

The ongoing trials of Paul and his opponents

Littlebourne - 19th November 2023 - Acts 25:1-12

It's roughly the year 59 or 60 AD. Last week we saw Paul stay in the custody of Felix, Procurator of Judea. The last couple of verses tell us that Paul was in prison under Felix for two years, and then after that Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, who we meet this week.

Felix left Paul in prison, apparently desiring to do the Jews a favour - he keeps him there, but also doesn't give the Jews exactly what they want, which is a conviction and an execution. Now, one of the first things we see Festus do is meet the Jews and see what mess he's inherited.

v1

Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea.

We don't know a lot about Festus. Josephus said that he was better than Felix and better than Albinus, who followed. He was less of a procrastinator - as we'll see in this passage - but other than that, not much is known of him. He apparently died after only two years in office.

Only three days in to his arrival and taking over from Felix, Festus immediately realises that the thing to do is to go see the Jewish leadership. He recognises that many of the problems and upheaval in the region is due to this group - a group that got some special privileges from the Romans, in terms of their religious freedom, but who had hostility toward Roman rule.

Romans knew their history - they knew of the Maccabean rebellion that ousted the previous conquerors of the Jews in that area. They know that Jews can be dangerous to them. This is a part of the reason that when the Jews next revolt and attempt to overthrow the Romans in the years running up to AD 70, the Romans take no prisoners and send several large legions in to make sure they have the advantage.

It was probably fairly clear that there were undercurrents of rebellion, which we know kicked off in earnest in 66 AD. In a world where news travelled a bit slower, you can imagine that the run up to a revolution took a little longer too, and Festus is probably seeing the signs of this. He needs to go and see the situation himself - whether to cool things down, or to impose his authority, he wouldn't have been wise to let things fester.

v2-5

2 And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, 3 asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. 4 Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. 5 “So,” said he, “let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him.”

Festus gets to Jerusalem and it's a familiar story - the leadership, the Sanhedrin, are still trying to kill Paul. It's been two years, Paul has been locked away out of their sight for a long time, but still, the thing that they talk to the new Procurator about is this. They just can't abide him living.

Their plan is to ambush Paul and kill him as he is taken to Jerusalem for them.

The Jew's ask for a favour - they don't ask for justice, or for a fair trial, because they probably realise what that would mean - Paul's release. They ask for a favour to them, knowing that they can use such a favour to their advantage. If Paul is ambushed and killed, they rid themselves of Paul, but they also gain some leverage over the new Roman leader, who would then be responsible for the death in custody of a Roman citizen, and they might even admit he was an innocent Roman citizen, after he was dead.

Festus might have wanted to just let Paul go, we don't know, but he would be trying to ingratiate himself a little and get some ground with the Jews. He tells them to come to Ceasarea instead - where Paul is. We don't know if Festus was aware of the full circumstances behind Paul's imprisonment - whether he knew that Paul was in Ceasarea because of an attempt on his life - but in doing things like this, Paul is again saved from the possibility of ambush.

v6-8

6 After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. 7 When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove. 8 Paul argued in his defense, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense."

Again, it's a familiar story - the Jews accuse Paul, but can't prove their case. We've seen them do this twice already, and got nowhere, but they are clearly so motivated against him that they keep on trying.

Paul's defence is also much the same as before - that he's not done anything that they can prove. There's nothing he has done that is against the law - certainly nothing related to the charges.

v9-

9 But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?" 10 But Paul said, "I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. 11 If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar." 12 Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, "To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go."

Festus, who again is trying to butter up the Jews, suggests that he and Paul go back to Jerusalem to sort this out. Paul probably understands that this is not a good idea - that's a step backward.

Paul tells Festus again that he has done no wrong - it seems none of the Romans can ever really disagree about this. Paul also maybe does some ingratiating of his own - he makes clear that he ought to be tried by the Romans rather than the Jews, even though the charges relate to the Jewish jurisdiction of the temple, which was a Jewish matter rather than a Roman one.

Paul's clever ploy is to appeal to Caesar. If he can stay away from Jerusalem, he stays relatively safe - as a Roman citizen, in Roman custody, he has some amount of protection.

More importantly, God has told him, chapter 23 v 11, that he will testify in Rome. But it's been two years of waiting around and now there's an opportunity to speed things up. In appealing to Caesar, Paul gets a free trip to Rome, though stays a prisoner.

What can we learn?

Well for the last few chapters - this one in particular, it's been pretty repetitive - Paul faces his accusers yet again. There's hardly any mention of anything we might think is 'theological'. It's quite matter of fact detail about this point in Paul's life.

He's offered his defence before the crowd, before the Roman commander, before the Sanhedrin, before Felix, now before Festus and as if that's not enough, we see in the next chapter the same thing before Herod Agrippa. We've heard every time that he is falsely accused without any amount of proof.

So what is the point? What is the Holy Spirit saying in including all this in scripture?

We can learn that patience is required - Paul had to have great patience in all this. We can learn that true Christianity can't be accused of any wrong - in Christ, we can all be free from real condemnation. The accuser can talk all he likes, but in Christ there is no condemnation. We can learn that God's providence in these situations is typically to turn what looks humanly hopeless to His glory - Paul will go to Rome just as God told him he would.

Sin

One reason that we have all this detail of many trials of Paul at this time is to illustrate the opposition that he faced. They just can't let this go, can they? They're obsessed - it's been two years, and there are still men willing to risk their own lives to murder Paul in an ambush. We learn from these chapters the great hardening in their sin that these people had.

When we look at Paul compared to the Jewish leadership that seek his death, which one of them seems imprisoned? Paul is literally, physically, imprisoned. But the Sanhedrin are imprisoned by their hatred. Paul is at the mercy of the Roman authorities, can't leave, has no freedom in that sense. But these Jews, who have physical freedom, and power, and privilege, are enslaved to their sin. Paul by all accounts seems to be less bound than they are.

Paul has by this point already written these words in Romans (6:16):

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

Indulging in sin becomes habitual, it takes over people. As those opposed to Paul experience, as they continue to sin, they become more and more hardened in it. There is a downward spiral of sinfulness.

At the core of their opposition is not Paul - he's the visible symbol of what they oppose, a stark example of what they oppose. What they really oppose is Christ. Their opposition to Christianity, to Christ, is at the heart of this, which earlier in Acts scattered most of the Christians away from Jerusalem. Every time that we see these Jewish religious leaders, they are opposing Christ - from since we saw them argue against Him, and eventually seek His death back when we studied Mark, all the way through to now.

Solution

Paul himself was not that much different - when we first met him, as Saul, he was persecuting the Christians, and his hatred of them was similarly fierce. He too was hardened in sin against Christ. He was a prime example of the sinfulness of the religious elite of Jerusalem, an opponent of all things Christianity.

But in Paul's example also we see the only way out for people like that. There's only one way to escape the sinkhole of sin. The only way is to be picked up by Jesus Christ and made new again - for us to be united with Christ, and regenerated by the Holy Spirit such that we are reborn as a new people.

This is what happened to Paul, and the sight of this is maybe what is so enraging to his former allies - they see what Christ has done, it's undeniable surely, and they hate it. Ultimately, the one route out of being a hardened sinner is through Christ.

Paul goes on in Romans 6 (22-23):

22 But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. For Paul, he can face down death knowing that he will be fine - indeed he says in his letter to the Philippians that 'to live is Christ, and to die is gain'. He's content to lose his life if that's what is required to follow Christ.

Judgement

But for the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem, death is the result of their sin - we know the time is nearing that they will be all but wiped out as Jerusalem is destroyed at the pivotal point of the coming war between Jews and Romans.

I think there's something of the same thing going on as when God told Abraham that his descendants would have to wait four hundred years before entering the promised land, because "the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet complete". Just as Israel had to wait until the inhabitants of Canaan were worse before God destroyed them, here we see the inhabitants of Jerusalem get worse before the judgement that they face in AD 70. God does not destroy Jerusalem lightly - he allows them to get to the stage that they deserve it. These, many of whom had first hand experience of the Messiah, who had more knowledge of God's word than anyone, who really had no excuse, but still rejected Christ.

Ancient sources tell us that the Christians remaining in Jerusalem at that time escaped the destruction. They fled when they saw the signs Jesus spoke of - armies surrounding Jerusalem, for example.

Conclusion

We see a great contrast between Paul and his opponents. Paul is pretty calm and confident, his opponents are still plotting and angry at him. The more Paul leans on Christ, and follows Christ's instructions, the more he confident he is and the more angry this makes his enemies. Throughout Acts, we've seen there are no neutral reactions to the gospel, to Christ. Some are converted, some are hardened, but nobody can ignore Him.

In the end, in all things, it's Christ or chaos. It's either Him, or it's sin and death and destruction.