

To the Emperor You Will Go

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 29th of August 1999 The preacher is Paul Barker His sermon is entitled To the Emperor You Will Go and is from Acts chapter 25 verses 1 to 27 Let me pray that God will help us to understand and apply his word to our lives God, we thank you that you reveal yourself and have spoken in the past through the scriptures and pray that you'll do so again tonight for us not only that we may know and understand them but that we may live better lives for Jesus' sake Amen Well, there's nothing new really when Paul was on trial or in prison rather, without trial for such a long time In the ancient world, in the medieval world and in our own modern and post-modern world prisoners are held without trial for substantial periods of time in some places

Often they're difficult or notorious prisoners the political prisoners like Janana Gushmao and so on And very often in such cases Christians are very quick to call for justice joining with groups like Amnesty International wanting such prisoners to face a fair trial and then, if innocent, to be acquitted and set free St. Paul's case alerts us to some other considerations It would be easy for Paul to gather some people together and be calling stridently for justice for a quick trial to be set free But what we see in this passage are some other considerations St. Paul was arrested back in chapter 21 Indeed, he's been arrested for over two years It was on a trumped-up charge of taking a Gentile, that is a non-Jew into the Jerusalem temple something that was forbidden and under Jewish law any Gentile entering the temple precincts or the temple itself would be sentenced to death

After Paul's arrest, a plot to kill him or ambush and kill him was foiled and for two years he was held a couple of days' journey away from Jerusalem on the coast at Caesarea as we probably say it rather than the American Caesarea or whatever It's a Mediterranean resort It's an archaeological site today It was where the Roman government of Judea held office Felix was the first Roman procurator or governor who had jurisdiction of the prisoner Paul But after a couple of years Felix was recalled to Rome He was a bad egg and he was replaced by a man by the name of Festus Probably not a very popular name today I should think It's a bit of an unfortunate name And we're dealing with about the period of 58 or 59 AD 25 years or so after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection The first thing to note, I think, in this passage is that Paul has not been forgotten by his antagonists You see, after two years of being held away from Jerusalem in the Roman government seat not a very Jewish city at all you could expect the Jews to really have forgotten about him because it was a trumped up charge They knew he was innocent So why not just let him sit in prison without trial? But that's not the case Festus has only been in the province for three days when the Jewish leaders and a whole group of them it seems very senior Jewish people approach him about Paul's case Now when a person takes office for the first time sometimes people approach them with bees in their bonnet I remember when I began ministry here three and a half years ago a couple of very trivial things really, I thought but people had bees in their bonnet about something and came or wrote letters to me about something they hoped that I would do Not sure whether I ever did or not The issues died away The animosity against Paul has not died down It's not cooled off in any way at all His antagonists are still literally hell-bent on deception and lies in order to kill him They don't just want to find him guilty they want him dead and that's very clearly the situation in the opening verses as we heard, read and saw on the video

[4 : 5 1] They are desperately keen to do away with Paul It's not good enough for them that he just sits in prison in Caesarea And indeed later in today's passages we also heard, read and saw Festus says to King Agrippa and to all the assembled crowd in the court This is the man about whom the whole Jewish community petitioned me both in Jerusalem and here shouting that he ought not to live any longer There's quite a lot of zeal against Paul in those words and quite a lot of majority

opinion it seems as well Festus was asked to allow Paul to stand trial in Jerusalem in the stronghold of the Jews and Festus wisely maybe ignorantly decided no, he would take trial back in Caesarea as he ought to that he himself would preside over the trial but he invites the Jewish leaders to go to Caesarea and after about a week or so he returns to Caesarea

So we're dealing now with perhaps the second or maybe third week of his time in the province as governor So you see how important this issue is to the Jews They're forced it onto the agenda within two weeks and they go to Caesarea two days journey away That's how keen they are to see Paul killed and the very day after he arrives back in Caesarea the trial or courtroom is set up and Festus sits on his tribunal seat to preside at this court There's almost a sense of intimidation The Jews are surrounding Festus and Paul almost trying to lynch him it seems in the way it's described at the early part of this chapter Now what's going on here?

Why is there such a depth of feeling against Paul? You see it's more than a personality clash because after all if he were in prison miles away the issue would just die down you'd get on with life It's not a clash of ambition It's not a clash of envy or rivalry between these Jewish leaders and Paul What's going on here is something far more sinister They say that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned That's not true Hell hath no fury except against the gospel of Christ and that is what is evident here The antagonism against Paul is an antagonism against the gospel of Jesus Christ It is an antagonism against the truth It is evil It is diabolical in its origin

That's why Paul's not forgotten because this is antagonism against the God of light by the forces of darkness It's not a personal attack It's a spiritual attack Because wherever the gospel is proclaimed their evil attacks and it does not give up You see often Christians are surprised when the gospel of peace and love and reconciliation is rejected But we're even more surprised when there is antagonism to it Because after all the gospel is good news It is about peace reconciliation about joy and freedom and life forever with a glorious and forgiving and merciful God Why should anyone not only reject that message but oppose such a message And yet in every day and age the gospel attracts hostility

Paul here is an example of that Jesus the example par excellence of course Now I guess Australia is one of the few places where it is uncommon for such violent hostility against the gospel of truth And most weeks in our newspapers and in our Christian press especially we see instances around the world where very violent and evil hostility against a great gospel is in evidence Missionaries and children killed in India earlier this year Christians slaughtered in the Sudan Christians tortured in Nigeria Churches burned in Indonesia Christians sentenced to death in Pakistan all this year and we could list many, many, many more examples of that as Australia becomes more secular we ought to expect the worst in our own country The gospel provokes evil hostility in every day and age [9 : 54] What are the precise accusations against Paul here? Three of them are mentioned and they're worth pondering to try and get in a nutshell what the issues are at least in the accusations made against him Paul in verse 8 defends himself and declares his innocence He says in his defence I have in no way committed an offence against the law of the Jews or against the temple That's the first issue Jewish law in particular to do with its temple Ostensibly of course Paul's charge or the charge against him was that he'd taken a Gentile into the temple Why is that so offensive?

Why was it that these Jews were wanting to put him to death for that sort of thing? If an unacceptable person walked into Holy Trinity I'm not sure that I'd be campaigning for their death no matter who they were or what they did You see the Jews' objection is not just about desecrating a building or bricks and mortar It's not just about some outsider invading their privileged or private space Their objection is a theological one and it's not a trivial issue You see for Jews the temple was the meeting place with God That is clear in the Old Testament in both a proper and a misunderstood way in different places But in the gospel that Paul preached the gospel that Christians believe the meeting place between God and humanity is not a building in geographical Jerusalem It's a person Jesus Christ That is where we meet God through the person of Jesus Christ No longer a building no longer any building but still through that same person alone Now that is a scandal for the Jews of Paul's day It was highly offensive for them to think that you met God through a person not the Jerusalem temple It is the issue that led to Stephen's martyrdom in the earlier part of the Acts of the Apostles the year after Jesus' resurrection the first Christian martyr and it's the issue that is bringing Paul's life under threat here You see the temple issue gets to the heart of religion How does a person get right with God?

And the Jews of Paul's day had got it wrong and that's why they took offence It's not a trivial issue It is a significant issue a fundamental essential issue for any faith or religion to get right How do we meet God?

And the answer is through Jesus Christ alone And for those who disagree with that like the Jewish protagonists against Paul they wanted his life because it got to the very core of what they believed No wonder such evil is arrayed against St. Paul in this chapter The other reason why Paul is offending them so greatly is not only where does a person meet God but who can meet God For the Jews they believe their privilege of having the Jerusalem temple was an exclusivism With some few exceptions they believe that God was for the Jews alone But the Christian gospel is inclusive It is a statement that God wishes to meet anybody through Jesus Christ No matter what their ethnic background is No matter what their intellectual capacity is

[13 : 51] No matter what their cultural differences are No matter what their gender is The gospel is for Jew and Gentile Slave and free Male and female rich and poor Australians and non-Australians of every sort So Paul's statement about the temple his preaching the Christian gospel is shattering the very core of their belief about where and who can meet God Essential issues for us all to get right Anybody and everybody is invited to meet God and the one single way by which that is possible is Jesus Christ The second accusation levelled against Paul is that he was a traitor In that verse 8 he declares not only his innocence with regard to the Jewish law about the temple but also with respect to the emperor

He's done nothing against Caesar Now why is that an accusation against him It's an accusation against him because his Jewish protagonists knew that the only way they could get him put to death was to make his so-called religious charge into a political one The same of course happened to Jesus before his crucifixion They needed to construe Paul as a traitor to Rome in the Roman court of Felix and then Festus No wonder you see Festus is confused because the real issue he recognises is a religious one He cannot fathom what the political charges are That's why he's in a dilemma and presumably why his predecessor Felix was in a dilemma and left Paul in prison for two years without trial Because what the Jews wanted was him put to death That required something like treason against

Rome Paul was manifestly innocent of such a thing they couldn't separate if you like the theological and the political that was going on there And even at the end of this chapter after Festus has heard the court and then sometime later this other petty Jewish king called Herod Agrippa II arrives on the scene to pay his tribute to this new Roman procurator he thinks well now I'll try and find out a bit more about him Herod Agrippa II was nobody important at all he was the ruler of a very small little area of what is modern Lebanon later he was given a bit of northern Israel called Galilee as well he's a descendant of Herod the Great and Bernice is not his wife but his sister with whom he it seems has an incestuous relationship he's not a very important person he's just somebody trying to get on good terms with the new Roman governor Paul is innocent of anything against Rome and with that confidence he tells Festus that he appeals to Caesar which is the right of any Roman citizen as Paul was any Roman citizen could say in those days that they wanted their trial to be held in Rome and that was their right and Festus after conferring with his council realised that that was the case and Paul would go to Rome some say that that's a strange thing for Paul to do because the emperor at the time was Nero whom we know by an infamous reputation as being the first persecuting emperor against Christians but at this early stage of his reign he's probably not yet sent any to the lions Paul's appeal to Rome is because he's confident that he's innocent but also because he seeks to avoid what will evidently be an unfair trial with the Jews involved the third issue or accusation levelled against Paul is to do with the resurrection of Jesus we're not told that initially though it's clear in earlier chapters but when Festus is talking to

Agrippa he says to him in verse 19 that he'd preface that by saying that none of the expected charges were made against him instead they had certain points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus who had died but whom Paul asserted to be alive Festus acknowledges that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is somehow important for the issue about Paul's charges even though he doesn't understand why why is it why would Jews be offended at Paul on the issue of resurrection does it really matter Paul clearly is not compromising on it and in one of his own letters in 1 Corinthians he makes it clear that without that the resurrection is a fundamental foundation stone for Christian faith and without it there is nothing to stand on or believe and throughout the book of the

[19 : 01] Acts the preaching of the various disciples and followers of Jesus make it clear that the resurrection is the turning point and the basis for their preaching and faith these Jews are attacking the resurrection of Jesus and for them it is an important issue challenges against the resurrection of course did not end in New Testament times in every century there have been people who sought to attack the belief and evidence that Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the third day many of them in our own day and age are cloaked with academic gowns or ecclesiastical robes they carry with them some authority inevitably they delude and deceive many the resurrection is foundational for Christian faith and like Paul any Christian must stand firm in it it is true its evidence is overwhelming even the

Archbishop of Canterbury has recently come out saying that he believes firmly in it despite what some of his revisionists might like him to have said Christians today like Paul need to stand firm against the attacks against the resurrection don't let sceptical fools deceive you and don't let anyone make you think that it's unimportant Paul is on trial for the resurrection he dies for it and he was not the only apostle to do so the final point of importance from this chapter is to do with God's strange sovereignty Paul ought to have been acquitted Felix knew that and Festus after him knew that the Jews who leveled the charges against him they knew that Paul knew it Luke who wrote this knew it it's very evident the indications run throughout all these chapters that Paul is thoroughly innocent of any charge leveled against him he does not deserve to be in prison let alone to die as tradition has it he did some years later under Nero in Rome but he's not acquitted he's not acquitted because firstly Felix the governor preceding Festus was weak he sought to try and get money out of Paul or money out of the Jews and when he got neither he just left Paul in prison and now Festus the new governor whom historians tell us was a wiser and more diplomatic person than his predecessor is also seeking to ingratiate the Jews in his early days and of course any Roman governor would seek to do that the Romans were viewed with suspicion and hatred by the Jews on the whole although it's interesting what strange bedfellows a common enemy makes when Paul is the enemy of Jews and Romans Festus is clear it's clear in this chapter he's seeking to get a favour for the Jews to get them on side if he's going to govern Judea well and peaceably he wants the Jews to be on their side there's a long history of trouble in Judea it's one of the few provinces of that Middle Eastern area that had a Roman procurator or governor all because Herod the great son Archelaus who ruled Judea was such a bad man that even the Romans got rid of him and the Jews didn't want him and the Roman procurator came in about 6 AD and for most of the time in the 50 years since then Romans have governed Judea one of Festus' predecessors was of course Pontius Pilate but each of those procurators almost without exception has had great trouble with the Jews partly because they're so difficult to understand and their religion seems so important for them and so fundamentally opposed to Roman religion and pluralist faith as well Festus is keen to start well with the Jews he's keen to offer them some sort of favour why doesn't God overrule here why doesn't God provide a successor to Felix who will stand up for what is true why doesn't God make it clear that Paul is innocent and let him be set free if we were there in those days we'd be campaigning wouldn't we as members of Amnesty International or Christian churches in Caesarea to set Paul free to end the injustice why doesn't God overrule after all he's the God of mercy he's a God of justice he's a God who's on the side of the people who are in prison he tells us that in both Old and New Testaments Jesus came we're told to set prisoners free and here of all prisoners is one who is very evidently innocent why doesn't God exercise his sovereignty and set Paul free Paul appeals to Rome not because he trusts in Roman justice he trusts in a sovereign

[24 : 18] God and when Paul was first converted as we hear in an earlier chapter of Acts chapter 9 through a person called Ananias God spoke to Paul and said that God's intention was for Paul to preach the gospel to Gentiles to Jews and to kings now strangely through injustice God's sovereign purposes are being worked out doesn't look as though God's in charge all the pomp and ceremony of both Herod Agrippa and Festus make it look as though power resides with Romans and Jews but through this injustice God's purposes are being worked out doesn't mean mean that the means is justified by the ends not at all God's concerns are for the gospel for the proclamation of Jesus Christ in the world that's his priority it was

Paul's priority it ought also to be ours that doesn't mean that justice is unimportant of course but Paul longs for real justice that's made clear in his speeches and in his letters in the New Testament he longs for the day that he describes in an earlier chapter of Acts as the day that God has fixed

when he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed namely Jesus Christ and that day depends upon the resurrection that's real justice the day when God will sift the hearts of men and women of every age truly fairly with mercy and impartiality Paul had confidence in such a day all Christians ought as well some Christians today are so preoccupied with calling for justice now that they don't actually look forward to or believe in God's final day of justice rather our concern for justice now ought to rest in the confidence of that future day when God will just fairly judge fairly with impartiality but also with boundless mercy God's sovereignty is strange it doesn't look in this chapter that God is actually in control for much of our world I suspect it's the same one of the great dilemmas Christians face I think is seeing in the world today where is God sovereign his sovereignty is not always obvious but it always can be trusted trusting in God's sovereignty ought to give us boldness when we face attacks against the gospel trust in God's sovereignty ought to give us confidence to proclaim the gospel as Paul did trusting God's sovereignty ought to give us endurance against injustice as we await that final judgment day with confidence Festus and Agrippa entered their courtroom with great pomp and show all the power and sovereignty looked to be in their hands and in their words the irony of course was that the bound prisoner the man who wore no purple robes of glory but no doubt was in some way shackled and guarded it's his message that had the power the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ the sovereign and risen God that's where real power lies and that is what Paul trusted in and that is what we are to trust in every day of our lives this however 18 years come through the road to you ■ you can't he hold you there that you can't see your arms can't see her saber through their universe anybody knows can't can't hear anything what Thank you.