

Paul Before Felix

Introduction. As Paul's third journey comes to a close, and Luke enters the final section of Acts, Paul returns to Jerusalem. He is asked to tarry in Philip's house at Caesarea, but declares his determination to preach the gospel in Jerusalem. He goes to Jerusalem, is seized by the Jews, and makes his defense before them, but escapes scourging because he is a Roman citizen.

Paul is then brought before the Jewish council, where he incites an uproar between the Pharisees and Sadducees. His heavenly vision assured him that he would indeed travel to Rome. Forty men bind themselves in a conspiracy to kill him, but the chief captain, Claudius Lysias, is warned and sends Paul away by night to Caesarea.

Five days later, in Acts 24, the high priest and elders come down to Caesarea to try him before Felix, the governor. They bring with them a lawyer, Tertullus, to prosecute the case. After a statement of the accusation by Tertullus, Paul defends himself in his usual logical manner. Felix, who already has some knowledge of the claims of the gospel, defers judgment until the arrival of Lysias from Jerusalem. Thus the way is opened for Paul's personal message to the governor, with its ringing tones of sincerity, accusation, and conviction.

I. *The Setting*

- A. Several days later, Felix and his wife, Drusilla, while seated in the marble palace of Caesarea, happened to drift into a conversation regarding the famous prisoner.
 1. Antonius Felix became procurator of Judea in A.D. 52, succeeding Cumanus.
 - a) He remained in office until A.D. 60, when the emperor Nero recalled him. He held Paul for two years, hoping he would pay him a bribe (Acts 24:26).
 - b) Contemporary historians Tacitus and Josephus paint Felix as a brutal, incompetent politician who was finally replaced by Porcius Festus (cf. Acts 24:27).
 2. Drusilla was the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I.
 - a) She had been engaged to Antiochus Euphron of Commagene, but he refused to become a Jew. King Aziz of Emesa did agree, and they were married.
 - b) Atomos, a magician from Cyprus, helped Felix win Drusilla away from her husband. Apparently, her son Agrippa died when Mount Vesuvius erupted in A.D. 79. She may have also died in this disaster.

- B. Felix orders him brought up from the prison cell to tell them more about the faith in Christ. Paul walks into their presence, a man only about 60 years old, with the stench of the prison on his clothes. He bows courteously to the governor and the beautiful woman by his side. At their request, he begins to present the first principles of the faith.
1. What an opportunity to show off his oratorical ability! He might have orated about Greek culture, or the injustice of Roman taxation, or the ancient mythologies, or the magnificence of the Acropolis, or prison life at Caesarea. No public speaker ever had a better opportunity to display his ability!
 2. But Paul realizes his great responsibility to God (1 Corinthians 9:16). Here are a man and woman living in sin, and he may never have another opportunity to talk to them about eternity. Paul never allowed such an opportunity to pass by unexploited. We, like Paul, need the deepest interest in the salvation of humanity.

II. ***The Message***

A. Righteousness.

1. Righteousness is doing the will of God. This term includes more than morality; it includes obedience. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, not because He had committed sin (Hebrews 4:15; 1 John 3:5), but in order to do the will of God (Matthew 3:15), and to set the example for mankind.
2. An individual may be moral, like Cornelius, but he cannot be righteous until he does the will of God, as Cornelius did when obeying the gospel and becoming a Christian (Acts 10:2, 48; 11:14).
3. The will of God toward man is revealed in the gospel (John 3:16-17; 14:6-9; Romans 1:16-17; 4:13; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21). Hence the gospel is called the "word of righteousness" and the "law of righteousness" (Hebrews 5:12-14; Romans 9:31). When Paul preaches of righteousness, he includes everything whereby the sinner is justified and reconciled to God: facts (1 Corinthians 15:1-4), and commands (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Galatians 3:26-29).

B. Temperance.

1. Temperance, or self-control, is the crucifixion of the lusts of the flesh as it particularly relates to being a faithful Christian (Proverbs 25:28; Galatians 2:20; 5:23; 2 Timothy 3:1-3; 2 Peter 1:6).
2. Freedom in Christ does not give Christians liberty to cast off moral restraint, nor does it call for a withdrawal from life and its temptations. It calls for a self-disciplined life following Christ's example of being in the world but not of the world (John 17:14-16).

This instruction was a terrible blow to Felix, who was living in adultery.

C. Judgment.

1. Paul usually closed his arguments by referring to the resurrection of Jesus as positive evidence of the general resurrection and judgment of all mankind (Acts 17:30-31; 1 Corinthians 15:12-26).
2. In keeping with his normal custom, he now portrays the wrath of God to be visited upon the world of the ungodly (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9; 1 Peter 4:17-19; 2 Peter 2:9-14; 3:3-10).

III. **The Effect**

- A. Felix "trembled" before Paul's straightforward message. Various versions render the word as "afraid," "alarmed," "terrified," or "frightened." It was the same fear that struck the women who had come to the tomb, the disciples in Jerusalem who had seen the resurrected Lord, and Cornelius who had seen the angel (Luke 24:5, 37; Acts 10:4).
- B. But Felix delayed his repentance. Why did he procrastinate? Why did he order Paul back to his prison cell?
 1. He does not want to give up his sin.
 - a) He cannot give up his adulterous relationship with Drusilla. How many today are married to the pleasures and lusts of the world?
 - b) They cannot expect to retain those sins and gratify carnal desires, and get to heaven! They must surrender to Christ.
 2. He is busy with the affairs of state.
 - a) This unfortunately is an age of commercialism and materialism. Many get so busy with everyday life that they have no time for Jesus.
 - b) Those who are slaves to wealth set their affection on the world and wait for a more convenient season.
 3. He cannot give up the honors of the world.
 - a) He refused to give up the governorship of a Roman province to become a follower of the lowly Nazarene, a member of the sect that "everywhere is spoken against" (Acts 28:22).
 - b) How many people have bartered their souls for political power? How many have sacrificed their hope of heaven for social distinction? Even preachers have sacrificed the primitive faith, catering to denominationalism, in order to achieve distinction and to gain the praise of others.
- C. Death is the leveler of all men. In death, everything of this world will pass away. Why will you sacrifice redemption, immortality, and eternal life for the gratification of fleshly lusts? Why not obey Jesus now (2 Corinthians 6:2)?

Conclusion. Before the end of Paul's life, he plead his case before three earthly rulers. Felix wanted a convenient season, but one never came. Festus thought Paul was mad, preaching the gospel as the superstition of a fanatic. Agrippa was never persuaded, and was never any nearer to God.

Are you procrastinating? Are you, in spirit, ordering the apostle back to his prison cell? If you are, heed the warnings of God (Matthew 6:33; Luke 12:19-21; James 4:13-14). Hell will be populated with the victims of procrastination. Be not "almost," but altogether persuaded now to obey Jesus as your Christ.