

# Sermon 72, Resurrection Hope on Trial, Pt. 1, Acts 24

**Proposition:** Paul insists to Felix that he is on trial because he hopes in the resurrection.

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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the passage before us this morning it's easy to get lost in the details. Paul, as you recall, was detained in Jerusalem during the previous week for being found at the center of a riot in the Temple courts. He was examined by the Sanhedrin, which also tried to beat him to death. Upon discovering a plot against Paul's life, the Roman commander on the scene forwarded Paul up to Caesarea so that he could stand trial there, before the governor of the province of Syria-Palestine. That's where we pick up the narrative this morning. In other words, we've seen Paul on trial for the last three Sundays, and we will see him on trial for at least two more Sundays. What is the deal? Why does Luke spend so long on the trials of Paul? The answer, brothers and sisters, is in every chapter of these trial scenes, if you will simply care to look for it. Let me spill it to: Paul is on trial for his hope in the resurrection. Understood this way, we see Luke's point clearly: Resurrection hope is solid. It can carry you through any number of trials, because the risen Jesus reigns.

### **I. Context: The Resurrection at Issue between Paul and the Jews, chs. 21-26**

Paul does not directly refer to the resurrection of the dead in chs. 21 and 22. He does describe the call from Jesus of Nazareth in ch. 22, with the clear implication that Jesus is alive, not dead as one might suppose. But in ch. 23, when he is formally before the Sanhedrin to describe what he's thinking, he says clearly that the issue is the resurrection of the dead. Notice, then, the following sequence in the remaining trials:

- having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust (Act 24:15 ESV)

- Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. (Act 25:19 ESV)
- I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles." (Act 26:22-23 ESV)

Do you see a particular theme emerging? I certainly do. Paul is interested in getting the point across to whoever will listen, Jew or Gentile: Jesus is alive. He insists repeatedly that the real issue in these trials is not whether he defiled the temple, or whether he causes trouble among Jews. The real issue is resurrection hope, generated by the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the first, but not the last, to rise from the dead.

In short, the reason Paul kept getting in trouble with the Jews is that he looked not just for life beyond death, but full-blown, restored bodily life. That landed him in front of the Sanhedrin, in front of Felix, Festus, and Agrippa. And that is why we are looking at this series of trial scenes under the heading of "resurrection hope on trial." Our main takeaway from this section is clear too: Resurrection hope should be what the Christian is all about. We don't perceive death as the end. We see it as a reversible condition. Someday, Jesus will return and overcome death.

## **II. The Accusations Against Paul, 24:1-9**

Well, with that background, hopefully you know where we are in this text. We are in the first of three parts of Paul's trial. He has testified to a governor once before, on the island of Cyprus. But other than that, he interacted with governors about as often as the rest of us do. That changes in this chapter. Paul is testifying to resurrection hope before a former slave who has risen to the status of governor of a decent-sized double province. The Roman historian Tacitus is pretty hard on Felix. The governor's name may have meant "happy," but Tacitus says that "he exercised the power of a king with the instincts of a slave." So says Tacitus. We do know that he married Cleopatra's great-granddaughter, then two more women sequentially. All three of his wives were of royal blood, and the two whose names we know were famous for their good looks. In other words, like many politicians before and since, this guy was better at recruiting cute girls than he was at actually, you know, administering justice.

But that doesn't matter. Paul isn't here to critique Felix's governing; indeed, he says that he is cheerfully ready to make a defense before him. Luke mentions who Felix is but moves swiftly on to the actual trial scene. Here, we see a professional lawyer stand up to prosecute Paul. The lawyer, one Tertullus, lists four major charges.

### **A. He's a Plague, v. 5a**

The first of these is, alas, only too true. Luke's narrative makes no attempt to disguise it. Paul was a plague. He was a pest everywhere he went to those who were content in their paganism and Judaism and not interested in moving forward with Jesus Christ.

Paul would not let alone those who had no interest in being Christian. He insisted on making an issue out of it. He consistently brought up the name, the nature, and the identity of Jesus, and he demanded commitment from the people to whom he was speaking.

The plague, then, was not that Paul sowed subversion or stood for political or economic causes that were unpopular. Instead, he simply forced the issue as much as possible: Is Jesus your Lord, or not?

### **B. He Stirs Up Riots, v. 5b**

The second charge is that Paul stirs up riots among all Jews throughout the world. Again, Luke's own narrative indicates that this charge is at least half true. Paul's goal was not to cause riots; his goal was to convince people to believe in and follow Jesus. But his countrymen *really* didn't want to do that. They had not the slightest desire to be obedient to the Son of God. And so, they consistently rioted against the man who sought to convince them to follow Jesus of Nazareth — one of their own, and yet not one whom they would receive or acknowledge.

So did Paul cause riots? Yes and no. He didn't personally riot, or encourage anyone to riot. But he also refused to be blackmailed or manipulated into silence by the threat of a riot.

### **C. He Is a Ringleader of the Nazarenes, v. 5c**

The third charge is pretty much entirely true: Paul is indeed a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes, if that's what you want to call Christians. Without Paul, it's hard to imagine the church as looking anything like its present self. Jesus founded the church, but Paul was the wise master builder who did the most under Jesus to build that temple.

### **D. He Tried to Profane the Temple, v. 6**

Only the final charge is completely false — and ironically, it is the final charge that triggered Paul's actual arrest and his transferral to the Roman authorities in Caesarea. Paul had walked around Jerusalem a bit with Trophimus the Ephesian. He had not tried to profane the Temple.

The kicker, though, of course, is that the Jews lean so heavily on this charge because this is the only one that a Roman ear would hear as an actual issue. If they had presented the first three charges, Felix would have said "And your point is?" and then had them driven out of the courtroom, possibly with whips. Does a Roman care about the religious squabbles of fanatical and temperamental Jews? Let me put this delicately: He doesn't give a crap! Felix is not in the least interested in whether a particular Jew has started a school of Judaism that the other Jews don't like. *But* — Roman law does allow the Jews a lot of latitude in protecting their Temple. That is their baby and if they want to protect it from desecration, Rome will assist them in doing so. Hence the final charge being the only one of any importance to Felix. Felix doesn't care why Jews are rioting. If they're rioting, send out riot police with sharp swords and kill them until they stop rioting. It's very simple. But if the Jews are saying that someone violated their Temple, then that person is dead meat.

So this final charge is the real sting, the only lever with which Paul might possibly be pried out of Roman custody and remanded to the people who want to kill him. They are actually offended by items 1-3, but this, item 4, is the only one that *might possibly* matter to the Romans. The high priests are hoping, anyway.

## **III. Paul's Defense, vv. 10-21**

Paul is then given the chance to respond to the charges. He doesn't have a lawyer; indeed, as Luke makes clear, he doesn't need one either. He responds to the charges point by point, but in

the middle of his speech and again at the end he insists on his right to define the real issue. The real issue, he says, is not the temple, nor riots, nor me being a Nazarene. The real issue is resurrection hope.

#### **A. The Real Issue Is Resurrection Hope, vv. 15, 21**

Paul insists that he is a hopeful man. He has a conviction that death is not the end of the line. And, he says, the people accusing me have this same hope! The hope is that every human person, good and back alike, will rise from the dead and return to the bodies in preparation for the final judgment. Now, this doctrine is explicitly stated in Daniel 12, and thus anyone who takes the OT seriously is required to believe it. This resurrection hope is indeed the real issue here. The trials of Paul relate to resurrection hope. The only “wrongdoing” Paul engaged in was to believe that Jesus is risen, and that therefore all human persons will rise from the dead, some to Heaven and some to Hell.

Now, what does it imply that Paul defines the trial this way? It means that the issues are indeed “a dispute about the Jewish law,” as Festus summarizes in the next chapter. It also implies that this is not about public order, a “riots vs. peace” paradigm such as Tertullus is trying to argue for.

Paul doesn’t stand on the side of riots and chaos over against peace and order. Rather, Paul stands on the side of resurrection hope over against the idea that death is the end and that life is ultimately hopeless.

Brothers and sisters, what a great paradigm for 21st-century culture warriors! We believe in law and order, constitutional originalism, freedom, and more. But our messaging needs to be simple and direct: We are on the side of resurrection hope. We are against death and for life, even to the extent of believing in life on the other side of death as exemplified in our risen Leader.

Paul is saying to Felix, “If you acquit me, you are agreeing that human life has a purpose and that there is something good to look forward to even beyond the grave. But if you condemn me, you are condemning human life too.”

I read recently that the church grew through late Antiquity and the Middle Ages because pagans perceived it as being on the side of freedom. That was certainly the stance Paul took: Your human life will be better, more joyful, more hopeful, if you throw in your lot with Jesus of Nazareth. In Him, there is resurrection hope. Paul does not throw a fit about how the Jews were so mean, or about how the Romans were so mean. He could have had a lot to complain about, but he chooses not to complain. He is a hopeful man.

#### **B. I Didn’t Create Any Disturbance in Jerusalem, v. 11-12**

But addition to the general issue of resurrection hope, Paul takes the time to respond to all of the points that Tertullus made. In response to the first point, for instance, he says that he was not in Jerusalem very long, and that he did not gather any groups or do any teaching while he was there.

Now, notice that Paul deliberately sidesteps the charge that he has incited riots throughout the world. Why? Not because he was lying. He knew that riots had a habit of following him around the Mediterranean. But the charge was not properly before the court, and both Tertullus

and Paul knew it. Whether Felix knew it I don't know. But my hunch is that he might have been willing to pull on that thread if Paul had brought it up again. In any case, Paul neatly sidesteps the charge of causing riots in Ephesus, Thessalonika, etc. Those were years in the past, the witnesses were not present, and the governor of Syria-Palestine had no jurisdiction to try crimes committed in those other locations, particularly by someone who wasn't a native of his province anyway. So Paul silently pushes the court in the direction of examining the only matter properly before it. He may have been a plague on Judaism, but there was and is nothing illegal about one Jew presenting ideas that most Jews find to be anathema. It happened in the first century, it happened in Antiquity, and it continues to happen down to the present day. One need only say the words "Benjamin Netanyahu" in a mixed Jewish crowd to see what I mean.

So Paul essentially refutes the charges of being a pestiferous riot-monger by saying "I didn't do anything illegal in Jerusalem last week, and that is the only place and time where my actions are properly before this court."

### **C. My Opponents Can't Prove My Guilt, v. 13**

He goes on to state something even more bold, though: "My opponents can't prove my guilt." Why does he say that? Because an unbiased witness (i.e., an Ephesian or Thessalonikan who did not participate in the riot, was not a Christian or Jew, and simply observed the whole event from a neutral position) was nowhere to be found. It is possible that there might be someone like that out there, but the prosecutors were never going to bring such a person in to testify because his testimony would show what Luke has already narrated — viz., that Paul did nothing but preach Jesus and that it was the extreme outrage of the Jews that created such aggressive reactions against his preaching. In other words, though Paul said things they didn't like, it was the opponents who created and supported the riots. Paul knew this, and so he boldly asserted that the accusation that he was a riot-monger was incapable of proof.

### **D. Resurrection Hope Creates Worship and Generosity, vv. 11, 17**

But Paul does confess one crime: The crime of hoping in the resurrection, just like other Pharisees do. He adds further that he has a clear conscience. Again, this is not just a random observation about his own psychological or even moral state. This is a courtroom claim: "I am not a bad Jew. I have not betrayed my people. I live in accordance with the laws and commandments I grew up with, because Jesus is the fulfillment of real Judaism." Or, as he put it elsewhere, "He is a Jew who is one inwardly." Jesus is indeed Jewish, and Paul is indeed Jewish, and as a Jewish follower of Jesus Paul has a clean conscience.

Notice, too, that he directly ties his belief in the resurrection to having a clean conscience. Because he looks forward to a future life, he takes jolly good care to live uprightly here and now. The hope of the resurrection makes people live well!

Now, the atheists try to turn this around and say, "You Christians are so heavenly minded you're no earthly good. When you believe in pie in the sky by and by, you can't possibly invest in this world like you should. We enjoy life more and do more for it because we know it's temporary."

Paul says “No you don’t. I came to give alms to my nation because I hope in the resurrection. I came to worship God because I hope in the resurrection. I keep a clean conscience because I hope in the resurrection.”

Brothers and sisters, do you stand with Paul? Are you so wrapped up in the concept of life with Christ, dwelling in the house of the LORD forever, that you are generous to give alms like Paul was? Do you contribute to the poor in a meaningful way? Do you worship God regularly? You’re here on a Sunday evening, which tells me that you do. But don’t give up on doing that. Paul let his resurrection hope create worship and generosity in him. You can do the same.

#### **E. The Real Accusers Aren’t Even Here, vv. 18-19**

Paul finishes up with two points: First, the real accusers aren’t even present. The ones who claimed to have seen the alleged offense are missing in action. Under Roman law, that means that Felix needs to throw the case out entirely. But Paul then winds up with one final thing: The resurrection of the dead is what really counts here.

Is that where you’re at, mentally speaking? The state is holding you on some trumped-up charge, and you are most interested in the coming resurrection of all the dead? That’s where Paul was at. And that’s where you and I need to be. We need to be so wrapped up in the truth of life after death with our Savior that we are not worried about wars, rumors of wars, and so on. We can just rejoice in what God has for us deep in His plans for our future.

#### **IV. Felix Withholds Judgment, vv. 22-27**

Felix, though, servile creature that he is, refuses to render judgment on Paul’s case, instead preferring to wait for a bribe. He and his wife know about the Christian faith more accurately than one might have supposed. Yet Paul’s teaching only made Felix afraid, and though Felix liked talking to him, he had not the slightest interest in believing in Jesus.

Yet through it all, Jesus reigns. That doesn’t mean that he always frees his people right away. It doesn’t mean that we won’t go through hardships if we live for Him. But it does mean that we will rise from the dead. And honestly, if that is the case, what can hurt us? So Paul wasted two years of his life rotting in prison for doing absolutely nothing except walking into the temple one day. But you see, Paul was not thinking “this is one-fortieth of my entire life! This is so much ministry time wasted! I’m going bonkers in this cell!” He was thinking “I have all eternity before me. Two “wasted” years, or twenty — I’m not going to sweat it, because I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Do you have that eternal perspective that will allow you to live generously and joyfully even when imprisoned? When made the plaything of a lousy governor? When your worship becomes the occasion for your indefinite detainment?

Brothers and sisters, the reign of Christ is real. It’s more real than a Roman prison or a period of detention under Felix. If you believe that, you’ll worship heartily; live generously; and look forward to life in Heaven with Jesus, embodied in your glorified body, forever. Amen.