

Truth on Trial

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Date: 04 August 2024

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[0 : 00] All right, do leave your Bibles there to Acts chapter 24, and there's an outline to follow along as well in the newsletters.

Well, some of you US political junkies would know this, but the appointment of federal judges in the US system is rather unique in that although it's the president that nominates people to the role, the Senate has to confirm their appointments, right?

Hence, there's a process whereby these judges are being judged before they take their place in court to judge others. Of course, the Supreme Court appointments in particular are very public events, often broadcast across the nation in prime time, and sadly, maybe in recent times, maybe forever, often politicized as well, Republicans versus Democrats.

Now, why am I raising this fun fact about the US system? Because I think in our passage today, we have a similar situation where those in authority, those meant to be judges, upholders of the truth, end up being judged themselves.

Of course, it doesn't begin this way. Instead, if you recall, a couple of weeks ago, Paul has been spirited away on horses from Jerusalem to Caesarea by the commander in Jerusalem, Lysias, for his own safety.

[1 : 31] He's now before Felix, the governor here in Caesarea, who decides that he's going to hear the charges against Paul. And so, the high priest, together with Aldous and a lawyer named Tertullius, have been summoned to this courtroom.

And so, we have this opening scene here then, a classic scene where there is a judge, there is the accusers or the prosecution, and then we have Paul as the defendant.

This time, however, unlike what happened in the Sanhedrin, we might be perhaps hopeful that Felix is an impartial judge who will settle things correctly.

So, we pick up the action here in verse 2, where Paul was called in and Tertullius presented his case before Felix. And he says, Now, obviously, there's a bit of posturing going on around here.

Here, you know, Tertullius wants to get into Felix's good books. Paul will do something similar later. And this is not uncommon with the way oratory works in ancient Rome.

[3 : 05] But the picture that's painted here is that Felix is a fair-minded governor. That he will act in accordance with what's true and what's fair.

And so, with that, Tertullius then proceeds to present the case against Paul. And he says, We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world.

He's a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple, so we seized him. By examining him yourself, you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him.

The other Jews join in the accusation, asserting that these things were true. Now, I want you to know this, what the focus is for both Tertullius and the other Jews.

They use that same word, don't they? That of truth, or things being true. But, you know, it's one thing to assert that things are true, and it's another to back them up with proof.

[4 : 07] And, you know, some of you are lawyers in our midst. You know what's required, isn't it? To prove a case. And in particular, what's important in a case like this is to bring forward eyewitnesses that were there to testify.

And it doesn't appear that Tertullius has done that. Paul, in response, now defends himself in verse 10. He says, So Paul here explicitly recognizes Felix as judge.

He expects there to be fairness and justice. He continues, Paul's defense is a little more specific, isn't it?

He gives details. 12 days ago, you can go and verify. All these places that I mentioned, that I've not done anything. Paul is confident with what he's saying, because the fact is, you cannot substantiate what has not happened, right?

That's not, Tertullius wouldn't be able to do that, because Paul knows that these things didn't happen. Unless the Jews bring forward false witnesses, there's actually no way to prove these charges.

[5 : 41] Instead, what now happens is that Paul says that all the other things that I've done can easily be verified if you just go and ask witnesses.

But you know, Paul realizes that the issue with the Jews is really not anything to do with these. These are all, in one sense, sideshows to distract from the main issue.

And so he gets to it by changing text, saying in verse 14, So here these men, men were probably a reference to the Pharisees, some of whom may have come with Tertullius to Caesarea.

And if you recall, in the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees were divided with the Sadducees, weren't they? Because the Pharisees, unlike the Sadducees, believed that there was a resurrection.

So Paul is now saying that actually his beliefs are consistent with theirs. He's already tried to explain that to them in Jerusalem. Except Paul would say that, yes, he is a follower of the way.

[7 : 14] And that phrase there has been used by people in Jerusalem and elsewhere to describe the Christians. Followers of the way are another way of describing Christians.

But Paul says, we as followers of the way actually believe in many things that the Jews do as well. So the law and the prophets, that's the Old Testament, well, we do as well.

Same like the Jews. And we have the same hope in the God of their ancestors. Right? Same God, same ancestors, and same hope.

And so as far as Paul is concerned, what he's trying to show is that his beliefs are actually orthodox, not radically different from the Jews.

And further, he says that his conduct in Jerusalem was exemplary, that he did not do anything wrong. And so he continues, After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor.

[8 : 13] I was doing good and to present offerings to God. I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance.

So what Paul is saying is that, look, I'm actually trying to obey the law here, rather than to be disruptive. And again, all of this is easily verifiable.

You know, the people that found me in the temple courts, they can tell you what I've been doing. And in fact, the Roman commander, Lysias, has said as much, hasn't he, in his letter to the governor.

So really, if this is all true, and Paul says all this is readily verifiable, what then is all this fuss that the Jews are making?

Well, Paul gets straight to the point, and he gives it to the governor. Here is the real issue, Paul says. There are some Jews from the province of Asia who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me.

[9 : 19] All these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before them in the Sanhedrin. Unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence.

It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today. So Paul is saying, if you really boil things down to it, it's really these Jews from Asia.

They've come to Jerusalem to stir things up. And they're stirring things up because of what I'm preaching. Or, same with the people in the Sanhedrin, because it was only at the very moment when I boldly declared the resurrection from the dead, that all hell broke loose and they started to fight.

And so this particular point of the gospel, which Paul is preaching, that Jesus rose from the dead, Paul is saying, look, if you want to judge me, judge me for that.

If my faith and my life hangs on this fact as to whether it's true or not, then I am willing to put my life on the line for this.

[10 : 32] Otherwise, he says, all this other stuff, you know, I have not done anything wrong by them. And you know, that's how it ought to be for us as well, isn't it, as Christians? May it not be that others would use other reasons or excuses to accuse us for our bad behavior or the way we treat other people or other things that we do.

Instead, if we are to be criticized or charged or accused, then let it be for believing in the truth of the gospel. Now, at the moment at least, I don't think in this country we will ever be dragged before a court to testify in defense of the gospel.

There is still freedom of religion. But, you know, I think in other ways, more subtle, less official, we and the gospel is being put on trial.

Now, each and every day, as we go about our ordinary lives, people who come into contact with us, know that if they came to know that we are Christians, would begin to judge us, wouldn't they?

And judge the truth of the gospel by how we live. If we live our lives faithfully to the gospel, there is a possibility that others will think that, you know, what we're doing is a little weird.

[12 : 02] If they fail to understand why we would make such sacrifices in order to follow Jesus, why we're so committed to the cause, why we're here on Sundays when we could be doing 101 other things.

And we do all this even though we cannot prove categorically that Jesus rose from the dead. Well, they may begin to wonder and judge us for it. But friends, I want to say that rather than fear this rejection or fear this negative view that people have of us because of our faith in Jesus, let's instead see this as an opportunity, like Paul did, to speak in defense of the truth.

Rather than run away from it, let's say, great, this is our chance, like Paul, to stand up and tell people about the truth of the gospel. And whether people end up believing or not is not the point.

You know, you may notice here that Paul is not being very successful, is he? Unlike the times when he's been around Asia and preaching and all the churches have been growing, the same witnessing here is not producing any converts, is it?

But that's okay because whenever the gospel is preached, even when it seems like we are the ones that are being judged, the truth is the gospel has a way of putting its hearers on trial.

[13 : 29] Whenever the good news about Jesus is declared, God is the ultimate judge that is putting each and every one of us on trial. And how we respond determines God's verdict on us.

And that is exactly what's happening here with Felix as well because as you see, the trial progressing, the tables become turned, don't they? Felix, the judge, ultimately, like the Supreme Court nominee, becomes the one who is being judged.

And Paul, although on trial, becomes actually God's agent in bringing Felix's own motives and hearts under the microscope. So let's look at verse 22 and see how Felix does respond.

So Felix, who was well acquainted with the way, adjourned the proceedings, it says in verse 22. He said, when Lysias, the commander comes, I will decide your case. He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard, but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs.

And so we find out, actually, Felix is rather acquainted with the way already. Even if he didn't believe in Paul, he probably knew enough about Paul's belief to pass a verdict.

[14 : 50] And yet, he decides to delay until Lysias arrives. Why? Probably because he maybe was going to use Lysias as an eyewitness to prove or disprove what the Jews have been saying about Paul.

But in the meantime, he's good enough to at least allow Paul some visitors and some freedoms to attend to his needs. But then, in verse 24, we get to something even more important, and that is we find out more about Felix's true motivations in what he's doing.

Several days later, it says, Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, that's enough now, you may leave.

When I find it convenient, I will send for you. At the same time, he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe. So he sent for him frequently and talked with him.

When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Portius Festus. But because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison. And so we find out, don't we, that this fair-minded judge actually has ulterior motives, that his real interest was personal gain.

[16 : 20] Wanting to hear Paul repeatedly was just a pretext for a bribe. And so we see that this judge is not that fair-minded after all.

It kind of reminds me of some of you guys, perhaps, who always keep offering to help the girls with their studies at uni as a bit of a pretext to spend time with them. Well, that's what Felix is doing, isn't it?

Wanting to spend time with Paul, but hoping to get some personal advantage out of it. And we also find out that Felix has a Jewish wife. She may have been the one, perhaps then, that told Felix about the way.

But as Felix kept hearing Paul explain the Gospel, what it means to have faith in Jesus, he finds himself, actually, coming under the judgment of the Gospel, having his conscience pricked.

And that's why he responds the way he does. As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix becomes afraid and says, enough.

[17 : 25] I don't want to hear anymore. It's too much for me. It's cutting too close to the bone for me. And you know, there's actually a bit of a background here as well, because both Felix and Drusilla aren't each other's first husband and wife.

Josephus, a Jewish historian at that time, tells us that actually Felix seduced Drusilla. And she, apparently she was a really beautiful woman, no photos, but anyway, I have to go by what Josephus is.

And she actually divorced her first husband in order to marry him. And that's why Felix, I think, responds the way he does, right? He and Drusilla had lacked self-control.

They had fallen short of God's righteous standard. You know, when Paul talked about judgment to come, Felix knew that it was, Paul, not Paul, but that God was talking about him.

His conscience was pricked. But instead of repenting, what he did was push Paul and his words out of his sight. What he did was to suppress his conscience and instead he tried to entice Paul with a bribe.

[18 : 45] So, this is the ironic situation, isn't it? Here we have a judge meant to be impartial and incorruptible, but instead, for two years, he delays justice.

Why? Firstly, in order to get a bribe, hopefully, which he doesn't, and then secondly, to placate the Jews. But even as he fails as an earthly judge, what he doesn't realize is that he himself, his own life, was under judgment.

But Paul had told him about the judgment to come because there is another judge that sits in heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ, who sadly now finds him wanting in his response.

Friends, God's word, the gospel, is an instrument of great power. It's not just empty words. When the gospel is proclaimed, when the good news about Jesus is being told to us, we're not engaging in just a mere intellectual discourse.

We're not just arguing about the finer points of theology. No, when the gospel is spoken, there is a power that cuts deep into our hearts.

[20 : 05] And everyone who hears it without exception will be judged by how we respond. And the truth is, we all have secrets in our lives, right?

Things we're not proud of. We may succeed in hiding them from others, sometimes even to those closest to us, but it cannot escape the scrutiny of the Holy Spirit.

It is he who knows what's in our hearts. And the gospel is like this powerful searchlight that is turned on in the dark to expose what is hidden.

And even I, as I'm preaching, as I'm reading God's word, I come under its unyielding scrutiny as well, just as all of us do. And then, we all have a choice.

When that light is turned on and pointed at us, and we know what it reveals about us, we can choose humbly to ask, as the psalmist did in our other reading in Psalm 139, verse 23, for God to do this, to search me, God, and know my heart.

[21 : 18] It's interesting, isn't it? We don't even know ourselves. We're asking God to search us and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

It's a very humbling thing to ask that. Very vulnerable because we're exposing ourselves to God and saying, God, tell us the truth about us. And you know, I think we've all experienced that moment, haven't we, when we've read God's word.

When even our own conscience tells us that what we've heard in God's word, what we've read, is the truth. And we know that's the case because we actually don't like what we hear.

And yet, we cannot but admit that what it has exposed in us is true. And yes, we feel ashamed. We're not proud of it. But you know, there's something worse.

And that is to allow our pride to tempt us then to suppress our conscience just as Felix did and to tell God to go away.

[22 : 26] As though by telling God to go away, the truth will disappear when it won't. And that is dangerous and fatal because Felix, once he managed to suppress and sear his conscience, notice what he could then do.

He could just ask Paul to come back repeatedly, time and time again over two years. And each time, Paul would have been telling and speaking to him and explaining the gospel to him.

But each time, Felix was just numb to it, wasn't he? So instead of finding salvation, you know, all Felix was doing was trying to angle for a bribe, some monetary gain for a moment in time when what he could have was eternal riches in God's kingdom.

What a poor trade-off. What a loss. Friends, let's not fall for that same mistake that when we open God's word each time, whether we do it alone or at church, let's not bring our own agenda to it.

Whether it's to get rich or get ahead in life or to find a wife, whatever it is, instead, we need to come with our conscience tender and say, Lord, it is your agenda that we want to hear.

[23 : 52] And even though it may challenge us, we want to ask God to search our hearts by his spirit so that when we know it, we can admit and repent and that will lead us to the way everlasting.

Let's pray. Father, you are a holy judge. Here is our heart.

What can we say to you? Where could we run? How could we hide? Darkness is day to you. So come, light the way, illuminate our sin, judge of the secrets of the hearts of men.

Here we surrender and humbly repent. You've conquered our soul, now be its defense, judge of the secrets of the hearts of men.

Amen.