

Paul on trial

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[0:00] For some reason I've been thinking a lot about life over the last few weeks. Praising God for the wonder of new life. Praising God that he has made Micah so fearfully and wonderfully that he has knitted him together.

! But also issues of death as well. Tuesday, Parliament met and voted to decriminalise abortion. And on Friday, MPs voted to back assisted dying. What do we make of that as Christians who meet together this morning, who believe this book, who believe the God who is revealed to us in this book? What do we think about that? Well, we know that he himself is the author of life, who is sovereign over the day that we're born and the day that we will die. And we know that the life that he gives to us as human beings is of particular special dignity and value and worth. We're created in his image.

[1:28] We believe that life is precious. And so seeing these things in Scripture, we grieve what's happened this week.

Because we stand up for life as Christians. For the life of the unborn child who cannot speak for themselves.

We stand up for life of the weakest and vulnerable in our society who may even now be feeling the pressure to consider should they end their lives earlier than God intends.

We recognize the pain and suffering in taking these decisions. We recognize the pain and suffering in death.

But the Bible is very real and honest with us about that. We live in a broken and fallen world. But the Christian message has a better story for us.

[2:33] A better story than the story that the laws of our land, which seem to be changing, have to tell us. And this better story has been shown to us throughout the book of Acts so far.

Very early on in Acts chapter 3, Peter said, You killed the author of life. That's not a good story, but that's what those who oppose the Lord Jesus can say.

We killed him. But God has something better. God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of it. This morning, as Bible-believing Christians, we stand up for life.

We stand up for resurrection life. And as Peter said in his sermon on the day of Pentecost, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

And in doing so, can receive eternal life because of our resurrected Savior.

[3:43] But what's that going to do with Acts 24 and 25? I hear you asking. We come to this passage where Paul is on trial, firstly before Felix.

We'll spend most of our time in chapter 24 and later on before Festus. And it's helpful for us to see that he's on trial this morning with the background of this week and the decisions taken by our government.

Because I think Paul is on trial here because of issues of life and death. Issues of resurrection life. And I pray that that's going to be helpful for us to see here today as we live in a world where perhaps people will want to put us on trial in some form because we stand up for life.

We're going to see this chapter in three scenes. Firstly, flattery and false accusations. Secondly, the truth. And thirdly, a gospel opportunity.

But before we get into that, just to introduce you to some of the main characters. We've got the Apostle Paul here. We know him well. We've been meeting him throughout the book of Acts.

[5:06] We saw his wonderful conversion. We know Paul. Who's Tertullus? He appears at the beginning. He's a trained professional lawyer.

He represents the Jewish religious leaders. Some debate whether he himself is a Jew or perhaps he's a Gentile. That's who Tertullus is.

Who's Felix? He's a governor. The historian Tacitus says he wasn't very good. He practiced every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of a king with all the instincts of a slave.

Another commentator says, Felix is not a good ruler.

And then he's married to Drusilla. That's not the zoo nearby. That's the daughter of Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great.

[6:27] She had been married off to someone else, another king, king of Syria, age 14. But was led away from that marriage by Felix who seduced her to marry him.

Drusilla is his third wife. So that's the main characters in Acts chapter 24. So let's get into it. Scene one.

Flattery and false accusations. Tertullus, the trained lawyer, he's pretty good at his job. He butters up Felix with a load of flattery.

Did you see that there in verse 2? He says to Felix, We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you. Not according to the history books, we haven't. And your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation.

Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude. Felix, aren't you amazing, he says. When actually, and especially for the Jewish people who Tertullus represents, he was far from good.

[7:41] Flattery. Which leads to false accusations. False accusations against Paul, the man on trial here before Felix. Let's have a look at them.

Verse 5, we see that Paul's accused of being a troublemaker. And of stirring up riots. And of being a ringleader of the Nazarene that Jesus set to the Christians.

In verse 6, we're told he desecrated the temple. Allegedly, that refers back to verses in chapter 21. Allegedly, Paul brought a Gentile man into the temple, which would have been against Jewish law. But Paul wouldn't have been so foolish to do that.

He wouldn't have known that would mean the death penalty. And then in chapter 25, when he stands on trial before Festus, we read this in verse 7.

[8:49] When Paul came in, the Jews who had come from Jerusalem stood round him. They brought many serious charges against him, but they could not prove them.

False accusations. Flattery and false accusations. Not a good way to proceed a trial like this.

So we move to scene 2, where we see Paul defending the truth. Defending the truth. Paul's defense is one marked by truth from the beginning.

He doesn't begin with unnecessary flattery. He just says something very true about Felix. He doesn't say you're particularly great. He says this in verse 10.

I know that for a number of years you have been judge over this nation. So I gladly make my defense. That's very true. Without telling him anything untrue.

[9:49] Perhaps it comes across well, though, to Felix. And so then Paul gets into his defense, arguing back against these things.

So is Paul a troublemaker? Yeah. Well, he says no. Verse 11. There's proof. Verse 11. You can easily verify no more than 12 days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship.

And my accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple. Or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues. Or anywhere else in the city.

He's not a troublemaker. He's not stirring up trouble. He's not a ringleader. Of the Nazarene set. You can verify this. Go back to those that were around me just 12 days ago.

And for us, we can see Acts 21 for details. And he wasn't coming to desecrate the temple at all.

[10:56] That was another accusation against him. Verse 14. He says, I admit that I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the way which they call a sect.

I worship the same gods as you. And then verse 17. After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts to the poor and to present offerings. I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. He wasn't desecrating the temple.

He was a worshiper of the same god that they claim to worship. What a load of false accusations. So, what's the real issue here?

Why is Paul having to stand here and defend himself? Is it just they're annoyed with him and want to get rid of him? Well, that might be the case.

[12:02] But I think it goes further than that. I think it's about resurrection truth. Verse 21. Paul is trying to think what it is.

And he says this. Unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence, it is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.

It's about resurrection life. It's about theology. The Pharisees had found him innocent.

It's the Sadducees that will have the real issue with Paul here because they didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead. And that's what gets them riled up when Paul starts speaking about that.

And so, Paul's defense is, well, I believe in the resurrection. And I'm not going to make an apology for that. Because I believe in the resurrection of the dead.

[13:16] That the Christians, those trusting in Christ, will rise from the dead on the last day. Because I believe in the resurrected Savior, Jesus Christ. He rose from the dead.

So, Paul is not there because he has done anything to violate Jewish law or Roman law. He is there because he says yes and amen to the resurrection of Jesus and the future resurrection of the dead. He's standing on trial there because of the gospel which provides a better story. The gospel which speaks life to dying souls.

And Paul willingly stands on trial here. Because he knows that for him, knowing the resurrection, for him to live is Christ.

He gets to serve Christ, but to die is gain. Because he believes in resurrection life. A few weeks ago at a Sunday evening service, I shared this phrase with you.

[14:28] I wasn't sure if it was very well known. It was going around a lot when I was younger. And I think it possibly still is. YOLO, you only live once.

And so, people will do wild things. Go out for a wild, drunken night and say, YOLO. It doesn't matter. You only live once. It's okay. Or bunk of school or work at YOLO.

It's okay. You only live once. It's all right. But for the Christian, YOLO really isn't true, is it? It should be out.

You actually live twice. Paul is convinced of that. As he stands on trial here today.

It's because of the resurrection I am standing here. And people may, especially now after this last week, of these issues of life and death, which have been discussed and voted upon.

[15:42] People may hear our position, standing, speaking, life, and say what you believe is actually harmful.

People, Christians, have already been known to get in trouble for praying silently outside an abortion clinic.

People may take great offense at us opposing assisted dying and standing up for the dignity and worth of human life.

But in these things, what crime are we committing? And in what Paul says about resurrection life, what crime is he committing?

And yet he stands on trial. If this life was all there is, then okay, kill those who are terminally ill.

[16:53] Because there's no hope for them. And yet the Bible says God has come down in the person of his son Jesus to live amongst us, to share in our sufferings, to die in our place, and rise again.

The fact that God comes down in the person of his son Jesus to live amongst us, to die in our lives. We must stand up for life. Not just because God has created, life created us in his image, but because of eternity.

Because the human soul will live on either to experience God's just judgment upon us in hell, or to go and live with him forever in a glorious new creation.

We don't want to be killing people and sending them to an eternity they are not yet prepared for. So we stand for life.

[18:35] Just as Paul here stands for life. It's because of the resurrection of Jesus that we speak and tell a better story to our worlds.

And it's because of the resurrection that Paul can say this. In 25 verse 11, when he's on trial a couple of years later under Felix, he says, If, however, I am guilty of anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die.

Because he knows resurrection hope. And though Paul here finds he is hated and proclaimed a troublemaker for proclaiming these things, though we today may be hated, proclaim troublemakers for saying these things, may be told we're worthy of death, In all this we're simply following our resurrected saviour, are we not?

The one who himself came to offer life to the world and yet too was hated and proclaimed a troublemaker and sentenced to death, execution on a cross.

We are following our saviour. And his pattern is suffering, which will then give way to glory. And that's the path that we tread, suffering here, whatever it may be, but glory to come because of resurrection truth.

[20:33] So how will Felix respond to all this? How will Felix respond to Paul saying, I'm here because I believe in the resurrection?

Well, he doesn't respond by doing very much. In fact, he sort of waits this one out and wants to wait for others to come and deal with him.

And Paul finds himself continuing under arrest. But it's not too bad. Looking at verse 23, he ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard, to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs.

Clearly, Felix feels, there's not much wrong here. And this leads Paul to a gospel opportunity. Because we don't only speak up for life because of our resurrected saviour, the Lord Jesus, but also in this better story that we offer to the world, we offer a message of how you can know resurrection life.

[21:57] The good news of the gospel. And it's important that not only do we stand up and speak for life on these political matters, but that actually we stand up and tell and take opportunities to share the gospel with people, as Paul does here.

So that they too may hear and they too may know resurrection life for themselves, that on the last day they might be raised alongside us. We're not going to regret when we get to heaven telling someone the gospel.

Because perhaps they'll be there with us. And Paul has this opportunity, as we've said, to speak to Felix about the gospel.

Verse 24. Several days later, Felix came with his wife, Trusilla, who was Jewish. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ.

And then notice in verse 25, Paul preaches a three-point sermon to him. He talks about righteousness, self-control, and judgment.

[23:09] The man that Paul stood on trial under is now sitting himself under the word of God, hearing that he himself will stand under a judgment of God in the future.

And it's because of resurrection, it's because of Jesus' resurrection, that what Paul is proclaiming to him today about judgment is good news for Felix to hear.

It is good news for sinners. It is good news for each one of us gathered here this morning. And he starts by speaking about righteousness.

Righteousness. By this point, Paul had written the letter to the Romans. And Romans chapter 3, it's just an excuse to read these wonderful words.

Perhaps this fueled what Paul said. Romans chapter 3. Where Paul talks about righteousness.

[24:21] He says in verse 10, perhaps he told this to Felix. You imagine saying to Felix, Your greatness, there is no one righteous, not even one.

Not even you are good. Not even you are righteous. But later on, verse 21, here's the good news. That perhaps, again, he explained to Felix.

But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Paul tells him about this wonderful gift of righteousness. It's not of ourselves. It's by looking to the Lord Jesus Christ and his righteousness.

[25:27] We sang it earlier, didn't we? Thank you, Anya and Ruth, for leading us in that great hymn. My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

Dressed in his righteousness alone, faultless I stand before the throne. That gives us a solid ground for our lives to be built upon.

It's a wonderful message that Paul gets to proclaim as he proclaims to Felix righteousness. That by the grace of God, he doesn't need to live as a sinner without hope.

But he can know his sins covered in the spotless righteousness of Christ. And then he can know the work of the Spirit in him. The Spirit who grows love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in us.

And Paul here specifically talks to Felix about self-control. I wonder whether it was because Felix hadn't shown much self-control in the way he used his power, and particularly not in his relationship with his wife, Trusilla, his third wife, who he led away to commit adultery with him.

[27:12] They didn't show much self-control. But it's okay, Felix and Trusilla, because you can know the righteousness of Christ, and you can know the Spirit's work in you to produce self-control within you.

So how will Felix respond to the gospel? Felix already knew a considerable amount, apparently. Verse 22 says he was well acquainted with the way. Well acquainted with the way that Jesus is the way to heaven. He has clearly some interest in Christianity, because he sends for Paul to come and speak to him.

But is Felix's knowledge and interest in Christianity enough to save him? Is knowledge of the Bible and interest in Christianity, is being at church this morning, is that enough to save us?

Because perhaps that's what some of us here might think. Because I'm interested in what Christians believe. Because I'm gaining knowledge about what the Bible teaches.

[28:32] Because I'll be okay. But friends, it's not about how much knowledge of the Bible you have. It's not about how interested you are, how sympathetic to Christianity you are.

No, all of that should lead us to salvation in Jesus. To look to Jesus as our Savior. To say, please forgive me my sin.

I'm not righteous, but please cover me with the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. And Felix and Drusilla, certainly for them, their knowledge that they gained here, as far as we know, at this point, didn't save them.

Look at how Felix responds. As Paul talked, verse 25, about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid, or a better word, alarmed, and said, that's enough for now, you may leave.

When I find it convenient, I'll send feed. He becomes afraid, alarmed. He doesn't take this well. Perhaps he's thinking, I'm a judge right now.

[29:55] I have people on trial, but under me all the time. How could it be possible that I could sit under God's judgment? If that fear led him to Jesus as Savior, we can rejoice in another wonderful conversion in the book of Acts, but it doesn't seem that that happens.

Actually, rather than responding in faith, he tries to bribe Paul. Verse 26, at the same time, he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently, and talked with him. That's not good.

That's corrupt, isn't it? But Paul's a Christian, so you're asking the wrong person. Paul stands for the truth, and not lies and corruption. Paul stands under the sovereignty of God, in this trial and imprisonment, and in God's good timing, if it would please him, he will leave this trial and imprisonment.

Perhaps as they continue to talk frequently together, there will be more doors of opportunity for the gospel. We just don't know, but as far as we know, Felix's heart remained hard.

He didn't know this resurrection hope that Paul speaks of. And let this be a warning to us then, this morning, that if we're sitting here, filling our heads with more and more Bible knowledge, be a warning to us that that's not enough to save you.

[31:32] You won't have a leg to stand on, if you think it's all about that. Neither on that last day, can you offer God a bribe to save you. Knowledge of the Bible, knowledge of the judgment to come, knowledge of Jesus who died, knowledge of Jesus who rose again is good, but it needs to lead you to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because you don't only live once. You actually live twice, and we need to be prepared for that. We need to be prepared for eternity. Jesus rose from the dead. Paul gladly endures trial because of that wonderful truth.

Paul boldly even says, if I am to die, let it be so. Because my hope in life and death is found in Jesus Christ alone. And because of that truth, we say to a world that may say this is harmful, but yet we say it boldly, confidently, because of what we know of the Lord.

That life here is graciously given to us by God's. Our days are in his hands, and yet there is more than this. There is eternal life to come.

[33:03] And you can know eternal life and a new creation because of what the Lord Jesus has done for you. We proclaim life to the world.

And so in light of that resurrection truth, let's respond the way Paul does.

Paul encourages us to. At the end of his great chapter on resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15, he says, therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm.

Stand firm, brothers and sisters of Calvary. The news this week has been hard for us as Bible-believing Christians, but stand firm because of the resurrection.

Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. And because of resurrection, you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain because we're looking forward to a life that will be without end.

[34:19] Can we pray? And then we'll sing a song. Our heavenly Father, we thank you for your words.

Thank you for what we have seen in your word this morning. Thank you that your word reveals to us the gospel, reveals to us a righteousness, not of our own, but that can be ours because of the Lord Jesus.

And thank you that though there is a judgment to come, we thank you that because of Jesus' blood and righteousness, because of Jesus' glorious resurrection, we too will one day rise.

And so help us as your people to stand for life. And if that may mean enduring suffering, please help us to endure, knowing we're following a saviour who has gone through suffering and is now in glory and we are treading that same path.

And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, this final.