antonius Felix. So history tells us Antonius Felix became a procurator of Judea in 52 AD, and he remained in office until 60 AD, when he was recalled by Emperor Nero.

Gee, Pastor Kent, what's a procurator, you ask? Thank you for asking. A procurator was the title of a certain official in ancient Rome.

[7 : 34] This was an official title. And these men were in charge of the financial affairs of a province. Or they sometimes were also the imperial governor of a minor province.

So they had an important role. Ancient historians Tacitus and Josephus paint this particular man, Felix, as a brutal and incompetent politician.

Add a little bit of Roman power and authority to that, and not a great combination, right? In our passage this morning, we learn that Felix seemed to have had many opportunities to sincerely listen to Paul.

But he ultimately failed to make a decision about his case. Or also about Paul's gospel message. So we're going to break all this down together.

First of all, the charges. Well, we learn that the chief priests, Ananias, and the elders arrived from Jerusalem, and they brought this lawyer with them, whose name is Tertullus.

[8 : 40] So they were well prepared, right? They knew what they were doing, and they showed up ready. So Tertullus makes the case against Paul before Felix. And he begins, did you catch it, by praising the Roman official, right?

Stroke someone's ego is often a great way to get started and to get on their good side, unfortunately. So appealing to his vanity and his pride seems like a solid first move in this chess match of sorts.

He wanted to get his attention, and he also wanted to begin to win him over to their side. So then Tertullus lays out the charges against Paul.

I'll just read it again quickly. He makes Paul out to be a troublemaker, right? Says that he stirred up riots and dissension among the Jews all over the world.

There's a big broad brush painting. So maybe that seems like an exaggeration, but keep in mind their understanding of the world was likely much more limited, right?

[9 : 45] So it's not like they had a globe of the world and said this entire thing. Their understanding of the world would have been potentially a little bit more regional. But it's still a big area, right?

And they're ascribing pretty serious charges to this guy. So then he calls Paul a ringleader. It's always nice, right? Of the Nazarene sect.

So he's talking about Christianity. And making a bit of a derogatory comment there. That they're this little sect and we should really ignore them. But he's talking about Christians. So Paul is still being accused.

Did you hear this part? Still being accused of profaning the temple. That's from a long time ago. And they're still bringing this up over and over. So that was the assumption that that Jewish mob had made at one point to suggest that Paul had brought a Gentile into the temple.

Huge no-no. But they were never able to prove it. And yet they keep bringing it up again. Over and over. So we know that the Jews had seized Paul.

[10 : 46] They wanted to judge him according to their law. But it's not likely under those circumstances that Paul would have received a fair trial if he got one at all, right?

We can see that they have predetermined guilt. They're not really interested in a trial. They're willing to speed through to judgment, a.k.a. execution.

So we know that they had already predetermined a death sentence, right? That was what they wanted. They weren't prepared to settle for anything less.

And fortunately, it's weird, right? But we've acknowledged this in the past. Romans to the rescue again, right? They seem like the unlikely helpers in a lot of situations.

But God uses the Romans in really neat ways. So Paul was actually arrested and held captive, remember, at the Antonia Fortress.

[11 : 42] So that was the fortress, again, right adjacent to the temple in Jerusalem. And their sole task was to protect the temple, protect the religious leaders.

So then after Tertullus, that's, yeah, his mom loved him. After Tertullus presents the charges, the other Jews right away, we read, agreed with the accusations, right?

They're not interested. They're also not interested in learning more. They're right with it. They're saying, you got a case against them. We want them dead. Oh, you do too?

Let's get after it. So then Paul is given an opportunity, thankfully, Romans to the rescue, to speak in his own defense. It's an important opportunity.

So Felix mentions, the passage tells us, mentions that he motioned for Paul to speak. And right off the bat, Paul acknowledges, you know, he knows strategy too.

[12 : 41] He acknowledges that Felix has been a judge over the Jewish people for many years. So he's recognizing his authority. He's recognizing his position.

Remember Paul's tendency to be very respectful. So he's showing respect to a person who, A, is in authority over this entire situation. And B, he's recognizing that Felix has done the right thing by not passing judgment before listening to both sides.

Right? Do you see that there as well? Well, so Paul seems more than happy to speak for himself and in his own defense. And as you heard, there's a big chunk of the passage I read for us this morning.

Paul gives a really comprehensive account of the events. First of all, he starts with the fact that it had only been 12 days since he went to Jerusalem to worship. So we've got all these charges, all these crowds, all this antagonism towards Paul, and it's only been 12 days.

Then he counters the assertions of his accusers. Right? When someone has accused you of something and you have evidence that disproves their accusation, you need to raise it.

[13 : 56] So Paul says they had not found him in the temple causing problems. He had not stirred up any crowds, either in the synagogues or more broadly in the city.

Paul concludes this part of his defense in Acts 24, 13, because he says, They can't prove to you the charges they're now making against me. Right?

It's hard to find someone guilty and convict them when the charges are without merit. So Paul is turning these charges on their head by stating that because the charges against him were false, there's no way that this faction from Jerusalem could prove anything against him.

Right? Make sense? So next, Paul begins to state facts about himself. He gives a very clear witness to what he personally believes.

He doesn't hide the fact that he's a follower of Jesus. Right? He's appearing in a court before a Roman official. They're not Christians.

[15 : 05] He's being accused by a huge mob of Jewish religious leaders and other Jews. Not hiding his faith in Christ. He admits it clearly and openly.

He also states that he, though, believes the Jewish scriptures, the law and the prophets. Right? What we refer to as the Old Testament in lots of circumstances.

So we see here what we saw last week again. That Paul declares his personal hope in a bodily resurrection. And in final judgment.

And as we also considered last week, Paul takes this opportunity to make his point about having a clear conscience. Did you hear him say that again? He has a clear conscience before both men and God.

So Paul strategically and systematically addresses and dismisses the charges that have been brought against them. All while weaving in this really powerful gospel message at the same time.

[16 : 09] And he does all of this. Remember, he lost his temper before. He does all of this this time while keeping his cool completely.

And being respectful. Quite an example for us. Right? So Paul continues to present the facts. And then he outlines his calling and ministry.

After being active in ministry for several years, he had come to Jerusalem to bring offerings and other donations. Do you remember we learned that in the past? Bring these donations from churches to the needy church in Jerusalem.

So the Christian community were caring for each other. While the Jews from Asia had found him in the temple, he hadn't done anything wrong there.

He also makes it clear that if this group had had an issue with him, they should be there in person to make the case themselves. Right?

[17 : 09] That makes sense. But they weren't there. Paul concedes, though, that maybe their main issue with them was that he had declared before the Sanhedrin, openly, his belief in a bodily resurrection of the dead.

But then, he says again, if that had been their issue, they had their chance in front of the Sanhedrin, and they didn't say anything. So ultimately, it seems like it's only Paul's statement about the resurrection of the dead that the group who appeared before Felix could reasonably argue.

Any other issues, they either hadn't been there for, hearsay, right? Or they couldn't reasonably argue against Paul, because they weren't true.

So the charges made against Paul by this Jewish lawyer, Tertullus, were based on information from others that they couldn't conclusively prove.

Feels like a real shaky case at this point, doesn't it? So back to Felix. Now, if you remember The Odd Couple, that TV show, every time I read Felix's name, I think of Oscar and Felix.

[18 : 27] But anyway, it's a very limited demographic in this group that will get that, and that's fine. So having heard both sides, though, Felix makes this decision. Here it comes, folks. It's really exciting.

It's dramatic. He decides to wait. So we hear in our passage this morning that Felix was well acquainted with the way.

Maybe you caught that. So he knew. He had some knowledge of Christianity. Possibly he even knew, to some extent, what the followers of Jesus believed. So what was the holdup?

Well, having heard these charges against Paul, and then Paul's defense, and then also being familiar with the Christian movement, why didn't he just give his ruling?

He had all the information. Why didn't he just give his ruling one way or the other? There's two choices, right? So we learn then, maybe you caught this, that Felix sent for Claudius Lysias.

[19 : 35] So he says he's waiting for Lysias to arrive. And Claudius Lysias is the name of the commander of the garrison in Jerusalem. So the man who had kept Paul in the barracks and protected him, this is the man Antonius Felix had sent for.

So for whatever reason, he wanted to wait for this guy to arrive before he rendered his verdict. So while Felix ordered Paul to be kept under guard, we recognize that he was gracious at the same time.

He allowed Paul to have some freedom. So he was still in prison, but he allowed him to have some freedom. He allowed his friends to come and visit, take care of his needs.

So then we learn that several days passed before Felix and his wife Drusilla, who, remember, was Jewish, come back to see Paul. So here's a little historical connection.

Drusilla was the youngest daughter of King Herod Agrippa I. So that made her a Jewish princess from the Herodian family, like the line of Herods, right?

[20 : 43] So Drusilla came from a royal but dysfunctional family. Her father, Herod Agrippa I, was the grandson of Herod the Great.

Herod the Great was the king we read about in the Christmas story. So it's timely that we're, as we're edging towards Christmas, this is, she's related to that line.

And Herod the Great was the one who ordered the slaughter of all baby boys in Jerusalem in an effort to prevent and destroy the Messiah. So historians can really find no legal reason for Drusilla to be present at the hearings.

Why was she there? Maybe she was just curious, right? She knew of Paul, maybe, knew some things about him, maybe knew a bit of his message. And as a Jew, as a royal Jew, she wanted to hear what the story was.

So our passage tells us that Paul spoke to them, Felix and Drusilla, about faith in Christ Jesus. Paul shared the gospel with his judge.

[21 : 52] He probably shared his own faith story, right? Maybe even more broadly, speaking about the gospel and belief. He witnessed to them in the middle of all of this.

I think the Holy Spirit must have been at work in Felix's heart as he listened to Paul talk about righteousness and self-control and the judgment to come.

Because we can recognize that Felix got twitchy, right? He got uncomfortable. We even hear that he was afraid. Maybe convicted.

I think so. Because he asked Paul to stop, right? Paul is in the middle of sharing these things and Felix says, I'm good, stop there. So Felix then delays the whole process again.

He's a man of action, clearly. He's suggesting, though, that he'll summon Paul again at a more convenient time. What else has he got to do? Really?

[22 : 55] But he puts it off again. So maybe you know from your own story, from your own circumstances, go ahead and try to put the Holy Spirit off.

He will wait for you. My dad always loved that the Holy Spirit was referred to as a preacher once as the hound of heaven.

My dad thought that was such a powerful image that the Holy Spirit will chase you down. He will not let you go. So Felix also seems to have been motivated by greed.

Greed. There's a shocker, right? Seems to be a character flaw that would fit in with some of the others. Because we read that Paul was waiting for him to bribe, or he was waiting for Paul to bribe him, right?

I'm not going to render judgment today unless you had some drachma for me, perhaps. Maybe he wanted him to let him go.

[24 : 02] Maybe he wanted him to give him a more lenient sentence. That's what he was waiting for Paul to ask for. But whatever the reason was, this created an opportunity for Paul to speak with Felix frequently.

Whenever Felix summoned him, Paul met with him and they talked. And this carried on, the passage tells us, for two years.

Some good chats, I think, probably. So finally, Antonius Felix was succeeded by a man named Portius Festus. And as a favor to the Jews, we read, Felix left Paul in prison.

Yeah, I've been called somewhere else, but you just wait here. So it's sad to me to consider that the personal character of this man, Antonius Felix, both immoral and seemingly incompetent, at least to some extent, he had more than enough opportunity to learn the truth, both of Paul's message of salvation in Jesus and also to adopt it into his own life.

But he kept putting it off. Ultimately, Felix's procrastination just led to his own downfall. So what can we learn from these events we've considered this morning?

[25 : 33] Are you a procrastinator? I don't know. Let me get back to you. Don't let procrastination or stubbornness or sinful choices get in the way of what God is looking to do in and through you.

God, my friends, wants to give you his best. So listen, trust, and respond.

Have you submitted to God? Have you asked him to show you everything that you need to confess in your life? Or the way he needs you to trust him right now?

Do you take time alone with God? God doesn't have to be in your closet in the dark, kneeling on the floor. I pray to God a lot of times in the car.

I don't close my eyes. I pray a lot of times out loud to God in my car. Do you ask him to speak to you and then stop talking and listen?

[26 : 51] Are you pushing for something to happen without asking God if it's his will or yours? Or are you just constantly putting these things off for another time?

When you think that will be more convenient for you, he will wait. Friends, we do not know how much time any of us have left.

Please, please do not waste the time that God has given you. And really, most of all, do not be afraid of what is unknown to you because it is all known and all too familiar to God.

Trust him. Let go and step forward into his waiting and loving arms. Amen.