

# Lies and Truth as Paul faces Felix

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Littlebourne - 5th November 2023 - Acts 24:1-21

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In the last chapter, Paul, in the custody of the Roman Tribune, the commander of the garrison in Jerusalem, was threatened with a plot for his murder. Some of the Jews wished to ambush him and put an end to their dispute permanently. But the Tribune gets wind of this, and Paul has been sent to Ceasarea, with lots of soldiers to accompany him, along with a letter to Felix, the governor of the whole region. The Tribune really put a positive spin on what he did in this letter, but as we'll see, covering up what really happened is part of the way both Romans and Jewish leaders back then tried to protect themselves.

Paul is now in Herod's praetorium in Ceasarea, whilst Felix awaits the arrival of those that come to accuse him.

The next three chapters of Acts see Paul stay in Caesarea, giving a defence before various officials, and being kept in prison for more than two years. What started as Paul just visiting Jerusalem, has become a long slog in prison - but remember that The Holy Spirit said that this would happen, that wherever Paul went he would face imprisonment and persecution. Jesus has appeared to Paul as well in the previous chapter and made clear that Paul would not only testify in Jerusalem, but also in Rome - as his case makes it's way to higher authorities, he will eventually also get to the capital of the empire, and see Ceasar.

**v1-**

*And after five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and a spokesman, one Tertullus. They laid before the governor their case against Paul. 2 And when he had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying:*

*“Since through you we enjoy much peace, and since by your foresight, most excellent Felix, reforms are being made for this nation, 3 in every way and everywhere we accept*

*this with all gratitude. 4 But, to detain you no further, I beg you in your kindness to hear us briefly.*

After a little wait of almost a week, the high priest Ananias and others with him, reach Caesarea. They're not quite as fast as Roman soldiers at crossing that distance, but they get there fairly quick.

They don't come alone to accuse Paul, they bring a spokesman, Tertullus. He refers to the Jewish law as 'our law' in verse 6, so he might be a Jew, but he goes by a Greek name. As a spokesman, in Greek a ῥήτορος, he was probably something of a lawyer, an advocate.

Immediately, we see that he comes off as a bit of a sycophant. He's very complimentary to Felix - since Luke thinks to record this, it seems he is going beyond the usual pleasantries. In any case, the Sanhedrin are eager to please the Roman authorities and not to provoke them with their disputes.

They have reason to be afraid - Felix was known for some amount of cruelty. In the year 58 AD, Felix had the high priest of the time, one Jonathan, assassinated, because he was critical of Felix. This Jonathan had been instrumental in getting Felix the job of procurator, but threatened to report him to Ceasar for not doing well at the job. Felix persuaded one of Jonathan's friends to hire robbers murder him. These hired men mingled with the worshippers in the temple, concealing daggers, and after killing Jonathan, they escaped and were never caught.

The high praise for Felix offered really goes beyond just niceties, what Tertullus is saying, that Felix has the foresight to provide peace and prosperity - this is putting Felix very much in the place of God. In the Biblical worldview, peace and prosperity as the result of foresight is very much God's purview.

**v5-**

*5 For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. 6 He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him. 8 By examining him yourself you will be able to find out from him about everything of which we accuse him."*

*9 The Jews also joined in the charge, affirming that all these things were so.*

Tertullus now gets to his arguments. He has three main points that he makes against Paul.

First that Paul is like a plague, stirring up riots everywhere he goes. The word used literally means a pestilence or a disease, as if what Paul carries, his ideas, need to be quarantined.

We've seen that throughout Acts, wherever the gospel goes, it rarely gets a neutral reaction. When Paul and others take the good news to a new town, it ends up with some being convicted and converted, and some opposing - whatever the case, there is some form of conflict. In a sense, Tertullus is right that wherever Paul goes in the world, there are riots.

Second, Tertullus says that Paul is a ringleader in a sect. He's leading a group that isn't orthodox to Jews, and is dangerous to the Romans. He says that he is ringleader of the Nazarenes, the first time we see this term used.

We've already seen in Acts that Christians were referred to as Christians, in Antioch and we see that terminology again later in Acts. Paul will say in this passage that he follows 'The Way'. Here, the term Nazarenes is used, probably derisively. Tertullus is saying that Paul just follows that Jesus of Nazareth (and what good can come from Nazareth?). He won't use the term Christian, because that would recognise the possibility that Jesus really was the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, which those that opposed Christ could not and would not accept.

Third, he says that Paul was trying to profane the temple. No evidence is offered, but this is the charge. Remember back when Paul was in Jerusalem, the charge was that Paul really did profane the temple - but now the charge has been downgraded. They know they can't get him on this one.

The way Tertullus says it - "he even tried to profane the temple" - makes out that it's an extra charge, that he knows that the Roman authorities won't care about, but shows why they are involved in Roman matters.

He also says that 'we seized him', as if they arrested him, rather than the Roman tribune, and that they were out for justice from the beginning, rather than just looking to eliminate him. This is a lawyer speaking, really spinning things in their favour.

Tertullus finishes off by asking that Paul defend himself. He asks that Paul be examined which seems to be what happens next (and he might have meant maybe examine him in the Roman way, examine him to within an inch of his life?).

## v10-

*10 And when the governor had nodded to him to speak, Paul replied: "Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defence. 11 You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem, 12 and they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city. 13 Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me.*

Paul begins his defence against the charges. He starts addressing what happened in Jerusalem. Addressing the charge of starting a riot, he makes clear that he's hardly been in Jerusalem, and in the time he's been there, he was not disputing with anyone - not in the temple or elsewhere.

In actual fact, it's them that started the riot - they can't prove he started it, because they did.

## v14-

*14 But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, 15 having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. 16 So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.*

Next, Paul addresses the charge of being ringleader of a sect. Rather than a sect, Paul contends that he is following the same religion that his fathers did - the religion of the Old Testament, the law and the prophets.

Paul calls Christianity 'The Way' here - not the first time we see this name used. Paul was sent to persecute those who "belonged to the Way" back in chapter 9. In Ephesus, Paul met some who "publicly maligned the way". The Way is almost a neutral term that both sides used - those opposed to it would mean the way of heresy, those in favour the way of

Christ.

## v17-

*17 Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings.  
18 While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult. But some Jews from Asia— 19 they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me.*

Lastly, Paul addresses the charge of his attempting to profane the temple. He was actually there following all the right laws about purification, seeking to honour the temple and the ancient faith of Israel. He was, in fact bringing alms and offerings. The idea that he was there to profane the temple came from others - that aren't there to accuse him now.

## v20-

*20 Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council, 21 other than this one thing that I cried out while standing among them: 'It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.'*"

Finally, Paul returns to his hope in the resurrection - that both the just and unjust will be resurrected, and that this is a central thing around which all stands.

## Resurrection

When Paul was before the council at the beginning of chapter 23, Paul said similarly that it was on account of the hope and the resurrection of the dead that he was on trial. When we looked at that passage, I talked about the resurrection from the perspective of Christ being raised, but Paul here talks not just about Christ, but all being resurrected. He says the resurrection of the dead - the just and the unjust.

Paul makes clear that not only those that do good will be raised from the dead, but also those that don't. Both the righteous and sinners will face things at the end.

This resurrection of both the just and the unjust points us toward another statement that Paul made in Acts. In chapter 17, as Paul gives his speech at the Areopagus in Athens, he makes mention of the final judgement. He says (Acts 17:30-31):

*"The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.*

For Paul, there will be a day when all wrongs will be redressed, when all injustice will be sorted out.

A worldview without final judgement will be one that on the one hand encourages misbehaviour, as there are no unavoidable eternal consequences, and on the other hand encourages overzealous human attempts at justice, as it means that this is the only chance at justice that we get. We see both of these at play today - we have on the one hand a world in which people often do what they feel they can get away with, act like the here and now are all that matter and you get what you can. On the other hand, we have a world in which we often seek justice for trifles, or for things we shouldn't. For example, our culture often seeks justice and recompense for long past injustices. All the people involved are dead and buried, but because justice wasn't done back then, our only hope is to do it now. We want justice only when it suits us. Whereas we should believe that justice in the end will always be done - we don't need to punish people today for the sins of their ancestors, because in the end all will be judged perfectly.

However, if we just believe in the final judgement, but nothing more, then we'll all try to justify ourselves. We'll set our standard of justice at such a level as to put us firmly on the right side of things and put others on the wrong side. You can probably go to any prison in the land and hear 'Oh, I'm not bad - not like the guy in the cell next door. Now he really did something unforgivable.' Of course the guy in the cell next door says much the same thing. The inclination of fallen man is justice for other people, but not for me. If we see clearly, then we realise that the final judgement is not to be looked forward to if there's not more to it.

But Paul doesn't just talk about the final judgement - he makes clear that the judgement is going to be by one whom God has appointed. One whom has risen from the dead. Understanding that God has appointed Christ to judge us turns the final judgement from a matter of despair to one of hope. We look forward to the day when we are found righteous and then get to be with Christ forever - counted righteous because our judge

has given us His righteousness and taken away all our sins.

Because Christ was first raised, our resurrection is one of hopefulness and peace with God, not one of fear and destruction. The resurrection, where we look forward to having been made new, clean and fresh and in Christ's nature rather than Adam's, is our hope - in the face of final judgement, our hope is that we are united to Christ.

## **The faith of the Old Testament and the New**

Another point Paul makes in this passage is that he considers that he worships the God of their fathers, he believes that which is written in the law and the prophets, that is, the Old Testament.

Resurrection isn't talked about that much, and even less so explicitly, in the Old Testament, but there are glimpses of it throughout. Job 19:26 for example:

*And after my skin has been destroyed,  
yet in my flesh I will see God;*

In the Psalms, there are mentions of eternal life. David says in Psalm 21:4:

*He asked you for life, and you gave it to him—  
length of days, for ever and ever.*

Hosea 6:2 announces:

*He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, That we may live  
before Him.*

Hosea is talking about the nation of Israel, but the parallels are clear. Hosea 13:14 takes it a step further:

*Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from death? O  
Death, where are your thorns? O Sheol, where is your sting?*

Isaiah 26:19 echoes the hope of a resurrection:

*Your dead will live; Their corpses will rise. You who lie in the dust, awake and shout for joy, For your dew is as the dew of the dawn, And the earth will give birth to the departed spirits.*

I could go on, through Daniel 12, for example, or talk about the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel, or many of the other stories that reflect the idea of resurrection. The point is, that Paul is saying that this resurrection hope is not just made up, it's nothing new.

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God that the Sanhedrin claims to worship, is the God of Paul, the Apostles, and the Way. Ultimately, the dispute between Paul and the Jews is this - who is really faithful to the Bible? Who really takes the scriptures and understands them and worships the God of the Old Testament?

## **Conclusion**

What it all revolves around is whether Jesus really is the Messiah, as Paul says He is, or whether He's just a man from Nazareth, as Tertullus implies.

This is the conflict back then, and this is the key conflict now - if Jesus is who He says He is, then we need to take Him very seriously. If He's not, then none of this matters, and people like Paul are delusional troublemakers. If He really was raised from the dead, then this changes everything. If not, it's just a fairy tale of no relevance. This is the dividing line - do we believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, really came to earth, lived a human life, died a real death and was really resurrected? All things in this world, all our hope, everything about the future really rests on the shoulders of this one man from Nazareth. The question is whether he was just a man from Nazareth or if He was the saviour of the world.