

PERSECUTING PAUL

Acts 23:17--24:27

Forty fanatical Jews banded themselves together, having taken an oath to neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. What a conspiracy of gangsters! What hatred! What an oath! What hellish wickedness was back of it all! They used the chief priest and elders to set the stage for them. They were to arrange with the Roman officials to bring Paul out for questioning. This procedure would give them their opportunity. As they brought Paul the conspirators would spring upon him and slay him.

Hearing of the plot, a son of Paul's sister went directly to the castle and told Paul about it. Taken to the captain by one of the centurions at Paul's request, the lad repeated his story of the plot and said that those who were planning it would appear presently to get the chief captain's promise to bring the prisoner before the Sanhedrin. The captain dismissed his informant under the charge of strict secrecy and determined to send Paul at once to Caesarea, where his case would be heard by Felix, the procurator, or governor, of the province.

At nine o'clock that night he sent Paul away on horseback under the escort of two centurions, two hundred infantry, two hundred spearmen and seventy cavalry, with instructions to take him safely to Caesarea. He rode in the midst of these soldiers for thirty-five or forty miles until he reached Antipatris. The danger zone having been passed, four hundred of them returned, while the seventy cavalymen accompanied Paul to Caesarea.

The letter of Claudius Lysias, the chief captain, to Governor Felix is interesting. It shows how Lysias claimed the sole credit of having rescued Paul because he was a Roman. He declared him innocent, and yet he delivered him into the hands of the governor.

Felix read the letter, made the necessary inquiry for docketing the case, promised a thorough hearing when the accusers arrived, and then he ordered Paul to be kept under guard in the barracks of the palace. The palace was a prison, but a prison is also a palace when the Lord provides it for his servants.

I. The Judge.

1. His identity.

Felix, the procurator of Judea, was a freed slave, who had usurped the throne in a very corrupt manner.

2. His infamy.

Felix was exceedingly cruel. There is no despot as cruel as a slave when he ascends a throne. He entertains an exaggerated opinion of his own importance, suddenly changing from a man of frustration to a man of fury, especially against those whom he believed were responsible for his former state of slavery. He had hundreds of people killed at one time, in order to satisfy his abnormal craving for vengeance. His exalted position made him dizzy with power, resulting in his becoming a conceited and arrogant person. Then, too, he was guilty of avarice.

That Felix was unscrupulous is putting it mildly. Although he was aware of Paul's innocence, he allowed that honored servant of Christ to languish in prison for two whole years. Why? Politician-like, he wanted to please the Jews. Felix was very licentious. He seduced Drusilla from her husband and lived with her in open and unrestrained adultery.

II. The Accused.

1. His identity.

Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ, and the mightiest exponent of His gospel the world has ever seen.

2. His humility.

Paul was a prisoner in chains. Imagine his embarrassment when he stood before his accusers with heavy chains about him. And he was in that condition because of the accusation of his own countrymen, the Jews.

3. His innocency.

Having traced his course from the time of his conversion, we are compelled to admit that Paul was just, honest, righteous and pure in his personal life and his public service.

III. The Prosecuting Attorney.

The Jews hired a professional orator to arraign a fellow countryman before a Roman governor. They sought to do an indecent thing in the name of decency. They pretended to be law-abiding citizens while they were violating the law. Had Tertullus, this professional orator whom they hired as prosecuting attorney, thrown his life and influence on the side of Christ and Christianity, he would have been hailed as a hero, and would have become a benefactor of all posterity. But no, he sold out, like Judas, for a few pieces of silver.

Tertullus was a person who knowingly and deliberately engaged in flattery and falsehood in order to win a favorable verdict.

IV. The Charges.

1. Sedition.

They accused Paul of being a disturber of the peace, a scatterer of discontent. This is a strange charge to be brought against a man who actually preached brotherhood and good will. However, at times there is a peace that needs to be disturbed. There are many kinds of peace which are not desirable. One is the peace of the cemetery. Who wants that? The other is the peace of indolence, a lack of ambition, a willingness to go the way of least resistance. Such a peace needs to be disturbed. There is the peace of the uninterrupted reign of evil when wicked men are in authority. Naturally they do not want the peace of their reign disturbed. But such peace needs to be broken up. Paul was doing a good service in disturbing their peace.

For lack of more bitter slander, Paul was referred to as a general pest, a nuisance, a fellow who rubs men wrong. It was only natural that Paul irritated them. His life, his character, his teachings and his spirit were all so contrary to theirs that his every contact with them rubbed them wrong.

2. Sacrilege.

Paul was accused of being "a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes," a religion which was not officially recognized by Rome. What a compliment they paid Paul in calling him the ringleader among the Nazarenes, or the chief Christian of them all! This is the only charge they brought against him that was true. Even the worst liars will tell the truth occasionally.

Notice that Tertullus classified Christianity as simply a "sect," thus cheapening the cause of Christ in the eyes of the governor. To him Christianity was nothing more than a man-made affair--a mere sect, instead of the only way to God and glory. To the Jews, Paul was guilty of sacrilege because he believed the predictions of the prophets concerning the coming of Christ.

They charged Paul with desecrating the temple. According to His enemies, our

Lord also desecrated the temple when He drove out the moneychangers.

V. The Defense.

What a contrast to the previous speech! Paul's reply is courteous, dignified, calm, frank, fearless, challenging, and conciliatory. It is both negative and positive: here we have a clear and bold denial, and a candid statement of facts. There is courtesy, but not flattery; truth, and not falsehood; fairness, and not malice; respect, and not contempt; argument, but not abuse, and, let us remember, abuse is never argument. Paul's defense is convincing because of its correctness, cogency, and calmness. Certain things about Paul's defense are obvious:

1. He was as courteous as Tertullus, but he was not as complimentary.
Christians should be courteous on all occasions even if they are dragged into court.
2. He was willing to have the light turned on his past record.
It was an open book. He was willing to stand or fall on his past. This is a severe test for most people.
3. He positively denied every charge but one and put the burden of the proof back on them, and they were unable to answer.
4. He made his religion the heart of his trial.
His gospel was as true in the courthouse as it was in the churchhouse. It was as true when he was about to be killed for it as it was at the height of his career.
5. He accepted their charge of heresy as an honor.
He had given up all for that belief. He had made it the center of his life. He had gone to jail for it many times. He was even then ready to die for it. He was willing to be called a heretic.

When he was dragged into the courts Paul had three lines of defense. With these three fortifications he took his stand with a real sense of security no matter how bitter the conflict.

1. His experience on the Damascus Road.
How many times he told that experience! He told it in court; he told it in the jail; he told it to his friends; he told it to his enemies. That experience revolutionized his life.
2. His faith in God.
Neither persecution nor death could make him waver in this. Each hardship made it stronger. He changed his prison into the vestibule of heaven by that faith.
3. His appeal to truth.
On this occasion, he cried out, "Where are the witnesses? Why have they failed to appear and testify?" He then reviewed his past life and experiences, and challenged his enemies to refute his statements.

VI. The Result.

What pathetic reading is this in verses 22 to 27. How pitiable for one to know what is right, and yet, not to do it; to tremble at the truth, and yet, not to trust it. Felix was apparently free, but really bound. Paul was apparently bound, but really free. It is far better to be physically bound and morally and spiritually free than to be physically free and morally and spiritually bound.

Paul preached to Felix and Drusilla about righteousness, which neither of them possessed, about self-control, which neither of them exhibited, and about the judgment to come, which was sure to catch both of them. Felix trembled, procrastinated and promised, but died as he had lived.