

Trial Before Sanhedrin

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[0 : 0 0] And I will pray for us. Lord God, our Heavenly Father, please speak to us through your word, encourage us, strengthen our faith and make us excited for the days ahead of sharing with the world the good news of the resurrected Lordship of your Son and of his offer of free salvation through his death on the cross.

Amen. Well, friends, today we begin a new journey together in the book of Acts through the last third of this exciting book of the New Testament. There are going to be assassination attempts, plots, adventures at land, adventures at sea, shipwrecks, snake attacks, politics and most of all we're going to see legal trials.

Luke has decided under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to devote a third of the book of Acts to the trials of the Apostle Paul.

So, you really get to see the sort of selection here that Acts is not an objective sort of an account of everything in the early church but it's very focused on especially Paul's ministry in this second half of Acts.

And I think there's a number of agendas going on here that the Holy Spirit through Luke wants us to see. Firstly, one of them is Luke wants to show the governments of his world, that is Rome, that they have nothing to fear from us, the Christian citizen who has integrity.

[1 : 3 2] That Christians don't go out of their way to be disloyal to the state or riotous but that we are good citizens. It's very interesting that the Tribune in today's passage at the end of chapter 23 says, there's nothing that Paul has done wrong that deserves imprisonment.

Paul's innocence is one of the themes to show that the government really should have nothing to fear from the Christians. Now, that may actually remind you of something else in Luke's Gospel of another man who was on trial of whom the government said, I see nothing wrong with this man.

It is, of course, Jesus. And so, another point of this part of the book of Acts is so that we will see a parallel between the Saviour Jesus and his ambassador, the Apostle Paul.

As Christ was on trial toward the end of Luke's Gospel, in Luke's sequel, his Apostle Paul is on trial. And so, the shape of Acts, I think, is to show us that as Jesus went, so go the ambassadors of Jesus.

And thirdly, and I think this is probably the biggest point that comes out today, Luke really wants to show us that your beliefs as a Christian are not private.

[2 : 5 1] They are actually public beliefs that ought to have a public impact, that believing that Jesus is risen from the dead ought to be heard in the public square before governors, before authorities, before courts, before anyone who will hear the truth, the absolute truth that Jesus is the King of the world, that He is the true Lord of the world.

Now, we are in a bind a bit today because we start with Paul on trial. He is already in chains. And as Graeme pointed out, in the previous chapter, he was arrested and arrested particularly under the accusation that he had brought non-Jewish people into the Jewish temple, that he profaned the temple by bringing Gentiles into it.

And the reason people say this is because they hated the fact that he preached the promises of God in the Bible as being delivered and given to Gentiles as well as Jews.

To some of the Jews, that was great news. To other Jews, that was awful. They hated it. And that kind of reflects a tension within the book of Acts that there was an overlap of ages.

That in the period between Jesus' death in AD 30 and the destruction of the temple that Jesus predicted in AD 70, you have this 40 year window where there's an overlap of ages where the Old Testament systems are still operating but Christ is preached in them.

[4 : 31] Christians go to the synagogue and meet at the synagogue. Christians go to the temple and meet in the temple and preach Christ there. And thousands upon thousands of Jews within that functioning system receive Christ as Lord.

But also within that system there are those who won't accept that this age has dawned and their time is limited because Jesus has predicted that not one stone will be left standing in the temple and it's coming in AD 70.

They didn't know the timing as we do in hindsight but it's coming. And so, this tension of Jews who love this new gospel and love Jesus and love that it's for all nations. And then there are also these Jews who reject that and want to hold on to what is quickly fading away.

And so, Paul, in order so that the Romans can sort of understand what's going on, Paul is actually put not on trial but before his accusers among the Jews in the Sanhedrin and the high priests of the temple.

It's kind of a little fact-finding commission so that the Roman authorities can figure out why is Paul really in trouble. They don't understand the theology of it. And so, Paul appears in chapter 23 and looks at his brothers, as he says very clearly, and says to them, Up to this day I have lived my life with a clear conscience toward God, before God.

[5 : 59] Now, remember, he's on trial for his ministry to Gentiles. He's on trial for profaning the temple. So, by coming up and saying, I've done nothing wrong, God is on my side, to them that is blasphemy.

And Ananias, the high priest who from Josephus we know has a bit of a violent tendency, orders those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth.

So, I imagine Paul in chains, can't defend himself. Someone comes and just sort of smacks him, fists him in the head and he's knocked over and getting up.

Paul seems to lose it, actually. He says, God will strike you, you whitewash wall. Are you sitting there to judge me according to the law, yet in violation of the law you order me to be struck?

It's almost a curse that God will strike you. And it's with warrant. I mean, the law has been broken.

[7 : 03] This is not righteous for Paul to be punched in the head when he's the innocent one. Paul is right at one level, but he seems to acknowledge that he didn't know who he was talking to because those standing near him say, do you dare to insult God's high priest?

And Paul, it seems, didn't know that was the high priest. I did not realise, brothers, that he was the high priest. For it is written in the law, you shall not speak evil of a leader of your people.

And so Paul, maybe because he's been away preaching to Gentiles for so long, that he doesn't know that Ananias is now the high priest. He just thought it was some guy he went to Bible college with who was a bit nasty, but he's now the high priest.

And so, and maybe also there's a sense here, people speculate that Paul had a thorn in his side, a physical disability that plagued him, that was his eyesight.

And so he didn't actually see that he was talking to the person robed as the high priest. We're not quite sure. I don't agree with this, but some Christians think that Paul is being sarcastic here, that he's actually making fun of them, saying, oh, you must not speak evil of a leader of your people.

[8 : 17] But I think actually Paul is quite sincere. He's humbling himself. He's apologising. He's sort of remembering where he is. He's remembering these with his own people and remembers that great verse from Exodus 22, you shall not speak evil of a leader of your people.

It's there in the New Testament. There must be one of those laws that still apply and must apply to the acting vicar as well, by the way. Now, feel with me what was going on for Paul.

Previously in Acts, he's actually given up on Jews already. He's actually, in one place, wiped his hands and said, you guys keep rejecting Jesus.

You're not worthy of this. I'm going to Gentiles. So he's actually come into the court having given up on Jewish mission, in a way. And that's probably why he's so grumpy.

But then Luke's showing us that he's starting to change gears back to his first mode of ministry, which is the gospel first to the Jew. Because looking around, Luke says that he notices that some were Sadducees, but others were Pharisees, just like him.

[9 : 26] And so I think what's going on for Paul is he's starting to think, hang on, let's not confront them. Let's share the gospel here. And so he says in verse 6, Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees.

I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead. Now that is a puzzle. That's the biggest puzzle of this chapter, that he's actually, that's not what he's on trial for.

He's on trial for ministry to non-Jews, for bringing Gentiles near the temple. That's what he's on trial for. What's that got to do with resurrection? And so people are puzzled about this.

And we see what happens when he says this, that a dissension began between the two groups within the Jews, between the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

They were divided because the Sadducees say there's no resurrection, there's no angels, there's no immortal soul or spirit. But the Pharisees acknowledge all three.

[10 : 25] And so they kind of get divided within their own politics and their own beliefs. A great clamour arose and certain scribes of the Pharisees' group stood up and contended, we find nothing wrong with this man.

What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him? And that's just rubbing it in, I think, to their internal politics. When the dissension became violent, so some people are trying to hit Paul more.

They're both trying to hit each other, I think. They're getting violent with each other. There's a bit of a punch-up, really. So back to Roman custody, that wasn't really a very useful venture to try this commission.

So the question is, why does Paul say, I'm on trial for the resurrection of the dead? What relevance is that? And at face value, if you are cynical, and I'm not, but if you are cynical, you will think Paul is playing politics of his accusers.

That Paul sees, you know, I can get them playing against each other if I play the resurrection card. And I think that's too cynical, friends.

[11 : 42] I think if you think that, you will end up with your own version of Christian witness, which is common today, of counting heads, of saying what you think will work, of changing, diluting, distorting the gospel based on what you're hearers you think will work best in that context.

And, friends, that's a very dark road that leads to, that's basically why the Anglican church is in the messes in today, because people have done that, tried to count heads and say what will please people or kind of win the room, if that makes sense.

I actually think Paul would not use something as important as the resurrection as a political card to play. There must be something deeper. There must be something deeper.

However, I think there's great evidence of this in Acts, because he actually plays the resurrection card in every trial.

It's not just something that he will do with a group of Pharisees and Sadducees to split them up. He's going to speak of the resurrection of Jesus before Roman authorities, before Felix the governor, before Herod Agrippa, before everyone.

[12 : 50] He's going to speak of the resurrection of Jesus. For Paul, it's the foundation. It's why he is imprisoned. It's much more important to him than just something manipulative or a strategy.

I mean, think about why he's there. He's there because of the accusations about Gentile ministry. Why does Paul do Gentile ministry? It's because Jesus is resurrected Lord of the nations, you see?

That's the connection. So, Paul does what he does because of the resurrection. Because Jesus is raised, declared Lord and Christ in his resurrection, has poured out his spirit, has inaugurated the new covenant where the light of the gospel can go to all the Gentiles.

He is on trial for the resurrection. It does make sense in terms of the legal argument. You put your most important thing first. It is resurrection for Paul. And you think about how Paul just understands Christianity.

How did Paul become a Christian? He met Jesus resurrected. So, Paul kind of got into this business that he's in because he met Jesus resurrected.

[14 : 03] So, he is who he is, a servant of Jesus because of the resurrection. Now, for Paul, the resurrection, it is the gospel. It's the heart of the gospel that Jesus died for sins and rose as Lord.

And I think if you're still feeling cynical and I haven't convinced you, well then I have to say I've got Jesus on my side because Jesus appears to him and actually affirms Paul's own witness in verse 11.

So, verse 11, That night the Lord stood near him. So, privately the Lord appears to him, the resurrected Lord. Keep up your courage, says Jesus, for just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome.

So, Jesus, the picture of Jesus in the book of Acts, by the way, is that he is active. His reign is on the edge of his seat at God's right hand through the Spirit, through the apostles, through his ambassadors to spread the gospel.

And here we see that Jesus has been watching very closely what Paul has been doing. And he doesn't rebuke Paul and he doesn't say, Paul, well done for shrewdly playing the crowd and playing the numbers.

[15 : 18] He says, well done for testifying to me. And as you've done here today, do again in Rome. Paul knows, see, Paul already knew this.

We need to learn this lesson. It's the resurrection that demands that we tell the world, Jesus is Lord. It's like a divine necessity.

Jesus says, you must do it, Paul. You must do it because I am risen. You must declare it here. You must declare it in Rome and everywhere in between.

And that's exactly what this story of Acts will be from here on. It's a consequence of the plan of God the Father that he has given his son into the world and raised him from the dead, the firstfruits of many.

And now that must be heard in the public square and in every home. Well, so that's Jesus' commendation for Paul, not a condemnation but a commendation.

[16 : 19] But unfortunately, the Jews regroup and those who were divided quickly regroup and there's a plot to have Paul killed as we continue in chapter 23 in verse 12.

In the morning, the Jews joined in a conspiracy and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. There were more than 40 who joined in this conspiracy, so it's a pretty decent-sized terrorist cell.

They went to the chief priests and elders and said, we have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food until we have killed Paul. So you and the council must tell the Roman Tribune that you need to see Paul again to get some more facts and when he's on his way, we will do away with him before he arrives.

It's a great plan. And basically, friends, these are the kind of enemies you don't want. They're serious, aren't they? They're not going to eat or drink until someone has slit Paul's throat.

I would be very scared if I were Paul and you would be too. Forty-plus grown men who want to kill you before nightfall. Well, luckily, because they are men and I suspect there's a bit of a blokey bravado thing going on that they're kind of, who's in, who's out, let's make an oath.

[17 : 39] But then the rumour of it spread faster than the actual act and Paul has a sister who has a son. So Paul's nephew hears of this plot and so he goes to Paul in verse 16.

Now the son of Paul's sister heard about the ambush so he went and gained entrance to the barracks and told Paul. So we suspect this is a very young man that he was considered harmless enough that they could let him into the prison.

He's not going to do anything bad and there's another piece of evidence for that in a minute. But a very young, trembling man comes to Paul and says, tells Paul, then Paul tells the centurion. The centurion takes the young man to the tribune and the tribune, you sense that the young man is really shaking here because the tribune took the young man, the nephew, by the hand and drew him aside privately.

So he really kind of nursed him into this and said, what's going on? What is this? And the nephew says, the Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow as though they were going to inquire more thoroughly into his case.

But do not be persuaded by them for more than 40 of their men are lying in ambush for him. They have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink until they kill him. They are ready now and are waiting for your consent.

[18 : 55] And the tribune dismiss the young man ordering him, don't tell anyone that you've informed me of this. Well, this is really, really exciting now. Not only there's a plot, the plot's got to the Romans.

The Romans don't like their authority to be kind of undermined or their process of justice to be undermined. And so the tribune gets his back up.

He's insulted by this plot. So he says to his two centurions, get ready to leave by 9 o'clock tonight for Caesarea with 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen, 470 trained professional Roman killers versus 40 bravado, chest-thumping, hungry Jewish men hiding in a bush.

And you get a sense, you know, they go that night. So the 40 men get up early. They go sit in the bush, waiting for Paul, getting hungry. You don't really find out what happens to them. Presumably they just gave up and went to McDonald's or something.

But, you know. What is Luke showing us? Well, again, Luke is showing the Lord Jesus is the one who's in control. The Lord Jesus can take care of his ambassadors.

[20 : 12] The Lord Jesus is the one who's providentially covering all options to protect his messenger. So I suspect that's what happened back in the court.

When the court divided, it was the Lord Jesus, in effect, who was manipulating the crowd and making it happen that way so that Paul would be preserved to preach the gospel into Rome.

And there's a letter from the Tribune to the Governor Felix, which is where we're going to go next week when Paul's before the Governor Felix. And the Tribune just says, here's this guy accused by the Jews.

I don't see anything wrong with him. He's your problem. He's out of my area. The Tribune doesn't say, oh yeah, I accidentally flogged him and he's a Roman citizen. I shouldn't do that. But it's a typical bureaucrat just covers his tracks and gets rid of Paul.

Now, just think about where we are, friends. And think about our own strategies of Christian witness, our own boldness of how easily do we shut our mouth when there's pressure on us when we could speak of the resurrected Jesus.

[21 : 17] How quickly do we count heads and try and work out what people want to hear and only tell them the parts of the gospel that we think will work rather than just tell them the straight biblical gospel.

The Apostle Paul is not a tactician in that sense. He's not a manipulator of crowds. He's a prisoner. He doesn't really have time. He's dragged places.

He doesn't have time to work out what's going to work in this context. He preaches Christ crucified and raised as Lord of all. And that's what he speaks about wherever he goes.

And he's not a very impressive witness. If you don't feel like you are an impressive witness, neither is Paul. He's an old man. These are the last five years of his life in chains.

He's messy. He's dirty. He's a hungry prisoner of Rome. And just looking at it, this is like a series of accidents that save him every time.

[22 : 13] Sometimes his enemies don't agree. Sometimes a young boy, a young man hears a rumour and that saves him. Sometimes he's nannied by the Roman authorities.

Other times he's tortured by the Roman authorities. Eventually they will kill him. He's like a boat person, a refugee being passed from government agency to government agency.

He's not a very impressive witness. He's not much in the eyes of the world but he's an ambassador of resurrection. He's an ambassador of the resurrected Lord.

And if you're an ambassador of resurrection, wherever you are, the resurrected Lord is the one that will bless your witness, isn't it? Isn't he? He's the one who will do it.

It's not how well you sell it, how well you speak. Speak the truth about the resurrected Lord Jesus and he will be with you and bless it. When you are nervous, remember your resurrected Lord is there with you.

[23 : 14] When you're not sure what to say, just tell them that, that Jesus my Lord is the king. When you're insulted and you're tempted to lose it and get angry, remember Jesus as Lord and be evangelistic, be loving, tell people about him.

The way you became a Christian was to confess Christ as Lord. That's how you become a Christian. That's the way you preach Christianity. That's the way you share your faith. You're just telling people that you've got a king who died for you and is now resurrected.

That's it. That's all you have to tell people. And Jesus says to Paul, I think it's like he's saying it to us. Keep up your courage. You must testify about me.

Jesus is the one who will take care of us. And Luke is very intentional to paint the story on a knife edge. You know, Paul really only just makes it each time by a thread.

He survives by a thread each chapter. Now, why does Jesus orchestrate that? So that Paul will keep trusting in him. So that Paul will remain dependent on his resurrected Lord at the precipice of death each time.

[24 : 26] And eventually it will be beyond death. Friends, this is how our witness will work as well. There are times when the government protects us. There are times when the government gives us concessions to preach the gospel.

And they're good. We ought to embrace those protections and use them. That's what Paul's getting. But then there are other times where the government is against us. And those times we ought not to go underground and hide our message but we ought to even just as boldly to their face proclaim Jesus resurrected as Lord.

There will be times when we'll have large crowds for us like last Sunday and it will feel great to be a Christian. You think, who wouldn't want to be a Christian? Look at us all. But then there will be times when you'll feel very alone and there will be crowds and mobs making oaths to get you.

And so we live where both these things will happen. But the encouragement of Acts is to remember Jesus resurrected as Lord. That is the key to Christian courage.

That is why Luke has written it this way so that the suffering Christians of the first century will be strengthened and emboldened in their witness and in their valour.

[25 : 37] So friends, please remember Jesus Christ resurrected as Lord and share with people the good news of the resurrection. Amen.