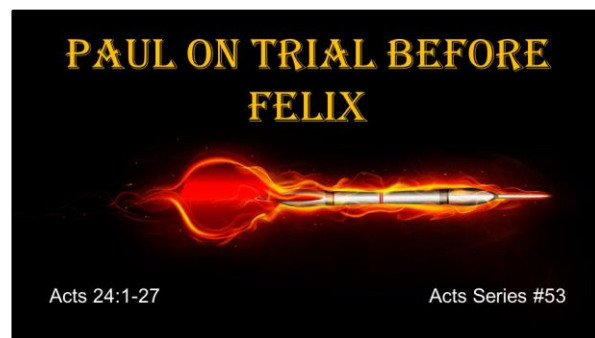


Message #53

“PAUL ON TRIAL BEFORE FELIX” (Acts 24:1-27)



John Stott writes....

Jerusalem and Rome were the centres of two enormously strong power blocs. The faith of Jerusalem went back two millennia to Abraham. The rule of Rome extended some three million square miles around the Mediterranean Sea. Jerusalem's strength lay in history and tradition, Rome's in conquest and organization. Their combined might was overwhelming. If a solitary dissident like Paul were to set himself against them, the outcome would be inevitable....He would be crushed, utterly obliterated from the face of the earth.

Yet such an outcome, we may confidently affirm, never even entered Paul's mind as a possibility. For he saw the situation from an entirely different perspective. He was no traitor to either church or state that he should come into collision with them, though this is how his accusers tried to frame him. Paul's contention, while on trial, was that in principle the gospel both supports the rule of Caesar and fulfills the hope of Israel. He presents himself as both a loyal citizen of Rome and a loyal son of Israel.

The gospel is on trial today. May we share the confidence and courage of Paul as we live and speak its defence. (John Stott – “Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work”, page 77.)

Have you ever been falsely accused of something? How did you respond?

How do you respond to the unfairness in the world around you?...the unfairness in your own life?

Paul has been kept in custody in Caesarea by Governor Felix for five days awaiting the arrival of his accusers from Jerusalem. When Ananias (the High Priest) arrives, he is accompanied by several other elders (members of the Sanhedrin) and a smooth-talking lawyer, Tertullus, who will present the case against Paul to Felix.

THE PROSECUTION (24:1-9)

After heaping lavish praise upon Felix, Tertullus then summed up the charges against Paul in three distinct categories:

SEDITION (violation of Roman law)

SECTARIANISM (violation of Jewish law)

SACRILEGE (violation against God's law)

Tertullus was trying to show the Roman governor that Paul, by these accusations, was threatening the PAX ROMANA (the peace of Rome) and, therefore required the harshest condemnation and sentence (death).

Is flattery a sin? In what situations are we tempted to do it? What does it say about us? What does it say about the person we flatter?

Tertullus calls Christianity a “sect” (24:5). What is a sect? What are the sects today? What do they believe?



THE DEFENCE (24:10-21)

Rather than cross-examine Paul, Felix gives him the opportunity of making a speech in his own defence. Paul does not engage in flattery of Felix, but he does acknowledge that he has been governor for some years and, as such, would have a working knowledge of Jewish beliefs and customs. He then goes on to address each of the three accusations in turn.

SEDITION: Paul refutes this on the grounds that he hasn't had time to engage in any seditious behaviour as he has only been in Jerusalem for 12 days and five of them have been in custody here in Caesarea and the rest mostly taken up with his ceremonial purification rites. Besides, he came to Jerusalem to worship, not to stir up a riot.

SECTARIANISM: Paul acknowledges he is a Christian but disputes that this is heretical. He insists that being a Christian means he is even more devoted to the "God of our Fathers". He believes in the teachings of the prophets, he lives in hope of the resurrection, and he has always strived to live with a clear conscience before God.

SACRILEGE: Paul recounts the reasons for his coming to Jerusalem – a mission of mercy to bring a gift from the churches of Asia and Macedonia to help the people. He had also supported and sponsored some men in their vows and went through the process of being made ceremonially clean. He was fulfilling the practices that any devout Jew would do. He was not being sacrilegious...far from it.

Paul masterfully showed Felix that these issues at stake were not of a civil or criminal nature (they were theological) and, therefore, did not belong in a Roman court.

DISCUSSION:

Read 1 Peter 3:14-17

Where in Acts 24 can you find Paul acting according to this advice?

- "have no fear of them, nor be troubled"
- "in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy"
- "always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you"
- "do it with gentleness and respect"
- "having a good conscience"

THE VERDICT (24:22-23)

Verse 22 tells us that Felix was well acquainted with "The Way"...which meant that he would have had some understanding of the issues involved. His dilemma was that he knew that Paul, as a Roman citizen, was not guilty of the charges brought against him, yet if he were to proclaim Paul innocent it would lead to unrest amongst the Jewish leaders. So, what did he decide to do? Nothing.

He fobbed off Ananias with an excuse about waiting for the Roman commander (Lysias) to come and report, and he ordered Paul to be kept under custody. The case was adjourned indefinitely.

Do you think Paul was frustrated by this delay? Would you have been? Why/why not?

THE OPPORTUNITY (23:24-27)

Over time, Felix met with Paul (hoping for a bribe to get him released). Paul was not going to bribe him, but did present him something far more valuable: faith in Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, Felix and his wife, Drusilla (a Jew) were not willing to respond to the gospel. Instead, Felix said he would send for Paul (consider the gospel) some other time when it was "convenient" (24:27). This was a sad example of an eternal opportunity missed!

When have you known someone to respond to the proclamation of the gospel as Felix did?

Bribes are still common in some parts of the world. How would you react if you had to bribe someone in order to deal with the basics of life? Is bribery always wrong in a country with low wages?

In Acts 24, Paul operates out of a healthy fear of God, while Felix operates out of an unhealthy fear of man. Why is it liberating to live seeking the approval only of the Lord?
