**PAUL’S HOPE IN THE RESURRECTION**

Acts 24:1-27 Key Verse: 24:15

“…and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.”

Last week, we saw how the Risen Christ stood beside Paul in the Roman barracks and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.” It showed us that even world-class missionaries like Paul sometimes need personal encouragement after many sufferings. Think about the content of Jesus’ encouragement in this verse: Jesus acknowledged Paul’s faithfulness up to that point, then promised Paul that he would continue to be used to testify to the Risen Christ. I believe Jesus would say the same thing to any of us here today. So let’s take some courage!

In today’s passage we get to see how Paul defend himself before an actual Roman court. Everybody likes courtroom drama! We can learn how Paul was able to use any context to preach the gospel, especially to plant hope in the resurrection. The message has three parts.

1. Paul in the courtroom (1-13)

As we studied in the previous weeks, an angry mob of Paul’s enemies rose up against him in Jerusalem, and the Roman commander intervened to rescue Paul. In Chapter 23, Paul was examined before the Sanhedrin to try to determine what charges might apply against him, but this led to nothing but another riot. Then a group of 40 men formed a conspiracy and swore an oath to not eat or drink until they had killed Paul. When the commander heard about this, he decided to take Paul’s case to the level of the regional governor. In a spectacular nighttime rescue, Paul was taken to Caesarea on horseback by 470 Roman soldiers. The governor’s name was Felix. After he read the letter from the commander, Felix put Paul under guard in Herod’s palace until his accusers arrived and his case could be heard.

Verse 1 says that it was five days later when the high priest Ananias, together with some elders and a lawyer named Tertullus came to Caesarea. Tertullus is a Latin name; the high priests must have hired him as an expert in Roman Law. Paul was called in and Tertullus, as the counsel for the Plaintiffs in Sanhedrin vs. Paul, gave his opening statement.

Tertullus begins his presentation by heaping flattery on the governor. In verses 2 and 3 he says, “We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. 3Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude.” We might find such obvious kissing-up nauseating, but it was probably par for the course at that time. People who went into law would extensively study the art of rhetoric. But often, what they learned was more about manipulating an audience than sound argumentation. Of course, buttering someone up like this, just to get what you want from them, is not a proper approach for a servant of the truth.

How does Tertullus introduce the charges against Paul? Look at verses 5-8. “We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him. By examining him yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him.”

Tertullus uses emotionally loaded words like “troublemaker” and “ringleader” to form a negative picture of Paul in the minds of his hearers—to make him look like some kind of mafia boss. Even worse, he takes what are actual facts and twists them. It’s true that several riots had occurred in different cities as a result of Paul’s gospel work. It looks like a very damaging fact. But a half-truth is just a very manipulative kind of lie. No riots were stirred up by Paul. Paul’s desire was for peace and orderliness. People rioted because what Paul taught convicted them of their sins and sometimes interfered with their income stream. Finally, Tertullus falsely accuses Paul of desecrating the temple, but without giving any details.

How would Paul defend himself against these accusations? When we hear manipulative words and misinterpreted facts used against us, we can easily become intimidated and defensive; we can be tempted to lower ourselves to the level of our accusers, repaying slander with slander. Paul did not do this. Look at verse 10. “When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: ‘I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make my defense.’” Though Paul did not pile on the flattery like Tertullus did, still he was respectful. He acknowledged Felix’s qualifications to judge his case, and said he was glad to make his defense before the governor. I believe Paul genuinely was pleased to be able to present his side of the case, to try to clear up misunderstandings about the gospel work.

In his response, Paul gave what is (to my untrained opinion) a very good legal defense. Look at verses 11-13. “You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. 12My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. 13And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me.” In contrast to Tertullus’ statement, Paul gives a proper presentation of factual evidence, with times and dates, describing what he did in Jerusalem.

How could Paul could do so well in court without a lawyer? Maybe it was because of his Pharisee training, in which he learned to tease apart the technicalities of the Jewish Law. But more importantly, Paul had been encouraged by Jesus to be strong and keep finding a way to testify. Maybe we can’t speak as well as Paul; but Jesus gave a promise to all his disciples for when they were brought before worldly powers-that-be to testify. In Luke 21 Jesus said, “But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.” (Lk 21:14-15)

1. Paul shares his hope (14-21)

I’ve never personally had to testify in court myself. But from what I’ve heard, lawyers train their clients very strictly to answer questions very carefully, using the same words every time, and not going any further or volunteering any additional information or commentary. It’s because anything people say will be used against them by the opposing attorney. So if Paul had had a lawyer to advise him, that lawyer probably would have instructed Paul to stop at this point, once he had addressed the stated charges. But as we know, Paul’s ultimate goal here was not just to get out of the charges. Paul kept speaking in order to fully present to the world the gospel on which he had taken his stand.

Look at verse 14. “However, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets…” Christianity was called “the Way” at this time, inspired by Jesus’ words, “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life” (Jn 14:6). Usually in court, one should never admit to anything. But Paul said, “I admit that I am a Christian!” Paul was not ashamed of Jesus. Paul acknowledges that the church of Jesus was widely disrespected with the derogatory term of “sect”. Paul is not ashamed to suffer the disgrace of being called a sect member for Jesus. But then Paul explains that this term is undeserved. He says that what he believes is nothing more and nothing less than all the revelations of the Jewish religion—everything that is in accordance with the Law and the Prophets. In other words, Paul believes the Bible, just like we still do today. As believers in Jesus Christ, we hold that Christianity is not actually a new religion after Judaism, but its true fulfillment, because Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Law and Prophets of the Old Testament.

Paul is saying that what he believes is the same thing his accusers claim to believe. Now look at verse 15. “…and I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.” The culmination of the gospel is the resurrection of the dead. Paul calls the resurrection his “hope in God.” Here Paul is opening his own heart before the court, revealing the inner motive behind all he is doing. All of Paul’s efforts and striving in preaching the gospel were not for his worldly ambition but for the hope of eternal life. As Paul wrote in Philippians 3:10, “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.” In his defense, Paul not just defending himself but praying that those who hear him will share the same glorious hope that makes his own life so meaningful—the hope of resurrection. It’s not a crime to have hope, is it? Everyone wants to live with hope. That’s what the gospel is all about.

Did you notice that Paul mentions the resurrection, he says it is of both the righteous and the wicked? Jesus taught that in the resurrection at the end of the age, the wicked are also raised, so that they may be judged. Paul is not hiding that there is also the element of judgment in the gospel; he is confronting his hearers with the seriousness of sin and the final judgment. Now look at verse 16: “So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.” Paul is showing that what he believes does not make him rebellious or troublemaking, but exactly the opposite. Paul would not knowingly do anything evil because he lived before God’s judgment, striving always to keep the highest standard of his own conscience that God put in his heart. Any wise ruler or governor or president would be happy to have citizens like Paul in his or her country—citizens who always try to do the right thing because of the fear of God in their heart.

To finish his defense, Paul comes back to the facts at hand and fills in the background of how he came to Jerusalem after many years of missionary activity, and what he came to do. Look at verses 17-18. “After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings. 18I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance.” Paul was well aware of the requirements of the Law and was punctilious in keeping them when he went to the temple. He only came to Jerusalem to quietly do good deeds. He was not a troublemaker; in fact, as we’ve discussed, his purpose in coming to Jerusalem was to make peace between the Jewish and Gentile churches. He was a peacemaker!

I think the strongest legal element of Paul’s defense is given in verse 19. “But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me.” The people who actually started the trouble that led to this trial were not the Sanhedrin members, but the Jews from Asia who seized Paul in the temple. But those people were not even present! Legally, if there is an alleged crime, but nobody who actually witnessed it shows up in court, there is no case!

Paul concludes in verses 20 and 21by saying the only thing that could possibly be brought against him by the people present was the assertion he made before the Sanhedrin about the resurrection of the dead. Clearly, this was a matter of faith only, and nothing relating to the laws of Rome. Legally, Paul’s defense is air-tight. But what about spiritually? Let’s read verse 21. “unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence: ‘It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.’” Spiritually, I think Paul knew that this statement he said before the Sanhedrin was still true as he stood before Felix. Paul knew that it wasn’t even about himself, ultimately. From God’s point of view, he was in this Roman court so that the gospel of Jesus’ resurrection could be presented to the world. May God help us also have such a perspective, so we can overcome ourselves and plant resurrection hope wherever we go.

1. Felix’s indecision (22-27)

How did Felix the governor take all of this? Verse 22 says that Felix was well acquainted with the Way. So he would know that what Paul was saying was accurate. It says Felix adjourned the proceedings with a promise to decide Paul’s case after Lysias the commander came. However, looking ahead, there is no more mention of the commander! It seems like that was just Felix’s excuse to not make a decision. Felix reminds us of another Roman governor, Pontius Pilate; like Pilate, Felix knew that Paul had not done anything against the law but was afraid of angering the Jews. So he put off making a decision.

Verse 24 says that a few days later, when Felix was with his wife, who was Jewish, he brought Paul back out to hear him speak about Jesus. Why did Felix want to hear more from Paul? There was no legal reason for it. It seems that Paul’s testimony to resurrection hope had begun to move the governor’s heart. Felix’s soul was thirsty for the truth. Listening to Paul was probably very refreshing to a ruler who spent day after day listening to people like Tertullus. So Paul began to have one-to-one Bible study with Felix! However, when Paul began to talk about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix got scared and ended the Bible study early. Have you ever had a Bible student do that?

In the following days and weeks, Festus continued to bring Paul out and talk with him on a regular basis. Verse 26 says that there was also a sinful motive to this; it was because he hoped to get a bribe. This is human beings’ double hearts. Paul never offered any bribe, but he never refused to talk to Felix about Jesus. Paul could be a patient shepherd even for a corrupted political man.

At the end of the passage, we see that Felix left Paul in prison for the entire remainder of his term as governor, for two whole years. Paul’s imprisonment in Caesarea was relatively comfortable, with some freedom and the ability to be visited by friends. It also protected Paul from his 40 would-be assassins, who after two years were probably getting pretty hungry. Of course, this imprisonment is still a great injustice due to a leader who won’t stand up for what was right. Nonetheless, although it seemed that nothing was happening for a long time, Jesus’ plan for Paul to testify in Rome was moving forward at God’s right speed.

In today’s passage, we saw the hope that can sustain a person’s spirit through all kinds of sufferings and give them purpose: it is the hope of the resurrection. This hope gives us the ability to overcome slander and a negative reputation and use every opportunity to be a shepherd for others. May God bless you to be moved by the same hope in God that Paul and many great men and women have had.