

The Trial – of the Judge!

Paul has been back in Israel less than a month as we come to ch 24. In short succession he has been attacked by a mob in the Temple, rescued and arrested by the Romans, and brought from Jerusalem to the coastal city of Caesarea, where he would be given a hearing before the Roman governor, Felix. His defense before Felix **is the third of five defenses given by Paul in his trials:**

- Ch 22 (3-21) To a Jewish mob outside the Temple
- Ch 23 (1-6) To the Jewish Ruling Council (Sanhedrin)
- Ch 24 (10-21) To Felix, the Roman Governor of Judea
- Ch 25 (8-11) To Porcius Festus, another Roman governor of Judea
- Ch 26 (2-23) To King Agrippa, who sends him on appeal to Caesar

In these trials, Paul is **caught between Jerusalem and Rome**, the two most powerful forces in the ancient world.

Rome held the power of political, economic and military ascendancy. Jerusalem held the power of the law of God. To set himself against them both would clearly mean death. The charges brought against him, were that he had offended "against the law of the Jews", (sacrilege), and "against Caesar" (sedition). In his defenses, he claimed he was not an enemy, but a friend who brought a gospel that supports the rule of Caesar under God and fulfills the aspirations of the Jews in Jesus.

His Judge was a man named **Felix**, the Roman governor of Israel. We know a little about Felix. He was a **former slave** who had been freed, and had risen through the political ranks to this position. That was no small accomplishment. Along the way he **married three times**. His second marriage was to Drusilla, a great grand-daughter of Herod the Great. They both left their marriages for each other. She was known for her **beauty** – and her **ambition**. He was known for his **lust**, his **cruelty** and his **greed**. Civil unrest expanded under his hard rule.

The Roman historian Tacitus summed up the rule of Felix with these words: *"He exercised the authority of a king with the disposition of a slave, in all manner of cruelty and lust."* That is a telling comment, and perhaps you know people like that, people who have fought through hard times to great responsibilities and opportunities – but who never rise to the possibilities – who instead **carry their prejudices and vices** with them. In the end they are known not for **how high** they rose but for **how low** they lived. Felix was like that.

Paul appears before Felix and makes his defense. What I want to look at today, is not the content of his defense, but **what happened to Felix** and Drusilla as Paul spoke before them. It is Paul who stands before Felix at the start – but soon enough it is Felix who stands before God. Let's **watch what Felix does...**

He Is Kind

At that point Felix, who was quite familiar with the Way, adjourned the hearing and said, "Wait until Lysias, the garrison commander, arrives. Then I will decide the case." He ordered an officer to keep Paul in custody but to give him some freedom and allow his friends to visit him and take care of his needs.

Acts 24:22-23 (NLT)

Luke tells us that Felix was a man who was 'quite familiar with the Way'.

You remember that the phrase, '**the Way**' was the earliest title for the Christian Church. It is a good title. We say, 'this is the way home', 'here is the way to get that done', or 'this is the way I live'... 'The way' is a manner of life, a road to travel. It means that we are people who are **living our lives in the 'way of Jesus'**. We are people who belong to him and love him and know that he is the way to the Father, the way to a different kind of life, an eternal kind of life - and we happily walk along that way with him. Believers in Jesus are people who walk his way of life with him. We are people of the way.

Well, **Felix knew some things** about this 'way', enough to know that Paul was no advocate of violent revolution, enough to know Paul was no threat to Caesar, and enough to know that he would not defile the Temple. So he took a step to protect Paul. He adjourned the trial, and placed Paul under **house arrest**, giving him access to his friends and some freedom. Felix is **kind** to Paul, and **defends** Paul – something that was **not in his usual character**.

Something is happening in Felix.

He Listens

A few days later Felix came back with his wife, Drusilla, who was Jewish. Sending for Paul, they listened as he told them about faith in Christ Jesus.

Acts 24:24 (NLT)

Part of the reason he defends Paul is because **he was interested** in what he had heard about 'the Way'. He must have heard their claim that **Jesus had risen**. He must have heard something about the **forgiveness of the gospel** and the impact it had made around the Mediterranean regions. He must have heard about **Jews and gentiles coming together**. Married to a Jewess, ruling over Jews and gentiles, that would have caught his attention. He must have heard about **Paul's own story**. It is quite a story.

These things were palace news. His wife – remember her family had ruled in Israel through some 6 decades – heard it too. She was interested. And Felix was interested.

So, we are told, they **sent for Paul and listened**. It is a good thing to listen. It shows a **heart that is open**. A **mind that is learning**. Most of us are so busy talking that we never listen deeply. So full of **our own thoughts and opinions** that we can't hear. The readiness to listen, to listen deeply, is a great gift. They sent for Paul and listened.

Paul told them about 'faith in Christ Jesus'. Literally Luke says that

Paul told them about **'the faith'** in Christ Jesus. Which means Paul would have gone through **Christ's life and death and resurrection**, and probably **his own conversion**, and spoken to them the good news he preached everywhere. He would have talked about yielding to Jesus, about believing in him, about coming to him in faith. And they listened. Because they were interested...

Jesus had said, 'Seek and you will find, ask and it will be given to you, knock and it will be opened to you...' Felix and Drusilla were seekers, and **a door was opening** before them. **Let's watch it open.**

He Is Afraid

As he reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the coming day of judgment, Felix became frightened.

Acts 24:25 (NLT)

As Paul went on, he began to shape the conversation to **fit his audience**. He knew about Felix and Drusilla – knew all about them. All the facts and all the rumors added up to a picture of a couple whose **love for pleasure and power** were the ruling passions of their lives.

So Paul talked to them – 'reasoned' with them, Luke writes, about **righteousness and self control and the coming judgment**. Let me unpack that a bit. He talked with them about their moral behavior (righteousness) and about their need for moral discipline (self control) and about how they would have to stand before God and answer for their lives on the day of judgment. Paul told Felix that there was **a throne** above his own throne, a greater throne. There was **a King** above every king. A righteous king. A holy king. Before him they would have to answer for how they lived and how they ruled.

Suddenly it is not Paul who is **on trial**, but **Felix**. Not Paul, but **Drusilla**. How you live and how you rule will be reviewed before the Judge. And he will judge with justice. He will not be impressed

by your position or your wealth or your famous good looks. He will look at **your deeds** – the ones done for all to see and the ones done in secret. And the ones you never got around to doing at all – but you could have. And He will **look deeper** to the motives of your heart. Nothing will be overlooked. And he will judge you, Paul says. You cannot avoid it.

In that moment, something happens to Felix. It is as though God **lifts a veil**, and he is able to see beyond, see above. He can see his failures. And he can **see eternity**. And he can see something of Jesus. Luke writes that in that moment, Felix is **frightened** – it is a strong word – he is **terrified**. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom', the Bible tells us. And **Felix trembles** before the Lord.

Right then, right there, **the door opens**.

Walk through, Felix! Walk through! Through that door is **the cross** of Jesus. Through that door is forgiveness for every single thing... through that door is a new life - a new heart, a fresh start. **Yield** to Jesus, Felix, yield! Join the way!

Look at what he says...

He Delays

"Go away for now," he replied. "When it is more convenient, I'll call for you again."

He also hoped that Paul would bribe him, so he sent for him quite often and talked with him. After two years went by in this way, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And because Felix wanted to gain favor with the Jewish people, he left Paul in prison.

Acts 24:25-27 (NLT)

"Go away for now," he replied. "When it is more convenient, I'll call for you again." He dodges. He ducks. He delays.

'When it is more convenient, I will call for you...' he says. But God's

doorways are **never convenient**. Repentance is never convenient. Never easy. New birth is never soft and easy. Can you imagine an **unborn baby saying to its Mom**, "Uh, let's not do this birth thing now. I will let you know when it's more convenient."

The moment passes and the door closes.

We like to say that the door of salvation never closes in this life, and by command of the Lord of salvation that is true – but it is also true that **the moment of opportunity can pass**. Felix calluses himself to what he has heard. In the months to come, he will come back to visit Paul again and again, but he has hardened. His ears have closed, there is no hint of the fear of the Lord, no hint of repentance, no hint of faith. He **snoops around for a bribe**. His character hardens.

Luke closes his chapter with these words: *he left Paul in prison.*

Felix, in a short time, would be **recalled to Rome** to face charges of cruelty in governance. His leadership would come to an end, and he disappears from the pages of history...

How did his story conclude? – we are not told, but apparently nothing changed his epitaph recorded by Tacitus: *"He exercised the authority of a king with the disposition of a slave, in all manner of cruelty and lust."*

It could have been different. He could have walked through that door on that day, and it would have changed everything.

That **door is open** on this day... Through that door is the cross, the blood that speaks mercy – to every twisted cruelty, that speaks healing to every ruling passion. Would you like to walk through, today... This is not something you want to put off...