

Caesarea: Do You Think To Make Me A Christian

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[0 : 00] or some of the cities in the New Testament, and that we've done two cities now. And just to refresh your mind geographically, let me illustrate to you that this is the Nile River down here, and the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, the Dead Sea there, Jerusalem, which is there, Antioch, which is way up there in the corner, and then today we're looking at the city of Caesarea.

And Caesarea was a city built by Herod the Great in the period between 22 and 10 BC. It was built in contrast to Jerusalem, because Jerusalem had at its center the temple, and as its citizens, the Jews.

And when the Roman legionnaires, with their flags and their legion trophies, and all the things that were marks of the glories of battle and the glories of Rome, when they marched into Jerusalem, they were forced to take them all down, because it was dishonoring to the god of the city of Jerusalem, whose residence was the temple in Jerusalem.

And that's why Herod the Great built this city called Caesarea. Caesarea was an entirely Roman city.

[1 : 50] Caesarea was an entirely Roman city. It had a great temple to the emperor Augustus. It had a huge hippodrome, and Herod built at it a great artificial harbor, of which there are very few on that end of the Mediterranean.

So it became the main seaport, and so it's a sort of pivotal spot in the whole history of the New Testament, Paul having arrived here and left from here on many occasions.

But at this city, I'm not quite sure what I'm going to do about this cough, because it wasn't here until I started talking, and I shouldn't have started talking.

But I would be grateful for a cough drop. If anybody can produce one out of their pocket, it might be a great help. I'm not sure that it will, but I'm sorry to embarrass myself and irritate you by doing this. But I'll thank you, and let me give them back, too. I'll sorry. Caesarea contained the official residence of the procurator, who was the senior Roman authority in this area.

[3 : 21] It also contained the residence for the Jewish king, which in the story that we're looking at today was King Agrippa, so that it was a very important city.

Now, you will remember when we were looking at cities, the position that I'm taking is that the city is the counter-creation.

God has created the world over which he rules. Man has created the city over which he rules. And man has created the city for himself as God has created the world for himself.

Man can write his own rules, behave in any way that he wants to, do whatever he wants to. Nothing is impossible to him in his city, and he builds great monuments to himself in the city.

That's where the city is the counter-creation. It's where man can live independently of God. And so that's what the city has always represented, and always creates that tension.

[4 : 33] I notice the United Church up the road here talks about God in the heart of the city. God is not there because the very nature and structure of the city comes from man being at the heart of the city.

And that's why the city is so attractive to us, and why many of us derive most of our identity from the city. The commerce or the law or the stock market or the banks or whatever it is you're connected with give a lot of meaning to your life.

To find a place in the city, to find power in the city, to find recognition in the city. All these things happen in the city. And so Caesarea is a fascinating city because they couldn't do what they wanted to do in Jerusalem, so they built a city where they could do it.

And here is where they had their, it was a very Roman kind of city. So that's what the passage is about today, and I want to take you to that passage, which you have on the piece of paper, which

you have in front of you.

Now we're in the 26th chapter of the Book of Acts, and the Book of Acts is written to explain to some of the senior members of the Roman Empire in Rome what the exact nature of the Christian faith really is.

[6 : 18] That's why it is written, and you'll see that if you look at the first verses of Acts as you might look at the first verses of Luke. And Luke and Acts are two volumes of the same book.

So they're explaining what Christianity is. And in order to explain it, they're telling the story of Paul's ministry.

And Paul has come at the end of his ministry. He has been arrested in Jerusalem. He has been taken with an escort of 200 cavalry soldiers from Jerusalem down to Caesarea.

He's been under house arrest in Caesarea, and where he stayed for two years. He was first under the authority of Felix, who was one of the successors to Pontius Pilate.

And subsequently, when this story starts, he is under the authority of Felix's successor, who is Festus. And Festus doesn't know how to handle this fellow.

[7 : 27] He thought at first that he would send him back to Rome, back to Jerusalem, and get those who had made the accusations against Paul to repeat them. Paul knew that if he went back to Jerusalem, it was curtains for him, because they were planning to assassinate him en route to Jerusalem.

There would be no such thing as going back to Jerusalem for a trial. And that's why Paul thought it wiser to appeal to Caesar so that he would go to a higher court in Rome than to go back to Jerusalem, where he knew almost for certain that he would be put to death, either by, well, probably by assassination of some kind.

So he's made that appeal. Festus is the new governor, doesn't know what to do with this fellow or how to treat him. And so what he does is he talks to Paul, and then when King Agrippa is in residence in Caesarea, he arranges for a hearing.

The purpose of the hearing is to try and... What is it that lawyers do before they go... before a court case comes where they examine to see if there's enough evidence to proceed with a trial? Is that American or is that Canadian that they do? An examination for discovery. An examination for discovery. Well, what we're reading about today is basically an examination for discovery.

[9 : 01] And the people doing the examining are King Agrippa and his sister, who is Berenice, and this fellow over here, who is Festus.

So you have King Agrippa, Berenice, his sister, who ended up being a kind of courtesan to the Roman emperor, and Agrippa, who was the great-grandson of Herod the Great who had built Caesarea, and Festus, who was the Roman procurator.

And then down here in this corner and caught up in chains is Paul making his defense. So that's the scene that you're looking at.

Paul, the prisoner in the dock, and these are the people who are hearing him along with the crowd. They make a... They come in all their royal attire and robes, and they sit in pomp and majesty to hear this prisoner who is there before them in chains, and this is what happens.

Verse 24 of the passage in front of you, Paul makes his defense. Now, when he makes his defense, the interesting thing about him is that they have made a very serious charge against him.

[10 : 45] The charge was given by Tertullus, who apparently was a Jew and represented the high priestly group in Jerusalem that brought the accusation against him.

And this accusation had originally been made to Felix. I hope you're going to get Felix and Festus and Agrippa and all these people sorted out. It was made to Felix, and he made it saying, Felix, how much you've done for us, what peace we've enjoyed, how tranquility we've enjoyed.

It's virtually equivalent to saying, thank you so much, Felix, for bringing the tanks in, you know, to keep everybody behaving.

He makes that kind of appeal, and then he says of this fellow Paul that he is a pestilent fellow. He is an agitator among the Jews.

So another group accused him of turning the world upside down. He is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. He profaned the temple.

[11 : 48] And of course, the reason that the Romans had built Caesarea in the first place was that Roman personnel, Roman soldiers, by their very presence in Jerusalem, profaned the temple.

And so they knew that the Jews were fairly sensitive about that point. And so Paul has to answer to those charges. Those are the kinds of charges.

The profaning of the temple was because one day it was suspected that Paul had taken one of his Gentile converts into the temple where only Jews were allowed to go.

And the rumor got around that Paul had picked up one of his Greek Gentile converts who had become a Christian and treated him as though he was a Jew and taken him into the temple.

There was no evidence to prove this, but that's what's meant so that it's largely a false charge that Paul in fact profaned the temple by doing that.

[12:59] The fact that they called him a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes was very significant because where Christianity and Judaism were at that point in terms of the Roman Empire was that the Christians were thought to be Jews, that Romans coupled them all together.

And much of Paul's defense was to say, I am a good Jew. The Jewish religion is allowed by the Roman Empire, therefore there is no validity to the charge against me.

And that's why they were very careful to try and say, he's not a Jew, he's a ringleader of a sect called the Nazarenes. And that would be a very sort of telling charge against him.

Well, when Paul begins his defense and he makes it in the verses preceding the passage that we have today, he tells the story of his conversion, that he was a good Jew, that he was zealous in persecuting the Christians, that in the course of persecuting the Christians, he encountered Jesus Christ himself in what he describes as a heavenly vision.

And having encountered the person of Jesus Christ, his life was turned around. He went back to studying the scriptures. He discovered that this Jesus, rather than being the person whom they should persecute, was the person who in fact fulfilled all the promises of the Jewish scripture.

[15:03] And so Paul's defense is, I have read the prophets, the prophets have confirmed that Jesus is who he says he is, and so I believe the prophets.

And for believing the prophets, I'm in trouble? Well, that was hard to know how to handle that, you see. And so when this passage opens, Festus says, Paul, you're mad.

You're out of your mind. You've been studying too long. You've been caught up in some fantastic frenzy about this whole thing, and you've lost any grip on reality.

And that was Festus' answer to Paul's sermon, and it still is a fairly frequently used answer to any sincere proclamation of the gospel.

Well, he said, you're mad. And Paul said to him, I'm not mad. I'm speaking the sober truth.

[16:15] Most people are very afraid of emotion in the matter of religion. Anybody who's in the religion business, like me, knows that emotion really helps.

Generally stops people thinking, and then you've got to... Well, that's why the effectiveness of this thing, and that's why Paul said, I'm talking the sober truth.

Cold and calculating as you want it to be, that's what it is that I'm talking about. And so Paul says, if you look at the thing, Paul says, the king knows about this, and so Paul very cleverly centers out Agrippa.

And Agrippa is the subject of Paul's appeal. He doesn't talk to Festus anymore. He goes to Agrippa, and he says to him, you know what I'm talking about.

Agrippa was a Jew. He was the king of the Jews. He was a companion. His father had been a companion of that person whom all of you know as I, Claudius.

[17:37] They had been brought up together, this man's father. And he was a Jew. This man's father had come to Caesarea about less than 20 years before this.

Had, and this is one of the dramatic stories in the Acts of the Apostles, this man's father had appeared with his consort in this same stadium.

It was for some kind of Olympic Games that were on in celebration of the emperor's birthday. And the king, his father, had arrived there in a splendid robe with silver threads all the way through it. And he had stood up in the morning sunlight and made a speech to all the people. And they were so overcome with the glamour of this man, with the morning sun shining on him and the speech and rhetoric that he used in addressing the people that they said, this is God speaking, not man.

And in that moment, Agrippa was struck dead. That's how this man's father died. This man's father had been in Jerusalem when he was first named the king of the Jews.

[19:04] He'd been attending a religious festival and it was given to him to read the scriptures. And he stood up to read the scriptures.

And the Jews were very much taken with this, that this man so revered the scriptures that he would stand to read them. And one report says that tears came to his eyes.

And he was acknowledged to be by all the people their king, their Jewish king. After years of being subject to the Roman procurators, they were now under a Jewish king, appointed by the Roman emperor, but nevertheless Jewish.

So when Paul says to Agrippa, Agrippa, you know what I'm talking about. Agrippa really did know what he was talking about. He knew all about it from his own experience.

And so, Paul says to him, I know that you believe. You know the prophets. You know what they say. [20 : 17] You know that what I've told you about Jesus Christ is entirely in accord with what the Jewish scriptures say. You are the king of the Jews.

Now, do you see anything wrong with this? Do you not believe this? Do you not accept what I'm saying? Well, you see, Agrippa was really cornered by this.

Paul said, this thing has not been done in a corner. You know how, you know how it would work. And so, what happens is that Paul corners Agrippa and says, you must know that this is how it works.

And Agrippa makes this famous line for which the city of Caesarea is famous today. Agrippa turns to Paul and says, Paul, this was, I mean, this is pretty clever.

Only kings can think this fast. But he said, Paul, do you think that with such a brief argument you will make me a Christian? You know, and he uses the word Christian very deliberately.

[21 : 32] Remember, this was still a term of derision of the followers of Jesus. It was a term of contempt. It was a term that defined the Christian as being sectarian.

That is, just a small section of the people of God and not really. He said, do you think in this time to make me a Christian? And then Paul gives his brilliant reply to this question when he says to him, whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but all who hear me this day might become such as I am.

Except, Paul says, for these chains. In other words, I would that you would come to the place where I am.

Except for these chains. And if you look at the story, you can see where Paul is. First, he says, I have confronted the sober truth that who Jesus is, who Jesus claims to be, and what the scriptures have said about him to all our forebears, those things both agree.

This, Paul says, is the sober truth. You can't escape that. Most of the preaching of the New Testament was just to tell people that.

[23 : 09] All that you've learned from the prophets is fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. As the gospel might be preached in our day, all that you long for in your society and in your culture, your deepest longings are fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.

So, Paul says, I speak the sober truth. He said, secondly, I'm speaking freely to you because I've got nothing that I'm afraid of.

I can trust the truth of what I'm saying. So, I don't have to hide or deceive you. I'm speaking freely to you. I'm speaking freely and he says, I am, and Festus had already accused him of being too much of a scholar, but he said, I am persuaded of the truth of the gospel, the truth of the news about Jesus Christ.

I believe it to be true. So, we had John Chapman doing a mission in our parish last week and the thing that he brought out time and time again which was so helpful to everybody is that the only reason why anybody would put their faith in Jesus Christ is because they believed he is true, that he is who he says he is.

That's the only reason. If he's not, dismiss him right away, but if he is, you've got to do something. And that's the only claim I think that the Christian gospel can make in a pluralistic society such as ours is that it's true.

[25 : 00] And our society says, well, it's true like everything else is true or like everything else is false, but that's not what Paul's saying here. He says, I am persuaded that it's true. Paul says further, I'm not hiding anything in a corner.

Jesus Christ is not hidden from you. You know all about him. The very people who are persecuting me are the people who sentenced him to death so that they're not unaware of what it is I'm saying. There's nothing hidden about this. And Paul says, and you would have to acknowledge that believing as I do what the prophets say makes me a good Jew because God sent the prophets to

the Jews and I'm accepting everything they say.

And so that's who Paul regards himself to be. He says, let me summarize, sober truth, freely held, intellectually persuaded, nothing is hidden and the prophets verify it.

That's who I am. King Agrippa, that's what I would like you to be and everybody else who hears this. And if you can get hold of it and make a snap decision about it, fine.

[26 : 24] Or if I have to stay and argue with you for two years to convince you, I will do that. But my end desire is that you should be persuaded of the sober truth, of the fact that is not hidden in the corner, that is testified to by the prophets, that's who I want you to be.

And I think that's still the same. The strange thing is, you see, that this man was in chains down here made of iron.

And these people were in chains made of fear. And guess which chains are the strongest? And guess how our lives are controlled, largely.

Particularly with reference to professing our faith in Christ. We are caught in chains of fear. We can go with Agrippa to saying, do you think to make me a Christian?

And the problem was not that he didn't understand. The problem was that he was the one that was in the chains.

[27 : 41] And the end of this examination for discovery was that this man was innocent of the charges brought against him.

and the other was that but under due process of law they said he has appealed to Caesar. If it were not for that we could let him go.

But since he's made the appeal to Caesar he must go. And so the man in chains went to Rome to tell more of the story.

And that's again another powerful picture of a city in the New Testament. The city of Caesarea and this event that took place there. Let me say a prayer and then Father it's important that we understand the scriptures and we ask that as we examine and perhaps re-examine this story that the import of the argument which is recorded might bear in on our minds and hearts and that we might be persuaded that we might see the sober truth that is involved that we may be free to respond and that we might recognize the fulfillment of the scriptures in our acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as Lord.

And in his name we ask it. Amen.