

THE TRIAL

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I was happy to see that eight of the ten missionaries to Haiti were released this past week. I don't know the circumstances under which they were incarcerated but I suspect that they should have been, as Jesus said, 'wise as serpents and harmless as doves.' Their probable impropriety got them in a lot of trouble. I sympathize with them, for I too was in jail for a short time in my first trip to Romania. When my pastor friend, Vali Radu, and I were released a few hours later, I preached to the jailer and he listened. Vali said to me, "Now I know why we were sent here; for no Romanian would have the courage to preach to one of these powerful people." Vali was expressing the fear people had of such strong communist leaders as the jailor, shortly after the fall of Couceascue, the dictator under the communist regime. I know Vali was exaggerating for emphasis, for many Romanians lost their lives for speaking out against the evil regime. Still, I was in jail and had the opportunity to preach to that lost soul, and I did.

During Paul's conversion, Christ had told him that he was chosen to be a vessel for Christ, and to stand before kings and other powerful people. Could Paul have known that just now he was fulfilling that prophecy of Jesus? Perhaps so.

Anyway, here he is, taken from the temple, rescued by the Romans, and now standing before Porcius Felix, the governor of that province. Tertullus the lawyer and orator who is for the prosecution says: 1) Paul is a pestilent fellow, meaning that Paul was a 'low-life', a pest, a plague. He wanted to assail Paul's character first. 2) Then Tertellus said that Paul was a disturber of the Jews and a leader of sedition, meaning that Paul was a troublemaker who was trying to cause rebellion, a false charge. 3) Then Paul is labeled the 'chief among the sect of the Nazarenes', a true charge. 4) Last, since Paul brought the Greek youth Trophimus to the city with him, they concluded that he had brought the Greek into the temple, thus the charge of profaning the temple—a false charge. These were the charges leveled against Paul.

Paul was on trial. He would stand before Porcius Felix, before Governor Festus, and before Agrippa II and his 'sister' Bernice. And although Paul was on trial concerning the above charges, Paul was not as much on trial as were Felix, Festus, and Herod Agrippa II.

Let us look at these three men and see how they came out in their trials. The first man, Porcius Felix, was a man who made bad decisions, and Deferred the Most Important Decision of His Life. ^{AC 24:24} Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you."

Like Agrippa II, and Bernice, Drusilla was a child of Agrippa I, and was always a rival with her sister Bernice over which was most beautiful and which could climb higher on the social ladder. Porcius Felix was a Roman who had had two previous wives. But when he saw Drusilla, who was then the wife of Azius, King of Emesa, he cons[ored] with the magician Atomos to Seduce Drusilla. After getting her away from Azius, he married her, and, I suspect, they both got what they deserved.

Josephus and others write that Felix would commit any crime because he knew that he could avoid punishment because of his influence with the courts. He also organized a group of revolutionaries called Sicarii (assassins) to kill and do his bidding. In Caesarea the Syrians and Jews were in bitter struggle over who owned the area. Felix allowed the Syrians to kill many Jews and plunder the homes of the wealthy Jews and do what they wanted. This alienated the Jews against him; so he was trying to make amends with them by holding Paul. His revolutionaries, according to historian Josephus, brought about the later Jewish-Roman Wars that resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem.

Now this Roman procurator and his wife Drusilla stand before Paul as Paul's judges. They will soon be judged by Rome, called back because of the bad relations they have instigated. Moreover he would have been executed had not his brother, Pallas, saved his life. He only wanted two things with Paul—he wanted the favor of the Jews, and he wanted a bribe, thinking Paul was from a wealthy family. Barclay writes of Felix and says, **“So Felix passes from history, a name of shame, and from the pages of the New testament one last injustice, for he left Paul in prison to please the Jews when he well knew he should have liberated him.”**

Surely the greatest mistake of Porcius Felix was that he heard the message of God, was deeply touched by it, and deferred it to a more convenient time as if to suggest, “Paul, I know I need to be saved. But this is not the time nor the place. Wait till there is a more convenient season. Then I will call you in and you can explain this thing about Jesus to me.” Felix was a flawed man, like so many politicians and public figures who are outed by the press for their adultery and so on; and who meekly tell the public, they're sorry. As someone said, “Sorry for what? For getting caught?” However, before we get too judgmental regarding the peccadillos of Porcius, or of the Governor of South Carolina, or of Tiger Woods, let us remember that ‘you have to be a sinner before you can be saved.’ That awful message of Righteousness to sinful Felix; that terrible message of temperance to intemperate and out of control Felix (or out of control Tiger Woods); that dreadful message of God's impending judgment upon sinners and sin; --that message should have been heeded and mingled with sorrow for sin and joy and happiness for forgiveness, Porcius Felix would have been a saved man with a reason for living. That message would have made Porcius Felix free from the awful fear of judgment to come and of hell that follows. No wonder Felix trembled. He knew he was unrighteous, he knew he was out of control, and he knew, from Paul's preaching that he was being Judged by the Judge of Judges. He was standing, shaking at the court of the Almighty, and passing it off for a ‘convenient time.’

Porcius goes back to Rome and sometime later a new Governor is appointed: his name is Festus. Those of us who watched Gunsmoke love that name, don't we? Like all political leaders, the faces change but usually the content of their rule doesn't change at all. However, this is not true in the case of Festus. HE WAS A GOOD AND JUST MAN WHO PUT LAW BEFORE HIS ETERNAL SOUL. Within two years he would be dead. Here is what Barclay says about him: “...we know very little about him, but what we know proves that he was a just and upright man.” In his commentary on Acts, Dr. Frank Stagg writes, “Festus tried to be fair, but he was a Roman puzzled by the strange Jewish laws...He was convinced that Paul was not guilty of criminal offense, yet Jewish rulers could hardly be ignored by a new procurator. But he cannot be cleared of the inference

that he lacked courage to act decisively.” However, he writes again, “Festus did not propose to turn Paul over to the Sanhedrin, but only to move the trial to Jerusalem.”” Also Stagg says that the ‘before me’ is emphatic, and that Festus is saying I will make sure he has a fair trial in Jerusalem, I will make sure he is protected.

Here is what Scripture says: ^{AC 25:1} Three days after arriving in the province, Festus went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem, ² where the chief priests and Jewish leaders appeared before him and presented the charges against Paul. ³ They urgently requested Festus, as a favor to them, to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way. ⁴ Festus answered, "Paul is being held at Caesarea, and I myself am going there soon. ⁵ Let some of your leaders come with me and press charges against the man there, if he has done anything wrong."

^{AC 25:6} After spending eight or ten days with them, he went down to Caesarea, and the next day he convened the court and ordered that Paul be brought before him. ⁷ When Paul appeared, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many serious charges against him, which they could not prove.

^{AC 25:8} Then Paul made his defense: "I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar."

^{AC 25:9} Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?"

^{AC 25:10} Paul answered: "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. ¹¹ If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!"

^{AC 25:12} After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"

Festus followed the letter of the law. Even though pressured by the Jews, and willing, if Paul agreed, to have Paul’s trial in Jerusalem. He thought he could be fair and protect Paul, but the Jews had planned an ambush to kill Paul, according to Dr. Luke. Paul, a Roman citizen, played the citizen card. “Since I am a Roman citizen I want to be tried in Rome. I appeal to Caesar!” Roman Law held that any Roman citizen could, if he chose, appeal to Caesar and be tried in Rome. Festus displeased the Jews after all and sent Paul on his way to Rome

I too think Festus was a good man. I too think he tried to do the right thing. But wasn’t Festus like a host of good men who put their faith in being good citizens and who forget that God doesn’t judge us on whether we’re good or not, but upon whether we have welcomed His Son into our hearts and into our worlds. Most morality is based on social mores. Law is essentially an agreement among the members of society that some things are good behavior and some things are bad behavior. In that sense it has nothing to do with our relationship to God, just our relationship to our society, to our social order, to our own perception of right and wrong. These are value judgments. The 10 Commandments, however, are based on Love, according to Jesus, who told the young lawyer, ^{MT 22:37} Jesus replied: " `Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: `Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

If Jesus is the Son of God and we do not love Him with our total being, how can we possibly say we Love His Father? If we don't love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves, how can we say we Love God who created our neighbor? Moreover, how many of us Love God with all our heart, soul and mind? Only Jesus Loved the Heavenly Father in that way. Therefore, somehow, Jesus must become our Righteousness, and that can only come about by faith which makes us perfectly right with a Perfect God.

That is why the Bible declares that Grace and not Law saves us. We are weak through the flesh and cannot possible keep the law. But God says, "My Son died for your sins, and you can be made righteous through His sacrifice." Faith does not say, "I'm a good man therefore I am right with God." Faith says, "I am a sinful man before a Holy God, and cannot by my works be saved." Then that faith reaches out and cries out to God, "Lord, I receive your righteousness. I receive your Son." Faith looks up to the Cross where mercy falls, like blood, down upon us and covers our sin with His salvation. Good men are, after all, not that much better in God's sight than sinful men. Festus may be more acceptable to you and me than Porcius Felix, but there is no difference, 'for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Learn what this means and salvation is near. Festus put Roman Righteousness, found in Roman Law, above the righteousness of God and perhaps lost his soul.

Are you good? Maybe to me and to others you are; but your righteousness and my righteousness are simply filthy rags and rotting garbage compared to God's Righteousness!

Festus stood as Paul's Judge, but he was under the judgment of another Judge, and that Judge declared him guilty at this judgment day.

There is a THIRD PERSON WE WANT TO SPEAK OF AND HIS NAME IS ANTIPAS II. HE WAS ALMOST A CHRISTIAN, BUT REFUSED TO GO ALL THE WAY. ^{AC 25:13} A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. ¹⁴ Since they were spending many days there, Festus discussed Paul's case with the king. He said: "There is a man here whom Felix left as a prisoner. ¹⁵ When I went to Jerusalem, the chief priests and elders of the Jews brought charges against him and asked that he be condemned.

^{AC 25:16} "I told them that it is not the Roman custom to hand over any man before he has faced his accusers and has had an opportunity to defend himself against their charges. ¹⁷ When they came here with me, I did not delay the case, but convened the court the next day and ordered the man to be brought in. ¹⁸ When his accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. ¹⁹ Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive. ²⁰ I was at a loss how to investigate such matters; so I asked if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges. ²¹ When Paul made his appeal to be held over for the Emperor's decision, I ordered him held until I could send him to Caesar."

^{AC 25:23} The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high ranking officers and the leading men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. ²⁴ Festus said: "King Agrippa, and all who are present with us, you see this man! The whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer.

When Paul gave his testimony to Agrippa and to Bernice, he gave his testimony to two very sinful people. Agrippa II was 17 when his father died, and was 26 when given title of King over the territory in Galilee. He moved his residence from Rome to Jerusalem. His sister/wife Bernice was married to their uncle, Herod, king of Chalcis. He died in 48 A.D. and she joined her brother in Rome. She lived with him in an incestuous relationship. She later married Polemon, King of Cilicia, but soon left him for her brother Agrippa II. Even to the sinful Romans, this scandalous affair was the gossip of the time. However, after living among the Jews a number of years, they started really helping the Jewish people and were applauded by them. Everyone who is bad is not all bad. Moreover the preaching of the Gospel touches the hearts of even very sinful people. As long as we live in this body, whatever sins we have committed, God still loves us and wants us to be saved. Until we die in sin, the Spirit of God wants to enter our lives and give us the Heavenly Father's Eternal Life. "And this is Life Eternal, that they might know Thee the only True God, and Jesus Christ whom He has sent."

Here is Paul preaching to this sinful royal couple, telling them how he was saved, and how they can be saved. Let me quote Barclay again: **"There is no more dramatic scene in the New Testament. It was with pomp that Agrippa and Bernice had come. They would have on their purple robes of royalty and their gold circlet of the crown on their brows. Doubtless Festus, to do honour to the occasion, had donned the scarlet robe which a governor wore on state occasions. Close at hand there must have stood Agrippa's suite and all round the most influential figures of the Jews. Close by Festus there would stand the captains in command of the five cohorts which were stationed at Caesarea; and in the background there would be a solid phalanx of tall Roman legionaires on ceremonial guard. It was into a scene like that there came Paul, the little Jewish tent-maker, with his hands in chains; and yet from the moment he speaks it is Paul who dominates the scene."**

And what did he speak? He spoke the word of God. He spoke that Jesus died and rose again. He preached the cross. He preached the resurrection. He affirmed that Jesus who died arose in three days, appeared to him and told him to tell everyone about this Gospel. Paul pressed King Agrippa for a decision about Christ. Perhaps Agrippa's statement was irony. Perhaps he said somewhat laughingly, "Paul you are so convincing that you're about to convince me." But I think he said it seriously. I think that because he knew what the Prophets had said, he knew Paul was right. So he said, "Almost, you persuade me to be a Christian." Here was a powerful man who was almost saved but lost. Here was a monarch with a royal robe and a golden crown who could have been forgiven of his scarlet sins and reigned as a King with Christ when our Lord returns a second time. He chose to be lost.

Three men—Felix a very sinful Roman who trembled when Paul reasoned with him about righteousness, temperance and judgment; Festus, a good man who based his deeds on social morality, but who put goodness before Righteousness; and Agrippa II who

felt the pull of the Gospel and willfully decided not to be persuaded to accept the Jewish Messiah. These men made their choices. They refused to accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They turned their backs on Jesus. What will you decide? What will you do with Jesus who is called the Christ? You see, you stand before a Holy God. You are on trial, not Paul. You are on trial, not Felix or Festus or Agrippa. God is your Judge. He summons you to repent and believe. The option is to refuse God's Word and be lost eternally! What verdict do you chose?