

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Acts 24-26 - Paul at Caesarea

In this, the fifth of our talks on the closing chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, we find Paul at Caesarea, a prisoner of the Romans. Today we shall concentrate our attention upon chapters 24, 25 and 26. You might remember from last week's broadcast that Paul had been taken into custody after being accused of accompanying a Gentile into the Temple at Jerusalem. For his own safety, the Roman guard had delivered him to Caesarea, where the Roman governor was lodging. Thus ended, what was quite probably, Paul's last visit to his beloved Jerusalem.

We must not look lightly at the hurried journey that Paul made escorted by the Roman cavalry. Something like sixty miles were covered in two rapid stages, so the apostle, who was not a young man, must have been fatigued, to say the least. This is typical of Paul's uncomplaining toils for the Lord Jesus. Many trials and tribulations were accepted, as a matter of course, by this aged and well-travelled apostle. It doesn't seem much when we read that the soldiers took Paul and brought him to Antipatris and then to Caesarea, but we must remember he did not complete the journey in a motorised prison van!

Only a few days elapsed between Paul's arrival at Caesarea and the accusers travelling from Jerusalem. Amongst these were Ananias, the high priest, and an orator named Tertullus. This latter man led the case for the prosecution when the court was convened before Felix, the Roman governor of Judea. He, Felix, was not the most favourable man for Paul to face, for he was known to have few scruples. He was the first man ever to have risen from slavery to the exalted position of a Roman procurator. When Paul stood before him, Felix had been in the post of chief administrator of Judea for about five years.

From 24:6-7 we learn that Paul was facing a three-charge indictment. This was that he was a troublesome pest, a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes and that he had desecrated the Temple. The first of these charges would have connotations of drastically disturbing the peace in Jerusalem. Then, as now, there were those in society who seemed to take great pleasure in hooligan behaviour. Such persons are never popular with the authority responsible for law and order in the streets. If Paul could be associated with that reputation it would be easier to make the other charges stick. The second charge of being a ring leader of the sect of the Nazarenes would be listened to carefully by Felix, for we know, from secular history, that he had put down the leaders of various uprisings with great cruelty. He was not afraid of dealing with disturbers of the Pax Romana wherever they appeared, especially when they challenged the rule of Rome and the self-interest of Felix. The third charge could have led to the death penalty being imposed if Tertullus could prove that Paul had tried to desecrate the Temple by taking in a Gentile.

From a consideration of these charges, we can see that the main motivation, as far as Ananias and his colleagues were concerned, was religious, though they tried to cover Paul with a cloak of political insurrection. It is also obvious from 24:6-7 that the priestly party was peeved that matters had got as far as Felix. Given the chance they would have preferred to deal with Paul in a summary fashion at Jerusalem, where their influence was much stronger.

Furnished with the opportunity to answer his accusers, the much-travelled apostle reaches out with a complete denial. Verses 12 and 13 record this for us, and I quote from the Authorised Version. "And they neither found me in the temple disputing with any man, neither raising up the people, neither in the synagogue, nor in the city: Neither can they prove the things whereof they now accuse me."

In the following verses Paul deals with the charges, refuting each one in turn. Not content with defence alone, he went on to positively plead his case. Far from desecrating the Temple, he insisted that he was reverently worshipping the God of his fathers. He accepted that he was a follower of the Way, but that did not preclude him from belief in the Law and the Prophets.

In his address to Felix, the apostle plainly states the reason why he was in Jerusalem. As one reads his speech to the court, it seems obvious that the writer of the Acts was present, in person, listening to Paul. Not only is the gist of the address recorded, but in verse 18 it even notes Paul changing his mind in mid-sentence. He begins to say something about certain Jews from Asia who had found him in the Temple, then he goes on to say that they ought to be present in the court that day. It seems to me that this is indicative of the humanity of Paul. Like most of us, he would suffer from anxiety and tension in such a high-pressure situation. This, I suggest, causes him to digress without finishing off his first point regarding the Jews in the Temple. We must never fall into the temptation to view the great apostle as super-human being, bereft of the usual human feelings.

As on other occasions when Paul had to defend himself against false accusations, he used his day in court as an opportunity to preach Christ. In 24:21 he focuses attention on the fact of the resurrection. Here Felix seems to cut him off, due to his being aware of the facts of Christianity, or 'the Way', as it is described in the chapter. This habit of Paul to take every opportunity to bring the claims of Christ before people has to be set against my last point. Even if Paul was caught up in the tension of the occasion he did not neglect an opening to preach Christ. If there is one thing we can take from our passage of Scripture today it is to be diligent in the service of evangelism.

Paul suffers the irksome bondage of prison for the next two years, yet whenever he appeared before Felix, he availed himself of every opportunity to evangelise. 24:24-25 inform us on this point. "And after certain days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, which was a Jewess, he sent for Paul, and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee."

Whether Felix was really affected by Paul's words is difficult to judge from the context. It says that he trembled which would suggest that he was troubled by the thought of judgment. If this is so it soon passed off, because verse 26 tells us, "He hoped also that money should be given him of Paul, that he might loose him: wherefore he sent for him the oftener, and communed with him."

Bribery was a weapon that came easy to the hand of Felix enabling him to stifle the stirrings of his conscience. Possibly, the fact that Paul had arrived in Jerusalem with a considerable sum of money in his possession, was the spur that provided Felix with thoughts of bribery. Unfortunately for him, Paul had collected it from the Gentile churches for the poor Christians in Jerusalem, and there was never the remotest chance that the apostle would ever have used it corruptly. After two years Festus was appointed procurator and Felix leaves Caesarea and the pages of scripture. Interestingly, Josephus tells us that the son of Felix and Drusilla was killed in the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79.

Even after two whole years, those at Jerusalem who despised Paul and all he stood for were still actively seeking his death. They contacted the newly installed governor to suggest that he, Paul, be brought to stand trial at Jerusalem. Initially this was to provide them with another opportunity to assassinate him, but Festus would have none of this. It would have been easy for him, being new to the post, to have given way on this point in a desire to curry favour with the important people of his province. Instead, another trial was arranged, at the more neutral Caesarea. Again, his accusers exaggerated the crimes that Paul was supposed to have committed. We can judge what these were from Paul's answers in 25:8. "While he [Paul] answered for himself, Neither against the law of the Jews, neither against the temple, nor yet against Caesar, have I offended any thing at all." Needless to say, none of his accusers could bring a shred of evidence to substantiate their claims.

At this point there is a dramatic development, for Festus, wanting to please the priestly party, suggests that Paul agree to a trial in Jerusalem. This might seem reasonable for, as the alleged offences had been committed there, it was only proper that the trial should take place there. For Paul that was one compromise too many. If Festus was willing to make that concession to Paul's accusers, it was a distinct possibility that he might be persuaded to make others, once they were back in Jerusalem. To counter this, Paul made a plea that had far reaching implications. This was his appeal to be tried by Caesar that is recorded for us in 25:10-11. "Then Paul said, I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged: to the Jews have I done no wrong, as thou very well knowest. For if I be an offender, or have committed any thing worthy of death, I refuse not to die: but if there be none of these things whereof these accuse me, no man may deliver me unto them. I appeal unto Caesar." To make this momentous decision, Paul must have been convinced that his safety before Festus was in jeopardy. He had endured two years in the custody of Felix without appealing. Why then, if his safety was ensured under Festus, did he appeal? It must be that he was convinced that his trial would not be fairly conducted, due to the possibility of pressure from the Sanhedrin. This is not to say that Paul was only thinking of his own skin. From a study of his life, his prime consideration was always the furtherance of the Gospel. Perhaps he was hoping for a more favourable verdict from a Gentile court in a Gentile city. To be tried at Rome was to be far removed from the influence of the priestly party at Jerusalem.

Before the judicial process that would eventually take Paul to Rome, could begin two visitors came to Festus at Caesarea. These were Agrippa, king of the territory to the north and east of Lake Galilee, and his sister Bernice. As Festus would have to prepare a statement outlining the salient features of the case against Paul, there is little doubt that he was particularly glad to see Agrippa. Here was someone with expertise in Jewish affairs to help to explain some of the more obscure details. 25:19 illustrates one of these points of dispute. "But [the Jews] had certain questions against him of their own superstition, and of one Jesus, which was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive". One can imagine how difficult it was for Festus, the Roman, to prepare a document to accompany Paul when he was faced with such statements. That was why he was glad of help. This is confirmed in 25:25-27 Festus is speaking. "But when I found that he had committed nothing worthy of death, and that he himself hath appealed to Augustus, I have determined to send him. Of whom I have no certain thing to write unto my lord. Wherefore I have brought him forth before you, and specially before thee, O king Agrippa, that, after examination had, I might have somewhat to write. For it seemeth to me unreasonable to send a prisoner, and not withal to signify the crimes laid against him." This now

Personally speaking, I think that chapter 26 which brings before us Paul's defence before Agrippa and Festus, is one of the most lucid and powerful speeches in the New Testament. Consider the context with the prisoner brought in to the court in chains. The king, the Roman Governor and the principal officers of the city faced him. It would have been easy for Paul to be overawed in the presence of such affluence and influence. Instead he delivers an address, overflowing with glad confidence that presents the glory and greatness of the risen Christ.

When invited to speak, he makes a gesture with his manacled hands to get the attention of the assembled persons. He then begins this most arresting and potent address by referring to his life before he was a Christian. Acts 26:9-11 tell us what his actions were in his unconverted days. "I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests: and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities."

From such an extract, we can judge that Paul willingly assented to killing believers in Jesus before he himself became a Christian. His mindset then was similar to those who were bringing charges against him at Caesarea. His persecuting zeal found its source in the Pharisaic heritage of his formative years, which is outlined in 26:4-8. We haven't time to examine the traditional teaching of the Pharisees. Suffice to say that it included a belief in the resurrection, yet strangely, this was one of the features that marked his prosecution.

From verse 12 we begin to get to the heart of Paul's address to the court as he begins to recall the life-changing event on the Damascus road. I am reading 26:13-15. "At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest". There is more than a hint here that Paul was partly convinced that his mission to Damascus was misguided. It would seem that he was becoming convicted in his mind of the validity of the Christian message. That seems to be the meaning of 'kicking against the pricks'. Perhaps this conviction began as he watched Stephen being stoned, even as he was claiming that he could see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

Another lesson that Paul learned on the Damascus road was that the despised Christians he persecuted were part of the body of Christ. The Lord from heaven stated that Paul was persecuting Him. The apostle never forgot that, for, henceforth, his ministry was coloured with the thought that the church was the body of Christ. Neither did he forget the sight of the glorified Christ. The greatness and glory of the Lord Jesus are paramount in the letters of Paul. From this time on, Paul only ever knew and served one Lord. Though many years had passed since that day on the Damascus road, the apostle regretted nothing. Rather, it was that the knowledge of Christ surpassed anything else in his experience, and the possibility of serving the Lord Jesus was the greatest privilege afforded to any man.

The rest of the address describes the effect that this dramatic experience had on the rest of Paul's life. He became a servant of the Lord and, in Paul's words, 'was not disobedient to the heavenly vision'. In actuality, this meant that he travelled much, and suffered much, in the service of Christ, seeking to win others and form Christian churches across the Roman Empire. His summary of his service is contained in verses 22 and 23. "Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and unto the Gentiles".

At this point, Festus breaks in to stop Paul, and to bring matters to an end. Obviously, he was impressed with the seriousness and intensity of the apostle's account, but had doubts about his sanity. It was not the allusions to the prophets that Festus rejected, so much as the claims that a person had risen from the dead. All Paul's biblical knowledge had turned him into a fanatic of messianic interpretations, so Festus thought.

Paul immediately appealed to Agrippa for confirmation that the prophets predicted the things that he, Paul, had been saying about Jesus. Anyone who knew the salient facts of the life and death of Jesus, and measured them against the prophets, must come to the conclusion that Christianity was genuine. Agrippa refused to support the apostle publicly, regardless of what he thought privately. Verse 28 gives us Agrippa's answer. "Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian". This does not mean that Agrippa was at the point of believing the truth of Christianity. At least, that is my judgment. I know there is some debate around this point. There is even a gospel hymn written, with this phrase as the chorus, but I would judge that it was said with irony. In his commentary on the Acts, FF Bruce suggests that Agrippa is saying 'You are trying to make me play the Christian.' Whether that is so or not, Paul, with the ear of an evangelist, seizes the moment, and uses the phrase to appeal to all present to embrace Christianity. One can only admire the fervent spirit of the apostle Paul. He was a true evangelist who desired the salvation of all men.

Our study ends this morning with the king and the governor talking together, admitting that Paul had done nothing worthy of death. If he hadn't appealed to Caesar, he could have gained his liberty. Historians, whether ecclesiastical or secular, do not deal with 'ifs'. Paul asked to be tried in Rome, so unto Rome he went. What we can say is that neither his imprisonment, nor his journey to Rome, was wasted time. One only has to read his prison epistles, with their deeply spiritual prayers, to know that, wherever Paul was, the Lord was with him.

Next week, God willing, you will hear the details of the journey to Rome. My final thought this morning is that we, like Paul, may constantly seek to bring others to faith in Christ, and consistently encourage our fellow believers along the pathway of faith.

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