

A CONSCIENCE VOID OF OFFENSE

– ACTS 24. – *OCTOBER 17.* –

Golden Text: – "Herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense towards God and towards men."

FELIX, the Roman governor, received St. Paul a prisoner. His enemies, the high priest and other Jewish rulers, hastened from Jerusalem to Caesarea, thirsting for his blood. They brought with them a Roman lawyer, Tertullus. His knowledge of Roman usage and his skill as a pleader would, they hoped, enable them to prove that St. Paul was a dangerous character – a sort of anarchist. Felix was the judge. There were no jurors. Tertullus made his charges and confirmed them by witnesses from Jerusalem.

Shrewdly the Roman attorney complimented the governor along the lines of his hitherto efficiency in preserving the peace and putting down every form of insurrection and maintaining quiet and order. This very completely paved the way for the lawyer's request that the governor should continue this praiseworthy course and rid the land of an obnoxious trouble-maker – the Apostle. Witnesses were produced who testified respecting the first tumult in the temple and also respecting the one of the following day in which the Sanhedrin became divided into two parts, and a general uproar ensued. The Apostle was credited with being a ringleader of a sect called Nazarenes, and it was claimed that he made trouble the whole world over amongst both Jews and Greeks.

This was his case. He charged that the prisoner was guilty of sacrilege – that he had defiled the temple, and the inference was deducible that he had caused rioting within the holy sanctuary.

The witnesses were produced to prove that these charges were true.

The governor motioned to the Apostle that he was at liberty to answer the charges. St. Paul opened his defense by remarking that he was gratified that his judge had been on the bench for some time and was well acquainted with Jewish customs; that he would understand, therefore, what a novice could not, why the Apostle had come to Jerusalem to worship after the manner of the Jews, to celebrate one of their religious festivals. He came not to raise an insurrection, but to worship, and no witness had testified, nor was it true, that he was found in the temple even disputing or gathering a crowd; neither did he do these things in the synagogues, nor anywhere; neither could his enemies prove the things of which they accused him. This, his answer, was logical and complete. Still the governor could not understand why there should be such a commotion under the circumstances; hence it was necessary for the Apostle to explain that the Jews had an antipathy against him, because of his different belief and not because of any wrongdoing.

"A RESURRECTION OF THE JUST AND UNJUST"

St. Paul avowed that he had experienced no change in his Jewish belief – that he still believed the teachings of the Law and the writings of the prophets; and that he still held to the fundamental Jewish doctrine of the necessity of a resurrection of the dead, and that thereby God's blessing should ultimately come to Israel and through Israel to all the families of the earth. And, continued the Apostle, I exercise myself, discipline myself, train myself, to keep my conscience pure, free from violation of Divine and human laws. This was a grand testimony. The force of it should have had weight, not only with the governor and the prosecuting attorney, but also with the Jews, who murderously sought the Apostle's life, because of a little difference of opinion

on religious questions. What a lesson we have here! A Roman governor and judge of not too savory a reputation; a prosecuting attorney willing, regardless of justice, to sell his talents for money; the Jewish high priest, typical of the great Messiah, associating himself with those who were endeavoring to pervert justice and to destroy one "of the sale of the earth"!

Our Lord foretold that some of his disciples would stand before kings and princes, but that they should not be dismayed, for he would stand by them to give them aid. How literally this was fulfilled in St. Paul's case! How evidently the Lord stood by him and gave him the suitable words! He proceeded to explain that he brought alms to his nation, the offerings of Gentiles, who had heard his message of the grace of God. Certain Jews from Asia found him purified in the temple, but without cry or tumult. Those Jews should have been brought as witnesses, or those who were making the charges against him should have been specific – should have said what he did tumultuously in the temple, or what wrongdoing they found in him on the day following the mob, when before the Sanhedrin. Only one thing could they charge, namely, that he cried out while standing amongst them, "Touching the resurrection of the dead I am called in question this day." Surely the governor could not think that in this there was anything akin to rioting or anarchy. The prisoner had been quite in the right, while those accusing him had been in the wrong. **[R4499 : page 317]**

The Apostle's testimony shows us that in all of his preaching he laid special stress upon the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead – the just and the unjust. Alas, that in our day this doctrine has been measurably lost sight of. Few Christians ever think of the resurrection. Few have ever heard a sermon on that subject. Why is this? We reply that it is because a great error has come in amongst Christian people in respect to the condition of the dead. According to both Catholics and Protestants only the saintly are

fit for heaven at death. Both agree that only finished characters could properly be admitted there. Both agree to our Lord's words respecting the Kingdom, "Few there be that find it." Our Catholic friends tell us that nearly all heathens, Catholics and Protestants go to Purgatory, where terrible sufferings for centuries will purge them of sin and prepare them for heaven. Many Protestant friends tell us that they do not see even this hope – that from their standpoint only the "little flock" go to heaven, and all the great mass of mankind, unprepared for the presence of God, must be sent somewhere and that the only place for them is a hell of eternal torture, from which there will be no escape. We need not quarrel with either party. Both views are too horrible to be reasonable or just, not to mention loving!

We prefer to go back to the words of Jesus and the Apostles and to note that, according to their teachings, the dead are really dead and that their only hope is, as the Apostle expresses it, a resurrection hope, "the hope of the resurrection of the dead, both of the just and of the unjust." It is not the resurrection of the body that the Bible teaches, but a resurrection of the soul, and that "God will give it a body" at the time of the awakening. (I Cor. 15:38.) We could wish that all Christian people would arouse themselves to a fresh study of the Scriptures: that the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead should be given its proper place: and that thus much of the fog of "the dark ages" might be gotten rid of – fog which has troubled us, saddened our hearts and turned many away from God and the Bible – into infidelity. [R4500 : page 317]

RIGHTEOUSNESS, TEMPERANCE, COMING JUDGMENT

The governor-judge, after hearing both sides, set aside the case until Lysias, who made the arrest, should be heard.

Meantime St. Paul was given great liberty, the real status of his case being evidently quite clearly understood by the governor.

Subsequently Felix, evidently much impressed by the Apostle's demeanor, called for him again at a time when his wife, a Jewess, was present. He wished her to hear the Gospel message, which somehow seems to have appealed to him as reasonable. St. Paul doubtless reviewed much of his previous testimony, and then reasoned respecting a coming judgment or trial – that eternal destinies are not fixed, as a result of the present life. Assuredly he pointed out that God had appointed a day of trial or judgment for the world of mankind – the Millennial day, a thousand years long. In it the whole world of mankind shall have a full trial as to worthiness or unworthiness of perfection and life everlasting. The obedient shall be blessed, uplifted, raised up, up to perfection. The wilfully disobedient shall be destroyed in the Second Death. If then the trial of the world is in the future age, and if in the present time God is merely electing or selecting the Church to be the Bride of his Son and his Joint-Heir in the Kingdom, which is to bless the world, how could these matters have any special influence upon Felix and his wife? In two ways:

(1) It might influence them to accept Christ and seek to be of the "elect" Church.

(2) Knowing of their future trial they should know also that the words and deeds of the present life have much to do with the status of the individual when awakened from the tomb. The vicious, the hypocritical, the self-righteous, the wanton, the profligate, degrade themselves and increase the number of steps that will be before them in the Millennium. On the contrary, every good deed, every victory gained, every practice of moderation, would make the individual correspondingly the better prepared for the next life. Every generous deed of the present life makes its impress upon the character and will bring proportionate

blessings in that Millennial Judgment Day. On the contrary, every evil deed, every violation of conscience, will surely receive its "stripes" or just punishments.

As Felix listened he was conscience-stricken. According to this theory he would have much to give account for as one of the "unjust" in the resurrection. The Apostle said nothing about fiery tortures, which an intelligent mind must repudiate as unreasonable, but his argument was all the stronger without these. His forceful argument was, "A just recompense of reward, both for the just and the unjust." The Apostle was dismissed with the memorable words, "Go thy way for this time; when I have a more convenient season I will call thee." Time and again Felix called for the Apostle, but never apparently did he find his heart in a sufficiently mellow and humble condition to accept the Apostle's message and surrender to the Lord. A lesson in this connection for us all is that we should do promptly whatever we realize to be our duty. St. Paul remained a prisoner two years, comfortably provided for, preparing for the further services of his important life, and writing several epistles.

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