

He Will Not Die In Jerusalem, But Testify About Jesus In Rome

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Date: 15 May 2022

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Just making sure my microphone is working. Can you all hear me? I think you can. Excellent. That's great. It's so good to be back at Bells Hill. It's so good to be continuing the partnership between yourselves and Caldwood Baptist. So greetings from the folks up the road. I don't know if anyone is familiar with Caldwood, but yeah, we had a nice car journey down. No dramas en route, which can often be the case when you're called to preach somewhere else. And yeah, we are delighted again to be supporting the work.

Thank you to Cal for the invite to preach. And I can't remember who was here the last time I was here. I was trying to work it out this morning. But yeah, it must have been maybe over a year ago or just under a year. So yes, it's absolutely brilliant to be back. And the reports that we hear from Caldwood are always encouraging at our leaders' meetings as well. So keep going because you're going really well. And we do pray for the ministry here. So yes, so we are continuing our series and acts. Let me read from Acts 22. This is final verse of Acts 22, and then we're into Acts 23 down to verse 11. Let me pray before we read God's Word.

Father God, we thank you for you, Lord. We thank you so much for your amazing grace, for your amazing love, and for this day which, Lord, you have assigned as your day. Father, we thank you that we can gather here like this. And Lord, we pray that by your Holy Spirit and through your Word that we would hear from you this morning. Father, we do thank you for you and your Son and your Holy Spirit. We thank you that you are three in one, the Alpha and the Omega.

Lord, we thank you. You are in control of all things. So Lord, no matter what is going on in our lives, no matter what our week has just finished, what that has looked like, Father, we thank you that we can call upon you, that we can rely upon you, and we can rest upon you.

Father, help us now this morning to hear from you. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So Acts 22, the last verse, verse 30, says this.

[2 : 47] But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he, Paul, was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them. And looking intently at the council, Paul said, Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day. And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. 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? Those who stood by said, would you revile God's high priest? And Paul said, I did not know, brothers, that he was a high priest, for it is written, you shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people. 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 a Pharisee. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.

And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisee's party stood up and contended sharply, we find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him? 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. 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.

Powerful stuff. I know that Cal and others have been taking you through the story of Acts, and we've now reached the end of chapter 22 and then into 23. So before we dig into the passage in a little bit more detail, my first question right off the bat is this. When you think of powerful speeches, what do you think of, or who do you think of, that throughout history has given powerful speeches at any point in time? I don't know if you like me, but my mind would go maybe to Churchill.

Yeah, a couple of nods. Yeah, fight them on the beaches. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I Have a Dream speech in the 1960s. Have you ever been in court, as in for jury duty or maybe for some other reason, but if you've ever been to court, particularly on the final day of a trial, both parties, both defence lawyer and the accused lawyer will present their final and closing speeches.

And the only time that I've been part of jury duty was actually during lockdown, January 20, what would it have been, 2021, right in the midst of lockdown, and I get called to do jury service.

[6 : 18] Weirdly enough, I was sent to the cinema in Glasgow, and we had a video call, and I found it fascinating because I'd never been part of a jury, and particularly on the last day, the final speeches were when the lawyers made their last attempt. So have that in the back of your mind as we look through today's passage, the power of speeches. And I once heard someone very wise and very biblical in their knowledge, describing that the power of speeches. And this morning's passage is the first of five. So as the book kind of draws towards a close, this is the first of five trials that Paul is facing. And Paul almost gets an opportunity to give a speech. But throughout the books, depending on who is giving it, sometimes it's Peter, and he is speaking, preaching to the crowds, and he is building up the message. But then sometimes the speeches and acts are a defense speech, and a courtroom-like situation, and that's exactly what we have in today's verses.

So this morning I would like us to look at this trial and this speech in two parts, and then we'll focus on the key verse, verse 11, and see what we can learn from it.

So the story continues. I'm picking up from last week. Luke recording the very next day, the tribune wants to get to the bottom of this case, which Paul, and why, of which is regarding Paul, and why Paul has been attacked by an angry mob. And then the tribune was going to punish Paul, but then he found out that Paul's true Roman citizenship, which put an end to that. So then he's got one more kind of card to play. He's like, right, I'll get the Jewish council, and we'll get them in the court, and we'll find out why all this is taking place. So the tribune seeks the help of the chief priests and all the council to hear what Paul has to say. So Paul is led out to stand before them, before the Jewish council, and things certainly don't go to plan. So let's reread verses 30, and then chapter 23, verses 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them. Chapter 23. And looking intently at the council, Paul said, Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day. And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. 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. For those who stood by him said, would you revile God's high priest? And Paul said, I did not know, brothers, that he was a high priest. For it is written, you shall not speak evil of the ruler of your people. So I know that Carl has been bringing out the shape and the feel of Luke's account, and how much of the echoes that Jesus being put on trial can be found amongst the writings of the book of Acts. And I think we've got that here again this morning.

Theopas, who must be connecting the dots, has got to know how Jesus was treated, and then how he's reading and picturing in the mind Paul's treatment at the hands of both the Jewish religious council.

[10 : 08] It must be the same. So both Jesus and Paul were struck at the hands of their accusers. And I like how Luke records how Paul looked intently at the council. When was the last time you looked intently at someone? As an artist might be painting a landscape, they would look intently at their scene, and then slowly and surely begin to paint.

A student studying for exams would look intently at their coursework, trying to retain as much as they possibly could before they have to go and sit their exam. Again, in a courtroom, there may be different people looking intently at each other at many different times.

The judge would be looking intently at the person at the dock, the judge would also be looking intently at the lawyers and listening to what is being said. We have Paul here, who is being accused, looking intently at his accusers, which tells me that he is ready to take an opportunity.

Not just to explain his faith, but to defend it. But his opening speech is cut short. Just like Jesus was, he was struck in the face by the orders of Ananias, the high priest.

The high priest. And what's so interesting about this scene is we have in chapter 23 the difference in character. The Jewish high priest, the top man, is full of hypocrisy.

[11 : 54] Ananias, the high priest, the high priest. While Paul, remember back in Acts chapter 9, verse 15, Jesus says that he will be an instrument used by Jesus to carry Jesus' name to the children of Israel.

So he is full of sincerity and truthfulness of God's word, which ironically is what Ananias should be, but he is not. And if you delve a little bit further into this character, Ananias, he is actually responsible for the death of James, Jesus' brother, and that occurs later on in the biblical story.

So this guy is a real piece of work. He has got the highest position in the council, but yet he is full of hypocrisy. So Paul, being educated as a Pharisee, knows his Old Testament.

He knows the writings of Moses. If you were to turn to Leviticus 19, verse 15, you don't have to do it, but let me read what it says to you.

And this highlights the difference between Paul's character and the high priest. Leviticus 19, verse 15, says this, You should not, you shall do no injustice in court.

[13 : 08] You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbour. So Paul knows this.

Paul knows that his education has taught him how somebody is to be treated in court. Yet the high priest is the one who is blatantly ignoring that and that is in evidence when Paul is struck.

So not only does Paul know the verse, but he also knows that the council and especially the high priest Ionais, they will know this too. Which leads us to one of the strongest echoes back to Jesus when he was face to face with the Sadducees.

If you do have a Bible, please turn to Matthew 23. Matthew 23 and verses 27 and 28.

So Jesus in Matthew's account is face to face with the same group of people.

[14 : 19] Matthew 23 verses 27 and 28. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are like whitewashed tombs with outwardly appeared beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.

So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Paul, empowered by the Holy Spirit, uses the same metaphor that Jesus had used to call out the hypocrites that are the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

So does that surprise us? Does that surprise us that the same tack that Jesus used, Paul is again using here in our passage in Acts?

We're told all the time, aren't we, that we have to be role models, or our role model should be Jesus. If we have Jesus as our role model, what do we do when we encounter religious hypocrisy?

[15 : 26] Do we make a stand like Paul did? Or do we wilt and let it slide? The reason why I ask this is because I know for myself that I'm afraid. I'm afraid of the consequences of what making a stand for the gospel will mean, and what pressure it will bring to nearly every area of my life.

But this passage should be filling us with confidence and hope. But we'll come back to that reflection towards the end. So again, have that at the back of your minds.

How do we stand or how do we cope when we know about religious hypocrisy? So as we go on, so Paul knows his audience, he knows who's in front of him, and he knows what Jesus knew, that they are hypocrites.

But they also, but they also do not know the scriptures nor the power of God. Mark 12, 24 says that. Jesus said to them, this is the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.

So Paul's journey as one who stood by and approved the stoning of Stephen back in chapter 27, he is now following in the very same footsteps by defending the gospel just as Stephen did.

[16 : 44] So Paul has had this miraculous journey. He was there back in chapter 7 approving what was being done to Stephen, and he was part of that gang.

He was part of that religious sect. But now he's gone 180 in the opposite direction, and he is now walking the same footsteps as Paul did, as Stephen did, sorry.

But for the benefit of Paul in this case, he's not out in the open, and there can't be an open stoning, so he's actually got the security of the law of the court. But now he totally gets it.

He totally understands where Stephen was coming from. He understands, obviously, the writings of Moses. That hasn't changed. But now he understands the writing of Moses all point to Jesus.

And this is where the council cannot, they cannot understand it. They cannot get that in their minds. That the one who they killed was the very one that Moses and his writings were pointing to.

[17 : 47] So the trial goes on, and for our first readers and for Theo, they would have known that it doesn't look good for Paul. His opening speech was abruptly cut off when he was struck in the face, and he's facing an unfair trial, as his accusers are full of hypocrisy and unbelief.

Back into Acts. Picking up with verse 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, as with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.

And when he'd said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledged them all.

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?

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 back into the barracks.

[19 : 13] So Paul in effect knows, or Paul in effect throws the ultimate verbal hand grenade into this mix, into this courtroom. In the same way, Paul looked intently at the council in verse 1 in chapter 23.

He also knows them intently. So he looks at them intently, he knows them intently, and he perceived what they were thinking.

Paul knows his audience and it gives him such a strong foothold. And going back to Mark chapter 12 verse 24, Paul knows the scriptures and the power of God, so he declares biblical truth.

The same truth that will be the Lord, what the Lord has done. So if you remember Acts 21 verse 14, so that has resulted in him being beaten and arrested and now put on trial.

So this all started back in Acts 21 verse 14. Let me just refresh our minds. Acts 21 verse 14. And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, let the will of the Lord be done.

[20 : 27] So Paul knows that this must be the will of the Lord. For him to say these very words, he is giving the Lord his rightful place.

Paul declares the hope of the resurrection of Jesus. That is why he throws the cat amongst the pigeons. It's very, very clever.

The resurrection is a dividing point between the Jewish council, but oddly the Pharisees who acknowledge resurrection cannot acknowledge Jesus' resurrection, the most important part of the whole Bible story.

As we read about the situation, the situation escalates very quickly to the point that it turns violent and Paul is removed from the scene by soldiers. Think of the heart attitude or the mindset of this religious council.

Very, very quickly when disagreement is thrown into the mix, they're not only content to disagree, but it actually gets to the point of violence.

[21 : 37] What does that say about their character? Paul, very cleverly, knew his opposition and he knew that the will of God would be acted out and then, as I say, he threw in the ultimate verbal hand grenade.

So the first readers of the books of Acts and us, we know this is not a new argument. The Gospel highlights the same issue in Matthew 23-23 when Jesus was asked about the resurrection in relation to marriage.

But Jesus replied that the religious leaders had neglected the weightier matters of the law and that Jesus highlights as justice, mercy and faithfulness.

So as the first readers of Acts would have been piecing this together, we too can piece this together when we remember Jesus' teachings, when he was faced against the same opposition.

And Jesus basically says to them, you asked me about marriage in heaven, but there is a much more important part of the law that you hold so tightly to. And Jesus points out, you've neglected justice, you've neglected mercy and you have neglected faithfulness.

[22 : 49] How much time, energy and money has the church put so much of what doesn't matter rather than what does matter as Jesus describes? How much time, energy and money could we have spent on justice, mercy and our own faithfulness when we look back, not just at ourselves but as our nation as a whole?

How much different would the church within Scotland look like if we put the weighty issues at the heart of our community outreach? If we were to focus on compassion and justice, how much greater would the impact that we have in our communities look like?

That's true for Bells Hill, it's true for East Gold Bride, that is true for Scotland and the United Kingdom and obviously to the ends of the earth. What can we learn from this passage in reflection of our community's needs and declaring the good news of Jesus?

are we intentionally looking at our areas of our communities as a church here in Bells Hill but also the church and our nation?

Are we looking intently at our communities and thinking where does the gospel need to be taken to? The trial spirals out of control and the tribune can see that Paul's life could be ended within the walls of the court so he acts and gets Paul out of there.

[24 : 14] But Paul had said what needed to be said. This is his mission. His mission is in two parts. Mission one is Jerusalem and this is where we are at this morning and then the second part is mission Rome that Cal was highlighting in the children's talk.

Remember Paul as Jesus' instrument. He will be used by the Lord Jesus to declare the good news and he has basically done that now in Jerusalem and his mission will continue.

Which leads us into the last verse in this morning's passage. Verse 11. The following night the Lord stood by him, being Paul, and said, take courage for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.

How encouraging is that verse? So encouraging for Paul and it's encouraging for us this morning. isn't it interesting to think that how Paul would have been thinking and feeling after all that's gone on since his arrival and Cal highlighted that really well in the children's talk.

He must have been so weary and he must have been so tired and not getting ahead and looking into next week. How must he have been feeling knowing that he was in this prison?

[25 : 36] but he knew the words of Jesus. He knew God's will was to be done. So yeah, he was probably at a really low point in his mission, but then he gets these words from Jesus.

Luke describes it beautifully as it says, the Lord stood by him. How encouraging is that phrase as well? No matter how physically, emotionally or spiritually exhausted Paul would have been, he must have been restored to have listened to the words that Jesus says and to have Jesus stand by him.

And not only that, to have Jesus say, take courage. Paul has done well and he's been a faithful servant thus far in his journey. His work in Jerusalem is basically done and now Rome is beckoning.

The courtroom language that Jesus uses highlights how much the book of Acts is focused on the trials and speeches. Paul did in fact testify.

He told the truth to put it plainly. It nearly took his life. Paul went to the Jews, but he is now turning and heading to Rome.

[26 : 56] And again, we've got the echoes of the gospel right there. The Gentiles are next to hear the good news. Jesus' words to Paul here are a confirmation that Paul will make it to Rome.

He's going to get out of Jerusalem and again, that's come back next Sunday and you hear all about that. And when he will get there, he'll speak the truth of the gospel to the people of Rome, which is basically the capital of the world back then when the New Testament was written.

So how do we put that into perspective in 2022? So isn't it clear that the book of Acts, from the book of Acts, that often hostility and justice towards Christians in an upside-down kind of way presents opportunities for gospel growth?

Whenever we hear of Christians being persecuted or being taken to court because of their faith, we should remember the context of which the book of Acts is played out. Jesus himself knows that through courtroom situations, through Christians being put on trial and through Christians making a stand, then his word will go forward.

There's hope in the most difficult of situations, increasing hostility towards our Christian faith. It's going to get harder to be a Christian in our world.

[28 : 24] there's going to be more trials for our fellow brothers and sisters. But going back to what I said earlier, are we brave enough knowing that Jesus is on our side?

He is by our side. And when we have opportunities to stand for what is true and what is for Jesus, in a culture which is so anti-Christian, what will we do?

Do we fear courtroom situations? But if we do fear courtroom situations, are we missing the bigger opportunities, the bigger picture, which may lie ahead of us? If we do so, if we do make a stand for the Christian faith.

And to be clear, I'm not saying we leave here and then we march to whichever situation we know of that is anti-Christian. I'm not saying that. I would not be wise.

But the question is, where is our strength? Do we stand on our own strength or do we stand on the strength of Jesus? Do we make our stand for Jesus, even though we know it might bring us hostility or difficulty?

[29 : 35] So looking at Acts 23 and towards the end of the book, there are many gospel opportunities which will follow from trials and accusations. Christians. We should be encouraged and we should pray for Christians who testify to the facts about Jesus because it's exactly what Paul did.

And I can't not read this passage and study this passage even more and think of the Asher's Bakery situation recently. And again, that's been going on now for maybe five, six, seven years where a Christian organization, a bakery, stood up for their Christian beliefs and it resulted in them not only in a court in Ireland but also the high court in London and then actually the European court.

But they, the Christian couple, have made their stand and we know that there will be gospel opportunities that lie in wait as a result of that.

So are we praying for people like the Ashers? believers. So that's exactly what Paul did. Paul made his stand. He spoke biblical truth and as a result opportunities came.

So we started this morning by thinking of powerful speeches. So let's finish with one from Paul when writing to the Philippians. Turn in your Bibles if you have them to Philippians 3.

[31 : 07] So Philippians 3 and we'll go from verse 8. So again, Paul writing and see if you can connect the situation and the context from what we've just read about in Acts.

It says this, Philippians 3 verse 8 through to 11. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share in his sufferings becoming like him in death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law. It's basically Paul putting his past, his education, his Pharisee label to the side.

[32 : 16] But he continues, but that which comes through faith in Christ Jesus, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. Our saving rescue comes through faith.

Nothing that we have done, nothing that we can earn, but it all comes through Jesus. The resurrected Jesus, which was the cat amongst the pigeons in our passage this morning.

So as we leave here this morning, let's go with encouragement, let's go with hope. even in the hardest of trials and anti-Christian environment, Jesus works through these situations when we make our stand, when we depend on God for our faith and not our own education or understanding.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for Jesus. Lord, we thank you for your son.

Lord, we thank you that we are saved by Jesus. Lord, we thank you for the resurrection, for the great news. Father, we pray that we would be able not to fear our culture, but we would be able to look to our community to see the needs and to bring hope and good news.

[33 : 46] Father, we pray that for here at Bells Hill. Lord, we pray that for our country and for our nation. Lord God, we thank you for the book of Acts.

We thank you that we have these dramatic scenes. but Father, we thank you that Jesus is in the midst. Lord, we thank you that your will was done back then, then.

Father, we pray that your will would be done here and now. Lord God, we thank you that it's all about Jesus. It's all for Jesus.

Help us to remember that. Help us to stand by that and help us to put our faith and our trust in that continually day by day and week by week. We ask us now in Jesus.