

Acts 24:1-23: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 24, verses 1 to 23. And after five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and a spokesman, one Tertullus.

They laid before the governor their case against Paul. And when he had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying, Since through you we enjoy much peace, and since by your foresight, most excellent Felix, reforms are being made for this nation, in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude.

But to detain you no further, I beg you in your kindness to hear us briefly. For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world, and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.

He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him. By examining him yourself you will be able to find out from him about everything of which we accuse him. The Jews also joined in the charge, affirming that all these things were so.

And when the governor had nodded to him to speak, Paul replied, Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defence.

[1 : 08] You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem, and they did not find me disputing with anyone, or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple, or in the synagogues, or in the city.

Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me. But this I confess to you, that according to the way which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law, and written in the prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.

So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings. While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult.

But some Jews from Asia, they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me. Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council, other than this one thing, that I cried out while standing among them.

It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day. But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the way, put them off, saying, When Lysias the Tribune comes down, I will decide your case.

[2 : 29] Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody, but have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs. After the plot killed Paul in chapter 23, In Acts chapter 24, Paul makes his defence before Felix, after the spokesman, Tertullus, presents the case against him.

Paul is walking in the footsteps of Christ here. As we have seen, Paul's trials and hearings in the book of Acts can be mapped onto Jesus' trials and hearings in the book of Luke. Jesus was tried before the council, before Pilate, before Herod, and then was brought before Pilate again.

In Acts, Paul is tried before the council, before Felix the governor, before Herod Agrippa II, and before Festus. One of the effects of Luke's focus upon speeches of defence at the end of the book of Acts is that of presenting the hearer with a more forensic framework for thinking through the issues at stake in the book.

These are issues of justice, issues of truth, as well as being issues that have ramifications for social order and for political allegiance. Beginning the book focusing upon crowds and ending the book focusing more upon kings and rulers is a way in which Luke communicates the implications of the gospel for every area of social life.

Only five days after Paul has come to Caesarea, Ananias, some elders and a spokesman or legal advocate, Tertullus, come up from Jerusalem. The fact that the high priest himself comes up to Caesarea might be an indication of how significant a threat they view Paul as, as Jeff Myers has observed.

[4 : 09] Notable by their absence, however, are Paul's original accusers, the Jews from the province of Asia. Perhaps they were only in Jerusalem for Pentecost and have since returned. However, the seeming absence of any witnesses is very telling.

It is possible that Luke was able to get access to the notes of this trial, as various commentators have noted. Many of the details have a clear ring of historical veracity. Tertullus begins with ingratiating praise for Felix.

He associates Felix with and praises him for his establishment of peace. This might add force to his case against Paul. Felix's honour lies in his being a peacemaker and a peacekeeper, and Paul is a man who stirs up riots and provokes the masses by being prepared to desecrate a temple.

He is a threat to civil peace and order. He is a political agitator, a leader of a dangerous sect, and someone who is prepared to profane the temple. It is worth noting that there is no mention of the very specific charge that was made against Paul, that he actually brought the Ephesian Trophimus, the Gentile, into the temple.

Rather, there is merely the general claim that he attempted to profane the temple, and while the original claims against Paul were that he spoke against the law, the temple, and the people, here Tertullus tries to lean more into the fact that he is a political and social agitator.

[5 : 29] He is someone who is causing unrest. A figure like Paul should not just be the concern of the Jewish authorities, he should be the concern of the Romans who try to keep the peace. This can't be dismissed as merely a religious matter.

Verse 7 is missing in many translations, because a chunk of verses 6 to 8 are not found in many more reliable manuscripts. And we would have judged him according to our law.

But the chief captain Lysias came and with great violence took him out of our hands, commanding his accusers to come before you. Tertullus invites Felix to examine Paul.

He will discover from Paul the confirmation of everything that he has been accused of. In the absence of any other witnesses, they are hoping that Paul will end up giving evidence against himself. When Tertullus has finished, Felix indicates that it is Paul's turn to speak.

Paul, like Tertullus, begins with a reference to Felix as the governor, in a way that is designed to make Felix serve his defence. Tertullus had tried to use Felix's character as a peacekeeper, as something to push him to act against Paul.

[6 : 33] And now Paul employs Felix's longer tenure as governor, as evidence that he is not a troublemaker within the region. Indeed, it was only 12 days from the time that Paul first went down to Jerusalem, to the time he was brought up to Caesarea.

He went for the purpose of worship, and there was no evidence whatsoever that he was a troublemaker. He wasn't disputing with anyone, he wasn't stirring up a crowd, he wasn't found in the synagogues of the city making trouble, nor was he found in the temple doing so.

The claims that his adversaries bring against him have no proof to go with them. However, if they want a confession, he's only too happy to give a confession. His confession is that he worships God according to the way.

They might call it a sect, but Paul believes everything written in the law and the prophets, and this is the way he is worshipping the God of their fathers. Even the men who are accusing him seem to have belief in God that there will be a resurrection, and this is the conviction that informs Paul himself.

Beyond that fact, Paul takes pains to have a clear conscience towards both God and man. While riots may often start in response to Paul's message, Paul is not someone who goes around trying to cause trouble.

[7 : 41] He doesn't instigate riots, he doesn't purposefully try to incite people by profaning temples or speaking directly against deities. He seeks to live at peace with men, and he seeks to live faithfully before God.

Although trouble follows Paul around, he can honestly say that he is not the one who really causes it. While Tertullus' accusations have a more political edge to them, Paul is also concerned here to answer the claim that he speaks against the law, the people, and the temple.

He presents himself as a faithful and observant Jew. He has been absent from Jerusalem for many years, for about five years, and then he comes up to bring alms to the nation.

He's someone doing a good work. He's presenting offerings at the temple, and he's providing relief to the people. When he was found in the temple, he was purified. He was not profaning it.

His accusers don't mention Trophimus here, so he doesn't mention Trophimus. That charge brought against him by the Jews from Asia may have been dropped as there was no evidence to substantiate it, nor witnesses to corroborate it.

[8 : 44] We should also note that this is the one place in the book of Acts where we have confirmation of the fact that Paul was going to Jerusalem to present the offering to the Jerusalem church. While it may be surprising that something that occupies so much of Paul's attention within his epistles is largely passed over in silence in the book of Acts, it seems that the other events of this visit overshadowed the gift somewhat.

Paul underlines the importance of the absence of the Jews from Asia. Their absence, as the people who made the accusation that first provoked the riot, is a very strong point against his opponents.

He makes clear that the only thing that the people who are actually present have witnessed is his time in the council. Unless they have a meaningful accusation to make against him on account of that, then they really do not have a case.

The major incident in that whole hearing was Paul's statement that he was being tried on account of the resurrection of the dead. Once again, at the end of his response, Paul is underlining the point that he is on trial because of his witness to Christ.

And it seems clear that Luke wants his hearer to notice that it is really Christ and his message that is on trial here. Paul is the apostle of Christ and he is being tried as the apostle of Christ.

[9:55] It is the message that is really on trial. This is seen in part as the more specific accusations fall away and the more general accusation that he is a troublemaker, that his message is that of a sect, and other such more general accusations come to the forefront as the main thing that Paul's accusers have against him.

To sum up then, Paul points out that his accusers do not have a strong case against him. The actions that he is being accused of are against his known character. There are no witnesses to the things that he is being accused of.

The claims being made against him are implausible. He had very good reason to be in Jerusalem as the bearer of the gift to the Jerusalem Christians, and it could easily be substantiated that he was with the people who had taken the vow.

He was only there for 12 days before he ended up in Caesarea. The first day he came from Caesarea and arrived in Jerusalem. The second day he met the elders. On the third to the ninth days he was probably being purified with the men who had taken the vow.

On the tenth day, after he was taken in the temple, he was before the Sanhedrin. On the eleventh day the plot was discovered, and on the twelfth day he was brought to Caesarea. It doesn't leave him a lot of time to foment rebellion.

[11:06] He makes clear that the real reason he is on trial is because he believes in the resurrection of the dead. This belief in the resurrection, at the very core of Paul's faith, something that is bound up with his witness to Christ, is the reason why they are opposed to him.

They are opposed to him because of Christ, not because of anything that Paul himself has done. Having heard the case from Paul's accusers and Paul's response, Felix does not cast judgment.

Rather, he puts them off, saying that he will wait until Lysias the Tribune arrives. We are informed that the reason for this is that he had rather accurate knowledge of the way. Perhaps he had learned from someone like Cornelius.

As the governor in Caesarea, it would not be surprising if he had some dealings with the centurion living there. Likewise, his wife Drusilla is a Jew, and will probably have knowledge of elite Jewish women, among whom there were a number who were associated with the early Christian movement.

Presumably, he knows enough to recognise that the way is not a political movement, designed to be a threat to Rome's authority. He probably also recognises that the Jewish authorities are not to be trusted, that this is really a religious dispute, and that what is really at stake is the authority and power of the religious leaders.

[12:18] He is not about to let himself be drawn into such a situation. Paul is returned to the custody of the centurion, but he is given more liberties. While prison rations were mostly just designed to keep the person alive, his friends can bring him extra support to make sure he's healthy, and provide for other needs, perhaps even making it possible for him to do some writing.

Because the centurion has been given these orders, it will also mean that the visitors will not be harassed as they would usually be by the guards, who would often expect bribes or take things from visitors before they would be allowed to see the prisoner.

A question to consider. Looking at Tertullus' speech and Paul's speech, how specifically does Paul respond to the accusations brought forward by Tertullus, and how does he play off Tertullus' speech in other ways in his response?

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