

On Trial for the Resurrection

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 22nd of August 1999. The preacher is Warwick Grant.

His sermon is entitled On Trial for the Resurrection and is from Acts chapter 24 verses 1 to 27.

Often the most exciting scenes in movies are courtroom scenes, courtroom dramas. And while strictly speaking what we didn't see there was a courtroom, it was sort of a trial of some form.

But in courtroom scenes in movies and TV series, there's high drama as the defence and prosecuting attorneys bring forward their arguments, weigh up the evidence and persuade the judge or jury to their particular point of view.

Now some of you might have even seen that show that's on TV at the moment called Judge Judy. And it's American of course. And we see a whole trial conducted before us on our TV screens.

[1 : 1 0] And as I say, it's kind of a courtroom scene we see before us here in the video and in Acts chapter 24. But from the point of view of being a fair trial, it's an utter farce from just about every point of view.

False accusations are presented. Witnesses aren't even present. The judge is corrupt. He's just a bribe-seeking, self-serving pagan. Apart from that, he's a nice guy.

As well as that, the prosecuting attorney is a crawler. And you heard that with that speech he gave at the start of the video, which almost makes one want to throw up.

Well if you want to follow this story in the Bibles, it's on page 908 of the Black Bibles in the seats in front of you. Page 908. Well just to fill in a bit of background with this, Paul's been in Jerusalem and a plot has been discovered to kill him from the Jewish leaders and people.

So the Roman soldiers, and remember the Romans were ruling most of the known world at that time, they take Paul to a place called Caesarea. Now Caesarea is a town and there are ruins there today.

[2 : 2 8] It's on the far eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, on the coast of present day Israel. Now Jerusalem was like the spiritual base of the Jewish people of course, but Caesarea was the Roman political centre of power.

And here resided the Roman governor, a guy called Felix, who wasn't a cat. He was a guy, that was a joke, a guy called Felix. There was a cartoon character called Felix the Cat when I was a kid, but this is the Roman governor of Judea.

His name is Felix. He ruled from the years 52 to 59 AD. He had the same position that a guy called Pontius Pilate had had a few years earlier.

He was also the governor of Judea at Jesus' time. Well Paul is to be tried before Felix when the accusers arrived from Jerusalem in Caesarea.

So let's go to our Bible reading. It's verse 1 and 2 of chapter 24. Five days later, the high priest Ananias came down with some elders, an attorney, a certain Tertullus, and they reported their case against Paul to the governor.

[3 : 42] When Paul had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying, Your Excellency, because of you we have enjoyed long peace and reforms have been made for this people because of your foresight.

It's really significant that the high priest himself was willing to journey a hundred kilometers to be present at this trial of Paul.

He traveled, I don't know, by horseback or walking or I don't know how, a hundred kilometers. That's like from Melbourne to Geelong to be at this trial. Would have been a couple of days.

The Jewish religious leaders were savagely opposed to Paul and what he was going on about. It's significant that their main leader, the high priest Ananias, came and was present.

And their crawler of a defense attorney, Tertullus, opened their case. Let me keep going with his speech in verse 3. We welcome this in every way and in everywhere with utmost gratitude.

[4 : 50] But to detain you no further, I beg you to hear us briefly with your customary graciousness. We have in fact found this man a pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.

He even tried to profane the temple and so we seized him. By examining him yourself, you will be able to learn from him concerning everything of which we accuse him.

The truth of the matter is that Tertullus would have had a hard job finding anything positive to say about Felix. So he resorted to flattery.

Felix was a governor who'd gone down in history as being merciless in putting down revolts of the Jews. Not only that, like most of them, he was corrupt and took bribes.

In the end, he was actually recalled to Rome because of the abuse of his power and the Jewish dissatisfaction with his rule. So what we have here is a patronising, prosecuting attorney who's simply trying to flatter this evil, incompetent governor.

[6 : 06] If you go back to the speech in verse 2, you'll see where there are inconsistencies, not inconsistencies, but where historical truth shows that this speech is pure flattery. He says, Indirectionally, because of you, we have long enjoyed peace.

Well, that was garbage. He'd put down revolts mercilessly. He talks about gratitude from the people. They weren't grateful for him at all.

They hated his guts. The charges were false against Paul. In verse 5, Paul is referred to as being a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.

Well, the Nazarenes were another name for the Christians because Jesus, indeed, was born in Bethlehem but he grew up in a town called Nazareth. So if you are a Nazarene, you're a follower of Jesus of Nazareth.

At that stage, it was regarded as a sect and like many other sects around at the time, people didn't understand at this point that Jesus had come to fulfill all of the law and the prophets that the Jews professed to believe in.

[7 : 16] Paul was also accused of profaning the temple or of trying to profane the temple. What that was was bringing a non-Jewish person into a particular area of the temple reserved only for Jewish men.

Paul never did it. He was simply seen in Jerusalem with a Gentile, a non-Jew. So they said, oh, he must have taken him into the temple but there was no evidence that in fact he had and I don't think Paul would have because Paul knew what the penalty for that was.

There was a punishment of death. Well, we're told in verse 9 that the Jews also joined in the charge by asserting that all this was true. Well, of course they did.

They didn't care about the truth. They just wanted Paul done away with. What a farce this court has been so far. Fortunately, now we have some common sense as we hear Paul defending himself and there's no flattery in his speech.

When the governor in verse 10 motioned to him to speak, Paul replied, I cheerfully make my defense knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation.

[8 : 26] As you can find out, it is not more than 12 days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem. They did not find me disputing with anyone in the temple or stirring up a crowd either in the synagogues or throughout the city.

Neither can they prove to you the charge that they now bring against me. So Paul begins by answering this charge of treason against the nation. He hadn't even been in Jerusalem long enough to stir up trouble and he hadn't even been trying to stir up trouble.

Paul says if you'd looked into the facts properly they'd understand the truth of the matter. Paul goes on in verse 14 But this I admit to you that according to the way which they call a sect I worship the God of our ancestors believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets.

I have a hope in God I hope that they themselves also accept that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the unrighteous. Well the expression the way as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago is an old expression for the followers of Jesus.

Christian people weren't referred to as Christians until a bit later down the track and in fact originally it was a disparaging term or he's a Christian it was sort of a sneer.

[9 : 49] They were known as followers of the way perhaps from when Jesus said I am the way the truth and the life. Well the Jewish accusers thought this was an heretical sect and Paul said look I am involved with the way but that didn't make him someone who'd abandoned his Jewish roots.

He says in verse 14 that he worships God and believes in everything that is written down in the law and the prophets. He's not denying any of that in fact he's seeing that it has been fulfilled.

He becomes controversial when he says that there is a resurrection of all people of the righteous and the unrighteous. We need to remember that Paul had met the risen Lord Jesus he had a personal experience of the risen Lord Jesus as he went on that journey from Jerusalem to Damascus and the Lord Jesus has appeared and spoken to him.

Paul acknowledged that Jesus Christ was the goal and the fulfillment of everything in the Old Testament as I said a couple of weeks ago I think the Old Testament is a bit like a great big arrow which points to Jesus and as I said a couple of weeks ago as well I heard a Jewish person say who has since become a Christian person that the most Jewish thing a Jew can do is to put his trust in Jesus Christ.

Paul goes on in verse 16 therefore I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people now after some years I came to bring arms to my nation and to offer sacrifices.

[11 : 46] Paul protests his innocence and he says that I am a person he is a person of integrity someone who desires to serve God and to serve others.

He was concerned enough to serve others that on his travels he collected money from the different churches in Asia and brought them back to Jerusalem to relieve the sufferings of those afflicted with the famine in that region.

he was hardly someone who you could describe as only being self-serving. Verse 18 While I was doing this they found me in the temple completing the rite of purification without any crowd or disturbance but there were some Jews from Asia they ought to be here before you to make an accusation if they have anything against me.

You might remember from chapter 21 that the Jews from Asia had seen Paul in the temple and they'd stirred up the whole crowd they'd wanted to lynch him they were just about to kill him when the Roman soldiers came and rescued him.

Paul himself hadn't initiated any such disturbance. What's more these accusers weren't even present at this hearing before Felix to present their accusations.

[13 : 08] Paul says they should be here. There's a problem they should be here. Verse 20 Let these men here tell what crime they had found when I stood before the council unless it was this one sentence that I called out while standing before them.

It is about the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today. Paul acknowledges that maybe his accusers were a bit upset by the fact that he talked about the resurrection of the dead before the Jewish council the Sanhedrin which was a group of 71 men Jewish leaders.

Now remember that not all of the members of the council believed in the resurrection. They were divided. The Pharisees did believe that there was a resurrection after you die. The Sadducees another party another religious party didn't believe that at all and they denied other things as well.

Well many of us here tonight too also know that the resurrection is true. In our own lives we have met the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Maybe not in a way like Paul where we saw something or heard his voice but we have still met with him and we know that he's changed our lives and is continuing to change our lives.

This was the only accusation that they could throw against Paul about this resurrection and even then some thought it wasn't a problem. As far as the Romans were concerned it was some theological mumbo-jumbo that didn't concern them.

[14 : 48] It was simply a domestic Jewish theological matter as far as the Romans were concerned. But the governor Felix had a bit of knowledge of Christianity.

We find this in verse 22. But Felix who was rather well informed about the way adjourned the hearing with the comment when Lysias the tribune comes down I will decide your case.

Then he ordered the centurion to keep him in custody but to let him have some liberty and not to prevent any of his friends from taking care of his needs. Well Felix knew about Christianity because he'd been the governor of Judea for six years and he would have been really familiar with the activities and the movements of Christians.

But it seems that all he was wanting to do was stuff to please the Jews. It seemed that one moment he was putting Jews down and oppressing them and putting down revolts and other times he was trying to curry their favour.

Remember they didn't really like him as their governor because of the bad things he did and perhaps Felix thought well if I leave Paul in jail that'll keep the Jews off my back. Well you might remember this guy Lysias the tribune that's another term for that is the commander the Roman commander who was there when Paul was about to be whipped and he was summoned to come from Jerusalem.

[16 : 18] Well was he? We don't even know. Felix says we'll wait for Lysias to come but we're not even told whether he was asked to come. What happened was that Paul was left in jail for two years.

It was simply Felix's way of just stalling things. But Paul did have some freedom to come and go and he stayed in jail as I say for two years. He had opportunities to speak with Felix and his wife and we see that in verse 24.

Some days later when Felix came with his wife Drusilla who was Jewish he sent for Paul and heard him speak concerning faith in Christ Jesus. Well the background to this couple was fairly checkered as Drusilla had been married to a Syrian king but Felix had enticed her away and persuaded her to join his harem as his third wife.

So it seems that both these individuals had pretty loose moral standards. But look at the topics of Paul's discussions with them in verse 25.

And as he discussed justice, self-control and the coming judgment Felix became frightened and said go away for the present. When I have an opportunity I will send for you.

[17 : 43] Paul discussed the very things these people, this couple needed to hear. justice is perhaps more accurately translated as righteousness, the living of a life pleasing to God.

Clearly they needed to hear about self-control and we all do and they needed to know that they would have to appear one day before God as their judge. Felix we are told was frightened and who wouldn't be?

as it says in the book of Hebrews chapter 10 verse 31 it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Paul was in Felix's face with his sin said look you can't man be pamby around with God. God knows what you're doing. No wonder Felix was frightened.

No wonder he could see he was nowhere near God's perfect standards. no wonder he could see that he was a sinner. He didn't do much about it though. Friends our faith isn't a game that we play a game of church.

[18 : 51] It's a thing that we have that gives us peace and assurance that when we trust in Jesus Christ we can be forgiven for our sins. We're dealing with a holy awesome God.

Sure God wants us to be intimate and very close to him but he's completely pure and holy and we need to remember that and it's fantastic he's given us a way back to himself through his son Jesus Christ despite our sinfulness.

Well Paul would have wanted Drusilla and Felix to come to know Jesus and to accept him and it seems that Felix was really convicted by the Holy Spirit through Paul's discussions but it didn't result in him coming to repentance and accepting what Christ had done.

Well the last two verses of our reading tonight are verse 26 and 27. At the same time he that's Felix hoped that money would be given him by Paul and for that reason he used to send for him very often and converse with him.

After two years had passed Felix was succeeded by Paul and since he wanted to grant the Jews a favour Felix left Paul in prison. Well bribes were a common practice in that time and as I said the governors and the political leaders often were taking bribes.

[20 : 15] As I said before too Felix was removed from office by the Romans when the Jewish people protested at his cruelty and he was succeeded by Festus. Paul was left in jail for those two years that Felix was in power and next week we'll see what happened under this new governor.

I was thinking about all the things in tonight's reading and what can we learn from them for our own lives? How can we leave here tonight? How can I leave here tonight?

Better able to serve God from what we've read in the scriptures tonight. I was reminded that Jesus promised that we would be persecuted as we stood up for him. Jesus promises that not everyone will want to follow him and those who do follow him will be persecuted.

Paul is a great example of someone who kept going despite opposition, despite cruel opposition, even despite death itself. He trusted and knew the resurrected and living Jesus Christ.

He was not afraid to confront people with their sinfulness, even people high up in the political scale of things. If you were confronted with John Howard and you knew of some sin in his life, would you have the guts to confront him with it?

[21 : 34] Or any political leader for that matter. Someone that you might be scared to approach or know, if you know they were sinning, would you confront them with that? Paul was one who trusted God in all things.

He knew that God was in charge of everything, no matter what happened. Even if Paul didn't quite understand why things were happening, he trusted in God and we can do the same as well.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, thank you for the example of your servant Paul. Thank you, Lord, for changing him from being a persecutor to someone who follows you and someone who proclaims your good news.

Thank you, Lord, that through his work and your work through him, we can know you better today. God, give us the courage and the guts that Paul had. Give us the trust that he had in you.

Give us the stamina to keep going that he had. And Lord, help us to know that even if this results in our death, we will still be with you forever. We ask this in Jesus' name.

[22 : 42] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.