

Acts | The Incendiary Fellowship

Fanaticism, Apathy and Faith

Acts 23.11-15, 24.10-27

7.23.17

But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also."¹² When it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul.¹³ There were more than forty who formed this plot.¹⁴ They came to the chief priests and the elders and said, "We have bound ourselves under a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul."¹⁵ "Now therefore, you and the Council notify the commander to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case by a more thorough investigation; and we for our part are ready to slay him before he comes near the place."

¹⁰ *When the governor had nodded for him to speak, Paul responded: "Knowing that for many years you have been a judge to this nation, I cheerfully make my defense,¹¹ since you can take note of the fact that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship."¹² "Neither in the temple, nor in the synagogues, nor in the city itself did they find me carrying on a discussion with anyone or causing a riot."¹³ "Nor can they prove to you the charges of which they now accuse me."¹⁴ "But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets;¹⁵ having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked."¹⁶ "In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men."¹⁷ "Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings;¹⁸ in which they found me occupied in the temple, having been purified, without any crowd or uproar. But there were some Jews from Asia--¹⁹ who ought to have been present before you and to make accusation, if they should have anything against me."²⁰ "Or else let these men themselves tell what misdeed they found when I stood before the Council,²¹ other than for this one statement which I shouted out while standing among them, 'For the resurrection of the dead I am on trial before you today.'"²² "But Felix, having a more exact knowledge about the Way, put them off, saying, "When Lysias the commander comes down, I will decide your case."²³ Then he gave orders to the centurion for him to be kept in custody and yet have some freedom, and not to prevent any of his friends from ministering to him."²⁴ But some days later Felix arrived with Drusilla, his wife who was a Jewess, and sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus.²⁵ But as he was discussing righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix became frightened and said, "Go away for the present, and when I find time I will summon you."²⁶ At the same time too, he was hoping that money would be given him by Paul; therefore he also used to send for him quite often and converse with him.²⁷ But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned.*

We're looking at this fifth book of the New Testament, The Acts of the Apostles. It's a defense of the Christian faith using HISTORY as evidence that Christianity is true. As if the historian, Luke, is saying to his readers, "There's NO WAY this movement could've spread the way it did unless God was IN it... but He is!"

Now the Apostle Paul is in Jerusalem. He's there despite MANY warnings because he loves his own people and he wants them to see that Christianity isn't an alternative to Judaism – it's the

fulfillment! The Good News of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection doesn't compete with the Jewish faith – it completes the Jewish faith. Jesus Christ didn't abolish the Law of Moses – He accomplished it (Mat 5.17) !

And now Paul has been arrested in Jerusalem for inciting a riot (and other charges)...and there's a kind of church vs. state thing going on (very similar to the trial of Jesus Christ where He was remanded back and forth between the secular courts and the religious authorities).

In this sort of complicated scene, we meet a number of colorful characters. I want to focus on three TYPES, three character-studies or profiles. Two of these types are sort of overblown, exaggerated personality types but in their extremes we can see OUR own flaws and tendencies "writ large" or magnified.

The profiles I have in mind are the 40 militants who want to assassinate Paul (the fanatics) and then the governor, Felix (the indifferent...comfortable man) and last, the profile of Paul...and his unassailable sense of confidence in the face of danger.

I want to show that these two opposite types often show up in the same person (i.e. YOU could be aggressive one day and be apathetic another day...or even on the same day under the right conditions) and though these two life-responses SEEM opposite, they're actually motivated by the same impulse.

The fanatics are these 40 men who are Jewish assassins plotting to kill Paul. They're men of the Temple and very offended by the fact that Paul has consorted with the enemy, with Gentiles. They accuse Paul of defiling the Temple by bringing a Gentile into the inner courts – "he made the Temple impure!"

And Paul's response is, "I went to the Temple with a group of Jewish men (not Gentiles) and we were completing a purification ceremony... We weren't making the Temple UNclean but ourselves CLEAN..."

It's a real irony and anyone can see it...but...these men are blinded by their militant fanaticism.

I've seen a number of references in the last year or so to "confirmation bias". One writer describes it as: "The tendency to experience the world through the lens of your already held beliefs. If you think, before you've eaten there, that La Frontera is a terrible restaurant...the odds are in favor of you hating it when you go there." (MBird.com CJ Green, Jan 12, 2017)

It's a mark of fanaticism but we ALL do it. We make up our minds before the evidence is in and then we ignore the evidence when it opposes our biases. It's VERY difficult to see in ourselves (if you're married, your spouse might help you see it or your roommate or friend or co-worker) and it's ONE reason this text is so helpful because it blows it up to a ridiculous level.

It's a real problem in us AND in our society. It's ONE reason we're becoming more blindly partisan in our politics. We make up our minds before we get the evidence. A New York Times article from January says that in the 1950's people were asked if they'd be opposed to their daughter marrying a man from the OTHER political party and 28% said "YES".

A similar poll in 2016 had 63% of Republicans and 60% of Democrats said they would strongly object. And the article (by Lynn Vavreck) concludes: "Americans are increasingly surrounded by those who are like minded – and they prefer to keep it that way for the next generation" (New York Times, Jan 31, 2017).

It seems we ALL have a bad case of confirmation bias and that is ONE symptom of fanaticism: disregard for the facts and a stubborn adherence to ones bias.

Another symptom is what C.S. Lewis called, "The Inner Ring" – it's a strong desire to be included in a group or a faction. It's the thrill of hearing someone says, "Pssst! I'm not supposed to tell you this – but hey, you're one of us – so here's what's happening..."

And that rush that comes from being accepted into a club, a clique, a peer-group, the insiders, the Mean Girls, the cool kids, the privy (i.e. participating in the knowledge of secrets), that impulse left unchecked will eventually become fanaticism.

You see it here, as these militants form a conspiracy. They go behind the scenes; they know the password and the handshake. They get access to the movers.

Again, it begins in 6th Grade...and it NEVER ends. C.S. Lewis wrote, "I believe that in all men's lives at certain periods, and in many men's lives at all periods between infancy and extreme old age, one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring and the terror of being left outside." ("The Inner Ring" in *The Weight of Glory*)

One last quality of this fanatical, militant spirit is that it is...amazingly nutritious...Did he say, "Nutritious"?

Yeah, THREE times these radical, sold-out, super religious defenders-of-the-faith... THREE TIMES they vow that they will NOT eat until they have killed the Apostle Paul. And it points out that we ALL have such a voracious hunger and thirst to be RIGHT...and when someone close by tells us, "YOU are right!" – it feels so good that it is positively nourishing...it'll keep you alive! Mark Twain said, "I can live for two weeks on a good compliment."

And when we find something/-one that supplies us with the sense that WE ARE RIGHT...that we are inside and included...I am on the side of virtue and justice and true values and I and my kind

are the only ones who stand for good and oppose the wrong...WE WILL MAKE GREAT SACRIFICES to keep that feeling.

We'll get up early in the morning...work late at night...we'll neglect our families...our health...give our money...EVEN GO WITHOUT FOOD. Why?

Because, we all want to be right. We got our first taste when the teacher said, "Good, Billy! You're exactly right!" and as time goes by we crave that sensation. We want to be evaluated and found good.

AND often to GET and maintain that sense that I am right...I also have to show that someone ELSE is wrong. We need a villain who embodies all that's wrong with the world...and in contrast to him, you can see how RIGHT I am. Paul was that villain.

That's what fanaticism IS: the solid conviction that the world-view, the outlook, the basic way of looking at life that WE hold is RIGHT. All my confidence is in MY rightness and OUR rightness... Paul had once been trapped in it himself and he knew it well.

Are YOU a fanatic? Probably not...probably few of us would be identified as one... Do we have those tendencies/symptoms? Probably more than we know.

The second profile (I'll be much shorter here) is the indifferent/apathetic person. In this case his name is Felix (like the CAT). He was governor in Judea/Jerusalem and Paul was testifying before him.

Felix the Cat (actually Felix Antonius) had been born in a lower class (perhaps even a slave) and through a series of fortunate events his brother became a ruler and brought Felix the Cat along with him. The great historian Tacitus writes of Felix, "he exercised the authority of a king with the disposition of a slave in all cruelty and lust."

Felix the Cat married the notoriously beautiful Drusilla. She was daughter of Herod Agrippa (who died back in Acts 12 [20ff]). According to Josephus Felix seduced Drusilla away from her husband, (named King Aziz) and stole his 15-year-old bride using sorcery. Then Felix ruled Jerusalem with a VERY heavy hand (crucified hundreds of Jews) and moved in to a palace on the Mediterranean Coast and all his wildest dreams came true (thought he was one cool cat!): once a lowborn nobody and now living on the Med!

And then...one day...Felix the Cat got him a mouse, named Paul. But he didn't want to jeopardize all he had – if he let Paul go, the Jewish folks would be mad. If he punished Paul, Drusilla might get mad and besides, Felix knows something about this sect called The Way...knows Paul is a Roman citizen (deserves a real trial!)... So Felix decides to do nothing. Takes a long cat-nap...Felix means "happy" and HE INTENDS TO STAY THAT WAY (doesn't wanna go back)!

Every once in a while Felix calls for the mouse just to play with him for a while...and he and Drusilla hear Paul tell about (24) "faith in Christ Jesus" and apparently he was intrigued enough to call for the mouse more than once...until one day when Paul spoke (25) of "righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come" and "Felix became frightened and said 'Go away for now...I'll call you back when I find the time...'" (Which he never did find... he forgot!)

What I think happened was that Paul spoke about righteousness meaning, "How a person becomes right with God" i.e. "we are justified/made right in the sight of God when we admit our sins (like Felix's total lack of self-control in killing all those people who threatened his happiness and in stealing that young bride) and if we have faith in Jesus Christ, God will save us from our guilt; Jesus Christ will answer for us in the judgment...and declare us right."

But Felix ...got scared (like a scaredy cat) and perhaps he FEARED that he would lose all his comforts – and that IS the great fear of the indifferent – to lose their comforts. And maybe God would change Felix into a self-controlled and just ruler and that would involve change... But cats don't like change...none of us do...we cling to comfort.

And here again: you may not be a full-fledged fanatic but maybe you do have some tendencies/symptoms and the same might be said of INDIFFERENCE. You may not be an apathetic comfort-hog, holed-up in your palace and concerned ONLY with your privacy and conveniences and endless amounts of luxury and "me-time"... but surely you can see some parallels: that you too are afraid of change...afraid of losing your stuff...your place...afraid of leaving your comfort-zone. "Afraid I don't have the time" (sounds so modern!)

And that's what both these types have in common. They look opposite but they are BOTH GOVERNED BY FEAR. Fanatics are afraid of losing their status as insiders, as people who are right, as the good people and those who have the right values.

Comfortable, indifferent people (like Felix and Drusilla and you and me) they're afraid of change...of losing the way of life to which they have grown accustomed.

Both are driven by fear...they're much more similar than they look and that's why we can be BOTH...or at least have symptoms or tendencies of both. And what drives it all... is fear.

And that brings up the last profile: Paul. He is a man of astounding composure in the face of danger and frustration (forgotten in prison). He has no power (like a slave) but with the mindset of a king. Felix was a king who ruled like a slave – Paul was a slave who conducted himself like a king!

He answers without fanaticism but with facts and with rationality and respect. "I cheerfully make my defense (10)...I did nothing to incite a riot...but yes I do believe in the resurrection of the dead." No hype – just respectful dialogue and humility.

When they were about to flay his back with the cat-of-nine-tails he calmly asks his punishers, "Uh, excuse me...are you supposed to flog a Roman citizen like this?"

When Felix wants Paul to bribe his way out of jail (not because Felix needed money but because he wanted an excuse to get rid of this pest [24.5]) – Paul won't do it. He's NOT indifferent; just at peace.

He's being treated like a court jester (like Felix's mouse) but he patiently tells Felix the good news because he's confident ... confident in what?

He's confident that he's NOT alone... Paul is not in the "in-group" with the cool kids and fanatics – HE'S IN THE TRUE INNER RING: Jesus Christ has stood by him and assured him – YOUR future is in My hands. I have plans for you and no one will thwart MY plans.

And this was Paul's great confidence – he's NOT alone in the furnace. Like in Daniel's day, there is a fourth Man in the fire...we may face the furnace but that fourth Man will take the heat. Paul trusted that.

Jesus Christ has taken Paul's punishment and has clothed Paul with a perfect standing before God and therefore Paul is really the cool cat... He has a King standing with him and while there WILL BE big difficulties ahead for Paul – his soul, his life, the real Paul is NEVER in danger. The Lord stood by his side and said, "Take courage...I will continue to use you here and in Rome...I have plans for you."

The approval of people and the love of comfort have lost their hold on Paul...and he's free. He knows the God who paid his price...and come what may, his true comfort and his eternal belonging are secure.

That's what gave Paul the composure of a King...and that's what will sustain you when the diagnosis comes...or the job goes... It's the antidote to fear in whatever form it appears. Are you trusting the One Mighty to save?