

# Paul before Governor Felix

---

Acts 24:1-23

“Count it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials.”

One wonders if Paul didn't bring this familiar verse to mind from the great letter of James, one of the very earliest New Testament books.

We recognize that he probably had every-day, informal trials in mind.

But it is worth noting as Paul is facing the 3<sup>rd</sup> of a total of 6 trials in the closing chapters of Acts.

He has yet to stand before Festus in 25, King Agrippa in 26, and before Caesar's court, at the end of the book.

Count it all joy when you are dragged before the civil rulers, with charges of sedition, schism and sacrilege!

And think of some of those he has stood before!

To be charged by men like Ananias – whom Josephus calls “one of the most disgraceful profaners who ever kept the office of high priest!”

Or to stand before this Felix – a man who married his way to power from the lowest station of life; whom Tertullian described: ‘through all cruelty and licentiousness, he exercised the authority of a king with the mind of a slave.’”

We would not be surprised to see these two winking at one another as the proceedings began, some 5 days after Paul was whisked away from an assassination plot in Jerusalem.

But Paul looked to a higher King – a greater, perfect Judge – and a better High Priest even than Aaron.

For all the mighty array set against him, this chapter shows us a great reversal of truth, as upside-down, in a fallen world.

As Keddie wrote, the ‘most excellent Felix’ is seen to be just another lost sinner; the charges against Paul are set on their head and Judaism is shown to be guilty and in error; and as we will return to see later, instead of Paul cowering as a captive in chains, it is the Governor who trembles before this lowly servant of Christ.

We are going to draw two points out of the presentation of this Tertullus, who is a professional advocate or lawyer, and then two more points from Paul’s defense.

Our first point in the accusation regards touches on the sin of flattery.

One commentator I read tried to make the case that this was just normal protocol for addressing dignitaries.

However you really have to ignore so much bad blood between the two governments of the Jews and the Romans – the excesses of Felix against the Jews, and the hatred of the Jews to their Roman rulers.

In just a few short years, they would find themselves in all-out war.

“MOST EXCELLENT FELIX!”

May we kiss your big toe! The great toe of your peace-keeping, your great protections for us, which we acknowledge in every way and every where, with ALL thankfulness!

Wow!

Proverbs 29:5 tells us that “A man who flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his steps.”

Proverbs 26:28 ties it with a lying tongue and says, “A flattering mouth works ruin.”

Why would people do this? The little letter of Jude lets us in on the secret: *These are grumblers, finding fault, following after their own lusts; they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of gaining an advantage.* (Jud 1:16)

Flattery is the art of telling a person exactly what he thinks of himself!

And where does it come from? Plumer traces it back to a surprising source: “All other flattery would be harmless if we did not flatter ourselves!”

And what is the aim? Puritan Brooks observed: “Whilst an ass is stroked under the belly you lay on his back what burden you please!”

There is a place for proper praise – let another praise you and not yourself; honor to whom honor is due.

But flattery is greedy – it is a lie, a deception; manipulative; a blinder to what is real and true; and like a bee the flatterer has honey in his mouth but a sting in his tail.

At this election season, we should know a true judge or leader will recognize this, and will not accept or approve it.

JC Ryle commenting on Pontius Pilate, says:

Wretched and contemptible are those rulers and statesmen whose first principle is to please the people, even at the expense of their own consciences, and who are ready to do what they know to be wrong rather than offend the mob! Wretched are those nations which for their sins are given over to be governed by such statesmen! True godly rulers should lead the people and not be led by them, should do what is right and leave consequences to God. (Daily Readings on John 18:37-40)

Once all the sweet honey of flattery is past – we come quickly to the sting of four charges brought against the Apostle – all of which are lies.

After a long list of fawning, the orator promises brevity:

1. Number one, he is a disease to the health of the empire; we found him a pest, a pestilent fellow, a plague upon the fine face of our noble kingdom.
2. Number two, he is not only a disease but a danger to peace – stirring up conflict among all the Jews throughout all the world! Now again, what was the peace of Rome, the famous Pax Romana? Bruce reminds us of what Tacitus, a contemporary, said, that the Romans create a desolation and call it peace! – but I digress. Paul was turning the world upside down because it was not right side up. He was bringing true peace.
3. Number three, he is the main director of low lives – a ring leader of the Nazarenes – he appeals to the basest Jews and others to form a separate group. The early church often faced suspicion along these lines, because many of the poor heard the gospel preached to them.
4. Number four, he is a desecrator of holy things, of the great temple built by Herod the Great. You know how important our religion is to our people! This man should be treated as sacrilegious to the approved worship of the Roman Empire! Whoa!

All of this was presented like a mighty mountain, to demand not only his being found guilty, but that he would be erased from humanity; Paul is thoroughly demonized here; if you cannot see that, O most excellent Felix, how can you really be a friend to Caesar?

And for good measure – we have all the Jews present piling on in the attack.

Now these are serious charges – and yet all of them are quite false.

Like a crystal hammer, it looks terrible, but when it is brought down with any force, it must shatter.

Christian, you will face false accusations in your life. You will be painted with the most remarkable colors, but by those who first hated your Master in glory.

How do you deal with this? Well this is our second point. You are to give an answer, and to stand true for the Lord.

1. You be forewarned; know that this will occur – not always, but sometimes. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.
2. Be honest if you are not pure in your case; be ready, as Paul was, to live a clean conscience – that means owning your sin. This is a must.
3. Be confident, knowing your Lord endured the same, is with you in your trials, and that you bear His Spirit in such times. The Scriptures say: *If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. (1Pe 4:14).*
4. Lastly, give an answer fitted to the false charge – answer them with a gospel answer, as Paul is about to do. Proverbs 25:11 says: *“Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances.*

Let us turn then to Paul’s reply, which after an appropriate and respectful address, begins with a flat out denial to the charge of sedition:

Not in the temple! Not in the synagogues! Not in the city!

They did not find me doing so; I did not do so; they cannot prove it because it did not happen; they have no leg to stand on.

Where are their witnesses? What is there proof?

He leaves aside the issue of how could Felix have jurisdiction there.

Thus he turns from defense to offense – and see how he does it.

He confesses his opponents are right; that he does worship as they say according the Way; that Way which they say is a sect, but which I serve according to the God of OUR fathers, believing the whole Bible, having hope in God and the certainty of the resurrection of both the just and unjust.

Paul wisely and honestly moves the differences upon religious grounds. He holds to the Bible, he holds to the God of the OT, he holds to the hope of heaven and the life to come.

And he punctuates it with living such a devotion to God with a clear conscience before God and man.

This is no low-life, dissenter, looking to stir up trouble.

And that opens the door to his purpose in coming to worship, outlined in 17-21, which is our last point today.

He calls Israel his nation, his people; he brings alms to them – the Christian segment of them, no doubt; he is occupied in the temple in worship, not provoking a riot, but purified, without crowd or uproar.

He puts the charge upon the true dissenters – the Hellenistic Jews from Asia – who should be there to bring accusation.

Or if not them, let these make their case; and again, an admission of sorts, not necessarily a confession of guilt – that he shouted out loud regarding the resurrection – which would let Felix know how unruly the proceedings were.

Paul more than successfully turns the tables:

Is he sacrilegious? Doesn't sound like it given his actions and intent on being there. And if he is, it is an intramural difference, and in-house debate among Jews.

Is he a schismatic, starting his own new religion? He claims he is in line with the OT promise and religion.

Is he seditious? Nothing in his demeanor or testimony or life thus far shows even a whiff of this.

This reply puts matters on hold until Lysias can arrive, and in the meantime, Paul is given liberty in Herod's seaside palace to receive friends.

And this is where we will have to pick up later, with what unfolds over the next stretch of time.

But let us close with this point: Paul effectively brought across the gospel into his defense.

He not only discredited the charges – he was no deceiver, no disturber of the peace, no devotee to some illegal god, but declared his religion.

And what was that religion?

Well, one writer insisted Paul defended himself without any reference to Jesus.

Yet, who is the Way, if not Jesus Christ? Is He not the Way, the Truth and the Life!?

How we need to get these points across to others!

We won't if they are not near and dear to our hearts!

What is our message?

1. We worship the true God of Scripture, the God of the covenant of grace found in the OT, and fulfilled in the New.
2. We worship according to the Scriptures, which we hold as the only basis for our faith and practice, the word of life.
3. We worship with an eye to things above and things to come – to the eternal world following the resurrection of all, the just and the unjust. We worship in hope, assurance, in verity and confidence.
4. We worship with purity and integrity, with a clean conscience, by grace, through a Savior who bled for us and sanctifies us.
5. Lastly, we worship through the lowly Nazarene, who stooped so low to reach us, to become our very road to walk upon to heaven!

This is the message we share, which should comfort all who hear.

But there is another part of the message which should make our hearers tremble, and that is what Felix will find next time.

Amen.