

Tertullus – Paul's Accuser

Acts 24:1-9

24:1 And after five days Ananias the high priest descended with the elders, and with **a certain orator named Tertullus**, who informed the governor against Paul.

24:2 And when he was called forth, **Tertullus** began to accuse him, saying, Seeing that by thee we enjoy great quietness, and that very worthy deeds are done unto this nation by thy providence, **24:3** We accept it always, and in all places, most noble Felix, with all thankfulness.

24:4 Notwithstanding, that I be not further tedious unto thee, I pray thee that thou wouldest hear us of thy clemency a few words.

24:5 For we have found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes: **24:6** Who also hath gone about to profane the temple: whom we took, and would have judged according to our law. **24:7** But the chief captain Lysias came upon us, and with great violence took him away out of our hands, **24:8** Commanding his accusers to come unto thee: by examining of whom thyself mayest take knowledge of all these things, whereof we accuse him.

24:9 And the Jews also assented, saying that these things were so.

Acts 24:10-22

24:10 Then Paul, after that the governor had beckoned unto him to speak, answered, Forasmuch as I know that thou hast been of many years a judge unto this nation, I do the more cheerfully answer for myself: **24:11** Because that thou mayest understand, that there are yet but twelve days since I went up to Jerusalem for to worship. **24:12** And they neither found me in the temple disputing with any man, neither raising up the people, neither in the synagogues, nor in the city:

24:13 Neither can they prove the things whereof they now accuse me. **24:14** But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets: **24:15** And have hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust. **24:16**

And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men.

24:17 Now after many years I came to bring alms to my nation, and offerings. **24:18** Whereupon certain Jews from Asia found me purified in the temple, neither with multitude, nor with tumult. **24:19** Who ought to have been here before thee, and object, if they had ought against me. **24:20** Or else let these same here say, if they have found any evil doing in me, while I stood before the council, **24:21** Except it be for this one voice, that I cried standing among them, Touching the resurrection of the dead I am called in question by you this day.

orators and lawyers

From ancient times lawyers have been better known for their speaking ability than for their honesty. Tertullus is a foundational example of this, as he dishonestly called for the condemnation of Paul. Despite all the negatives involved in his attack, there is much to learn from his interaction with Felix (left) and from Paul's defense (right).

negatives

The legal hearing before Felix in Acts chapter 24 is calm and perhaps even boring compared to the suspense-filled account of the failed assassination plot against Paul in the previous chapter. Even so, the subject in these chapters was the same. Only the weapons of choice changed, from swords to spoken words.

Tertullus, the orator, used derogatory and misleading words to try to get Paul killed and silenced through the Roman legal system. Thankfully, Roman law allowed the Apostle to use the spoken truth to defend himself, as he did in 24:10-21. Better still, Paul went on to proclaim the gospel to Felix and Drusilla in 24:25. The truth of the resurrection played a key role in this, a fact for which Tertullus had no answer.

As a Roman governor and judge, Felix would have been primarily interested in the sedition charge, since the Romans were understandably fearful of discord and rebellion. So this is the first charge that Tertullus voiced (24:5). Paul, however, insisted that the main issue was religious, about resurrection (24:21).

Thankfully, for Paul and for the gospel, Felix was interested to some extent in Paul's message. (Having a Jewish wife probably played a role in this, since she is prominently mentioned in 24:24.) Though Felix was corrupt and more interested in receiving a bribe (24:26) than in the truth, he nevertheless protected Paul. The Jewish and Roman leaders were corrupt, but God was still at work in it all.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A	() Tertullus' was probably well known at the time, but . . .
A-1	() He is never mentioned again in the Bible after Acts chapter 24.
A-2	() He was known as a speaker rather than as a lawyer (24:1).
A-3	() It was not a great complement to be referred to as an orator.
A-4	() He was probably not well known for honesty. (24:1-8).
A-5	() He was not as well known as the Apostle Paul was.
A-6	() Orators and actors are much alike.
B	() Tertullus was a failure.
B-1	() Paul was not quickly condemned and executed (24:22-26).
B-2	() Felix listened to Paul more than he did to Tertullus (24:10-26).
B-3	() Tertullus failed because he did not understand Roman law (24:5).
B-4	() It may have been unwise to criticize the Roman commander, Lysias.
B-5	() Tertullus will forever be associated with Ananias, the high priest (24:1).
B-6	() Tertullus failed like the would-be assassins in 23:12-15 and 25:1-4.
B-7	() Ananias and Tertullus failed because God opposed them (23:11).

positives

Though it is difficult for a believer to find anything positive to say about Tertullus and the setting in which he appears, there are two ways to do so. The first approach is to focus on Tertullus as a skillful speaker. Since he was an orator, he must have been able to speak well. This is the subject of the various “C” lines below.

The second approach is to think about and discuss the various good things which result from the written record including Tertullus. This way, it is totally unnecessary to search for good things to say about Tertullus himself. The subject, instead, becomes why Luke was led to include Tertullus’ words and to include his name. This is the topic to be discussed in the “D” section.

One of the great blessings of Acts chapter 24 (which is not mentioned below) is that it is a revealing example of Roman law. The accuser (Tertullus) was allowed to speak first and the defendant (Paul) had the last word, aside from the judge. This order and system worked quite well, although Felix’s greed became a problem.

Another great positive in the chapter is the fact that Felix and Drusilla heard the gospel. Humanly speaking, if Paul had not been accused by the Jewish leaders, this meeting and outreach would never have taken place. (A similar evangelistic outcome is seen regarding the shipwreck in chapter 27.) Ironically, the opposition to the gospel by the Jews led to its proclamation to Gentiles like Felix.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

C	() Tertullus was a skillful speaker.
C-1	() He skillfully flattered Felix (24:2-3).
C-2	() He must have been fluent in Latin (24:3).
C-3	() His remarks were logical and concise (24:4-8).
C-4	() He may have been a better speaker than Paul (2 Cor. 10:10).
C-5	() He was able to link Paul to the despised town of Nazareth (24:5).
C-6	() Others spoke against Paul, but Tertullus was the main speaker (24:1, 9).
D	() It is good that Tertullus is included in the record.
D-1	() Tertullus was an elitist, not one of the common people.
D-2	() Using an orator implies that the case against Paul was weak.
D-3	() Tertullus’ naming helps demonstrate the authenticity of the passage.
D-4	() Tertullus shows that being honest is not as important as speaking well.
D-5	() It is encouraging to see how God protected Paul from his enemies.
D-6	() Tertullus helps show how corrupt the Jewish leadership was.
D-7	() It is good that the chapter has a happy ending (24:26-27).

conclusions

worksheet answers

Nearly all lines are either correct or partly correct. The exceptions are B-3, C-2, and possibly D-4. Tertullus was obviously an expert in Roman law (B-3). Moreover, since he was probably a hellenistic Jew, he would have been fluent in Greek, rather than in Latin (C-2).

Line D-4 is false in an absolute sense, since it is always more important before God to be honest than it is to be a popular or skillful speaker. Nevertheless, pragmatists have always insisted that success in this world depends far more on skill than on honesty. Even so, Tertullus was a failure (B) despite his skillful dishonesty. God was in charge and overruled (B-7).

Tertullus is the only person in the Bible who is called an orator. Although he is called a lawyer in a few translations, the term that Luke used to describe him has far more to do with spoken words than it does with the written law (A-2). Moreover, it was certainly not a great complement to be known as an orator (A-3). Tertullus' own words show that he was a dishonest one (A-4) and in some ways much like an actor (A-6).

One of the most important worksheet lines is the final one. Acts chapter 24 has a somewhat happy ending (D-7), in that Paul's life was spared as God said it would be (13:11). Yet, there is sadness at the end as well because Felix did not turn to the Lord when given the opportunity to do so (24:25). In addition, he was too focused on money to release Paul (24:26-27).

So what?

Acts shows that the Christian gospel is truly of God because the message of the resurrected Lord continued to go forward despite stiff opposition. Chapters 23-25 are full of opposition, but the Lord protected Paul and enabled the work to continue. This is very encouraging, indeed (D-5)!

It should not surprise us that the high priest, Ananias, and Tertullus, his hand-picked orator, failed. They were fighting against God (B-7) as surely as the would-be assassin who failed in the previous chapter (B-6). Moreover, let's not forget that there was another group of failed assassins in the next chapter as well. (See 25:1-4.)

In light of verses like 2 Cor. 10:10, Tertullus may indeed have been a better speaker than Paul (C-4). He may have had a better voice, and his physical presence may have been more impressive than that of Paul. He may have been taller and in better health. (Remember Paul's thorn in the flesh, 2 Cor. 12:7-10.) Yet, none of these things mattered because the Lord was with Paul rather than with Tertullus.

That said, the wording of Paul's rebuttal of the false charges made by Tertullus mattered a great deal. Paul cited various details which contradicted his opponent. Tertullus wished to make the temple an issue, but Paul showed that the core issue was the doctrine of resurrection. The orator spoke skillfully, but God used his Apostle to proclaim and defend the truth.

applications

Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most needful.
