

Grace Church
Roanoke, Virginia

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Lesson #55

ACTS
Paul on Trial Before Felix
Acts 24:1-27

Perhaps no chapter in the Book of Acts is filled with intrigue and the intertwining of plots more than Acts 24. The Apostle Paul is on trial before the Roman procurator Felix. However, not only Felix is mentioned but there is Ananias, the high priest, the elders of Israel, consisting of a few Pharisees and many Sadducees, Tertullus, a lawyer, and Drucilla, the wife of Felix. What we find in this chapter is that, while Paul is on trial, all of these characters are also on trial before God. Because of the rottenness of their lives, they were yet to face the ultimate and highest court a man must face--the court of Almighty God!

We all know who Paul was, but who was Felix? Felix Antonia was the Roman governor of Judea for five years and was the successor of Pontius Pilate. Felix was born a slave, but his brother Pallas, who was also a slave, became a favorite of Claudius Caesar, the Emperor of Rome. It is believed that Pallas was shown favor because he was a homosexual partner of Claudius Caesar, the emperor. Through Pallas, Felix was given the governorship of Judea. He was the first slave in history to become a governor of a Roman province. He was an absolute demagogue who abused his authority. He was ruthless, vile, greedy and totally unrestrained in his sexual behavior. It is interesting to note that in Latin Felix means "pleasure." The Roman historian, Tacitus, said of Felix, "He wielded his kingly authority with the spirit of a slave, in all cruelty and lust." He slaughtered any and all who were a threat to his rule for he was an insecure tyrant. He had been married three times to different princesses. We know little about his first wife. His second wife was the granddaughter of Anthony and Cleopatra. His third wife was Drucilla who had been the wife of the King of Emesa. Felix, a man never to deny his lustful passion, seduced Drucilla, committing adultery and then later married her. Felix was completely unscrupulous. He would rub out anyone who got in the way of his political ambitions. It was before such a wicked judge that the Apostle Paul was to appear.

PAUL ACCUSED BEFORE FELIX - Acts 24:1-9

Accusers of Paul (24:1)

"And after five days . . ." -- By way of background, the Apostle Paul, on his way to Rome, went through Jerusalem to take a love gift from the Gentile Christians to the Christians in Jerusalem, and he also went to preach the gospel to the Jews. While worshipping in the temple, he was taken by the Jews who had every intention of murdering

him on the spot. Claudius Lysias, the Roman commander in Jerusalem, with his Roman occupation troops, intervened and saved Paul's life. Claudius Lysias sent Paul away secretly by night with a guard of 470 soldiers to keep him from being murdered by a band of fanatical Jews who had vowed not to eat or drink until they had assassinated Paul. God providentially protected Paul and these radical Jews must have become mighty hungry. Paul was sent to Caesarea with a letter from Claudius Lysias indicating his innocence of the charges brought against him. The Jews in Jerusalem wasted no time, for after he had been in Caesarea five days, they came and demanded that Paul be put on trial before the Roman governor Felix.

“. . . the high priest Ananias came down with some elders, . . .” -- The Jews from Asia Minor who made the initial charge against Paul that he had defiled the temple by bringing a Gentile into it, did not come to Caesarea. However, Ananias, the high priest and some elders, probably mostly Sadducees and a few Pharisees, came to Caesarea to bring charges against Paul. Remember only six days before, Paul was on trial before the Sanhedrin and had called the high priest a “white-washed wall” when he ordered him to be punched in the mouth. Paul called him a “bald-faced hypocrite.” Furthermore, Paul had gotten the Pharisees and the Sadducees fighting each other over the subject of the resurrection. These religious leaders could hardly wait to even the Score with Paul who they hated because they felt him to be an apostate from Judaism. These Jews felt they were doing God's will by bringing Paul to trial.

Ananias and the elders were the epitome of corrupt religion and one day they would be judged by God for their hypocrisy and external religion with no God-given power to live life.

“. . . with a certain attorney named Tertullus; and they brought charges to the governor against Paul.” -- Tertullus, probably a Hellenistic Jew, was like an assistant district attorney who was hired by the Jews to try Paul since they did not feel secure themselves in Roman law. Perhaps his name, Tertullus, which means “little Tertius,” tells us something about his character. Using your imagination, you can see him as a short, fat, cocky, feisty and pompous man, strutting around the courtroom trying to establish his case.

All the time Tertullus was trying Paul, God was trying Tertullus for his arrogant, audacious spirit. It was Tertullus who should have been on trial, not Paul.

Audacious Flattery Given to Felix (24:2, 3)

“And after Paul had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying to the governor, ‘Since we have through you attained much peace, and since by your providence reforms are being carried out for this nation, we acknowledge this in every way and everywhere, most excellent Felix, with all thankfulness.’” -- Such flatteries and lies. The Jews hated Felix, for the Jews were in a constant state of furor under his rule. The whole province was in a near state of anarchy and reforms were carried out to help Romans and not Jews. Apparently Felix knew this was mere flattery and showed

his disgust by some facial gesture or a wave of the hand. For whatever reason, the lawyer changed his tactics.

Tertullus had learned well the ways of the world--“Flattery gets you anywhere;” “ell lies to get your ends;” “Butter up a man’s ego so he will think you really like him when you really don’t give a rip about him.”

Accusations Set Forth by Tertullus (24:4-6)

Charge of Political Sediton (4, 5a): “But that I may not weary you any further, I beg you to grant us, by your kindness, a brief hearing. For we have found this man a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissention among the Jews throughout the world,” -- Surely Tertullus said more than these few lines in his indictment of Paul. Obviously, Dr. Luke only gave us a summary of what he said, for Tertullus was a famous orator in law circles. The first charge against Paul is that of a revolutionary, a troublemaker who stirred up riots all through the empire. Romans, under no circumstances, would tolerate civil disorder. They were hated so by the populace that the slightest uprising might get a large following, so this charge caught the governor's ear. They called Paul, “Paul, the pest.”

Charge of Religious Heresy (5b): “. . . and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.” -- The second charge was that of a radical ringleader of a religious heresy. The word “sect” could mean “heresy.” Jews referred to early Christians as Nazarenes because they were followers of Jesus of Nazareth. The Jews were claiming that Christianity was an illegal religion not recognized by the Roman state. The Romans wanted no religious leader to come on the scene of history who would be a revolutionary since they had heard of the rumor of the Christians about a Messiah who would rule the world.

Charge of Sacrilegious Profaning of the Temple (6): “And he even tried to desecrate the temple and then we arrested him.” -- The third charge was that Paul tried to bring a Gentile into the temple to profane it. This too caught the ear of the Romans for they knew the temple was sacred to the Jews, and any uprising about the temple could inflame the whole nation of Israel and cause a revolution.

All these charges were twisted to appeal to the Roman administration but there was not one word of truth in any of them.

Absurd Claims of the Jews (24:7, 8)

“And we wanted to judge him according to our own Law. But Lysias the commander came along and with much violence took him out of our hands, ordering his accusers to come before you. And by examining him yourself concerning all these matters. you will be able to ascertain the things of which we accuse him.” -- These Jews told Felix, through Tertullus, that they wanted to judge Paul according to their own Law, but that Claudius Lysias used police brutality and took him away. The truth is that the Jews would have killed Paul on the spot because they were nothing less than a lynch mob.

Furthermore, they made the ridiculous claim that when the facts were examined, Felix would agree.

Agreement of the Jews (9)

“And the Jews also joined in the attack, asserting that these things were so.” -- The high priest, the Sadducees and the Pharisees all agreed with the charges of Tertullus. Yet they knew they were all lies.

What does this tell us? Religion does not change a person's heart. These were the most religious men of the first century; they believed the Bible more or less; they outwardly kept the Law; they went through the externals of religion; they wore the right clothes, said the right things and went through the right motions but their hearts were corrupt, and they would bend any religious conviction to gain their own ends. Men do not need religion. They need regeneration. They need to be born again, so they will have the internal power of the Holy Spirit to live a positive Christian life. Religion damns but Christ saves a condemned soul.

PAUL’S DEFENSE BEFORE FELIX - Acts 24:10-21

Defense Against Sediton (24:10-13)

“And when the governor had nodded for him to speak, Paul responded: ‘Knowing that for many years you have been a judge to this nation, I cheerfully make my defense, . . .’” -- Paul began with respect and courtesy but no flattery. He made the only nice statements an honest man could make about Felix. This was Paul’s way of saying, “You have been around a long time. You know the Jews and their customs, and I hope you will listen faithfully to me.”

“. . . since you can take note of the fact that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. And neither in the temple, nor in the synagogue, nor in the city itself did they find me carrying on a discussion with anyone or causing a riot. Nor can they prove to you the charges of which they now accuse me.” -- Paul had no time to incite a riot for he had been in Jerusalem only twelve days before he was accosted by the Jews. Furthermore, he did not incite a revolution since he made no attempt anywhere to stir up trouble. Lastly, Paul showed the Jews could not substantiate one charge against him. They had no proof for their claims.

Defense Against Heresy (24:14-16)

“But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law, and that is written in the Prophets; . . .” -- Paul admitted readily to Felix he was part of the Way, which was the main first century term for Christianity. Undoubtedly Paul pointed out that the Jews thought the Way was heresy but Paul thought the Way was the fulfillment of Judaism. He felt that all true believers in Christ are true Jews who faithfully worship

Jehovah-God, the God of Israel, through Jesus Christ, God's Son. Christianity is the fulfillment of the types and shadows of the Old Testament. Paul believed everything in the Law and the Prophets, a claim that not even the Pharisees and Sadducees could make. Paul said, "If it is heresy that I believe in the Law and the Prophets, then I am a heretic!" Furthermore, Paul was saying, "What Roman law have I violated by becoming a member of the Way which is really a part of Judaism and a completion of it?"

In essence Paul said, "As to the charge that I am a Christian and part of the Way, I plead guilty. I will tell all the world that I am a Christian!" Paul did not hesitate, stutter, make excuses or deny he was a Christian when confronted by the court. He boldly claimed his faith even though it may have meant imprisonment or the loss of his life.

Christianity is called "the Way." Why? Because Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father in heaven. "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me'" (John 14:6). All other religions are false and Christ is the only way of salvation.

". . . having hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked." -- Paul merely held to what all good Jews believed--a resurrection of the just and unjust, one to heaven and the other to hell. However, Paul also believed that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was basic to the resurrection of all men, and where a person spends eternity depends upon what he does with Jesus Christ in this life.

"In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men." -- Paul was saying, "Look at my life, and see if you can find anything which would condemn me as a heretic." He had a clear conscience before God and men, and this should be the goal of every Christian.

Defense Against Sacrilege (24:17-21)

"Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings, . . ." -- Paul pointed out that he was not against the Jews but brought an offering to the Christian Jews in that nation from the Gentile Christians. He loved his country and people. He was not in Jerusalem to commit sacrilege but to worship by taking a vow.

". . . in which they found me occupied in the temple, having been purified, without any crowd or uproar. But there were certain Jews from Asia--who ought to have been present before you, and to make accusation, if they should have anything against me. Or else let these men themselves tell what misdeed they found when I stood before the Council, . . ." -- Paul pointed out that those Judaizers who accused him should have been before Felix. Also any member of the Sanhedrin could testify if he had broken any law when he was tried before them. They simply had no proof for their charges.

". . . other than for this one statement which I shouted out while standing among them, 'For the resurrection of the dead I am on trial today.'" -- Paul claimed the only crime

that the Sanhedrin could accuse him of was his belief in the resurrection of the dead. If to believe in the resurrection of the dead is a crime, then Paul was guilty. However, if the resurrection of the dead is true, then the Sadducees and the High Priest were the heretics. God had these Jewish elders on trial and would judge them for their unbelief of the written Old Testament.

PAUL PUT UNDER HOUSE ARREST - Acts 24:22, 23

Deferral of the Case (24:22)

“But Felix, having a more exact knowledge about the Way, put them off, saying, ‘When Lysias the commander comes down, I will decide your case.’” -- It became obvious to Felix that Paul was innocent and there is no question that Paul should have been released immediately. Felix adjourned the court, postponing the decision on Paul. However, Paul stayed a prisoner. Why? Some think Felix was a weak man and kept Paul in prison to placate the Jews, for a man like Felix was always interested in public opinion. He should have stood on truth and said, “Case dismissed” However, there may be a deeper reason for deferring Paul's case. Perhaps Paul had stirred his interest in Christianity and he wanted to know more. He had some knowledge of the Way, but now he started to get an intense interest in the spiritual aspects of Christianity. After all, he did not have to have Claudius Lysias appear because he had a letter from him stating Paul's innocence. This was just an excuse by Felix because his curiosity about Jesus Christ had been awakened.

Detention of Paul (24:23)

“And he gave orders to the centurion for him to be kept in custody and yet have some freedom, and not to prevent any of his friends from ministering to him.” -- Paul was put under house arrest when he was totally innocent. Furthermore, he would stay under house arrest for two more years in Caesarea. We hear nothing of Paul's ministry for these two years other than that he talked to Felix and Drucilla occasionally.

Paul got a bum deal but there is no indication of bitterness, for Christ had promised him he would get to Rome but Christ did not say how or when. Some have thought that God used these two years of imprisonment in Caesarea as a time for Paul to put his theology together more completely so he could later write the prison epistles. We do know, however, that God wanted Paul to witness to Felix and Drucilla for these two years even though neither one of them ever came to Christ.

PAUL'S DISCOURSE WITH FELIX AND HIS WIFE - Acts 24:24-27

Proclaiming Christ to Felix and Drucilla (24:24, 25a)

“But some days later, Felix arrived with Drucilla, his wife, who was a Jewess, . . .” -- Drucilla was a very beautiful, sensuous and cunning Jewish woman who had her own skeleton closet. Drucilla was the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I. She had been

married to a prince in Asia Minor at the age of thirteen but the marriage was annulled and never consummated because the prince refused to convert to Judaism. At the age of fourteen she was given away by her brother in marriage to the King of Emesa, a small domain. When she was sixteen, Felix, with the aid of a magician (some think it was Simon the Magician) persuaded her to leave her husband and become his wife since Felix had already seduced her. Then she married Felix she married a Gentile so she not only had an adulterous marriage but also a fornicatious marriage. At the time of this event in Acts 24, Drucilla was nineteen years old.

Drucilla also probably knew much about the Way and this famous leader of Christianity, Paul, struck her fancy. For her, Paul was a novelty because she was a real Christ hater and came from a long line of Christ haters. It was Agrippa I, Drucilla's father, who killed James. Her great uncle, Herod Antipas, cut off the head of John the Baptist, and her great grandfather, Herod the Great, was a man who ordered all children two years old and younger to be put to death in order to kill the King of the Jews, Jesus Christ. Drucilla probably knew much about Christianity and hated it but for amusement she would discuss with Paul the Christian Faith.

“. . . and sent for Paul, and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus.” -- Felix and Drucilla both knew quite a bit about the Way. Perhaps Felix had learned the facts of Christianity from Drucilla, or from Philip the Evangelist who lived in Caesarea, or even from Simon the Magician, but he had no spiritual discernment about Christ. When they spoke to Paul, Paul gave them the whole truth about Jesus Christ. He surely explained the way of salvation which is in Christ Jesus. Nothing was held back from Felix and Drucilla. He spoke of Old Testament prophecy about Christ, Christ's life, death, resurrection and ascension, and of His second advent.

“And as he was discussing righteousness, self-control and judgment to come, . . .” -- Now we are told what Paul emphasized to Felix and Drucilla as he told them about the way of salvation in Christ Jesus. He stressed righteousness. Felix was guilty of cruelty, murder, deceit, greed, bribery and every conceivable type of sin. Drucilla was just as ruthless. Paul spoke to them of God's law--You shall not steal, lie, commit adultery or murder. They had broken God's law; they were sinners; they had no righteousness to please God. Paul undoubtedly explained to them that there are none righteous, no not one, and all come under God's judgment. Then Paul probably told them of imputed righteousness that God gives to all people who accept Christ by faith. He also stressed self-control. Felix indulged in every kind of sexual lust and Drucilla was no better. Both were then living in adultery according to the Law of Moses. For these two people to become Christians, they would have to come to grips with their sin problem and repent of it, trusting Jesus Christ to save them. Paul also stressed judgment. Felix and Drucilla were faced with the truth of eternal judgment in hell if they refused to accept Christ as Lord and Savior. Paul warned them that without Christ they would die in their sins.

Notice that Paul did not take a philosophical approach to Christianity. He did not ease Felix and Drucilla into the gospel by the side door. He did not begin by telling them of

God's love for them, although he undoubtedly told them about God's love for all those in Christ. Paul used a frontal approach with love. Some have said Paul used the "blackjack" approach. He pointed out the sin of Felix and Drucilla, showing their guilt before a holy God and the certainty of judgment if they did not repent and turn to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

“. . . Felix became frightened. . .” -- Literally this says he became terrified. Felix came under the conviction of sin from the Holy Spirit. “And He (the Holy Spirit), when He comes will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment” (John 16:8). God, in common grace through the general call to salvation, brought Felix under conviction. He, for the first time, realized that if he should die before receiving Christ, he would go to hell. He trembled in his soul when he received a glimpse of a Christless eternity.

What about Drucilla? Apparently the Holy Spirit did not put her under conviction, for she had heard the gospel many times and rejected it. This was the first time Felix really heard the truth and he was convinced that Christ was the way and he was convicted of his sins, but he refused to come to Christ.

“. . . and he said, ‘God away for the present, and when I find time, I will summon you.’” -- Felix sent Paul away. He indicated he would hear the gospel again in a more convenient time and when the opportunity was more favorable. What irony! How pathetic! This was Felix's time to receive Christ and he turned from the truth, thinking that he would accept another day, and there was no other day. From this time on, Felix became more hardened to the truth even though he must have heard it often. The truth of Christ would no longer make the same impact on him as it did in this one moment of time. Felix retrogressed to the truth from this point on.

Dr. George Truitt, a great preacher in the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, told this story. It was at the celebration of his fiftieth anniversary that a lawyer friend, who was not a Christian, came to him. He said, “George, you and I came here to Dallas at the same time. You were a young preacher and I was a young lawyer. I must confess that when I first heard you, I was moved a great deal by your sermons. Very frankly, there were nights when I couldn't sleep. As the years wore on, the day came when I could listen to you and enjoy hearing you. Your message didn't disturb me at all. And you're a much greater preacher today than you were at the beginning.” The lawyer laughed it off. He did not realize how tragic it was, for he procrastinated about making a decision for Christ and became dull and hardened to the truth.

Passion for Money by Felix (24:26)

“At the same time too, he was hoping that money would be given him by Paul; therefore he also used to send for him quite often and converse with him.” -- Felix put off repentance and faith in Christ because he was greedy. He was hoping to get a bribe from Paul. Felix considered the cost of following Christ and concluded the price was too high. He loved money, pleasure, women, power and self more than Christ. He

would rather go to hell and enjoy sin for the moment than to forsake sin for the moment and enjoy heaven. He made his choice and by that choice he would be judged by God!

Postponement of Paul's Release (24:27)

“But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned.” -- Felix also procrastinated on the release of Paul. About this time, we learn from secular history, there was a clash between the Greeks and Jews in Caesarea as to whether that city was a Jewish or Gentile city. The Jews won the encounter and Felix sent in troops and killed thousands of Jews, looting the homes of the Jewish leaders and burning them to the ground. As a result, the Jews complained to Nero in Rome and Felix was dismissed and summoned back to Rome to answer for his conduct. In order to salve his conscience and save some kind of face before the Jews, Felix kept Paul in prison before turning the rule over to Festus.

We close this chapter with Paul still in jail after two years and with no apparent way to get out and on his way to Rome, but God has His ways and we shall see more of this in another message.

CONCLUSION

Are you a Drucilla? Have you heard the gospel of Christ so many times you are hardened to it? Drucilla was a frivolous, wretched, vessel of wrath fitted for destruction. She did not even tremble under the message of eternal judgment. Are you a Christ hater? Are you hardened? Are you so deep in sin that you don't care about Christ? God may deal with you as He did Drucilla. He may never put you under conviction, for as a sinner you deserve nothing from God. If you are like Drucilla, cry out to God to bring conviction to your sinful soul so you can trust the Lord Jesus and be saved.

Are you a Felix? Have you heard the gospel of Christ and are you under conviction about your sin, your lost condition and the reality of hell? Felix procrastinated! He delayed his decision! He postponed trusting in Christ, and as far as we know he never again was placed under conviction. God gave him one chance and he blew it. God may be convicting you today about your sinful life and your lack of righteousness. He may be convicting you of eternal judgment. Do not procrastinate! Do not delay! Do not postpone your decision! You may never be put under conviction again. God may bring conviction to you many times but He is under no obligation to do so. Today may be the last time the Holy Spirit puts you under conviction. Do not pass by this opportunity to bow to Christ as your Savior and Lord. Do not be a victim of tomorrow, for tomorrow may never come. Procrastination, my friends, is not only the thief of time but it is also the burglar of heaven.

Procrastination means more rejection of Christ and progressive hardening to any sensitivity in spiritual matters. Say not, “After I have done my fill of pleasure, I will trust Christ.” Say not, “After I have sowed my wild oats, I will consider the claims of

Jesus.” Say not, “After I make it in business, then I will attend to my soul and spiritual realities.” Say not, “After I get married, then I will think about being saved.” Say not, “After I get old and have lived life to its sinful maximum, then I will receive Christ on my deathbed.” My friend, do not procrastinate, for you cannot receive Christ when it is convenient to you. You can only receive Christ when the Holy Spirit has you under conviction. Say not, “Tomorrow I will give up my pet sins and follow Christ,” for tomorrow may never come. Say not, “Tomorrow I will be saved,” for you may become a victim of tomorrow and never be saved.

The lesson of Felix and Drucilla facing the wrath of a holy God should cause chills to go up your spine. Do not be like these two reprobates--one who did not care at all and one who cared but not enough to turn from sin and embrace Christ. Be like the Philippian jailor who also trembled at the truth of the gospel, and he cried out, “What must I do to be saved?” The answer came back loud and clear, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved” (Acts 16:31).