

SUMMER 7 - Acts 16-28 - Apostles Under Persecution and in Prison

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[0 : 00] You know my big question from this passage, it is, did that group of soldiers die or not? I don't know, they probably broke their oath is my guess.

Now I wonder if anyone, this is just a Bible quiz, very quick Bible quiz, does anyone know what the connection between the first Bible reading and the, well we didn't actually read the section in the second Bible reading, but does anyone know why we read the first Bible reading, just a one liner? Did anyone spot it? That's right, that's what Paul, that's right, that's what Paul, Paul acknowledged that, you know, he'd broken the law in one sense, in that part, in the first part of Exodus, sorry, the first part of Acts chapter 24, 23.

So you might like to look at that. So there's that little quotation about not speaking ill of the ruler of your people, both in Exodus and in the passage we read. Anyway, let's pray, friends. Almighty God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you said that your word is living and active, sharper than any sword, penetrating to the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

And you have made it able to judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. So please cause us to be able, well, please speak your word to us tonight. Please help us to hear it and please cause it to do what you have promised it will.

[1 : 34] And we pray this in the name of Jesus Christ and for his glory. Amen. Friends, I want to begin tonight by telling you a story from my days as a student worker in Sydney.

You see, I had been appointed to look after a variety of campuses and one of them was called Cumberland College of Health Sciences. It's now part of Sydney University. Anyway, various disciplines were taught there, such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, nursing.

My wife had studied there, but I want to tell you I didn't meet her there as a staff worker. Anyway, the group was growing and on one particular year, the peace group on campus, ironically, began to have objections to the Christian group.

And they looked at the constitution of the group and they noticed that it restricted its leadership to only those who were Christians. And the peace group objected to this.

And so they took it to the student union. And the student union took an interest. And they began to threaten to disaffiliate the Christian group for its exclusiveness. And so I thought I would then go and get some legal advice.

[2 : 40] So I went off to see a friend and a board member of the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students that I was working for. And he told me of a law that Christians had opposed, but which had been made into law.

And my memory is that it could effectively be used to bar organisations from withdrawing goods and services on the grounds of religion.

Anyway, my advisor told me that I should urge the students to raise the issue with the student union and gently explain two things. First, I should explain to them that the, that, sorry, I should explain to my students as they went to the student union, that the law was on our side and that if necessary, we might use the law of the land to protect our rights.

And secondly, we should suggest to the student union that if it disaffiliated with us, then we might approach directly the council or board of the college and ask for direct affiliation with it.

Anyway, that's, the students from the Christian group did exactly that. They went to the student union and strangely enough, the student union backed down. And ministry continued by the Christian union until it did officially, and it, it, it maintained its official recognition by the student

union.

[4 : 01] Now, I should say that in the 25 to 30 years that have followed, student unions and university authorities have tried similar tactics a number of times. In fact, in the last five years or so, those tactics have escalated and has been tried on campus after campus after campus around the country.

I don't know whether the same law can be used these days or whatever, but there are increased threats to student ministry on campus by increasingly aggressive atheistic groups, as well as those who are just simply pragmatic and want Christians off universities.

Of course, the day may come when the law will no longer protect Christian witness on university campuses. But at the moment, it seems to give Christians on campus both protection and rights. And we have used those protections and rights for the cause of the gospel on university campuses. Now, I raise this issue to begin because it appears to me that Christians have many attitudes to the state and they do so here in Australia.

At one extreme, some think that the state is satanic, opposed to God and opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. And there are some indications that the Bible may give support to such a notion about the state.

[5 : 21] In fact, the book of Revelation and other parts of the New Testament paint Rome as an agent of the evil one in the first century, a sort of beast of cosmic proportions.

Even if it's not regarded as satanic, other Christians view it as a suspect and very much part of this world. Others or other Christians that I've met long for the state to be purged of evil and made thoroughly Christian.

Some even campaign for this. Other groups of Christians just decide that they're going to withdraw from engagement and involvement in interacting with the state at all.

Others just fear the state. Many Christians have a tentative ambivalence to governments and state and so on. Now, I need to say that this passage that we're looking at today actually raises some of these issues.

In fact, I think that the book of Acts raises such issues deliberately at a number of places, and I've chosen on tonight being the time when we'll have a look at some of them. So I'm going to use this passage later on tonight to reflect on these matters.

[6 : 29] However, as I do so, I need to tell you, I do so tentatively. After all, for many of our brothers and sisters around the world today, the state is an organ for oppression of Christians and Christian faith.

There are many balancing things that could and should be said, and I'm not going to have time to say them all. I just want to concentrate on one. However, it may be helpful for us to see that what Luke to see tonight, what Luke appears to be saying and to incorporate it into our thoughts on these matters of church and state.

So let's now turn to our passage. So have your Bibles open at Acts. Well, we're going to start at Acts 19, and I've given you an outline there of what I'm going to say. Let's remember where we are. We were in Acts 19 to 21. Paul is in the closing stages of his third missionary journey. The agenda is set by Acts 19, 21, which I showed you the other night.

Have a look at it with me. Acts 19, 21. However, in the middle of this chapter, we're told about his ongoing travel plans and look at it. Acts 19, 21.

[7 : 37] We read this after this. All this had happened. Paul decided to go to Jerusalem. So can you notice Paul's travel plans?

I did point this out to you the other day. Go to Jerusalem, but go via Macedonia and Archaia, then finally visit Rome. So notice it again.

Jerusalem via Macedonia and Archaia, then on to Rome. Now, as we've seen in the past two talks, he has indeed been to Macedonia and Archaia.

He set his sights on Jerusalem and steadfastly journeyed on toward it, farewelling his friends as he goes. You see, he anticipates that he will not see them again. His friends, as he journeys toward Jerusalem, are constantly telling him what he already knows.

That is, they're warning him against testifying to Christ in Jerusalem. They're saying that if you do it, it will mean hardship, imprisonment, great difficulty. However, we know, don't we, that Paul will not be deterred.

[8 : 44] Finally, in chapter 21, verse 17, sorry, in chapter 34, he and 24, he and his friends arrive in Jerusalem and trouble brews among the Jews when news gets around about his arrival.

You see, his Jewish friends urge him, therefore, to do something public that will show that he's not forsaken his Jewishness. And Paul does. But false accusations are still made by Jewish people willing, wishing him harm.

And remember, the Roman commander rescues him. Paul makes a defense before his Jewish contemporaries. He testifies to what Christ has done in his life. But when he mentions that he's been commissioned by Jesus to preach to Gentiles, well, the Jews remember why they're there. Gentiles. And the inclusiveness that Paul seems to want to go for. And their ire is raised again. That brings us to our next section, chapters 22, 22 to 23, 11.

And that's our first chapter for tonight. Paul is about to be flogged by way of interrogation. In verse 25, he appeals to his rights as a Roman citizen. The Roman commander knows Roman law and custom.

[10 : 01] He knows that it is on Paul's side. And so he releases him. Verse 30. He orders the religious council that is the Sanhedrin to assemble before him. So you get this gathering of Jewish leaders.

Paul is brought in again. Anyway, when he sees that he's really not getting a fair hearing, he seeks to divide and conquer. So he sets the Jews against each other and lines up with one group of them by shifting the focus from Christian faith to Jewish argument, which is, of course, consistent with Christian faith.

He announces that he, a Pharisee, is a believer in the resurrection. Now, the cat is really and really and truly set amongst the pigeons at this point. An uproar erupts.

The Roman commander orders Paul to be taken back into the barracks because, you know, everything's going wrong. But look at the conclusion in verse 11. The following night, the Lord stood near Paul and said, take courage as you have testified about me in Jerusalem.

So you must also testify in Rome. Now, these verses are critical. You see, what they do is they make plain that Paul's plan is God's plan.

[11 : 14] You see, the Romans may be confused. Jews may be angry. But the Lord is at work through all of this. He is with Paul and the goals Paul has set.

And Paul is to take courage. He has testified about Jesus in Jerusalem. And he now must testify about Jesus and to Jesus in Rome.

You see what's being said. He's saying, look, Jews and Romans are under God's command. They are under God's control. This may not be the easiest way of getting to Rome.

But it is God's intention that this is where Paul ends up. Witness or test me to the ends of the earth is what God stated. He had in mind as far back as Acts 1, 6 to 7.

And God is well on track. You see, Rome is the best way to the rest of the world. And Paul will testify in Rome.

[12 : 11] And if Paul has his way, Rome will then open up the rest of the world to the testimony of Jesus, as it in fact did. That intention is clearly laid out in the opening and closing chapters of Paul's epistle to the Romans, if you like to look them up later on.

But now let's move on to our second passage for tonight. You'll also see in my outline I've supplied just a map that covers these sections. In Acts 22, verse 12, Paul's Jewish gospel opponents raised their voices in unison and they proclaimed.

Do you remember it? Rid the earth of him. He's not fit to live. Now look at chapter 23, 12 to 35.

What these verses show is just how far this group of Jewish gospel opponents are prepared to go in order to rid the earth of this man, Paul. Unwittingly, however, and even ironically, instead of ridding the earth of him, they aid God in bringing him to his and God's gospel appointed place, Rome.

It's really deep irony, isn't it? Let's see what happens. So the narrative which follows is full of features that make it full of interest, intrigue, suspense and conspiracy.

[13 : 31] Apparently, the Jews are less than happy with the proper process of law and the pace that it's taking. And so they take matters into their own hands and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed Paul.

A little risky, I suppose, but they're very confident they'll get him. Anyway, the plan is to intercept and murder Paul when he comes for another arranged meeting. But now look at verse 16.

Paul's nephew hears of the plot. Let's Paul know. Paul ensures that it's passed up the line to the commander who must then do something about it. The nephew reports the full details in verses 20 to 21.

And the commander sends the young man on his way with a warning in verse 22. Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me. In other words, keep it all quiet. The movement from Jerusalem to Rome thus begins in earnest in verse 23.

Paul is accompanied by detachment. It's a lot of people for one man, isn't it? 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, 20 spearmen. Spearmen and he's whisked off to Governor Felix.

[14:38] In verse 26, our commander or our tribune is named. He is one Claudius Lysias. And he sends the following letter to the Governor Felix. Claudius Lysias to his excellency Governor Felix.

Greetings. This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him. But I came with my troops and rescued him for I learned that he was a Roman citizen.

It's a little sort of embellishing of the truth here. But anyway, I wanted to know why they were accusing him. So I brought him to the Sanhedrin. I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law.

But there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment. And when I was informed, mind you, he's noticeably quiet about the flogging he was about to give. Did you notice that?

Anyway, when I was informed of a plot to be carried out against the man, I sent him to you at once. I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case against him. Now, it is probable that the very first line of all of this is indicative of why the commander had acted.

[15:39] It may imply that he thinks Paul could be guilty of disturbing the peace. And the result has been Paul's arrest. And after description of charge and arrest comes a description of the investigation in verse 28, minus the flogging or proposed flogging.

And there's a conclusion to that investigation. Can you see it there? He says the conclusion is what's going on here is an internal religious dispute. That's number one.

Number two, there was nothing deserving of death or imprisonment on the part of Paul. And finally, there's the reason why the governor finds Paul in his hands.

Of course, let me say the portrait of the commander, as I've intimated, is interesting and not completely flattering, having read the story ourselves. First, it is full of self-congratulation and not a bit of self-exaltation.

Mind you, that's probably not uncommon in such letters of that day and perhaps even our day. Second, the language he uses about Paul is similar.

[16:43] This is really intriguing to the language used by Pilate of Jesus, which is really quite interesting. Hear the echoes of it there. And this just serves to emphasize what we've noticed before.

Remember what we've been pursuing this last few talks? Paul is taking up his cross and following in the steps of Jesus. And he's even getting Roman authorities saying similar things back to him.

Third, he is saying that although he thinks Paul is innocent, he has kept him prisoner. Of course, he does offset that a little bit by saying that he's protected him in the face of a death threat.

Anyway, in verse 31, the soldiers take the letter and carry out their orders. During the night, they travel about halfway to Caesarea, that is to a place called Antipatris.

And the soldiers then return to their barracks while the cavalry continue on with Paul to Caesarea. So you lose quite a few of the men at that point at Antipatris. Anyway, the governor reads the letter and quizzes Paul about its origin in verse 34.

[17:47] And then in verse 35, Paul is placed in prison in Herod's Praetorium, where we find out later he will stay for two years. That's a long imprisonment, really.

One of a number that Paul will suffer in his lifetime. So, or in his lifetime of Christian ministry. So that brings us to chapter 24 and Paul's first defense before a Roman authority.

Now, we don't have time to go into the details, but I will summarize what's happening here. The outline is clear. Can you see what happens first? First, the high priest with his elders and lawyers turn up after a few days in verse 1.

Second, the lawyer who's named Tertullus presents his case after he's been given, after he's given the somewhat customary praise of the governor's rule in verses 3 and 4.

Did you notice that? And the charges are given in verses 5 to 9. And what are they? There are about three of them, I think. They are. One, that Paul has been a troublemaker, public nuisance and broad spread agitator.

[18 : 50] So, it's just been a nuisance. Right? It's a little stronger than that. And second, that he's the ringleader of a Jewish sect. Verse 5.

And 3. This is perhaps the most strongest of all things. He is a desecrator of temples. That's a strong accusation. And then in verses 9 to 21, Paul mounts his defense.

After also affirming, you know, backing up the praise of the governor and saying his little bit as well, he responds by saying, 1. Evidence will point to the fact that there is no proof of the charges about disturbing the peace or stirring up things in the temple.

So, no proof of charges about disturbing the peace or stirring up things at the temple. 2. He does admit that he's a devout worshipper of the God of the Jews as a follower of the way.

Notice, I don't think he's drawing a distinction between being true to Jewish faith and being a follower of the way. He says his complainants have called it a sect, but I think Paul is saying that he believes it is the true religion according to scripture.

[20 : 04] And I think that happens, well, that does happen in verses 14 to 16. And the third thing he says is that he's innocent of the charges brought against him. He reiterates this. He's saying, look, they simply do not stack up beside the evidence.

Verses 17 to 21. He has not broken any laws and he is innocent. In verse 22, Felix, who's apparently well acquainted with Christian faith, adjourns the proceedings.

He defers a decision until the commander Lysias comes down to Caesarea. Paul is then given some freedom. His friends are allowed to take care of his needs. So it's a gentle imprisonment, if you like.

And then in verses 24 to 26, he has opportunity to explain the gospel to Felix and his Jewish wife, which may explain why he knows about Christian faith, because he's got a Jewish wife.

Felix, though, you'll notice, finds the gospel just a little bit threatening. But he used to talk with Paul frequently, although not without self-interest. Apparently, he's hoping Paul will offer him a bribe.

[21 : 07] Anyway, in verse 27, Felix is succeeded by Portius Festus. Now, we know from the history books that Festus was known by Jews to have a better reputation for fairness than Felix.

Felix leaves Paul in prison, though, for Festus to deal with. Undoubtedly, that was a favor for the Jews. After all, you see, in prison for two years, Paul was more constricted, and he couldn't go about being a nuisance as he'd been.

So, friends, there's the story of how Paul begins to bring, sorry, how God begins to bring Paul to Rome. It is not a smooth trip to Rome, is it?

I mean, it would have been much easier to just hop on a boat in Greece somewhere and off you go. But no, he had to come back to Jerusalem. It is not a smooth trip. It is not without difficulty, but it is under the oversight of God.

We heard that back in Acts chapter 23, verse 7. So, having had a look at the passage from this sort of bird's eye view, I want to concentrate on one theme that occurs through the passage.

[22 : 18] This theme has to do with the relationships between Christians, Jews, and Roman authorities. Let's take a look at the relationship between Jews and Christians. From the beginning of the book of Acts, Jews are presented as opposed, apart from those who believe in Jesus, as opposed to Christianity.

You see, it is the non-Christian Jews who imprisoned Peter, then John, then the apostles. It is the Jews who forbid them to preach and threaten them with harm if they do.

Way back in Acts 4 and 5. It is the non-Christian Jews who push Christians out of Jerusalem. It is the non-Christian Jews who stone Stephen.

It is those non-Christian Jews who have rigorously pursued Paul throughout his missionary journeys, and he's come across them time after time. It is the Jews in our passage who are implacably determined to get rid of this Paul once and for all.

So they attempt to beat him to death. And they continue hysterical, almost hysterical demand for his death. They engage in secret plots under oath to murder him.

[23 : 31] And they present court cases in order to make him and his religion illegal. You see, Luke is not anti-Semitic. He simply is presenting the facts.

The custodians and the heads of Jewish faith had opposed Jesus. And now they are continuing their opposition to God through their opposition to the gospel about his son. They are enemies of the gospel of Christ. Now I want you to notice something else in this passage. The world of the first century is a complicated world. A world of powers and of power brokers. And Christianity came from Jewish roots. In Jewish eyes, the Romans were the bad guys. They were the oppressors. You only have to read the New Testament to get a real feel for this. Now, it would be natural, therefore, if Christians followed Jews in this way of thinking. After all, you see, it was the Romans, wasn't it, who crucified their Lord.

[24 : 34] It was the Romans who were in power and ruled their lives. And some parts of the New Testament do, in fact, view the Roman government with suspicion.

The book of Revelation does this. It talks of a time when Roman government becomes very oppressive and begins to persecute and kill Christians. Here, Roman government is a beast in the hand of Satan.

And that is true in much of the rest of the New Testament as well. But other parts of the New Testament don't reflect this position. And the book of Acts doesn't present this position, does it? Let me show you. Think about it for a moment. Think about the story we have read tonight. The Romans were very human. They were not unflawed. They were self-interested.

We've seen that in our passage. However, in what we've seen tonight, the Romans were almost consistently friendly to Paul in the gospel. Whenever they have opportunity, the Roman authorities actually defended Christian missionaries.

[25 : 37] We've seen this before. You might remember back in Acts chapter 16 in Philippi. We saw the Roman officials. Mind you, they had beaten Paul by this stage. But we saw them actually apologize to Paul and Silas for having beaten and imprisoned them.

In Corinth, the Roman proconsul of Archaea refused to even listen to Jewish accusations against Paul and dismissed the case. That's Acts 18 verses 12 to 16.

In Ephesus, which we looked at a few weeks, a little while ago, the town clerk declared the Christian leaders to be innocent, rebuke the crowd for disorder and sent them home.

Acts 19 verses 35 to 40. In our story, the military tribune or commander takes Paul under his protection. He rescues him twice by bringing him into custody.

He exempts Paul from a brutal examination by torture. Mind you, not without self-interest. When he discovers that he's a Roman citizen. He protects him from a murder plot by transferring him to a procurator's jurisdiction in Caesarea.

[26 : 47] In Caesarea, they hear of the accusations with they hear the accusations with justice. And as we'll see, they refuse to release Paul into Jewish hands. As I said earlier, you see, the Romans in our story are by no means perfect.

For example, the commander does paint himself in a good light. Felix is ready to twist justice under bribery and to do favors for the Jews. Nevertheless, they do generally treat Paul and Christians rightly.

And as we'll see, they agree with Paul that he's done nothing wrong either against the law of the Jews or against the temple or even against Caesar. You can see that in chapter 25 verse 8.

In some of the verses we've looked at already in chapter 25 verse 25. You see, I think the point is clear in the Acts of the Apostles. Luke, the writer of Acts, wants us to know that Romans are protectors of Christianity.

And that Christianity is a legal religion. They regarded Christian faith as Jewish in character and legal in its practice. It had every right to exist as a legal religion in the Roman world alongside Jewish faith.

[27 : 58] Even perhaps as a subset of Jewish religion. So that's the main point I want to make. For Luke and for Paul, Roman authorities were not necessarily bad guys. The Roman state was not necessarily opposed to the gospel.

No, the heaviest opposition to the gospel comes from those who are meant to be God's people. You see, that's the hard part of it, isn't it? Even the book of Revelation will acknowledge this, though it views Rome as the beast.

In Revelation chapter 2 verse 9, very strong language will be used. The language seems to indicate that Jews of the New Testament period are sometimes tools of Satan against the true people of God.

Christian believers in Jesus. Now having said that, I want to move on to my next point. I want to talk about Paul before God and before humans. Turn to me in our passage again to Acts 23.

So Acts 23. Religious authorities are arraigned against Paul. They're quizzing him about his views.

[29 : 05] And look at what Paul does in the first few verses. He looks the council straight in the eyes. And in verse 1, he emphatically calls them brothers and states this. My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.

Now that is true throughout his ministry. No matter what you think of Paul or his words, you could not deny that he lived as one before God. He sought God's will continually.

Even here, when someone says he's done something wrong, he checks out the scriptures and refers to them. When confronted with God's will, he hears and obeys, even when it questions all his own values and beliefs.

He's a man, you see, who strives to live as one firstly committed to God. He wasn't a willing convert to Christian faith. He was a reluctant convert.

He is a man who strives to live as one firstly committed to God and God's revelation of himself. And he strives to have a clear conscience in his relationship with God.

[30 : 16] But that's not all. You see, Paul doesn't live in a vacuum. He knows that God's world is populated with people. And he knows that God has established relationships between himself and those people.

He knows that God expects him to live by the norms of relationships. And so when in Jerusalem, he tries to act appropriately. He tries as hard as he can to make peace between him and his Jewish brothers and sisters.

And in chapter 21, he does this by taking a vow. In chapter 24, he does it differently. Think about him before Felix. He hears the charges.

He responds in this court appointed by God and by human authority. He goes through the charges one by one and answers them. He shows the accusations leveled against him were false.

See, he's not against the state necessarily. He has acted rightly in terms of Jewish religious sensibilities. And he's not gone out of his way to aggravate Jews by defiling the temple.

[31 : 16] You see, he's innocent of offenses against the law. Flip in your Bibles to chapter 24, verses 15 to 16. Chapter 24, 15 to 16.

He says this in this context. I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have. That there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.

And so I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God. And man, can you see what he's saying? He's saying, look, I'm going to have to face God one day. You know, I'm an ex-Pharisee and now a Christian. I believe in the resurrection.

I'm going to have to face God one day. So I strive to keep my conscience clear before God and also before humans.

You can see what he's saying. He's saying, I know what God requires of me. And that is not only to love God, but to love my neighbor as well. And I know God has placed various orders within society.

[32 : 12] We'll hear him explain this in places such as Romans. So his love for his neighbors is expressed in his obedience to those orders in society, which he thinks are ordained by God, whether they are religious or moral or political.

In other words, Paul's love of God is expressed in being a conscientious citizen. You see, he makes every effort to be submissive to the state and all human authorities as long as it does not conflict with his religious obligations toward his God.

Notice the difference, you see. He strives as he can to live with a good conscience and submissive to all human authorities as long as those authorities don't order things that run into conflict with his religious obligations toward God, where, of course, God's authority must triumph.

You see, he obeys all human obligations and all human authorities as long as his conscience permits. Now, having said this, let me push on and examine our own position.

If you're a Christian, you are God's person. You live before him. And so your first and primary obligation in life is to be faithful to him and his will.

[33 : 25] And you'll seek that will in scripture. You'll seek it in advice from godly Christians. And when you've found it, you'll pursue it with all that you have and all that you are. You'll seek to live before God with a clear conscience, just as Paul did.

But the point is that you are not a person who lives in a vacuum. God has placed you in a universe populated with people, hasn't he?

In a world populated with people. And he expects you to live in this world with proper respect for those orders and structures which are instituted by him. Those orders and structures exist at a variety of levels.

They occur within families where children are expected to honour their parents and parents are to avoid exasperating their children. They occur within governments where governments make laws for our well-being and for the good ordering of society.

I got a letter this week from a particular department within the government that pointed out that I may have been remiss, totally unknowingly, from a particular law of the country. I emailed back immediately saying I'd been unaware of this particular law and giving them the details they were after and I'll pay whatever reparation is needed.

[34 : 37] Why? Because I live with these things which are instituted by God. I might not always agree with their laws but there's nothing that are opposing the gospel in them.

This is just a simple tax. I ought to pay tax, oughtn't I? It's part of being in God's world. Part of being in this country. Part of living under that authority.

Or you see, in democracies, we are expected to participate as full-blown members of our community for its well-being. It's a great thing, democracy, but it means that we Christians have obligations to participate in it.

The ordering of society actually occurs within our churches as well. It occurs within our normal relationships where certain moral and social ways of acting are rightly expected, such as being obedient to parents, honouring parents, and so on.

See, in such a world, God expects us not only to be faithful to him, not only to have a clear conscience in our relationship with him, but also to have a clear conscience in our relationship with the surrounding society.

[35 : 44] That's why Paul says that the leaders in Christian church must not only have a good reputation in the church, but they must be exemplary also in their family life, and they must have a good reputation in the society in which they live.

You see, you ought not to, you know, if you are now choosing me as a minister or keeping me on as a minister or whatever, you ought not to allow me to stay if I didn't have a good reputation in the society in which I live.

That is a good reputation for being godly. You see, God doesn't just care about the people of God. He's the God of all the earth. He cares about all the earth, and he wants us to be people not only who love him, but love our neighbour.

You can see what I'm saying, can't you? I'm asking us, are we good Christians? Good Christians are not only people who live rightly before God, they are people who live rightly before people as well.

Good Christians are good citizens. They keep the law. They contribute to the well-being of society. They pay their taxes. They treat their employees with dignity and honour.

[36 : 58] They are honest. They participate in their communities. They do all they can to keep a good conscience before God and all people. And let me just close with this final point. We Christians have come to know the truth about God in Jesus Christ.

In this world, there'll be many who can't handle this. There'll be many who set themselves against God, and therefore against us, and against the message that we preach.

Many will oppose us, just as there were those opposing Paul in the first century. God's wish for us is that, as we are opposed, we strive for a clear conscience before God, and before other people.

As we live in this world and proclaim the gospel in it, the only stumbling block must be the stumbling block of the cross. Not the stumbling block of our ungodliness.

But the stumbling block of the cross. It must not be our lives that cause people to stumble. The gospel must be the only stumbling block.

[38 : 01] So let me put it to you, as Peter puts it, and you might like to look this up, write it down, look it up later on, 1 Peter 2, 11 to 17. But I want you to listen to it. 1 Peter 2, 11 to 17. Dear friends, I urge you as foreigners and exiles to abstain from sinful desires which wage war against your souls.

Live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority, whether to the emperor, that's the supreme authority, or to governors who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and commend those who do right.

For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use that freedom as a cover-up for evil.

Live as God's slaves. Show proper respect to everyone. Love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor.

Let's pray. Father God, help us to live good lives among those who don't believe so that though they might accuse us of doing wrong, they may see our good deeds and glorify you on the day you visit.

[39 : 37] Help us under your authority to submit ourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority. We know that it is your will that by doing good we should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.

Help us not to give up our freedom but to live as free people, but to bind ourselves to not use our freedom as a cover-up for evil. Help us to live as God's slaves. Help us to show proper respect to everyone, to love the family of believers and to fear God and to honour those who rule over us.

And Father, tonight, though we bring to you our brothers and sisters across the world who have governments that oppress them, torture them, maim them and kill them.

Father, we pray that you would relieve them that you'd have mercy on them. But Father, we do pray that you'd help them also to live rightly before their persecutors so that whatever they say about them it may be that they were good that is they lived rightly before you.

Father, please help them, please have mercy on them, please rescue them from their oppressors, please where their oppressors refuse to repent, please remove them and replace them with godly leaders.

[41 : 07] Father, we pray all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen.