

Introduction

Have you ever been on trial? Have you ever appeared before a jury or judge having to give a defense of an accusation made against you? That is what lawyers are for—to give your defense. I would think it more unnerving to appear before a government panel in which I must speak and every word that I say will be scrutinized; even more unnerving to know that most of the questioners have already determined me guilty.

Jesus anticipated that his disciples would be placed in such a position, and so he encouraged them: “And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say” (Luke 12:11–12).

Paul will stand trial twice in our passages. Let’s see what the Holy Spirit taught him to say in his hour of trial.

Text

Paul is appearing before the Sanhedrin, the highest judicial council of the Jews. It numbered seventy members with the high priest serving as president. It was mostly composed of top-level priests and lay elders of the Sadducee party. The Sadducees formed the aristocracy of Jewish society and had learned to work with the Roman occupation. They held the reigns of Jewish power politically and religious-wise. You could compare them with the corrupt papal and priestly powers in the period leading up to the Reformation. Power, wealth—these were the treasures hoarded by the Sadducean priests. And no priest was more arrogant in his position than this particular high priest, Ananias.

And looking intently at the council, Paul said, “Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.”² And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.³ Then Paul said to him, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?”⁴ Those who stood by said, “Would you revile God’s high priest?”⁵ And Paul said, “I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.’”

Paul starts off coolly, perhaps with a prepared speech, but he is quickly thrown off his guard by Ananias, who is asserting his own authority. Here is a match of two strong-willed men. Paul recovers himself, but it is now clear that a strong hand is presiding over the council and that Paul will not be allowed a long speech; indeed, anything he says will be quickly contested. What then can he do?

Two factors will help us understand Paul’s next move. Let’s go back to understanding the Sanhedrin council. It was dominated by the Sadducees, but there was another significant party of

men—the Pharisees. Because of their appearance in the gospels, we regard them merely in terms of self-righteous hypocrites. That was an unfortunate characteristic of many, but what lead them into such sin was a sincere zeal for the law of Moses. They really did believe that Israel's downfall was due to forsaking the law, and they really were ardent in studying and following the law and in compelling their nation to do so. They were the conservatives of their day, while the Sadducees were the liberals. And their most famous, or infamous, party member was none other than the Apostle Paul.

The second factor is that this is not a true trial. It would be closer to our fact-finding government committees. The Roman tribune had called the council together in the first place in an effort to find out “the real reason” why the crowd at the temple was so angry with Paul. He could be trying to ascertain who should have jurisdiction. If the matter were purely religious, such as the claim that Paul had taken a Gentile into the temple inner courts, then the case would fall under the Sanhedrin. But no witnesses have come forth to accuse him. Even so, he is now before a hostile “fact-finding” committee that is intent on discrediting him before the Roman tribune. The Sadducees and Pharisees may not have liked each other but they were united in opposing the Way that Paul was a champion for.

⁶ Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.” ⁷ And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸ For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. ⁹ Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, “We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?” ¹⁰ And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.

Paul turned the tables on Ananias, causing him to lose control of the proceedings and providing himself an escape from their trap. I doubt that the turmoil that erupted was Paul's intent. My guess is that he is merely trying to win sympathy from some of his interrogators, who until then were uniformly hostile to him. We will come back to his statement, but let's go to his next appearance when he is called again to give an account of himself.

Paul's case is now moved to Roman jurisdiction. He is transported to Caesarea to appear before the governor Felix with his accusers from the Sanhedrin. They present Paul as a troublemaker who travels around the Roman empire stirring up turmoil among the Jewish population, creating civil unrest. He does this as the “ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.” They had had to prevent him from doing the same in Jerusalem when he attempted to profane the temple, though they cannot give evidence of what he actually did. Let's pick up at Paul's response.

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. ¹¹ You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in

Jerusalem,¹² 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.¹³ Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me.¹⁴ 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.¹⁶ So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.¹⁷ Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings.¹⁸ While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult. But some Jews from Asia—¹⁹ they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me.²⁰ 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.’”

This is a masterful defense. Paul presents facts about himself that can be verified by evidence. His accusers cannot verify their accusations; indeed, the so-called witnesses who made the slanderous claims at the temple about Paul stirring up trouble in the empire and profaning the temple are not to be found. Case dismissed.

Furthermore, Paul also answers the accusation of his belonging to a sect, which was an accusation intended to discredit him as an observant Jew and open him up to charges of disturbing the peace among Jews. Note how he does this. He does not claim to observe the regulations of the law but to believe the Law and the Prophets. It is that which he can do with “a clear conscience toward both God and man.”

Again, well done. Up to this time, however, I have omitted the key comment of Paul’s in both trials—his reference to hoping in the resurrection. Paul created the turmoil in the Sanhedrin by shouting out, “It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.” He concludes his remarks to Felix with admitting that it was this remark that his accusers would claim to have been the evidence of how Paul stirs up trouble. He had earlier noted to Felix that he has the same hope in God that his accusers have (not exactly true), namely that there will be a “resurrection of both the just and the unjust.”

However one wants to regard Paul—a brilliant defense lawyer or a troublemaker—it is clear that his perspective of the resurrection is central to his thinking. Indeed, these two trials reawaken for us the mission of the apostles.

The apostles were commissioned by Jesus to be his witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and “the end of the earth.” Witnesses of what? That he was the Messiah, yes; that he died for forgiveness of sins, yes. But what was the proof? How did Jesus prove that he was the Messiah and that his death did indeed atone for sin? His resurrection. And so Peter’s first sermon presents Jesus as the Messiah risen from the dead. Time and again the apostles will speak of themselves as witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection.

In his trial Paul does speak specifically of Jesus’ resurrection, to be sure. But his argument to his Jewish brethren is that the gospel message of Jesus dying and rising again is in line with the hope

of the Jewish people in the day of resurrection. Far from preaching heresy, Paul's gospel is founded squarely on the hope of the Law and the Prophets in the resurrection of the just and the unjust—the just to vindication, the unjust to condemnation. Jesus' resurrection is the proof that the Messiah has come which now looks to the great resurrection to come. What is so terrible about such a belief and hope?

Paul's defense will keep his accusers at bay and should have led to his release. For his own personal reasons, Felix will, however, keep Paul in prison.

Lessons

What are lessons to take from these passages?

One comes from a verse I skipped over, 23:11: “*The following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.’*” As noted, Paul ought to have been released. Felix had no cause for keeping a Roman citizen in prison. It is because of poor leadership by the church elders that Paul got into trouble at the temple. By chance he is spotted among the thousands in the temple courts by Jews from Asia Minor. And Paul himself had been warned all along not to go to Jerusalem in the first place. From a human perspective everything is happening from human error, leaving Paul to forego his preaching ministry, defending for his life and withering away in prison. What is really happening is that God's will is being carried out for Paul to crown his ministry of preaching by preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem and now before Roman officials to be culminated in testifying for Jesus and to the hope of the gospel in Rome itself.

Do you feel like you are caught up in the currents of the sea which are battering you about? You want to go one way, a way that seems good and honoring to God, and yet by events you cannot control, you feel either stuck or being pushed along a way against your plans? Take courage. The one task for you is not to figure out how to outwit the system, how to make things go your way. The one task at hand is to be faithful in your witness wherever you are, in whatever is happening to you. Some of Paul's most fruitful labor will take place in prison as he wins guards over to the gospel. You are not the victim of blind forces. Those forces are in the hands of God and he is using all circumstances for your good and as opportunity for you to bear witness for the hope that you have in you.

And what is that hope? That is the central lesson of our passages. It is the hope, based on the resurrection of Jesus, of our own resurrection.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. (Rom. 8:20–24)

It is in hope that we were saved. Our salvation is not merely relief from condemnation. It is not about fire insurance. Our hope is that this world, with all of its trials and pains and frustrations, is not all that there is. That, regardless of the comment from the Teacher of Ecclesiastes that there is nothing new under the sun, there is indeed a new song, a new world, even a new heaven to come when the heavenly Bridegroom comes for his bride. That there will be a time for all creation when “death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things [will pass] away” (Rev. 21:4).

This hope rests in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Without his resurrection there is no hope. Paul believed this with all his heart. It is what steeled him to face whatever suffering was allotted to him. It is what spurred him on to preach to anyone anywhere under any conditions.

Listen to him exhorting his church in Corinth.

If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Cor. 15:14–19)

The value of our religion does not lie in it making us moral persons. It does not lie in improving our characters. It lies in lifting our eyes to our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ and seeing in his resurrection, even seeing in his glory what awaits our destiny. We are a people of hope; a people with “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us” (1 Pet. 1:4). We are a people with a destiny that is glory itself. Listen.

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵ “O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 15:50–57)

When our faith is placed on trial, remember that what is truly on trial is not a philosophy, not a worldview, not a mere religion. It is our hope in the resurrection—the resurrection of Jesus, the resurrection of ourselves into the glorious kingdom of God. Never give up that hope. Never let trial discourage you; never let earthly pleasures seduce you. But let that hope keep you faithful to your Lord until the day that he returns.