

In Defense of an Offensive Gospel

Series: Fully Devoted Followers

Acts 24:1-27

Sunday, November 21, 2021

Do you remember *the trial of the century*? If you're having trouble identifying which trial I'm referring to, that's because the phrase *trial of the century* is used to describe many famous cases. In the early part of the 20th century, the Scopes Monkey Trial and the Lindbergh kidnapping trial was on everyone's minds. After World War II, Americans followed the Nuremberg trials and the case against Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. And in 1995, daily coverage of the O.J. trial was everywhere.

Recently, we've been following the story of Paul's journey to Jerusalem, his arrest in the temple, his conflict with the Jewish council, and his rescue by Roman soldiers. In less than two weeks, Paul found himself back in the city of Caesarea, no longer protected by his friends, but guarded by soldiers. Felix, the Roman governor who ruled over Judea, held Paul in prison until the high priest could arrive to make his case.

Remember, it was because of a foiled plot to kill Paul that he was taken to Caesarea by a military escort. Now on trial before the governor, the high priest along with "some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus" had come to make their case against Paul.

Tertullus presented the case for the prosecution. But not before buttering up the judge.

"When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented his case before Felix: "We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude" (vv. 2-3).

Tertullus praised Felix for the peacemaking reforms he had instituted. But everyone knew that Felix was no peacemaker. History records that he often used violence to bring order in Judea. This lawyer was praising Felix to gain a favorable judgment.

Paul's accusers saw this as an open and shut case. Look at verses 5-6.¹

"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."

First, Paul was accused of being a *troublemaker*, one who was "stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world." *Troublemaker* is a nice way of saying that Paul was viewed

¹ See NIV footnote: "Some manuscripts include here *him, and we would have judged him in accordance with our law.* ⁷*But the commander Lysias came and took him from us with much violence,* ⁸*ordering his accusers to come before you.*"

as a *pest* and that his message was spreading like a *plague*. It's true that wherever Paul went, trouble seemed to follow and that he often found himself in the middle of a riot. But Paul never intended to instigate violence.

But that's not how the high priest saw things. Notice that second, Paul was labeled as "a ringleader of the Nazarene sect." At the time, enemies of the gospel viewed Christianity as a sect—an offshoot of Judaism. Followers of Jesus of Nazareth were known as *Nazarenes*, and Paul was known to be their spokesperson.

Third, Paul was accused of violating the sanctity of the temple. Much of the trouble that started in Jerusalem was based on a rumor that Paul had brought a Gentile into the temple. The word on the street, in Acts 21, was that Paul had been spotted with his non-Jewish friend, Trophimus. It was assumed then—though no one could be certain—that Paul had brought his unclean friend into the sacred space and thus willingly violated Jewish law.

These were the charges made against Paul. Two charges, that of leading the Nazarene sect and desecrating the temple were religious matters. These would not have held much weight in Felix's secular court. To get a conviction, Paul's enemies needed to persuade Felix with the first charge, that Paul was a disturber of the peace, and thus an enemy of the state.²

The story of Paul's trial continues in verse 10. He's granted him the opportunity to speak as his own defense attorney. Paul first declared that he was innocent. He was accused of stirring up trouble in Jerusalem, but the truth was that he had come for a very different purpose. Follow along starting in verse 10 to see how Paul's defense unfolded.

“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. You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. My 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. And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me” (vv. 10-13)

Paul came to Jerusalem not to riot, but to worship. During the brief time he was there, not once did he aim to provoke anyone. His motives for coming to Jerusalem were well-intentioned. Look at verses 17-18:

² It's interesting that a similar case was made some thirty years prior when the Jewish council brought Jesus to trial before Pontius Pilate (cf. Luke 23:1-5).

“After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings. I 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” (vv. 17-18).

Paul came with financial gifts collected from the churches he visited on his journeys. These offerings were for the church in Jerusalem, in particular for the poor among the believers.³

Paul also pointed out that those who had originally charged him with violating the law, had failed to show up in court that day. Notice 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” (v. 19).

But there was another matter that Paul needed to address, his affiliation with the so-called sect of the Nazarenes. Was it right to label Paul as the ringleader of this group? Had he broken away from the sacred beliefs of God’s people?

Throughout church history, believers have used creeds to help them articulate what they believe precisely and succinctly. As Paul stood before the governor, he saw the opportunity to clarify his position by offering a confession of his faith. What he said wasn’t technically a creed, but it was a precise and succinct statement of some of his core beliefs. His confession of faith is found in verses 14-16.

“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, 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. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man” (vv. 14-16).

Let’s look at the three core convictions that Paul stated in these verses. First, **Paul worshiped the God of his ancestors**. Paul affirmed the foundational belief that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God of his ancestors—is God alone. Isaiah 37:16 says,

“LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth” (Isa. 37:16, NIV).

³ cf. Rom. 15:25-26

The God that Paul worshiped was the same God who revealed himself in the Old Testament. In fact, the second core conviction that Paul professed was that **he believed every word of the Hebrew scriptures**. Paul didn't refer to his Bible as the Old Testament, but that's what he meant when he said that he believed "everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets" (v. 14). So Paul not only believed in the God of the Old Testament, he believed in everything that was taught in the Old Testament.

One thing that is taught in the Old Testament is the hope of the resurrection. We might assume that resurrection is something that was introduced in the days of Jesus. It's true that the New Testament provides a clearer picture of this doctrine, but we've given glimpses of resurrection in the Old Testament. The prophet Daniel records,

"At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:1-2, NIV).

Paul worshiped the God of his ancestors, he believed everything written in the Law and the Prophets, and **he shared in the hope of the resurrection**. If Paul was so closely aligned with these doctrines of the Jewish faith, then what did his opponents find offensive about his teaching? The answer is in verse 14,

"I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors *as a follower of the Way*, which they call a sect" (v. 14a).

Paul had not invented a *new* way, his gospel pointed to *the* Way. The high priest considered the followers of Jesus of Nazareth to be a religious sect, but Paul understood *the* Way to be the fulfillment of all that God had revealed in the scriptures.

But don't just take Paul's word for it.

On one occasion, a group of Pharisees got into a confrontation with Jesus over core beliefs.

"At this they exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that whoever obeys your word will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?"

Jesus replied, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know

him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and obey his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”

“You are not yet fifty years old,” they said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!” “Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!” At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds” (John 8:52-59, NIV).

Jesus not only claimed to know the God of their ancestors, he claimed to *be* God!

On another occasion, the risen Jesus met with a group of his followers and encouraged them with these words,

“This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:44-47, NIV).

Jesus affirmed the core truth that Paul professed to believe: everything written in the Old Testament scriptures is true and it was all fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

If Paul was guilty of anything, it was he said about his hope in the resurrection. Look at verses 20-21,

“[T]hese who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin—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’” (vv. 20-21).

It wasn’t Paul’s general belief in resurrection that the Sanhedrin found offensive. Most Jews held the same belief. But Paul preached the hope of the resurrection *according to the Way*, that is according to the gospel.

One of Jesus’s most amazing miracles took place in a village called Bethany. A close friend of his had died and Jesus and his disciples traveled to meet with the grieving family. But the family knew that Jesus was someone special. So, Martha, a sister of the dead man, Lazarus met Jesus as he arrived and said to him,

““Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” Jesus

said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world”” (John 11:21-27, NIV).

Paul shared with his fellow Jews the hope of the resurrection. But Paul preached what many refused to believe, that Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life. On the last day, it will be the Lord Jesus who will assign those who are made righteous in him to eternal life, and those who reject the gospel to eternal separation from God.

What did they find so offensive? Everything that Paul believed, he believed as a follower of the Way. Every one of Paul’s core convictions was rooted in the gospel. In other words, a faith that holds to the teachings of the Old Testament yet fails to see its fulfillment in Jesus is no faith at all. **The way of Jesus is the way of God.**

But while Paul’s accusers wanted nothing to do with the Way, Felix was somewhat curious. Look at how this passage ends.

“Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings. “When Lysias the commander comes,” he said, “I will decide your case.” He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs.

Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul talked about 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.” At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him.

When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison” (vv. 22-27)

Felix “was well acquainted with the Way” (v. 22). He was familiar with the message and ministry of Jesus. You would think that this combined with his wife Drusilla’s Jewish background would give him an advantage. Felix often called upon Paul in prison to tell him more about faith in Christ. But notice how he reacted to Paul’s message in verse 25,

“As Paul talked about 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”” (v. 25).

Some, like Paul’s Jewish opponents, will take offense to the gospel for theological reasons. But others, like Felix, will take offense to the gospel because of what it demands. When Paul spoke to Felix about his lifestyle, about righteousness and sin, and about God’s judgment, the message hit too close to home.

Paul’s trial illustrates that **the gospel is an offensive message**. To claim that the way of Jesus is *the way* is offensive to those who believe that God is accessible by many paths. Yet it’s also offensive to those who believe that their way is the only way. The way of Jesus is offensive because it’s exclusive.

But the way of Jesus is also offensive to those who don’t agree that obedience and righteousness is a better way. It’s offensive to those who reject God’s definition of sin. The way of Jesus is offensive because it’s narrow.

But there’s hope for the offended. At one time, Paul refused to believe that the way of Jesus was the way of God. But Paul said of his own conversion,

“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Tim. 1:12-17, NIV).