

THE PSEUDO-RELIGIOUS, THE SAINT, AND THE SECULARIST
ACTS 24

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

In the most crucial social issues facing our nation today the loudest voices entering the discussion can often be divided into three camps. There are the conservatives, who include evangelicals and devout Catholics and Mormons and other religious people. There are religious liberals, and there are secularists.

This divide is evidenced in the case that appeared before the Supreme Court two weeks ago where the issue the court faced was whether states can prohibit transgender males from participating in women's sports. Religious conservatives say that this is wrong. Religious liberals tend to be more friendly to the idea. The Presbyterian Church in the USA, for example, declared in 2018 that it supported **"inclusion of transgender people, people who identify as gender non-binary and people of all gender identities within the full life of the church and the world."** Secular and nonreligious people are not all in agreement. But in a state like California a law was passed prohibiting public school officials from notifying parents if their children were involved in transitioning from one gender to another.

We tend to see similar divisions in regard to the issues of gay marriage, embryonic stem cell research, euthanasia, and even the origins of life. The discussion about all of these issues goes to the core of our identity, and it necessarily produces conflict.

The passage that we are going to analyze this morning illustrates why it is important that we understand the underlying spiritual and moral roots of such conflict. We need to understand this so that we will know why we get attacked by people holding views that are different than ours. We also need to understand these underlying issues so that we will make sure that our foundational spiritual and moral beliefs are right and are consistent with those of the Creator of the universe and with reality. Ultimately our eternal destiny will be determined by the beliefs that we choose.

I.

So in vv. 1-9 of Acts #24 we are first going to consider ANANIAS, THE PSEUDO RELIGIOUS, AND ATTACKS ON CHRISTIANS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. ANANIAS, THE PSEUDO RELIGIOUS...) In recent weeks in our study of Acts we have seen that the Apostle Paul arrived in Jerusalem bringing financial aid from mostly Gentile churches in the west to help the famine plagued Jewish Christians of Judea. Paul was partly motivated by a desire to promote unity within the church. To further promote that unity Paul responded to the suggestion of the elders of the church in Jerusalem by performing a Jewish ritual during the time of the feast of Pentecost. His intention was to counter false charges that Paul had rejected his Jewish heritage.

While he was in the temple one day, Jews from Asia Minor stirred up a riot. Paul would have been killed but for the intervention of Roman soldiers. They discovered that Paul was a Roman citizen and thus required that the Jews present formal charges against him. (JERUSALEM TO CAESAREA) When Paul and the Romans found out about a plot against his life, the Roman commander sent Paul off from Jerusalem to Caesarea, the capital of the province of Judea and home of the Roman governor. (CAESAREA)

The last verse of #23 mentions that Paul was kept in Herod's Praetorium. In recent years Caesarea has been the site of much archaeological exploration. It has been discovered that Herod's Praetorium was located on a peninsula that jutted into the sea. (CAESAREA HEROD'S PALACE) It was a beautiful palace that was constructed originally by Herod the Great. At this time it was occupied by the Roman governor Felix.

Verse 1 then of #24 tells us, **“And after five days [apparently five days after coming to Caesarea] the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and a spokesman, one Tertullus. They laid before the governor their case against Paul.”** (PROJECTOR OFF) No doubt Tertullus had experience with legal matters involving Governor Felix and no doubt the wealthy leaders of the Sanhedrin paid top dollar to get the best lawyer they could get. So although Tertullus is doing the speaking in the verses that follow, it was the high priest Ananias and his cronies who were behind the charges being made against Paul.

I pointed out last week that Ananias was high priest of Israel between 47 and 59 AD. He is generally recognized as an evil man. He arranged to have people murdered, he connived to get money that should have gone to others, he cozied up to the Romans to stay in power, and he violated Jewish law when it suited his purposes. In violation of the law we saw last time from #23 that he had Paul struck in the face. Eventually he would be killed by his own people during the revolt against Rome.

In vv. 2 & 3 of our passage the text tells us, **“And when he had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying: ‘Since through you we enjoy much peace, and since by your foresight, most excellent Felix, reforms are being made for this nation, in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude.’”**

Luke is probably giving us only a summary of the arguments of the speakers in this meeting before Felix. It was typical for speakers in such a hearing to use flattery toward the governor. However, his words were a bit of a stretch. For Felix was becoming increasingly unpopular with the Jews. He was becoming more and more ruthless in his suppression of Jewish unrest. In just two years the Romans were going to recall Felix because of complaints from the Jews.

After promising brevity in v. 4 Tertullus gets to the meat of the charges against Paul in vv. 5 & 6: **“For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. 6 He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him.”**

The Jewish leaders are making three basic charges against Paul. The first is that he is a pest who is regularly involved in stirring up dissension among the Jews throughout the Roman world. Paul had been the focus of Jewish unrest in several cities in Greece and Asia Minor when he preached the gospel there. The truth was that the supposedly religious Jews had resorted to violence to promote and defend their views. It was the pseudo religious who organized mobs that tried to attack Paul and his Christian associates.

The Jewish leaders were also familiar with the fact that Felix had dealt harshly with people in Judea who had led uprisings of one sort or another. He had recently put down a rebellion led by an Egyptian and supposed prophet who had showed up in Jerusalem with a band of followers. So Tertullus and Ananias were hoping that the mere charge of fomenting dissension would draw the governor toward their view of Paul.

There is a sense in which the gospel does provoke unrest. Jesus Himself told His followers that He did not come to bring peace, but a sword. By that he meant that the message of the gospel would cause people to get upset. Some would become His followers and their lives would be different. They wouldn't chase women and get drunk and lie to the tax collectors any more. They would go to Christian meetings. They would refuse to participate in evil and in unethical conduct. Some family members and business associates and friends wouldn't like those changes. Sometimes we get attacked for those reasons today. We get blamed for disrupting the family and upsetting the status quo because of our Christian conduct.

There was a second charge that Tertullus made. He accused Paul of being a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. Jesus is called a Nazarene several times in the New Testament, but this is the only place in the Bible where Christians are called Nazarenes. In both Arabic and Hebrew that equivalent word is still used today to describe Christians. In 2014 the Islamic State captured Mosul in Iraq (NAZARENE MOSUL) and painted the Arabic letter N on the houses of Christians. The message was that they had to convert to Islam, pay a tax, or be killed. Some Christians in the Middle East now use that letter N as a badge of honor. (NAZARENE SHIRT)

Tertullus was very likely claiming that Christianity was an illegal religion. Judaism enjoyed a special status in the Roman Empire as a legal religion. Normally the Romans required worship of the emperor and of the Roman gods from the residents of its empire. (PROJECTOR OFF) The Jews had been allowed not to do this because of their status as a legal religion. The Jewish leadership tried to convince the Romans that the Christians were not part of Judaism. Thus far in the dealings that Christianity had with Roman officials, the Romans had refused to make such a distinction. Probably Tertullus was pushing for such a distinction here.

It is also likely that Tertullus was using the term "Nazarenes" in a derogatory sense. Of course such things never happen today, do they? Terms like "fundamentalist" and "right wing Christian" and "religious extremist" are used of Christians to express their appreciation for our contributions to society, right?

The third charge made against Paul by the Jewish leaders was that he was trying to desecrate the temple. Originally the Jews from Asia had claimed that Paul had brought a Gentile with him into the sacred precincts of the temple. That was an offense punishable by death, and the Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism, had been given the authority by the Romans to carry out such punishment. That was a ridiculous charge that had no substance in fact. So now the charge was changed to be that Paul was trying to desecrate the temple. We don't know if Tertullus was more specific than that. But certainly this charge was also untrue.

Tertullus goes on to claim that the Jewish temple police had already arrested Paul. The implication is that the Roman commander interfered with their legitimate handling of the situation. Ananias and Tertullus would have the governor believe that Paul had begun to be subjected to the Jewish legal system when they were interrupted. The reality was that the Jewish mob was in the process of beating Paul to death when the Roman officer rescued him.

A few later manuscripts add some lines to v. 6 and include the words of v. 7 that specifically criticize the Roman commander Lysias. Those lines were probably not part of Luke's original historical account. But they could describe words that Tertullus actually said.

Tertullus concludes his argument in v. 8: **“By examining him yourself you will be able to find out from him about everything of which we accuse him.”** Verse 9: **“The Jews also joined in the charge, affirming that all these things were so.”**

Ananias was the epitome of the religious man. He was the high priest of all of Judaism. He was theoretically God's representative to man. Once a year Ananias entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement to offer blood for the sins of his people. Yet he was an extraordinarily evil man. He was a murderer, a liar, a thief, and a hypocrite. He was a pseudo religious man, a falsely religious man. How could such a man gain this high position in the religious bureaucracy?

Philosopher Martin Buber writes in his book, *Good and Evil*, **“Since the primary motive of the evil is disguise, one of the places evil people are most likely to be found is within the church [or we might add, “the temple”]. What better way to conceal one's evil from oneself, as well as from others, than to be a deacon or some other highly visible form of Christian within our culture. ...evil people tend to gravitate toward piety for the disguise and concealment it can offer them.”**

There is much evil that has been committed in the world in the name of religion, sometimes in the name of Christ. There were the Crusades in the Middle Ages, the Inquisition in Spain, the persecution of the Reformers in the 1600s, and the fighting in Northern Ireland. There has been the scandal of pedophilia involving Catholic priests. Occasionally there are bad stories about pastors in Protestant churches. The

perpetrators of these various evil deeds have been people whom I would call the pseudo religious. They profess to be servants of God, but they act as servants of evil.

What we need to understand is that the objects of attack by such people are often the genuinely religious, the true followers of Jesus Christ. Some of the strongest critics of evangelical, or Bible-believing, Christians are religious people. They are people who call themselves Christians. Yet they criticize us for our narrow-mindedness, for our literal understanding of the Scriptures, for our absolutism, and for our uncompromising morality. Thus we should not be surprised when we are attacked by religious people for our beliefs or our behavior. The harshest critics of first century Christians were religious people. The harshest critics of Christians today will also often be religious people.

II.

In vv. 10-21 then we come to PAUL, THE SAINT, AND THE DEFENSE OF CHRISTIANS. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. PAUL, THE SAINT AND...) According to v. 10, **“And when the governor had nodded to him to speak, Paul replied: ‘Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense.’”** Paul also begins his remarks on a positive note. But he avoids the bogus flattery that Tertullus used.

The apostle continues in v. 11, **“You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem...”** Verse 1 seems to indicate that Paul had been in Caesarea for five days. Before that he was a prisoner in the Roman fortress in Jerusalem for a couple of days. So he didn’t have much time to do all the conspiring and agitating that Ananias and company were accusing him of doing. Their charges are not very believable.

Paul adds in the next verse, **“...and they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city.”** Earlier in his career Paul had done evangelistic preaching in Jerusalem, and that had created a big stir. But in this visit he had avoided public preaching and discussion. The Jewish leaders were making things up. There was no real evidence to support the charges of Tertullus. The real problem was that the Jewish leaders didn’t like Paul’s beliefs. If Paul’s doctrine was right, some of theirs was wrong. If Jesus was the Messiah, then the Jewish leaders were guilty of killing their own Savior.

Sill today we Christians often take flack not so much for our behavior as for our beliefs. Christian doctrine says that there is only one way to heaven. If that is right, then people of other faiths are terribly wrong. Christian doctrine says that certain behaviors are sin. They violate the absolute standards of a holy God. If that is true, then people around us who practice such things are in serious trouble. Some take offense at that. Deep down they may know that we are right in our beliefs. But the mere adherence to Christian doctrine may provoke the anger of some people toward us.

In vv. 14 & 15 Paul says, **“But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, 15 having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.”** Apparently there were Pharisees among Paul’s accusers at Caesarea. Most of you will remember that the high priests and the lay leaders represented on the Sanhedrin tended to be Sadducees. The Sadducees did not believe in any bodily resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees did. The rabbis on the Sanhedrin were mostly Pharisees.

Notice that the focus of Paul’s defense is the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. In many places Paul spoke about the hope that Christians have that after death they can look forward to a resurrection of the body. That will be followed by a judgment of rewards and an eternity spent in what we refer to as heaven. This passage happens to be the only place in the New Testament where Paul also mentions that there will be a resurrection of the unjust. The Book of Revelation indicates that this resurrection of the unjust will be followed by judgment from God, after which these people will be sent into a place called the lake of fire, where they shall reside eternally.

In vv. 16 & 17 Paul says that he was bringing alms and offerings to Jerusalem. In v. 18 he says, **“While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult.”** We have seen from Paul’s statements in his New Testament letters that his desire to bring aid for famine relief in Judea was a primary reason for his trip. But this is the only reference that is made in Acts to it. He mentions it here because of the charge that Paul was trying to desecrate the temple. Paul argues that the truth is exactly the opposite. He had come to Jerusalem to honor his countrymen by bringing them alms and to honor the temple by bringing offerings to it. The mention of alms is probably a reference to his famine relief aid.

Beginning at the end of v. 18 Paul adds, **“But some Jews from Asia— 19 they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me.”** Roman law prescribed heavy penalties for accusers who tried to drop their charges or who failed to show up for legal proceedings. These Jews from the Roman province of Asia where Paul had recently been preaching and who originally stirred up the trouble in the temple with the claim that Paul had brought a Gentile into the restricted area had not made any formal charges before the Roman authorities. But their involvement in the matter was relevant to the case. Their absence from Caesarea for this hearing could be explained by the lack of evidence that they had. It may well have also involved the fact that they were in Jerusalem in the first place simply to celebrate the feast of Passover. They had jobs and families back in Asia Minor. They probably couldn’t afford to hang around for a long time in Judea.

So if these original accusers were not going to be present, then the Jewish leaders had to come up with something more substantive. Thus Paul concludes in vv. 20 & 21, **“Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council, 21 other than this one thing that I cried out while standing**

among them: 'It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.'"

If the issue was not the first riot in the temple, in regard to which the instigators and accusers were not present, then let the Jewish leaders be specific about the charges against him. It may well be that Tertullus was being pretty general and vague in his accusations. It reflected the fact that he had a weak case.

In the meeting with the Sanhedrin there was a small riot. If his accusers had a problem with what happened there, then they would have to deal with the statement of Paul that resulted in the tumult. That statement had to do with the doctrine of resurrection. While a minority of the members of the Sanhedrin believed in resurrection from the dead, the Pharisees represented by the rabbis on the council did believe it. Their influence in regard to this doctrine was reflected in the support that they had among most of the people.

So in his defense of Christians Paul was bringing the focus back to this idea of resurrection. The resurrection was a crucial element in the preaching of the early Christians. It was central to their defense of the Christian message. When their beliefs were attacked, they often resorted to the simple defense that the leader of their faith had risen from the dead. He was crucified by the Romans and buried and sealed in a tomb guarded by soldiers. Yet on the third day He rose bodily from the dead and left an empty tomb behind with no body to be found. These events happened within their lifetimes and in Jerusalem. The claims could be verified by those who saw what happened and by those who were present in Jerusalem.

The resurrection is still crucial to our message today. A Lifeway Research poll found last year that 65% of American adults believe the Biblical account of the physical resurrection of Jesus is completely accurate. That is great news. The sad thing is that more people don't grasp the significance of the resurrection that they profess to believe. Both before and after the crucifixion Jesus explained that He was going to die to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. As One who was both God and man he was able to provide a final sacrifice for sin that would satisfy the demands of a righteous and holy God. What people were and are required to do to receive the benefits of this sacrifice is simply to accept the gift of eternal salvation by faith, putting their trust in Jesus as their Savior.

The other religions of the world say that God ultimately accepts everyone, or that salvation, however it is defined, comes through good works or self-effort, or that salvation comes simply as the result of belonging to a particular religious group. The gospel says that the price has been paid and that the sole requirement of forgiveness before a holy God comes by accepting that gift by faith. Christianity is based upon a historical event: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Christ did not rise from the dead, Christianity, in spite of moral and ethical benefits it may have, is a lie. Thus it was that the resurrection was at the heart of Paul's defense of Christians.

III.

In vv. 22-27 then we come to FELIX, THE SECULARIST, AND THE DANGER OF PROCRASTINATION. (III. FELIX, THE SECULARIST, AND...)

If Ananias was the representative of the pseudo religious, and if Paul was the representative of the saints, then Felix was the representative of the secularists. He came from a pagan Roman background. He was born into a family of slaves. His brother Pallas, however, worked for a woman named Antonia. This woman had a son named Claudius, who was not too much older than Pallas. When Claudius got older, he became emperor of Rome.

Through these connections in high places Pallas won freedom from slavery, and he also obtained it for his brother Felix. Pallas was able to serve in high positions in government when his friend Claudius became emperor. Through his influence Felix also got positions in government. One position he held was an administrative post in the district of Samaria in the province of Judea. Then in 52 AD, about six years before the time of our story, Felix became governor of all of Judea. In doing that he became the first slave ever to rise to the position of governor of a Roman province.

Felix also chose marriage partners who served to advance his political influence. His third wife was Drusilla. Drusilla was the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I, the Herod who was responsible for killing the Apostle James. As a fourteen year old Drusilla was married to the king of a minor kingdom in nearby Syria. Felix met Drusilla when she was still a teenager. She was supposedly a very beautiful woman, and Felix was quickly attracted to her. Marrying her seemed to offer several benefits. She was mostly of Jewish ancestry, and she was of royal blood. For an administrator in Judea this seemed to be a way of winning more influence and favor with the subjects he ruled. Then she was also young, and she was beautiful. So Felix used his powers and his influence to convince Drusilla to dump her husband and marry him.

Marrying a young, mostly Jewish woman didn't solve all of the problems facing Felix. Judea was notorious for having a lot of unrest and incidents with fanatical Jews trying to cause trouble for the Romans. Felix tended to respond to such difficulties by sending in the legionnaires and brutally wiping out the troublemakers and everyone associated with them. But this method of dealing with unrest was producing a lot of resentment among even moderate Jews. This was the background for the appearance of the Apostle Paul before the Roman governor Felix.

In vv. 22 & 23 we read, **“But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, “When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case.” Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs.”** Having been an administrator in Judea for a number of years Felix had learned something about this growing movement of Christians. Then from being married to a mostly Jewish woman, he had to also have gained in understanding about the Jewish religion and culture. As a governor he would have had dealings with the Sanhedrin. So he had some familiarity with the character of Ananias and his fellow leaders. Felix saw that this was a weak case against Paul. But he was under enough pressure from the Jews that he didn't want to unnecessarily alienate them. His

predecessor as governor had been deposed for failing to get along with the Jewish leaders. So Felix simply chose to leave Paul in custody in Caesarea.

A few days later Felix and Drusilla showed up to listen to Paul. Paul talked about faith in Christ. According to v. 25, **“And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, ‘Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you.’”** In discussing righteousness Paul must have talked about sin and God’s remedy for sin provided in the death of His Son Jesus Christ. In discussing self-control it would have been hard to ignore the personal situations of Felix and Drusilla. Self-control was not historically a concern for them when there was opportunity to satisfy their lust and greed and hunger for power. Then Paul also talked about the judgment of God.

Drusilla was apparently unresponsive to this spiritual discussion. Perhaps she was angered by it. If Paul was not directly critical of their behavior, his discussion of God’s righteousness and self-control would have made it clear that their actions were inconsistent with the theology that he was describing. The text says that Felix was frightened by this discussion. Apparently the words of Paul struck some kind of chord with Felix. He sensed that there was truth in the things that Paul said. That realization of truth had implications for Felix’s status as a sinner before a holy God of judgment.

The story concludes in vv. 26 & 27: **“At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him. 27 When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.”** Notice that Paul was unwilling to give a bribe.

Felix continued to have spiritual interest. But at heart he was still a greedy man. Perhaps he heard about Paul bringing money to the Jewish Christians of Judea and thought that if Paul was such hot stuff with the Christians and had access to such financial resources, there might yet be some opportunity for profit in this situation. But it was not to be.

History tells us that tensions in Caesarea increased between the Gentiles and the Jews. Fighting broke out among them, and Felix sided with the Gentiles. He sent in the Roman troops who attacked and killed many of the Jews. He had his troops confiscate money and valuables from many of the wealthy Jews of the community. The tactics of Felix revealed such greed and brutality that the government in Rome responded to the complaints of a delegation of Jews who were sent to them. Felix was recalled. We don’t know what happened to him after that. Apparently he did not become a follower of Jesus. Tradition says that Drusilla died some years later at Pompei when Mount Vesuvius erupted.

Felix’s situation was seemingly a tragedy of procrastination. His mind was enlightened by the truth, and his emotions were stirred. But his will would not change. He kept putting off the decision to respond to the gospel, and in the end he was lost for eternity.

There is a story told about a supposed situation that happened when Satan had a meeting with four of his leading demons. Satan challenged his four henchmen to come up with a new lie that they could use in their dealings with humans. One demon suggested that they put forth the line that there is no God. The devil supposedly responded that people can see the evidence that there is a God. They are made in God's image.

The second demon suggested that they promote the lie that there is no heaven. But Satan also rejected this idea, saying that most all people sense that there is some kind of life after death. The third demon offered the idea then that they try to convince people that there is no hell. But again the Evil One rejected the idea. He said that people have a conscience that too often tells them that they will face the judgment of God.

So finally the fourth demon suggested a plan. To this idea the Devil heartily agreed. This demon said, "Let's tell people that there's no hurry." (PROJECTOR OFF)

Years ago a Christian woman and her two children came to our church in Connecticut. Denise's husband was not a believer. He came to our annual Christmas decorating night at the church once. A couple of weeks later he went with his family to the annual Christmas program at a large church nearby. There he heard the pastor challenge the audience with the question: "Do you have any room for Jesus?" Later that night he told his Christian wife that he didn't have any room yet for Jesus. Two days later the rest of his family came to our church on Sunday morning. When they went home, they found him lying on the floor, dead of a heart attack at age 38.

The Apostle Paul once warned, "**Now is the acceptable time, behold, now is the day of salvation.**" Which category best describes your spiritual situation? Pseudo religionist, secularist, or saint? If you are not a saint, don't make the same mistake of procrastination that Felix did, and that Denise's husband did. Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior today. In your heart of hearts acknowledge that you are a sinner, that you believe that Jesus was both God and man and that He died on the cross to die for your sin and that He rose again from the dead. If you will trust in Him as your Savior, you will instantly receive the gift of eternal life and forgiveness of sins. Don't put off that decision.