

Paul arrested

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[0:00] Well, you may have, if you've been following the story through Acts as we've been going through, you may come to this chapter and think, oh, another riot, another mob. But in a sense, those were just the undercard, the warm-up acts. What we have in this chapter is the main event.

This is Jerusalem. This is God's hometown. This is the temple, God's house. In a sense, this is time for the final showdown. As we were hearing last week, Paul had gone out of his way not to offend either the Jewish believers or the temple authorities. And yet he knew what was coming. Agur the prophet had told him he would be arrested.

Sorry, my phone is not on silent. So that's the context here. Henry Ford famously said, history is bunk. But of course he was wrong. History is important. History is how we got to where we are and therefore, in a sense, what we are. There are different ways of looking at history, of course. But I think Luke, of all the Bible writers, thinks of history in the sense that we normally sort of naively think about history. It's a matter of recording what actually happened and relating those events to everything else that's going on around them. That's the way Luke writes history. Of course, if you've been coming along in the evenings, Revelation has a very different view of history. But the history that we find in Luke is the way we usually think about history. And for that reason, Luke's writings are full of historical references. And in fact, we can date this event, this riot, quite accurately from these historical references. So the Roman officer referred to an Egyptian rebellion. And that, we find from other sources, took place in 55 AD.

Vestas succeeded Felix as procurator in Caesarea about 59 AD. We read in Acts 24, verse 27, that that was two years before Paul's arrest. So the date of this riot in Jerusalem has to be about 57 AD, give or take a year or two. So that puts it at over 20 years since the death and resurrection of Jesus, and possibly less than 15 years until the destruction of the temple that Jesus had prophesied.

Of course, at the time of this riot, no one knew that. But nonetheless, this puts it in an important point in history. The gospel was beginning to get a foothold in the cities around the Mediterranean, and the Jewish authorities were not at all happy about that.

[3:35] So what was going on in the world around? At this time, Nero was the emperor. And of course, he would be the first Roman emperor to seriously persecute Christians when he blamed them for the fire in Rome.

But in the account of this Jerusalem riot here, interestingly enough, the Roman authorities actually come out rather well, don't they? When they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar.

He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. The Roman officer was going to have protected Paul from the mob.

In fact, Luke really lays on the irony in this narrative. Paul is beaten by the Jews without trial. You read he struck again in chapter 23, verse 2, and in chapter 23, verse 12, he actually becomes the target of an assassination plot.

Paul, who is a Jew and indeed a Pharisee, is abused by the Jews against their own law, while the Roman authorities do their best to protect him.

[5:05] In fact, it was his state as a Roman citizen, as we read. Not his Jewish background, but eventually keeps Paul out of the hands of the rioters and has him delivered out of Jerusalem, firstly to Caesarea and eventually on to Rome.

So Luke certainly doesn't miss the irony here. Initially, the officer thinks that Paul is a terrorist. He takes Paul to the Roman barracks to get them out of the reach of the Jews. But he's surprised, we read in verse 37, to be addressed in Greek, and apparently by an educated and cosmopolitan man, not some ignorant terrorist.

Now the soldiers are firmly in control. The commander, surprisingly perhaps, permits Paul to speak to the crowd. And so as a result, we get this second description of Paul's change of heart.

This iconic conversion. Since the conversion that we think of almost as a map, an illustration of all conversions. The Damascus Road experience, as we call it.

[6:26] We've already actually read of this iconic conversion once, in Acts 6. That was when Paul was called Saul, before he changed his name. Just run through the actual facts of the incident, which are pretty much the same in both accounts.

Saul had started persecuting this new cult, as he sees it, in Jerusalem. And he sets off to do the same thing in Damascus. But on the way, he saw a vision of Jesus, who asked why Saul was persecuting him.

He also, we read, saw a bright light, which left him temporarily blinded. His companions led him into Damascus. Then God sent Ananias along to sort him out and to restore his sight.

And Saul is baptized and begins to preach. Those are the main facts of the conversion. Why does Luke tell us it again, though?

Why have we had this account here? And how is it different to the one in Acts 6? Well, I think primarily it's because this is Paul's own testimony, in his own words.

[7:43] Acts 6, it was recorded as if from an external observer. But here we get Paul's description of how it appeared to him, how it affected him.

And so, what about Paul's speech, how he defends himself before the crowd? First thing to notice is that he addresses the crowd in Aramaic.

He addressed the Roman officer in Greek. But he addresses the crowd in their own language. Their mother tongue, as we call it. Rightly so, I think.

This is the language in which they have their security. Language in which they learned on their mother's knee. Or if you think of the mother tongue being more the nation, that is the language of the nation.

It is their mother tongue. And Paul addresses them in their own language. In their everyday language. He's speaking, in other words, as a Jew to Jews.

[8:52] And he's keen to establish his Jewish credentials. I'm a Jew, he says. Born in Tarsus, Silesia. But brought up in this city.

He studied among the best teachers under Gamaliel. Most famous of all the Jewish teachers. I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers.

And was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. He even admits that they are zealous for God themselves. So what had changed?

What changed here? Paul had his lightbulb moment, as we might put it. Almost literally, he says he saw a bright light.

Notice this is not just a change of mind. It's a change of heart.

[9:51] It's a change of mindset. You suddenly realize, if you like, want to put it in these terms, that the model of the world you're carrying around in your head, your understanding of the world no longer quite seems to fit the facts.

It's almost like when you turn your computer off and on again, because it doesn't seem to be working properly. It's a reset. As if your mind is being reprogrammed to view the world in a new way.

Now, of course, this can happen in everyday life. We talk about having a change of heart. It can happen in academic disciplines, in which case it's usually called a paradigm shift.

It is called that. I came across it in an article quite recently. But it all means the same thing. You think you start... The way you were thinking about the world, if it's Newtonian physics perhaps, suddenly doesn't quite fit the facts anymore.

And you have to look at the world in a different way through Einstein or Schrodinger. Of course, as I said, this happens in everyday life sometimes.

[11:08] But, of course, the gospel message is particularly life-changing. It changes people at an even more fundamental level than that. It's not just a change of heart, but it's a change almost of everything.

A new life, as we'll come back and think about a bit later. And we say we think of this as the iconic conversion. What are the main points of it?

It's worth just thinking about this for a few minutes. The gospel's message is always repent and believe.

These are two partners. You can't really separate them. You can't have one without the other. Repentance is turning away from your old self-centred way of life, what the Bible calls sin, and setting out in a new direction.

But, of course, you have to have a new direction to go. That's where the believing comes in. Belief, faith in the Bible always requires action.

[12:16] In fact, Jesus told a rather amusing story about what happens if you repent but do not believe. This is Matthew 12, 43 to 45. When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes to arid places seeking rest and does not find it.

Then it says, I will return to the house I left. When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. And then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself. And they go in and live there. And the final condition of the man is worse than the first. This is how it will be with this wicked generation. They can get rid of what they think of the evil spirits of the sins in their lives.

But if you don't put something else in their place, you're going to land up worse than you started. That's Jesus' warning here. Because you have to have faith in something. You can't just hope. You have to hope for something. For Paul, we read, The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the righteous one and to hear words from his mouth.

[13:34] You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. It's not just he's freed from pursuing the, intimidating the Christians, persecuting them.

He's got to put something else in its place. He's not just going to sit there and say, Oh, I don't have to do that anymore. He's going to be a witness of what he has seen and heard.

The world talks about freedom from something, from slavery or poverty or oppression. But in the Bible, freedom is always freedom too.

The Israelites left Egypt, not so they could wander aimlessly in the desert. If that had been the plan, they would have been better off staying put, as some of them grumbled at one point.

But they left Egypt for a reason. They left Egypt so they could serve the Lord and build a new, more godly society. And then when asked what was the most important commandment in the law of Moses, Jesus replied with words from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, The most important one, answered Jesus, is this.

[15:03] Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength.

The second is this. Love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these. That's why they really left Egypt, so they could do that.

In fact, in the Christian life, love is the category that makes sense of all other categories. You want to know what the law is about?

Jesus says it's about love. It doesn't make sense without that. The greatest of these, Paul himself would write, is love.

Because it makes sense of everything else. So that brings us back to the text a bit. Because let's see what happened when Paul made his speech.

[16:07] So Paul was trying to explain his change of heart to his Jewish audience. And for a bit they listen. They're interested in Aramaic, they're prepared to listen for him a bit.

But then he comes to the punchline. The Lord said to me, Go, I will send you far away to the Gentiles. The crowd listened to Paul until he said this.

Then they raised their voices and shouted, Rid the earth of him. He's not fit to live. Those Jews should have loved the world in the way that Paul did.

They should have said, We've been waiting close on 2,000 years for that promise to Abraham that in him all nations of the earth will be blessed. And now it seems to be happening.

But they didn't really love God. They loved their own world and they wanted to keep it that way.

They loved their lifestyle, their special status as God's people, their impressive temple.

[17:15] But they had forgotten, as their ancestors had often done, that this status depends on the love of God. It's not wrong to love place, it's not wrong to love our hymns and our rituals and the things that we do.

But it doesn't make sense if we put those in place of love for God. Remember what the message in Revelation, the message to the church in Ephesians was.

Yeah, you're doing all the right stuff. You're being faithful in a sense. You're doing all the right things. But have you lost your first love?

Have you lost really the reason for doing all this? We always need to be asking ourselves that question. Have we lost our first love? Because if we have, then we're going to put our trust in something else.

Our impressive building, our impressive learning, or our modern hymns or whatever it might be. But have we lost our first love?

[18:23] It's the purpose of all this activity to show the love of God and to worship him. The Jews loved their lifestyle, their special status as God's people, their impressive temple.

But they had forgotten, as their ancestors had often done, that that status depended on their love for God. Notice the tone of Paul's speech was loving and peaceful.

He didn't really condemn them at all. In fact, in a sense, he sympathized with them. Like Jesus himself, it wasn't that Paul rejected the Jews, it was that they rejected him.

And then the lynch mob was back. And so, as we say, Paul appealed to the protection of Roman law. He said, my status as a Jew isn't going to help me here.

I'm going to have to rely on my status as a Roman. Well, what happened next? We'd have to wait till next week to find that out. I won't give you a spoiler.

[19:31] But before we leave this, just a couple more reflections. I'm sorry I didn't change the slide, did I?

Sorry about my problems with chat, GBT. Paul in Jerusalem is wearing the same clothes as he was on the Damascus Road. I haven't quite got the hang of chat, GBT yet.

Sorry, I should have... Paul appeals to the Romans, and we'll be doing more of that next week. But just two more reflections before we leave this. What are the metaphors that are used in the Bible for that experience we call conversion?

The actual term conversion doesn't appear in the New Testament in our translations, although convert does in the New International Version. But it's all usually described by means of some sort of metaphor.

And one of them, as we've seen here, is seeing the light. Or in one word, enlightenment. We've seen that used in an acted-out way in our passage.

[20:42] Paul was blind, but his sight was restored. We think of enlightenment. But this metaphor comes with a health warning. Not all lights are equal.

Remember that Jesus said, the eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness.

If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness? Looking at history again, we talk about the Enlightenment, with a capital E, as that period in Western history, in the 17th and 18th centuries.

And people stopped thinking in a medieval way. Started talking about a modern age of reason. And indeed, this did bring some initial benefits, progress in science and medicine.

But it never quite lived up to its hype, did it? Quite often, this new scientific way of thinking was used to find better ways to kill and enslave each other.

[21:58] If not direct children, Stalinism and Nazism, and certainly the stepchildren, of the Enlightenment. People looked for law in nature, but all the law they found was survival of the fittest.

Nowadays, of course, we're post-modern. In many ways, we reject reason as a window to understand the world. Just try asking the question, what is a woman?

No longer a matter of science. A woman is whatever you think a woman should be. We've entered a world in which words can mean whatever the user wants them to mean.

Where every structure needs to be deconstructed. That's a key term in post-modern thinking, deconstruction. Don't take anything at its face value.

Take it apart. In fact, this enlightenment seems a road to a dystopian future. It's worth remarking that the Bible is in favor of reason and reasoning.

[23:17] Paul does it all the time. Jesus does it all the time in the Sermon on the Mount. It's presented as a reasoned argument. You have heard this, but I tell you, you're not looking at it right.

You haven't thought it through properly. But godly reasoning starts from the premise that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. And fools despise wisdom and discipline.

We preach Christ crucified, the power of God and the wisdom of God. But actually, that wasn't the metaphor that Jesus used, enlightenment.

Jesus liked the baby image. Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

The rain came... Sorry, I've left a bit out here. No, that's right. Let me read this first.

[24:23] About wisdom, sorry. This is about wisdom. Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who builds his house on the rock.

The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house. Yet it didn't fall because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

The rain came down, the streams rose, the winds blew and beat against that house. And it fell with a great crash. When Jesus had finished saying these things, these crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one with authority, not as their teachers of the law.

What calls itself the enlightenment was built on the sand. And it's rapidly now collapsing. But Jesus' own metaphor of conversion is new birth.

It is more even than a change of heart. Jesus reminds Nicodemus that it's a supernatural process. I tell you the truth. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit.

[25:44] flesh gives birth to flesh but the spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying you must be born again. The wind blows where it pleases.

You hear it sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the spirit. But hang on a minute, you can't go back into your mother's womb as Nicodemus objects.

No, of course not. Neither does Paul go back to Tarsus to live his life all over again. In fact, as he explains, his past experiences studying under Gamaliel will actually form the context of his new life. His new life starts right where he is on the road to Damascus. And yet, it is a change so radical that Jesus refers to it as being born again.

It's a work of the Holy Spirit who is the breath of life. A baby can't do anything but cry out. A mother's love is not conditional on what the baby does.

[26:58] A mother's love is pure grace. It's her child and she's going to love it no matter what. It's not that in preaching to the Gentiles Paul earned God's approval.

That's what he'd been trying to do before his vision. Rather, God came to him in grace drawing him into the kingdom so that he could proclaim the good news.

So if you've not received this new life take Ananias' advice. Now, what are you waiting for? Get up and be baptized and wash your sins away calling on his name.

But if you've had that new birth maybe some time ago, have you kept your first love? I think I couldn't finish this sermon without catching Paul's missionary vision.

So we're going to sing a real old-fashioned missionary hymn. It all sounds very Victorian at first but it's right. We've heard a joyful sound and we need to tell people about it not be pressurized into thinking it's cultural colonialism.

[28:13] The nation should now rejoice hope we know the tune of this. It's not in praise but I'm hoping we all know the tune. Perhaps Angela could play the whole tune and hopefully some of us at least will know it.

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