

When Paul brought the gift from the Gentile Churches to the Church in Jerusalem, the Jews falsely accused him of taking Gentiles into the temple. Traditional Jews and Christian Jews alike rioted against Paul and tried to kill him. The Roman guard rescued Paul, and put him into protective custody. Paul tried to defend himself to the people, and to the Sanhedrin council, but each time further rioting broke out.

Forty men from among the Jews plotted to kill Paul, with the aid of the members of the Sanhedrin council, but Paul's nephew heard about the plot. He reported their plans first to Paul, and then to the Roman commander. In keeping with God's promise to Paul, that he would preach the gospel in Rome, God worked in Paul's circumstances to deliver him out of Jerusalem into the hands of Felix, the governor. Let's read about it together in Acts 23:23-24:21.

The Roman military leaders were in a quandary. They could not allow further riots, and they could not allow the Jews to kill a Roman citizen. At every attempt that Paul made to defend himself, the Jews responded with more violence, and were now determined to kill him. At 9:00 PM, under the cloak of darkness, 470 Roman troops smuggled Paul out of town so that he could present his case to Governor Felix.

This was not the first time Paul had to escape at night in order to preserve his life. He escaped from Damascus in chapter 9, and from Thessalonica in chapter 17, while his accusers slept. Our passage this evening recounts the events, accusations, and the legal proceedings of Paul's defense to Felix.

Felix was at one time a slave, but he won his freedom. He later found favor with the Imperial Court, which landed him in the position of Governor. He was also the brother-in-law of Herod Agrippa II. The historian Tacitus wrote unkindly that Felix exercised royal power with the mind of a slave. In other words, they promoted him to the level of his incompetence.

Following legal procedures, the Roman commander provided a letter outlining the charges against Paul, and the reason why they presented the case to the governor. It is interesting to note that in verse 29 the commander declares Paul's innocence. Gallio also declared Paul's innocence in chapter 18, as did the city leaders in Ephesus in chapter 19, and the Pharisees at Paul's defense to the Sanhedrin in chapter 23. Looking ahead, Festus declares him to be innocent in chapter 25, and Agrippa II in chapter 26. There can be no doubt that Paul was innocent of all the charges against him, but he still had to suffer through the legal ramifications. He went to Rome as a prisoner, and eventually lost his life because of his ministry of the gospel.

We want to cry out, "That's not fair!" Paul was innocent, why did God allow him to be treated that way? Sometimes things happen in our lives and we think that it isn't fair. The truth is that sometimes life is not fair. Why do bad things happen to godly people? When we share our faith, with pure hearts, only wanting what is best for the people to whom we witness, they sometimes treat us unfairly. In the United States, the constitution guarantees freedom of speech, and freedom to exercise our faith, but more and more we see resistance from government and society against everything Christian.

When these things happen, we must not think that God treats us unfairly, rather because we live in a sinful world, the world treats us unfairly. If the world treated the heroes of our faith unfairly, why should we expect anything different in our circumstances? The hope that we hang on to is that, as He was with Paul, God will be with us, and He will see us through, even when we suffer unjustly.

The entourage traveled all night to Antipatris, which was about 35 miles north of Jerusalem. With the relative safety provided by distance, the next day, a much smaller complement of soldiers delivered Paul to Caesarea where Paul made his defense before Felix.

The discovery, or the pre-trial hearing, consisted of the letter drafted by the Roman Commander, and his testimony before Felix. Once Felix saw that Paul's case fell under his jurisdiction, he agreed to hear the case once his accusers arrived for the trial.

It is significant that Ananias the high priest thought that this trial was important enough that he should be present. It is also interesting to remember that he and the elders were participants in the plot to kill Paul. They did not come alone; they brought their lawyer, Tertullus, to present their case.

At first I thought that this would be a good place to insert a couple of lawyer jokes, but instead I decided to remind you that a lawyer's job is to represent the interest of his clients, and Tertullus presented their case very well. He began with flattery. "We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude." There is nothing like buttering up the judge to gain a favorable hearing.

Tertullus presented three charges against Paul. He is a troublemaker who stirs up riots everywhere he goes, he is the leader of the Nazarene sect, and he tried to desecrate the temple. Rome focused on keeping the peace so that the tax revenues continued to flow, so these charges were of particular interest to the governor. By claiming that Paul was a leader of a sect, he basically presented Christianity as an illegal religion. Rome allowed the practice of Jewish faith, but did not allow any new religions. The only instance that Rome allowed the Jews to execute someone was if a Gentile desecrated the temple. Here they accused Paul, even though he was not a Gentile.

Once their lawyer presented the case, the Jews testified to affirm everything concerning the charges against Paul. This was a strong and persuasive case. The only thing Felix had to go on was their testimony, on the one hand, and the letter or the Commander, and his testimony, on the other hand, that said that he did not see any basis for the charges against Paul. The deck was heavily stacked against Paul.

In increasing measure, in our culture, it seems that the deck is stacked against Christians, and the practice of our faith. Whatever you do, don't teach biblical principles to children in our public schools. It would be wrong to display the Ten Commandments in public. We should redefine marriage so that it does not reflect Christian values. Don't pray in public, and if you must, don't pray in Jesus name. Don't allow a manger scene in a public place, and don't say Merry Christmas, say Happy Holidays.

Decrees, laws, and court rulings demand that Christians not push our faith on others, but instead that we be tolerant of other's beliefs. But, there is no push to have others to be tolerant of Christian beliefs, or the practice of our faith. In the minds of the lost world, we are the troublemakers. In a nation of free speech, there is a concerted effort to silence the Christian voice and witness.

Like Paul, we have to be willing and able to make a defense of our faith. Paul acknowledged Felix, and basically said, "You have been at this for a long time, and you know how the Jews operate in order to get their way, so I have confidence that you will be able to see through their accusations, and judge me fairly." He did not need a lawyer; he had truth and reason on his side.

Paul begins by declaring that he had not been in Jerusalem long enough to organize any kind of insurrection. He went there to bring an offering, and to worship. He had not disputed with anyone nor stirred up the crowd in any way. Others were responsible for the unrest. He confesses his Christian faith, calling it the Way, which the Jews called a sect. Here Paul delegitimizes the legal claim against him, presenting his Christian faith as a legitimate faction of Jewish faith, not some new cult, about which Rome might be concerned. Paul had in no way desecrated the temple. He was there to worship, and to complete the purification rites. His faith was in the God of the Jews. He affirms his faith in God's word and his belief in the resurrection of the dead.

Sometimes, like Paul, we have to defend our Christian faith, and our actions. If our hearts are pure before God, and we haven't done anything wrong, if our conscious is clear, then we can speak the truth in love with boldness. It is only when we are unsure about the things we say or do that it becomes difficult to make our defense. When we find ourselves caught in the grey areas, or we have said or done something that was wrong, then we must repent and ask for forgiveness. Otherwise we take our stand, and state our case with confidence, because we know that God has our backs.

In verse 17, Luke mentions that Paul spoke about the offering that he brought to Jerusalem. He presents it here only because it was important to Paul's defense. Paul had the purist of motives in everything he did. He did not start the riots in Jerusalem; it was some Jews from Asia. If they wanted to bring any charges against Paul, they should present their case, not the High Priest, and the elders, because he already presented his case to the whole Sanhedrin, and they could not find him guilty.

Paul confesses that there was one thing that he said that caused some division, and that was when he spoke of his belief in the resurrection during his defense with the Sanhedrin. He honestly confessed his belief, said that it caused some disagreement, but this was a matter to be settled by the religious leaders, and not a matter that would concern Roman officials.

Using this text, and Paul's example, what are we to take away from this? First off, if we are confident about what we believe, we will be better equipped to defend our faith. This is why we diligently study the scriptures, and why you will hear me emphasize that we must know what we believe, and why we believe it. Secondly, if we are not under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, we have truth on our side. There is no need to embellish, or to spin, just speak the truth, openly, and honestly. Thirdly, trust God to see you through. When our hearts are pure before God, He is with us, and the power of the Holy Spirit in us will give us the words we need to speak, and settle the hearts of those to whom we make our defense.

Was Paul vindicated during this trial? Yes, and no. The Jews wanted Paul to be executed, or at least turned over to them so that they could have him killed, but he remained in custody. God spared Paul's life, but Paul did not regain his freedom, and does not throughout the remainder of the book of Acts.

Was Paul treated fairly? From our perspective we would say no, but we can see God's hand upon Paul through these trials, and we see God's will accomplished in Paul as he eventually traveled to Rome, where he had an effective ministry, even though limited by house arrest.

Jesus said that in this world we would have trouble, but to take heart, because He has overcome the world. We do not know what tomorrow will bring, or how we might be called to defend our faith. But, 1 Peter 3:15 commands us to always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

Jesus is the Christ, the Savior of the world. God took on flesh, and sacrificed His physical life, so that through faith in Him we might have forgiveness of sins and inherit the promise of eternal life. God proved the trustworthiness of the Gospel through Jesus' resurrection from the grave. If we confess with our mouths Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God has raised Him from the dead we will be saved.

Let us all reaffirm our faith in Jesus Christ, and our eternal trust in Him. If there are any here who have not yet trusted Jesus into their hearts as Savior and Lord, why not? If you have questions, please come to me or to one of the other pastors. We would love to help you to find salvation in Jesus name.