

Will We Hear?

Acts 23:12–35

May 12, 2002

“I will hear you when your accusers arrive.” With these words, Governor Felix raises important questions for us: Will we hear the testimony of the Apostle Paul? Will we hear the gospel of Jesus Christ? Will we hear the word of God?

“I will hear you when your accusers arrive.” As it turned out, Felix did not live up to this early promise. He granted Paul a hearing but did not hear him. Paul’s words of faith fell on deaf ears. Felix left him in prison for two years so that the next governor had to deal with him. But that does not mean for us not to listen to Paul. In fact, this negative response by Felix to the gospel stands as a warning to us, a warning for us not to make the same mistake. So the point of the story is not for us to continue his wrongdoing. The point of the story is for us to make affirmative answers and positive responses to the questions raised by his statement: “I will hear you when your accusers arrive.” Will we hear the testimony of the Apostle Paul? Will we hear the gospel of Jesus Christ? Will we hear the word of God? Will we receive it? Will we believe it? Will we act on it?

What Paul had already told the Jewish council was that he was on trial “with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 23:6). What Paul would soon tell Felix would be that he was on trial “with respect to the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 24:21). These two proclamations of the one great truth of the Christian faith frame this heavily guarded, night time transfer of Paul from the tribune to the governor. This testimony to the resurrection is the reason the Jewish people wanted to kill Paul. This testimony to the resurrection is the reason the Roman government had to protect him, as one of their citizens, from the murder plot. This testimony to the resurrection still contains the dangerous gospel of Jesus Christ and the living word of God to us today. Will we hear it?

The consistent, repeated, life-endangering testimony of Paul was that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead. Paul never wavered from this. It is the one thing to which he returned over and over again. There is no accounting for the resurrection from a human point of view. There is no power by which the dead can raise themselves. If there were such an ability, it would mean by definition that such people were not truly dead. But Jesus was truly dead. He had been crucified and buried. The Roman Empire was good at killing people. They did not mess up executions. And yet, Jesus had then appeared to Paul, alive again after his crucifixion. Jesus had appeared to Paul not because Paul believed in Jesus in advance, not because Paul was expecting him, and not because Paul was praying to him. Instead, Paul was working against him. Paul was persecuting those who did believe in Jesus. So, when the risen Lord Jesus Christ appeared to Paul, Paul knew that God was at work in the world. God had raised Jesus from the dead, for no one else could have done it. God, who had created the world, began his new creation in the resurrection of Christ. And this stands at the heart of the Christian faith.

Thus Paul wrote his testimony to the Corinthians, which we shall treat here as virtually a deposition:

Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast—unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me (1 Corinthians 15:1–8).

This is the written statement of Paul, telling us why he believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and what its significance is.

Of course, not everyone believed in the resurrection. The Jews who were attacking Paul did not believe in it. The Romans apparently did not believe in it. Even some who pretended to be in the church at Corinth refused to believe in the resurrection of the body for Jesus or for anyone else. That continues to be a danger today. Some want to deny the plain letter of the scripture about the resurrection of the body and think of the resurrection as merely a spiritual or mental event. But Paul, again in his letter to the Corinthians, rejected such faithlessness as ridiculous:

Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied (1 Corinthians 15:12–19).

That is to say, if there were no resurrection, there would be no Christian faith.

The central, primary testimony of Paul was that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead. This is not a peripheral matter. This is not an optional matter. This is not something we may take or leave at a whim. This stands at the heart of the Christian faith. Without it, we have nothing. With it, we have everything. Without it, we are faithless. With it, we are faithful. Without it, we oppose Christ. With it, we proclaim Christ. Paul knew where to take his stand. He knew what mattered. He knew what was important. If he was going to suffer under the attacks of the Jews at least he was going to define the issue as clearly as possible: they thought that death was stronger than God; he thought that God was stronger than death. It is just that simple. Whose side do you want to be on in that argument? If Jesus were still dead, we should quit playing church and go do something else. But since Jesus is, instead, alive again, everything has changed, death has been defeated, the world has begun anew, and we have good hope for God's good will toward us. This is the testimony of Paul. Will we hear it?

The gospel of Jesus Christ is that the mighty work of God in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is also for the benefit of others. The good news flowing out of this singular event is not simply that one man has been raised but that the power of death has been defeated once and for all. God raised Jesus Christ not simply for his own benefit but also for ours. Do you see what that means? God, who made us for himself, has also saved us for himself. God, who put us here as his very own, has reclaimed us as his very own. The significance of the resurrection is not simply the vindication of the life and ministry of Jesus but also the promise of our own resurrection, of the forgiveness of our sins, of the justification of our lives, of the salvation of our souls, and of life eternal. This is the wonder which God has worked for us.

Again, Paul spelled this out for the unbelieving Corinthians:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. "For God has put all things in subjection under his feet" (1 Corinthians 15:20–27a).

That is, the resurrection of Jesus Christ has cosmic significance, and therefore it also has personal significance. In Jesus Christ, God has defeated the power of death, and therefore death is not supreme over us. It is a second rate power at best. We can look beyond death in good hope for eternal life. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Will we hear it?

The word of God to us yet today is the call for us to hear, receive, and believe this testimony and this good news. This is not ancient history. This is the living word of the living God. We continue to live in a world today where death rears its ugly head. We continue to live in a world today where the ravages of disease, the forces of crime, the agents of terror, and legally established governments all deal in the power of death. But its power is not absolute. It does not have the final say about who we are, about whose we are, about what we do, or about our eternal destiny. These things belong to God and to God alone. That is the significance of the resurrection. We are set free from the lies of the world. Our vision is lifted to another world. And that makes us able to live here as the best citizens of this world.

As Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 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. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. 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.”

“O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

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

That is, we can live this life in victory and thanksgiving. The powers of both sin and death have been defeated. Will we hear this? Will we receive it? Will we believe it? Will we act on it?

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To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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