



# SERMON NOTES

US N<sup>o</sup>. 124

Date: December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013

Title: Witnessing and Waiting

#33 in the Series on the Acts of the Apostles

## 1. The Prosecution

- a. This takes place twelve days after Paul's incident in the Temple and 5 days after Felix invites the Jewish leadership to come and present their case against Paul.
- b. The high priest Ananias, some elders and an attorney, Tertullus, come down from Jerusalem. Tertullus is either a Hellenistic Jew or a Roman, hired to serve as their "*Roman attorney*."
- c. Tertullus' speech is filled with deceitful flattery and accusations.
  - i. "*Most noble Felix...*" Felix began life as a slave and according to Roman historian Tacitus, "*he indulged in every license and excess, thinking that he could do any evil act with impunity...*" (Tacitus, *Annals* 12.54)
    1. "*In reality he [Felix] had put down several insurrections with such barbarous brutality that he earned for himself the horror, not the thanks, of the Jewish population.*" (Stott) In particular, he ordered a massacre of thousands of Jews in Caesarea, with many more Jewish homes looted by the Roman soldiers.
  - ii. Flattery is an often-neglected sin, one that the Bible speaks about more than one might think.
    1. Rom. 16:17-18, "*...note those who cause divisions and offenses... or those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.*"
    2. Jude 1:16, "*...they mouth great swelling words, flattering people to gain advantage.*"
    3. Prov. 20:19, "*He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with one who flatters with his lips.*"
    4. Ps. 78:36, "*...they flattered Him with their mouth, and they lied to Him with their tongue; for their heart was not steadfast with Him, nor were they faithful in His covenant.*"
  - iii. Note that Tertullus who found it so easy to flatter also finds it easy to accuse without evidence. A person who flatters today will likely tomorrow accuse without evidence.
  - iv. Tertullus carefully clothes the charges in political terms so that they may be viewed as violations of Roman law. First century Judea was filled with would-be messiahs and revolutionaries against Rome. Tertullus wanted to put Paul in the same group as these terrorists probably because Felix had to constantly deal with civil uprisings from such movements. (Josephus *Jewish Wars* 2.253-65)
    1. A plague and creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world causing an empire wide insurrection. Indirect praise.
    2. A ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. Nazareth already had a poor reputation as a city. (cf. Jn. 1:46) This is a serious charge in the Roman Empire. (cf. Luke 23:2; Acts 17:6-

7) Tertullus labels the Christians a sect, no more than an unauthorized minority movement within Judaism, and Paul their ringleader.

3. That Paul had profaned the temple with the implication of inciting theologically motivated civil unrest.

v. The Roman commander Lysias, who rescued Paul, was put into a bad light by Tertullus. Obviously Paul's accusers regretted that the case had come this far, preferring to have settled it with mob justice.

## 2. The Defense

a. Paul was happy to answer for himself, knowing that the facts of the case were in his favor, and notably, Paul used no flattery in his address to Felix. His introduction is bold and yet respectful, similar to the counsel Peter calls us to adopt when we stand before civil authorities and are required to *"give the reason for the hope"* that is within us.

i. 1 Pet 3:15-16, *"But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed."*

b. Even though it had been about twelve days and many witnesses could have easily been found, Paul's accusers gave no witnesses to prove that he was in fact in the temple disputing or inciting the crowd. In this, Paul reminded Felix that there was no eyewitness testimony to prove the charges of his accusers. *"This was a strong point in his defense: the people who had raised the hue and cry in the first instance, claiming to be eyewitnesses of his alleged sacrilege, had not troubled to be present."* (Bruce)

i. Paul could consistently call back to the lack of evidence, the very thing his accusers were avoiding. Christians should never be timid about or ashamed of the truth or of the evidence. If we are truly following God, the truth and evidence are our friends, not our accusers.

c. Paul makes it clear that he had not abandoned the God of his fathers or the Law and the Prophets. Instead, he acted in fulfillment of them both. While Tertullus called Christianity the sect of the Nazarenes, Paul called it the Way.

i. Paul reveals the uniqueness of Christianity in the face of first-century Judaism. Both the Dead Sea Scroll community of Essenes and the New Testament church via John the Baptist's ministry used as their mandate Isaiah 40:3, *"prepare the way for the LORD..."* (cf. Luke 3:3-6; 1QS 8:13-16). Christianity and the lifestyle it commended became known as *"the Way."* (cf. Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4, 22) The Dead Sea Scroll community prepared *"the way for the LORD"* through the study of the law, but Jesus' teaching set his followers on a more eschatologically imminent, ethically radical, profoundly personal and dynamically evangelistic *"way."* (cf. Luke 14:25-33; Jn. 14:6; Acts 1:8)

ii. In fact, Paul's worship has the same aim as his father's, to live with *"conscience clear before God and man."* In other words, no conscious record of misdeeds, in light of the coming judgment at the final resurrection. (cf. Acts 23:1)

- iii. For Jewish seekers and believers in any age, Paul's confession gives an encouragement that Christianity is, in the end, not a betrayal but the fulfillment of the Old Testament faith. The challenge is that this fulfillment will radically transform the Jewishness of those who step onto the "Way" inaugurated by Messiah Jesus.
  - d. Paul is relying on the time-honored Roman judicial principle that before any verdict, accusers must face the accused in person and there must be opportunity for a defense.
  - e. One "crime" Paul does own up to is his shout before the Sanhedrin, *"It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today."* (cf. Acts 23:6) The witnesses are present, but for two reasons this is no Roman crime because it is a matter of theology, irrelevant to their jurisprudence. Even to first-century normative Judaism, it is not heresy to confess hope in messianic salvation inaugurated through the resurrection of the dead.
    - i. Paul clearly believed in a resurrection for both the righteous and the unrighteous. The idea of soul-sleep or annihilation for the unrighteous is not accurate according to New Testament teaching.
  - f. Paul's introduction of the resurrection issue is not only good legal-defense strategy but also good evangelism. To speak of the final accounting before God and the eternal destiny that flows from it is to point out one of the certainties of human existence. Many may run from it, following alternate paths of personal eschatology, reincarnation or immediate annihilation. But all will have to face judgment. The resurrection of Jesus is proof of coming judgment and of eternal salvation and must be at the heart of all preaching concerning the "Good News."
3. The Wait
- a. Felix avoids a decision under the pretense of waiting for more evidence through the Roman commander Lysias. Nevertheless Felix clearly had enough evidence to make a decision in Paul's favor without eye witnesses, with the letter from Lysias, and from his own accurate knowledge of the Way. Felix tried to walk a middle ground, he knew Paul was innocent, yet he did not want to identify himself with Paul's gospel and the Christians. So he made no decision and kept Paul in custody.
  - b. Paul is granted a certain liberty that allows the acquaintance of his own people to minister to him, furnishing him with any of the conveniences and comforts of life, and to visit him as often as they pleased. This is ample proof that Felix found no evil in him and would certainly have dismissed Paul but for two reasons:
    - i. He wanted to please the Jews who could depose grievous things against his administration.
    - ii. He hoped to get money from Paul or his friends as the purchase of his liberty.
  - c. Meanwhile, Felix calls Paul to come and speak to him and his wife, Drusilla.
    - i. Drusilla was the sister of Herod Agrippa II and Bernice mentioned in Acts 25. She is reported to have been beautiful, ambitious, and about 20 years old at this point. Felix seduced her away from her husband and made her his third wife. *"The lax morals of Felix and Drusilla help to explain the topics on which Paul spoke to them."* (Stott)

- ii. The couple would have been known to some in Luke's Roman audience, since they repared to Rome after Felix was removed from his procuratorship in 59AD. Enquirer version.
- d. Paul preaches a message of justice, self-control and coming judgment which worries Felix.
  - i. Most modern preachers avoid speaking like this, especially to a high figure like Felix.
  - ii. The resurrection is the coping stone between creation and judgment; the resurrection of Jesus is when God sets the world right in principle. All that has to happen is that what happened on Easter day is worked out throughout the cosmos.
  - iii. The subjects are foundational to a call to repentance. (cf. Jn. 16:8-11). This couple and others need to understand God's standard, their accountability and the reality of a final reckoning.
  - iv. In brief, unbelievers must face the bad news of their lost spiritual condition before they can grasp and embrace the good news.
  - v. Today the majority view is that all moral values as relative, so Christians need to find a way to speak of God's righteousness again in such a way that it raises a standard for all.
    - 1. Sin is out and is only considered an alternative lifestyle, a psychosocial dysfunction, an involuntary addiction or even as a disease. We need to find a way to "speak" meaningfully of responsible moral self-control to the heart of our listeners.
    - 2. People know something is wrong, even though they have rejected the moral categories of absolutes, sin and guilt which would enable them to recognize the real problem. It's not something that is wrong, it's someone. Unless we can communicate God's judgment in terms that make sense, repentance will be impossible and the salvation rescue will appear unnecessary and hence irrelevant.
- e. Paul often preached for a decision and under the conviction of the Holy Spirit Felix knows this message is for him. He is startled and terrified at the prospect of the last day, but it does not lead him to humble faith. (cf. Luke 24:5, 37; Acts 10:4). From what we know about his life we can understand why. Felix uses procrastination to stay in control of his own destiny. He would determine when and to what extent these matters are considered in the future. He was unwilling to declare his decision against Jesus, but instead he rejected Jesus under the pretense of delaying his decision. The gospel should make those who are intent on rejecting Jesus afraid.
  - i. Many respond to the gospel by expressing their rejection by delaying their decision to commit to Jesus Christ – but it is still rejection. The Bible tells us "*Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*" (cf. 2 Cor. 6:2). It is foolish to trust in a "convenient" time to repent and believe.
    - 1. *"Thou sayest, 'Another time.' How knowest thou that thou wilt ever feel again as thou feelest now? This morning, perhaps a voice is saying in thy heart, 'Prepare to meet thy God.' Tomorrow that voice will be hushed. The gaieties of the ball-room and the theatre will put out that voice that warns thee now, and perhaps thou wilt never hear it again. Men all have their warnings, and all men who perish have had a last warning. Perhaps this is your last warning."* (Spurgeon)

2. *“God to-day is pulling the reins tight to check you from your lust; perhaps, if to-day you spurn the bit, and rush madly on, he will throw the reins upon your back, saying, ‘Let him alone;’ and then it is a dark steeple-chase between hell and earth, and you will run it in mad confusion, never thinking of a hell till you find yourself past warning, past repentance, past faith, past hope.”* (Spurgeon)

- ii. How often does fear hide behind a busy schedule? How many have fooled themselves into thinking that by not deciding they are keeping all the options open, and at a convenient time in the future they will give the claims of Christ the attention they deserve? In reality indecision is a decision; it’s a choice to remain where we are, outside God's saving grace, with the condemnation of the judgment to come our only prospect. (cf. Jn. 3:18, 36)
- iii. The claims of Jesus are never convenient for us. If we insist on waiting for a convenient time, we will wait for an eternity – an eternity spent in agonizing separation from God.
- f. Felix's procrastination was more than just a coping strategy, it also expressed his greed. Following common administrative practice, he seeks a bribe from Paul in exchange for his release. (Josephus *Jewish Antiquities* 20.215; *Jewish Wars* 2.273) He was willing to trade the hope of life eternal later for the hope of money now. (cf. Acts 24:15, 26) Jesus warned of the unevenness of such a trade (cf. Luke 9:25).
- g. Felix's desire for glory led him to trade the approval of fellow human beings for justice. He left office under a cloud. A Jewish delegation's complaint to the emperor about his ruthless suppression of a dispute between Jews and Gentiles in Caesarea led to his removal (Josephus *Jewish Antiquities* 20.182; *Jewish Wars* 2.266-70).
- h. As he leaves, he curries the Jews' favor by leaving Paul in prison. Paul's plight, clearly a miscarriage of justice and unworthy of a Roman citizen, nevertheless continues to provide the protection that is needed if Paul is ever to experience the divine promise to witness in Rome.

#### 4. Take aways

- a. Avoid flattery
- b. Truth and evidence are our friends, not our accusers
- c. The mandate of Isaiah 40:3, *“prepare the way for the LORD...”* is fulfilled in the person of Jesus as Christianity and the lifestyle it commended became known as *“the Way.”*
- d. Jesus' teaching set his followers on a more eschatologically imminent, ethically radical, profoundly personal and dynamically evangelistic *“way.”* Christianity is, in the end, not a betrayal but the fulfillment of the Old Testament faith. The challenge is that this fulfillment will radically transform the Jewishness of those who step onto the *“Way”* inaugurated by Messiah Jesus.
- e. Resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous. The idea of soul-sleep or annihilation for the unrighteous is not accurate according to New Testament teaching.
- f. Resurrection is the coping stone between creation and judgment; the resurrection of Jesus is when God sets the world right in principle
- g. It’s not something that is wrong, it’s someone.

- h. Many respond to the gospel by expressing their rejection by delaying their decision to commit to Jesus Christ – but it is still rejection. Indecision is a decision; it's a choice to remain where we are, outside God's saving grace, with the condemnation of the judgment to come our only prospect.
- i. The claims of Jesus are never convenient for us.
- j. Felix's profligate life warns us all not to let sex, money or power put us into a "don't call me, I'll call you" stance toward the gospel.