

Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work
Sunday Morning Bible Study
Lesson Seventeen – Acts 24-26
The Gospel on Trial

Jerusalem and Rome were the centers 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 could be inevitable. His chances of survival would resemble those of a butterfly before a steamroller. 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, although 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 defense.

OPEN

- How do you feel/respond when you know of or experience injustice in a court system?

STUDY

In the previous chapter Felix had read the letter from Claudius Lysias and sent to Jerusalem for Paul's accusers. In the meantime he kept him in custody in Caesarea. Five days later the high priest came and opened the prosecution.

Read Acts 24. As a trained and experienced professional lawyer, Tertullus began with an endeavor to capture the judge's good will. Traditionally, it was complimentary to the point of hypocrisy and often included a promise of brevity, but on this occasion it descended to "almost nauseating flattery." For Tertullus expressed gratitude for the "peace" Felix had secured the "reforms" he had introduced, whereas in reality he had put down several insurrections with such barbarous brutality that he earned for himself the horror, not the thanks, of the Jewish population.

1. What three charges did Tertullus make against Paul (24:5-6)?

Stirs up riots among Jews, ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes, profane the temple

2. How did Paul speak to each of the accusations?

He was not found with anyone or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city. There is no proof for the claims.

3. What four affirmations does he state in 24:14-16?

I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. I take pains to have a clear conscience toward God and man.

4. Why did Felix not come to any decision about Paul (24:26-27)?

He wanted to leave Paul in prison until Paul bribed him with money to get released.

Summary: Drusilla, the wife of Felix, was the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I, whose opposition and death Luke has described earlier (12:1-23). She had a reputation for ravishing youthful beauty, on account of which Felix, with the aid of a Cypriot magician, had seduced her from her rightful husband and secured her for himself. She was in fact his third wife. The lax morals of Felix and Drusilla help to explain the topics Paul addressed.

There was to be no further public hearing for two years. During this period, however, Felix conducted a kind of private investigation of his own. He frequently sent for Paul and talked with him. Luke is explicit that he hoped for a bribe. It would be cynical to suppose, however, that Felix's only motive was to hold Paul for ransom. I think he knew that Paul had something more precious than money, something which money cannot buy. If his conscience had been aroused by Paul's teaching, then he must have been seeking forgiveness and peace. Certainly the release of Felix from sin meant more to Paul than his own release from prison. But unfortunately there is no evidence that Felix ever capitulated to Christ and was redeemed. On the contrary, Felix left Paul in prison for his successor.

5. *Read Acts 25:1-22.* What kind of a person do you think Festus is based on the description of him and his actions in chapter 25?

Festus is the leader who tries to appease different groups in his care. He just wants to make people happy so that Rome will consider him a good leader.

6. Why do you think Paul requested to be tried in Caesar's court (25:10-11)?

He probably wanted to get out of the corrupt rule in Palestine, or perhaps he saw it as an opportunity to get to Rome.

7. In Festus's report to Agrippa, what is the main point about Christianity that he mentions (25:18-19)?

Paul asserted that Jesus was alive, not dead.

Herod Agrippa II was the son of Herod Agrippa I and the great-grandson of Herod the Great. Bernice was his sister, and rumors were rife that their relationship was incestuous. Paul's trial before Agrippa is the longest and most elaborate.

Read Acts 25:23-26:32. It was a dramatic moment when the holy and humble apostle of Jesus Christ stood before this representative of the worldly, ambitious, morally corrupt family of the Herods who for generation after generation had set themselves in opposition to truth and righteousness. "Their founder, Herod the Great," wrote R.B. Rackham in *The Acts of the Apostles*, "had tried to destroy the infant Jesus." His son Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, beheaded John the Baptist, and won from the Lord the title of "fox." His grandson Agrippa I slew James the son of Zebedee with the sword. Now we see Paul brought before Agrippa's son. But Paul was not the least intimidated.

8. Why does Paul say that he is on trial (26:6-8)?

Because he has a hope in the promise made by God to the fathers, and because he believes that God can raise people from the dead.

9. What are the main points about himself that Paul highlights for King Agrippa?

He was convinced that he should oppose the name of Jesus, he locked up people in prison for following Jesus, he punished them often.

10. What is Paul's commission from Jesus Christ according to 26:15-18?

To be a servant and witness to the things which he had seen, to preach to the Gentiles that they may turn from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith.

The commission of Saul as Christ's apostle was deliberately shaped to resemble the call of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and others to be God's prophets. In both cases the language of "sending" was used. As God "sent" his prophets to announce his word to his people, so Christ "sent" apostles to preach and teach in his name, including Paul, who was now "sent" to the Gentiles.

11. How is Paul's heart's desire and commitment to this commission again communicated in his final interaction with Agrippa in 26:26-29?

He does not back down when Agrippa challenges his belief. He states that he wants the king and all who listen to follow Jesus.

Summary: Luke's purpose in describing the three court scenes was not just apologetic, but evangelistic. He wanted his readers to remember that Paul had been commissioned to be Christ's servant and witness. Thank God for Paul's courage! Jesus had warned his disciples that they would be "brought before kings and governors" on account of his name, and had promised that on such occasions he would give them "words and wisdom" (Luke 21:12-15). Jesus had also told Ananias (who had presumably pass the information on) that Paul was his "chosen instrument" to carry his name "before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15). These predictions had come true, and Paul had not failed. Christ had commissioned him personally and directly, and he had not been disobedient to this heavenly vision!

APPLY

- What do you think that most people remember about Christianity from your witness?

To what degree is Paul's commission from Jesus Christ your own?

PRAY

- Thank God for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Ask the Holy Spirit to place in you a burning desire that your friends come to Christ.

All material taken from:

John Stott, *Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work*. Downers Grove, IL: IV Press, USA, 1998.