

Hope on Trial

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[0 : 00] Well, as you turn to Acts 23, and by the way, we're nearing the end of Acts. Somebody this morning said to me after the 9 o'clock service that they said, I think Acts is coming to an end, as though they couldn't believe it.

So I think that we've been in it so long that we think it's going to just keep going and going and going. It has been good to be able to go through Acts and to see God's work in the world and to show us what the church, the point of the church in our gathering is.

And on this beautiful Palm Sunday, I do want to wish you a happy Palm Sunday and let you know that Palm Sunday has a lot to do with Acts, and this chapter of Acts particularly as well.

Because on this day, as we heard in the children's talk, Jesus is welcomed into Jerusalem as king. And only a week later, another crowd in Jerusalem will shout for his execution.

It's an incredible contrast of joyful acceptance and very angry rejection as well. And we see that same pattern happening in Jerusalem for Paul as well.

[1 : 17] If you were to look back in chapter 21, the large and vibrant community of Christians welcome Paul with open arms and that they are glad to hear about what God has been doing among the Gentiles throughout the Roman world.

And they glorify God because of what has been happening through Paul's ministry. And yet, in just seven days later, in our last chapter, we see this very angry rejection of Paul and a crowd, a big mob saying, away with this fellow from the earth.

He ought not to live. These aren't the kind of things that you want a huge crowd to be saying to you as you're about to preach. So you see the same pattern with Jesus.

As Jesus comes to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday out of a deep love for that city, the reason that Paul is coming to Jerusalem is because he loves the Jews as well and he knows that the gospel is for them.

And he, like Jesus, knows that he is coming to that city to suffer and perhaps die as well. Paul is continuing Jesus' ministry and that is why the same pattern is happening in his life as Jesus.

[2 : 30] And certainly things are very bleak in this chapter. Paul is under arrest by the Romans and the very powerful religious leaders of Jerusalem are all conspiring to kill him.

And it looks like this is the end of Paul's missionary work, certainly as a freed person. If by some incredible chance he was released by the Romans, he will be killed by very powerful people in Jerusalem.

But in that desperate situation, we see the power of God very clearly. And Luke is teaching us in this chapter that God rules over all rulers, that his power surrounds every situation where Christians are powerless.

And God himself guarantees that the light of the gospel will go forth into all the dark places of this fallen world. Nothing can extinguish that light.

It will go into light in every darkness. And the darkness we see for Paul in this chapter is that he is being brought forward into an informal meeting of the Supreme Court.

[3 : 42] And this is a Supreme Court that is very different from any that we know of. There's 71 judges, up to that many people, and Paul alone faces all of them. And it's a rather violent group as well.

As soon as Paul starts talking, the chief priest, whose name is Ananias, commands people close, the judges close to Paul, to strike him in the mouth.

And this is not out of character for Ananias. He's somebody who was appointed by Herod's brother. He is known for his bribery. He is not an impartial, just man.

He's the very opposite. And Paul calls him a whitewashed wall, which we don't use in everyday speech much anymore. But it's a very helpful illustration because it's saying, you're like a wall that's crumbling, and it's whitewashed, so it looks like it's good.

In other words, you are a just, supposedly, man, but inside you have complete corruption within you. And Paul knows he has no chance against that power.

[4 : 47] Paul repents of that, allowing God to take his own justice upon this man. But this is what Paul is up against. And in that dark situation, we see God rescue him by the end of this chapter.

And the way that he rescues him is somewhat unremarkable if you look at it without faith. If somebody here today read this and doesn't really have a faith in God yet, they might say that there were four things that worked out really well for Paul.

It was fortunate. First of all, Paul was smart, and he turned two political parties against each other in this legal proceeding. And second, he had a good dream that really encouraged him and kind of kept him going.

And thirdly, what happened is that one of his relatives just happened to hear of a conspiracy to kill Paul. And he told a commander who happened to take him seriously and got him out of Jerusalem because he didn't want any more trouble from this guy who was causing mobs to riot.

But Luke is writing this to us because he sees God at work in a hidden way. It is part of the unfolding in Acts of how God causes the gospel to prevail over massive opposition.

[6 : 06] And that God does it in supernatural but also in very ordinary ways through unlikely people as well. And what happens in Acts and in this chapter is that God is strengthening our confidence in the gospel as we hear it read, as we see the events unfold.

So I just want to look at God's work in those four parts of this account. Look at verse 6. It looks as though Paul is an opportunist. And in a way he is because the accusers are divided.

But listen to what it says. But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees, with respect to the hope and resurrection of the dead.

I am on trial. Now that had an immediate effect. Sadducees were people who only accepted the first five books of the Bible.

They didn't believe in any kind of resurrection. They were the chief priestly family. And then there were the Pharisees who were very strongly represented in the Sanhedrin as well.

[7 : 17] They accepted the whole of the Old Testament and they believed the prophets when they said that there would be a general resurrection of the dead. And that there is a day of hope that they look forward to.

The day of the Lord coming. And it's very likely that Paul already knew that these two parties were there. And so when verse 6 says he perceived that these two parties were there, I believe that it meant that God was speaking to him and showing him a way that the gospel could come into at least part of that supreme court.

And that the gospel light would come into that darkness. Because in bringing up the future hope of Israel and the resurrection, he was shifting the legal process from defending himself against these charges that he was desecrating the temple and he shifts the whole proceedings to saying, I am on trial for the resurrection.

And so he's bringing out the point of the gospel. It is about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And that word resurrection and hope is a very strong bridge.

It's a point of contact with the Pharisees that were listening on that day. And because they believed in the prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel who speak so clearly about the resurrection.

[8 : 36] Listen to Ezekiel 37. These are two verses which are very powerful. In it, God says this, Those are very strong words of hope.

And do they sound familiar as we think about who Jesus is and what he has done? The hope of the resurrection was something that all of the people, most of the people in Israel had in their minds, in their hearts, along with the Pharisees.

And Paul used that hope to be able to explain to people how Jesus fulfills all of God's promises, all of scripture. He fulfills Ezekiel's prophecy because Jesus is revealed as the Lord who rose on Easter.

He opens the graves. He raises people from those graves as well. He puts his Holy Spirit in all of those who believe.

That's what Pentecost is about. And he gives us our own land. Our own land is our citizenship in heaven. This inheritance that God is keeping for us, for all who have faith in him.

[10:02] That is the hope that Paul talks about. It is your hope and my hope if you have faith in Jesus and the resurrection. It is wonderful that in that dark and dangerous situation, Paul brings this out as a bridge to the gospel for the Pharisees.

And maybe in time, and I think this is true, some came to faith after it. But in the short term, things do not work out so well. It was not a good result.

It degenerates into a violent argument between Sadducees and Pharisees. We heard read that it was as though Paul was going to be torn literally into pieces.

It's so bad that the commander comes with a lot of soldiers and he breaks the meeting up by force and they physically grab Paul and they take him back to the barracks so that murder won't be committed in the Supreme Court.

It's not a successful day of ministry for Paul. And we should not underestimate how this affects somebody like Paul. We think of Paul as Superman sometimes.

[11:09] But Paul is somebody that night who would have been very, very anxious. He would have been frightened. Perhaps he was depressed as well. He was in a great deal of need and we know this because in verse 11, Jesus comes to him and he stands by him by night to encourage him.

It is a very powerful scene in verse 11. And we were talking about this in our pastoral staff meeting this week and Lisa Nichol, who is our children's minister, said, you know, when we talk about this in Sunday school, there's bound to be at least one child who says, how did that happen?

You know, was it a dream or a vision? How do you describe that to children who are asking? Well, as you look at this, you see that it's a bit different from the vision in Corinth where Jesus comes and speaks to Paul because there in Corinth, Luke says it was a vision.

Here, it simply says that Jesus came to him and stood by him. And so, we realize that we really have to just say to the children and us today that we only can say what Luke did.

Jesus somehow came and stood by Paul and spoke to him very clearly. And what that meant to Paul was lots of things.

[12:32] First of all, it meant confirming that Jesus is the risen Lord, that he is alive, that he is, even in Paul's suffering, in charge of those situations.

He is Lord. Paul knew that God was always with him. He knew that Jesus was the resurrected Lord. He knew that Jesus was leading the church and him.

But he needed to be reminded. Even Paul needed to know that. Even Paul had his faith and his, and weekend, and doubts came into him as well.

And, wonderfully, I don't think any of us can miss God's deep love for Paul in this scene. He knew Paul's heart. He knew how frightening the situation was.

And Jesus knew Paul's need for comfort. And this is our need as human beings as well. We need to be reminded and comforted as well. We need reassurance of God's love and his rule over our lives as well as what is happening around us in the world.

[13:37] And that's why it's so important and good for us to hear God's word, to read the Bible throughout the week, to be part of Bible studies. It is good for us to hear God's promises again and again in the Bible.

It's why we need Christians to pray for us and to help us in our own struggles by pointing us to Jesus. This is what we're about as a church. It is reminding us of the grace of God, of the resurrected Lord Jesus in our lives.

And I want you to notice how Jesus comforts. It's not simply making Paul feel loved, although I'm sure he felt loved. Jesus also has a message for him very simply.

It says, take courage for as you have testified about me in Jerusalem so you must bear witness also at Rome. You see there's a challenge to that comfort.

He is strengthening Paul to actively go forward and trust God. Jesus is telling him you must testify in Rome just as you did in Jerusalem which means that God is going to do it.

[14:45] Nothing will stop that because God has decided it. There's no doubt. But he will still be a prisoner there just as he was in Jerusalem. And again you see God's nature of comfort for us.

It's not, God does not necessarily take away trouble and affliction. Sometimes he does. But all the time he will come into those troubles and suffering. He will help us and love us in the midst of them and he will use them for his good purposes.

That is what it means that Jesus rose for us. That's what it means to share the resurrection life which we prayed in the Colet today. That we suffer with Christ for God's good purposes. And this is what was such a great encouragement for Paul because Paul's great desire was that God's purposes will be fulfilled in the world. He wants to bring the light of the gospel to dark places. And God's saying to him you are going to be successful at this. I will work through you in that way that you desire. And even though he will be in chains Paul will reach the most powerful people in the world with the gospel in the next few years.

[15 : 57] And he will also reach people who are the most marginalized in the world as well. And this is the promise that Jesus makes to him in that dream. And that was what strengthened Paul that night.

Now Paul was in great need of that because the next day was worse. So if you look further down starting in verse 12 you see that some of the Jewish leaders made a plot.

And this plot was that they would bind themselves to kill Paul or die in the process. So one of two things will happen in their lives. they will die or Paul will.

And they asked the Supreme Court the Sanhedrin to continue the inquiry so that Paul would be brought down to them again and they would ambush him. But as we read this extraordinary story Paul's nephew just happens to hear of this plot.

And he comes and tells Paul and Paul acts in faith on what is being told him and he says to the soldier go to the commander and tell him. And commander decides to listen to this young man.

[17 : 08] Tells him not to tell anybody and that night by 9 o'clock at night under cover of darkness this commander puts Paul on a horse and he sends him to Caesarea with 470 soldiers.

That's over half the garrison in Jerusalem. And what they did was leave 40 very unhappy men behind in Jerusalem as well.

Now this is a costly thing to do. This is something that would have been tiring for the soldiers. It's a big risk for the commander to take that big a part of the garrison.

And you could say that was simply because the commander was desperate to get rid of Paul and the trouble. But I think John Calvin got it right when he said we must so consider the wisdom of the commander that our faith lifts up her eyes into heaven and understand that God guides the heart of a pagan man by a secret instinct and that he is at length a guide to Paul and the soldiers that he may come safe to Caesarea.

And of course that's what happens. They get him to Caesarea where he will be on trial before Felix in a safe place. And really that's what this passage is all about.

[18 : 28] It is about God lifting the eyes of our faith to heaven because we see God at work in the commander. We see God at work in Paul's nephew.

We see God at work as Jesus comes and stands by him and encourages him and tells him what will happen. And we see God's work in a very hostile court where Paul speaks about the hope and the resurrection of the dead and uses that time as a platform to point to Jesus as the hope of Israel. So you can't escape that this chapter clearly tells us that God rules all of the world. He rules those who are hostile to Jesus and he rules those who serve him.

And he shows his power to direct the light of the gospel into this dark world. And he shows that he penetrates into the places of religious power like Jerusalem as well as the great political power of Rome.

And so as we come away from this passage there are three things that I hope that we can take away. There's lots of things but I briefly want to point out three things that all have to do with Jesus' love for us and his rule in our lives in the world.

[19 : 48] Jesus' loving rule over this world. And the first is simply this that Jesus because of the resurrection is with you in your suffering.

We suffer with him and he brings suffering to good purpose. Now that's easy for me to say but it's hard to believe when you are in the midst of suffering.

And Paul knew this on that night that Jesus came to him. But God's word is clear about this. We're entering now Holy Week where we see King Jesus suffer terribly and die in order to triumph over death and sin.

God has the most powerful purpose imaginable for his suffering and that is that he would bring us release from our sins and new life with Jesus Christ as our king.

And what this means is that suffering that we have in our lives are normal as a Christian knowing that we suffer with Christ. Paul said this when he said through many tribulations we enter the kingdom of God.

[20 : 53] But just as God Jesus spoke to Paul in his dark night to assure him that his good purposes would be worked out through Paul all the way to Rome Jesus continually speaks to you and to me in the Bible.

And he is telling us that he does not abandon you in suffering. He is the risen Lord who is always with you. He works his good purposes in you and in this fallen world as you love him and as you trust him.

Nothing, Paul says, can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. And secondly, the passage tells us that God directs people in the world to do his will even though they don't know him.

And often, this is something that we forget. We limit God to Sunday morning or to our Bible study or to a time of prayer that we might have. But we see today that God works in the lives of everyone whether it's the commander or Paul, the nephews, the soldiers, the governor Felix, even the judges he worked through which should be reassuring to us at St. John's.

There is no aspect of the world that God does not rule and his power is directed at rescuing people. That is the point of his rule. And we as a church can expect that as we are part of God's rescue work in Vancouver.

[22 : 16] And you can expect his saving work in and through the lives of people that you are part of in your life that you may not expect. People that you are with in your place of work.

People in your social gatherings. People in your sometimes crazy family get-togethers that you might have. God is ruling and he is working out his saving purposes in those people.

And finally, the amazing revelation that Paul had in his very dark night reveals what is always true for him and for us as well. And that is that Jesus stands by you and he speaks to you.

Now the Bible tells us that Jesus is our advocate, that he intercedes for us, that he is our great priest, and that he is the one who strengthens us to serve him. And also the great gifts of God's word is that it is Jesus himself continually speaking to us.

This is the gift we have in his word. The Holy Spirit speaks to us through it just as Jesus spoke to Paul. He comforts us as he did for Paul by both assuring us of his love for us and his salvation that he has given to us, but also moving us forward to act on his behalf, to be part of his saving work in the world and to lead us into that work.

[23 : 41] And so as we read Acts, God is giving us courage to live for his saving purposes in this world, confident that God rules that world and that his gospel is powerful to penetrate every darkness.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you and we praise you because Paul was strengthened by you.

We thank you that Jesus came and spoke to him. And we thank you that today Jesus is speaking to us through your word, through this book of Acts, that you are teaching us that you are working out your saving purposes in the world, sometimes in ways that we cannot imagine or ways that we discount, but you are doing your work.

And we pray that you will help us, strengthen us to take our part in this as well. We ask particularly for people who are in our lives that you would come into them, that you would work your sovereign work in their lives, that there would be an openness to the missionary work of this congregation in Vancouver in the lives of people that we know.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Please kneel and join me in prayer.

[25 : 15] Father God, we think of Paul and his companions. They were Christians in a dangerous time. On one level, Acts 22 and 23 read like a cloak and dagger thriller full of foreboding and secret plots, political maneuvering, deception.

But on another level, above the danger, in closing it actually, these scriptures read like a healing bomb for fear ulcers and worry sores.

They read like a pep talk to the weary, a transcript of powerful testimony that you, Lord God, are sovereign. You are in control. We think of the places in our world, our country, our lives, where evil and chaos loom large, where greed and fear grip hearts.

Sometimes we wonder, where are you, Lord? Like on that first Good Friday at Calvary, how utterly forsaken you, Jesus, must have felt in your agony.

How confused and blind were the disciples. But time and your resurrection manifested with certainty that despite the danger, through the pain, you were in control.

[26 : 39] You were sovereign. You are sovereign. For this, Father God, we offer our praise. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We think of the present tension-fraught situation in the Middle East between Israel and Palestine, in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, such tragedy, hatred, and suffering.

We ask, where are you, Father God, in this. Though we may not perceive or understand how you are present there, we know that you are sovereign here, too. We pray especially for our troops in Afghanistan, and we hold this entire afflicted part of the world up to you in trust.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. We hold up to you now in a moment of silence other situations in our world and our country and our city which you have laid on each of our hearts.

we bring these burdens and causes to you, Lord, perhaps not understanding, but knowing that you wish us to bear them up to you in prayerful compassion.

[28 : 09] We pray your love and light into these situations, and we listen for your direction to us as agents of your love. We know that in these painful places, too, you are sovereign.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. We think of the insights and experiences shared by the members of the Cambodian mission team on their way home today.

They have witnessed up close how, in the midst of one of Satan's darkest strongholds, VAPAC, a center for child trafficking and child prostitution. You are showing your mighty love, your sovereign love, your powerful healing light.

We rejoice that there in that dark and dangerous place, you are sovereign. In the cycle of prayer for our other missionaries, we hold up to you, Father, Susan Norman, with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in South Carolina, Heather Bellamy with Samaritan's Purse in Afghanistan, Josh Strongheld with Arab World Mission in Cairo, Jess Cantillon with Christ Church in Jerusalem.

These are Christians in a dangerous time, Lord. May they know your peace and strength, and may they be assured that in their work for you, you are in control.

[29 : 41] Lord, in your mercy, we turn our minds to our own church family here at St. John's.

We pray especially for David and Bronwyn and their family, for Ken and Gail, Rowena, Rosemary, Ann, and Barbara. We pray also for Elizabeth Peer and her family, and Ian and Margaret Robertson.

Lord, in your mercy. And we think, too, of where we as a church find ourselves at present, the dispute with the diocese, court appeals, potential fallout.

We may be tempted to be anxious about these things, but today's scripture reminds us anew that while we don't know what the future holds, we know who holds the future.

It's you, Lord, and only you are sovereign. Help us while we wait on the unfolding of your will, Father God. Guide our actions, direct our hearts and minds.

[30 : 54] Help us to walk in your way of humility and love. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

And finally, there are many bowed here before you, Father, who are facing pain or darkness in their families or personal spheres.

as we take this moment to open these, our personal places of darkness and confusion to you, we make a pause to be still and know that here, too, you are sovereign.

Here, too, you are God. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.