

How to Stand Up Straight in a Spineless World

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

One of the first things you learn, or we all learn in school is how to sort. You may be looking at a book that says it has banana, apple, and carrot. And you say, what doesn't belong? Now, you don't have to answer it right now, but banana, apple, carrot, what doesn't belong? Or Mustang, for Ralph. House or airplane, what doesn't belong? Right? Your house doesn't take you. So it doesn't take you anywhere. So from an early age, we have a trained eye to see quickly what doesn't fit. And if you've read the book of Acts, if you've read through it one time or even several times, as we did several weeks ago when we hit it in our Trinity Grace reading plan, you'll quickly notice that the last eight chapters don't seem to fit.

Acts is marching forward at a breakneck pace. The gospel is going forward and breaking down every conceivable and imaginable barrier, saving Caesar-loyal soldiers, hated Samaritans, un-Jewish Gentiles, pagans, Samaritans, and just plain old idol worshipers.

[1 : 24] Yet everything suddenly stops in these final chapters. Paul is arrested in Jerusalem. Paul then endures five trials, carefully detailed over six chapters and nearly 200 verses.

Anyone who's read the book of Acts scratches their head at this moment. Okay, we get it, Luke. He was arrested. But do we need 200 verses to drive it into our thick skulls?

They don't seem to fit. They seem out of place. If we were sorting Acts, we would sort these chapters out. And yet, this morning, I hope we're going to try to cover these six chapters in one message.

We got until two o'clock, so we're good. But in a broad way that I hope we'll see why they're in here and give us a better understanding of why they matter.

So what happens in these verses? What happens? That's the first question we're going to answer. As you remember, Paul was warned everywhere as he was approaching Jerusalem that trouble, that afflictions, trouble, suffering awaited him there.

[2 : 39] And when Paul arrives in Jerusalem, it's true. He finds out very quickly. It's true. Paul gathers again with all the elders there in Jerusalem. James is there. He continues to tell them about what God has done with the gospel going forward to the Gentiles, which we have studied week in, week out.

And then he goes to the temple to purify himself. He takes four guys to purify himself. And within no time, the Jews find out he's there. They rally against him.

They stir up the whole city. They accuse him of defiling the temple. They grab him, drag him, beat him, and intend to kill him. And that's just in the first 17 verses.

But before they get too far, a Roman tribune steps up. Now, we've got to know a little bit about this character because he proves to be very important. A Roman tribune was a powerful character in Judea, in this region back in those days.

He would have commanded a cohort of soldiers, nearly a thousand soldiers, which were then overseen by several centurions, which we know because we see them all throughout the gospels.

[3 : 45] And so this tribune, he exercised political and law enforcement type responsibilities over this region.

So he steps in and arrests Paul so that Paul can have a proper trial. And Paul's about to be taken into the barracks, and he asks for a chance to speak to this crowd, this riot that has gathered before him in Jerusalem.

And that's the first trial. We're going to read that. So if you look down in verse, actually, verse 40 of chapter 21, we're going to read through a good chunk of chapter 22.

And when the tribune had given him permission, that's there in chapter, in verse 40, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people to quiet down.

And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, that is Aramaic, saying, brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.

[4 : 49] And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, again, Aramaic, they became even more quiet. And he said, I am a Jew born of Tarsus in Cilicia and brought up in this very city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel, according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God, as all of you are to this day.

I persecuted this way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness.

From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus, to take those also who were with me and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

Now we know this story, but we're going to read it again because it's so wonderful. And as I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon, a great light from heaven, from Jesus Christ, suddenly shone around me, and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

And I answered, who are you, Lord? And he said to me, I'm Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting. Now those who were with me saw the light, but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me.

[6 : 09] And I said, what shall I do, Lord? The Lord said, rise, go to Damascus, and there you'll be told all that is appointed for you to do. And since I could not see because of the brightness of the light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me and came to Damascus.

And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me and standing by me said to me, brother Saul.

That's wonderful. Receive your sight. And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. And he said to me, the God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the righteous one and to hear the voice of his mouth.

For you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.

When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, make haste. That's the Lord. Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly because they will not accept your testimony about me.

[7 : 20] And I said, Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another, I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. How could they not accept it? They know I wasn't like that.

That's what he's saying. And when the blood of Stephen, your witness, was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching it over the garments of those who killed him. And he said to me again, the Lord, behold, I will send you far away to the Gentiles.

Up to this word, they, that is the Jewish crowd that was gathered around, listened to him. Then they raised their voice, away with such a fellow from this earth, for he should not be allowed to live.

And so you kind of see what's going on in that first trial. All goes well among the crowd until he says he was unaccepted in Jerusalem. And then they sent out by the Lord Jesus away, far away to the Gentiles.

Now, the Romans carry him out after that. They plan to torture him to find out why the crowds are so angry. That's kind of protocol, a standard protocol in Rome.

[8 : 28] But as they stretch him onto the rack and as they raise the whips, Paul says, is it lawful for you to whip me? An untried, unconvicted Roman citizen.

So Paul is a Roman citizen. He shows his shrewdness in this moment, knowing it's forbidden by Roman law to whip a Roman citizen without a trial.

And so they wait and take him into the barracks. The next day, the tribune gathers again. The tribune gathers and commands the chief priests and religious leaders of the Sanhedrin to bring their charges against Paul.

And we're going to read a little bit of that one. So jump down to Acts 23 now. Paul addresses them. This is his second trial. He addresses them. If you look there with me, verse 1, and looking intently

at the council, that's the Sanhedrin, Paul said, Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.

And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall.

[9 : 39] Who does he sound like? Are you going to sit and judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law, you order me to be struck? Those who stood by Paul then said, Will you revile God's high priest?

And Paul said, I did not know, brothers, that he was a high priest, for it's written, You shall not speak evil of the ruler of your people. And so, you know, this second trial, we're kind of wondering, what's going on here?

So when Paul struck in the mouth, and all of them agree, Paul realizes that they're all united against him. So he thought he might have a chance to present a defense at this trial, before the Sanhedrin and all the crowd there, but when he knows they're in agreement at disobeying the law, which they do by commanding him to be struck, he knows he's sure to be convicted.

And this is where we see his shrewdness come out again. Look at verse 6, And when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out to the council, Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees.

It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial. And when he said this, a dissension, a disagreement, arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.

[10 : 55] So you see what's going on. So Paul was there. He knew that they were united against him. He was going to go down, so he tells them he's on trial because of the resurrection, which kind of sparks a disagreement.

The saga, though, continues with Paul. Forty Jews gather together and plan to ambush him on the way to the next trial. And one of Paul's family members, his nephew, which is totally cool because we don't know much about his family, sniffs it out and tells the Roman leaders.

And the tribute sends Paul away then to Felix. Several days later, the high priest Ananias comes down to Caesarea, where Felix is, with some of the elders, and they present their case to Felix.

And this is the third trial. So Paul again makes his defense. We're going to read just a snippet of that one. If you look down in chapter 24, verse 14, Paul says this, I confess to you, Felix and the high priest, that according to the way, that is the way of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which they call a sect, a cult, or whatever you want to call it, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law and written in the prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.

So I always take pain to have a clear conscience toward God and man. So again, we see Paul in this context.

[12 : 29] He's making it very clear. I don't stand in, I'm not being tried because of the law, or because of the temple, or because of rioting, or something like that. I'm being tried because of the resurrection.

Now this is not a cool turn of phrase, or Paul's not just pulling something out at the last minute to rescue him. It is true he's on trial for the resurrection. So Felix then has a decision to make.

I know this is a little bit tedious, but we're going to just a little bit more of this, then we'll slow down. Felix has a decision to make. But rather than making a decision, Felix, this Roman governor, keeps Paul as a political pawn.

Now that still goes on. A political prisoner. So he'll let him out if it goes well, or if it helps him.

It helps his case. It helps what he needs to do. So he delays a decision. And two years pass. Paul is there in the prison in Caesarea. Felix makes no decision.

[13 : 30] He's then succeeded by Festus, who is not much different. Festus organizes another trial, a fourth trial, and Paul makes a defense there too.

After Paul makes this defense before Festus, and before some of the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem, Festus wishing to kind of get a favor out of the Jews, he asked Paul at that point, do you want to go back to Jerusalem and be tried there?

Because I don't have anything I can do with you. After all, that's where you've come from. And Paul, knowing he would be killed if he went back there, he appeals to Caesar. That's what ultimately brings Paul to Rome.

As a Roman citizen, he knows he can appeal to Caesar, and it cannot be denied. It's a right as a Roman citizen. So some days later, King Agrippa comes to visit.

Now he's a king over this region of Judea. He hears Paul's case, and he requests to personally hear him. The next day, Festus arranges it.

[14:40] If you'll flip to Acts 26, I want to read a couple snippets of this speech. This is actually the longest speech of the Apostle Paul in the book of Acts.

This is to King Agrippa. He says, I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, that I am going to make my defense today. Against all the accusations of the Jews, especially because you are familiar with all their customs and controversies of the Jews.

So King Agrippa is the great-grandson of Herod the Great, which we know about from Matthew's Gospel. Therefore, I beg you, listen to me patiently.

My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. They all know all about me. They have known for a long time, if they're willing to testify that according to the strictest party of our religion, I have lived as a Pharisee.

And now I stand here on trial because of my hope and the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our 12 tribes hope to attain as they earnestly worship day and night.

[15:47] And for this hope, I am accused by Jews, O King. Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? Jump down to verse 19.

Those middle sections are just about his conversion, which we just read about. Verse 19, he says, Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.

For this reason, the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. To this day, I have had the help that comes from God. Now that's a wonderful phrase.

To this day, I've had it too. And so I stand here, testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass, that the Christ, the Messiah, must suffer, and that by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light, both to our people and to the Gentiles.

And then, Felix, or Festus, interrupts him and says, Paul, you're out of your mind. You used to be so well-read and well-respective, but all your learning has gone to your head.

[17:17] We're probably tempted to say that about some people in our lives, but Paul comes back at him. Look in verse 25. Paul says, I'm not out of my mind, most excellent Festus.

And you get a sense of Paul's boldness, don't you? But I'm speaking true and rational words. For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly.

For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice. For this, the resurrection of the Jesus Christ, has not been done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets?

He's trying to convert him. I know that you believe. And Agrippa said to him, In a short time, would you persuade me to be a Christian? Paul said, Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am, except for these chains.

The trial then continues a little bit. And then it concludes, And they both, Festus and Agrippa, say, This man's done nothing to deserve death, and would be free if he had not appealed to Caesar.

[18:37] So that's what happens. Why do these verses matter? Right? These are the ones we would sort out. So why do they matter?

And it seems clear to me, for at least two reasons, they matter, and they're included in the book of Acts. These chapters assure the original readers that Paul is innocent of the charges against him. You know, these chapters bring up three charges against Paul. They say he taught Jews to forsake the law. He defiled the temple by bringing Gentiles into it.

He caused riots. And as if it weren't already clear from the structure and content of these verses, they're meant to make a defense, Paul repeatedly says, I make my defense, my apologia, not apology like an I'm sorry sort of way, but a defense of the hope he has.

Now, the second two charges of defiling the temple, causing riots, are just bogus. I don't have time to handle all those. The first charge, though, forsaking the law, Luke carefully disproves.

[19:47] That's why Paul, when he does these defenses, he says, I was raised under the law. And you know it. I was a Pharisee. I was trained under Gamaliel, which is the strictest form of Pharisee.

So he's saying, I knew the law from birth. He also says, I was converted and believed in Jesus, the hope of Israel and the fulfillment of the law and prophets.

So when Paul is presenting the gospel, these guys, he's making it very clear. The Old Testament expectation is meant to deliver you to Jesus Christ.

We have this for you, Acts 24, 14. He says, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law and written in the prophets. So the expectation, all that is meant, all the promises, all the predictions are meant to deliver you to Jesus Christ.

So Paul says, I'm not against the law. I'm the one who actually upholds it and you don't. Paul continues also to obey the law when love requires it.

[20 : 52] And we see that in that second trial when Paul is struck in the mouth, right? And the high priest disobeys the law by striking an unconvicted man in the mouth.

Paul, you know, he immediately blurts out at him. And I just love that. You whitewashed wall. I don't even know what exactly that means. But you whitewash, you hypocritical person.

You command us to obey the law and yet you break it. But immediately though, look, when he's told it's the high priest, immediately Paul falls in contrition and repentance.

He obeys the law because he respects the high priest. So he doesn't disobey the law and he doesn't teach others to disobey the law. Now, you may be thinking, wait, we talked all about how Paul taught us not to, we didn't need to obey the law in order to be accepted before God.

And that's right. And yet, Paul continues to personally obey it where love requires it. I know that's a lot there. Sorry.

[22 : 01] He's innocent. That's what Luke's trying to say. He's innocent of all these charges. And each of the Roman rulers actually get it more than any of the Jewish people.

And that's very intentional for what Luke is trying to say. Secondly though, these chapters, after they prove Paul's innocent, they're trying to arm the original readers with evidence to defend Christianity against slander.

It's an historical fact that Christianity was slandered as being anti-law, anti-Jewish, anti-sacrifice, cannibalistic.

The names just keep going on and on. And these verses are carefully constructed with evidence to defend against those slanders. So the idea is, these were to arm the original readers to defend Paul and defend the gospel he preached.

Okay? So, why do these verses matter to us? Thirdly, after all that, why do they matter to us?

[23 : 10] And this is what I think it is. These verses are meant to fortify and strengthen us. Now you're like, what in the world? Six chapters of trials?

The heck's that got to do with me? They're meant to fortify and strengthen us. I think the idea is that Jesus was raised to strengthen a people to stand up straight in a spineless world. Jesus was raised to strengthen a people to stand up straight in a spineless world.

These verses are meant to give us a close look at Paul to teach us how to stand up with courage and calmness in a world of injustice, flabbiness, and outrage.

I just want to make a couple points of application. The first is, or A, it is not wrong to defend yourself and others.

It is not wrong to defend yourself and others. Paul is on trial in these verses and as I've said again and again, he jumps up to make his defense. I find this very interesting.

[24 : 17] Paul said in Acts 21, he's not making his defense for fear of death. He says, I'm ready to be imprisoned and even to die for the name of Jesus Christ. So he's not making a defense to avoid death.

He's also not making a defense for himself, for his own comfort, or even for protecting his reputation. Remember he said, I don't count my life of any value nor as precious to myself.

The only I may finish my course in the ministry I received in the Lord Jesus. So he must not be making a defense for his reputation or for his comfort, for his creaturely comforts, for his tax breaks or something like that.

No, no. So why does he do it? Why does he defend himself? Why not be like Jesus and turn the other cheek?

Why not be like a lamb before it shears and is silent? Here's what's going on. Paul defends himself because in so doing he's defending the honor of Jesus Christ.

[25 : 24] These accusations are untrue and threaten to untangle the church and its message. You understand? So when that happens, Paul is incensed.

That's why he calls that man a whitewashed wall. Now there's an important principle here for us. Most of the time we should not care what others say about us.

Most of the time. Many times we should not care or respond when others criticize us, speak unkindly about us or attack us.

Jesus did not go around adjusting people's perception of him. Charles Spurgeon says we should have one blind eye and one deaf ear.

Now think about that. You go down chasing every rabbit. It won't serve you, it won't serve anybody else. But sometimes we must defend ourselves when others say things that are untrue or misinformed and damaging to our reputation.

[26 : 37] A good name is precious and sometimes it must be carefully protected and fought for. Now this is a very important point in our culture.

Our culture is a cancel culture. You probably know what I mean by that. Once you misstep, in our culture, you're canceled. More than that, if you're accused of misstepping, you're canceled. What I mean by that, you're discredited, you're defaced, you're discarded and that is wrong. And it's not just that that is wrong, but when it happens, when someone is canceled, they're not allowed to defend themselves and no one else is allowed to come to their defense.

And so in the business world, what you see and what we've seen with Me Too and all this stuff, and I know that's a big can of worms, so I'm not going to open it up, but what we see with this is that the accusation is the verdict.

The accusation is the verdict. And so the business world, they just, they kind of have you just quietly resign and they tuck you away and so nobody defends you regardless of how true the accusation is.

[27 : 46] Nobody comes, nobody comes to you to defend, nobody tries this out and it's wrong. I realize it probably doesn't pertain to a lot of us, but the seeds of that are in our hearts because this is the culture we are in and we breathe it in every day.

So we must stand up for this and stand up against it. We must resist gossip and slander and believe the best until we know for certain otherwise.

We must resist gossip and slander and believe the best until we know for certain otherwise.

Theologian Dustin Tinsman says it like this, don't believe everything you hear and half of what you see.

I think that gets it right, you know, don't believe anything you hear and half of what you see. The tongue, Dustin knows, the tongue, as James says, is set on fire from hell.

Gossip and slander destroy hard-earned trust overnight. So we must be careful with what we hear and be very careful with what we say lest we spread gossip and slander.

[28 : 53] Nowhere in scripture are you permitted to say what you want whenever you want regardless of how bad it hurt or how strongly you feel it. That is the truth. Nowhere in scripture are we permitted to say what we want whenever we want regardless of how much it hurt us or regardless of how strongly we feel it.

It's just not permitted. Not in the public square and not at home. The story goes that someone came to Charles Wesley and said, my talent is to speak my mind.

Wesley said, well that's one talent God wouldn't care if you buried. You know, the background of the parable.

But he got it. All right. John Newton says it like this. Ever the pithy, helpful person. He says, the Christian man believes the precept, speak evil of no man, is founded upon the same authority with those which forbid adultery or murder.

And therefore, he keeps his tongue as with a bridle. What he's getting at is we parse out the commands we think are really authoritative.

[30 : 07] As long as we don't commit adultery, we're fine. So we must resist gossip and slander. Believe the best until we're certain otherwise. Secondly, we must give people an opportunity to make a defense.

Proverbs 17 or 18 says this very well. The one who states his case first seems right until the other comes and examines him. Now we live in a culture of outrage, of rushed judgment.

No one's given the opportunity to come and state the case next. We want alleged victims to be heard. But we also want alleged perpetrators to be heard. Innocent until proven guilty, not guilty until proven innocent. The accusation cannot be the verdict, not in the church of Jesus Christ. That's one of the things that's so wrong about George Floyd this week.

Regardless of what he did, it's a gross injustice to be held to the ground with a knee to the back of your neck for nine minutes. saying I can't breathe.

[31 : 14] He should have been given an opportunity to make a defense. No wonder the concerns are there about our justice system and our law enforcement.

I'm not making sweeping statements because I hate them. But right there, that scene is wrong. It's unchristian.

we live in a day of outrage, of rushed judgment, of rapid reputation, destruction, and deep-seated racism. What we need is not more laws.

What we need is not more conferences or coalition or more education. What we need is revival. What we need is Pentecost 2.0. What we need is a revolution by the Spirit of God to produce people of God who stand for truth and the dignity of individuals, who stand for justice, biblical justice.

That it just does not, it's almost foreign to this world. I don't want to overspeak. But that's what we need.

[32 : 24] We need Christians to act like Christians. After justice is served, we must defend the innocent regardless of the risk.

I'll defend you. I'll defend you. I promise. I'll put my neck on line anytime I get a chance for justice. Jesus was raised to produce a people because of the resurrection who stand up in a spineless world. Oh, it's so needed.

It's going to be so much more needed in the days to come. Point B, it's never right to go against your conscience. It's never right to go against your conscience.

Integral, Paul's defense, if you read these chapters, if you did the big sweep like I was encouraging you to do yesterday, if you read these chapters, is his appeal to his conscience.

[33 : 28] He says, I have a good conscience in Acts 23. He says, I have a clean conscience in Acts 24. Sometimes he declares himself to be faithful. What he's saying is, I was faithful. I was obedient to my conscience, to the vision I received.

That's what he said to Agrippa. I was obedient. I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. What's it mean, though, when he appeals to his conscience? What do we have to learn from that?

We have a definition for you, the conscience. The conscience is your consciousness of what you believe is right and wrong. You know, the conscience is often described as that little voice in our heads.

You know, that pain in our chest that leads us to what is right and wrong. A good conscience bears witness with us. That's what Paul is getting at and confirms that we're walking in the truth.

And you know this feeling like a good conscience is that peaceful feeling knowing you're walking in the right. It's that release feeling after asking for forgiveness. I don't know, I've been a Christian for 19 years but I never want to ask for forgiveness but every time I feel better and yet I just forget next time.

[34 : 36] I do not want to ask, I don't want to humble myself. Not in my flesh. The spirit's willing but the flesh is still weak in me. It's that restful feeling knowing you have nothing to hide.

Come and search me, IRS. I have nothing to hide. Nothing you will find that I did not report. And so Paul appeals to his conscience saying, not only have I sought to do what is right but my conscience agrees with me that I've done what is right.

My conscience is clear. Does that make sense? So that's part of his defense. He's saying, this is what I believe but also my conscience bears witness. It's another witness for me.

It's a vital defense. We must hear that too from other people. This is a wonderful little parenting trick too. You know, when your kid will not fess up, sorry kids that are in the room, to what they've done, you just have to lay the conscience on them.

You know, you say, well, okay. Well, I'll just let you sit with that. You know, because the conscience works. The Lord works in it. So it's never right to go against it.

[35 : 45] Martin Luther said, it's neither safe nor right to go against the conscience. Now, one of the greatest blessings of justification is a clean conscience before God. So, Kevin DeYoung says, our consciences are completely clean.

We read that last week. They've been sprinkled clean from a defiled conscience by the blood of Jesus Christ. We've been declared innocent before the only courtroom that matters.

Yet, our consciences can become weak, defiled, or seared. As we grow, we want to keep them tender and keep them informed by God's word so that they lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil.

So it's critical that we keep them clean, that we confess when things come to us. You know, we don't enter the worship of God, we lay our gift on the, or we don't lay our gift on the altar until we've worked things out with our brother and sister.

We listen to our conscience, we obey it. If your conscience says, you shouldn't do one thing, don't do it. If your brother is doing that one thing that your conscience says you shouldn't do, don't do it.

[36 : 55] You know, this is where it gets tricky. In the church, our consciences are sensitive to different things. After becoming a Christian, I came to believe that kissing before marriage was wrong for me.

So go ahead and mock me, but it's true. I came to the conviction it was wrong for me. And after dating my then-girlfriend Kim, I found her so attractive, I ended up kissing her one night. I felt terrible. I'm serious. I was lower than a snake's belly. And I felt terrible, though I did like to kiss. I must admit that I had a tender conscience.

My conscience was tender. Now, Kim did not believe the same thing. She didn't feel bad at all. She's like, lift your face.

What's the big deal? Needless to say, we had to work that out a little bit. But if we're walking openly in the church, we'll realize our consciences are sensitive to different things.

[38 : 02] They should be. We'll have different standards and beliefs on alcohol, movies, money, schooling, politics. as long as our consciences don't lead us to disobey God's commands, that's fine.

But it is a reminder of us to let not our consciences and our different standards divide us. Unity does not equal uniformity. That's what our culture wants to say. If you disagree with me, then you're writing me off and throwing me out.

That's not true. Unity does not equal uniformity. unity actually is a beautiful thing in the church where a multitude of convictions are on display for the glory of Jesus Christ.

So right now our convictions can be so different on any number of things. Even COVID-19, how to respond to this. When do we go out? Do we wear a mask? Why are we wearing a mask? The church even. I mean, whatever, our consciences can be kind of pricked in different ways.

And we must permit one another to walk this out carefully. and in their own way. See, it is always necessary to stand up for the truth. It is always necessary to stand up for the truth.

[39 : 19] The last aspect of Paul's defense is upholding the resurrection. Again and again, as we pointed out, throughout these defenses, he says he's not on trial because of those charges, but he is on trial because of the resurrection.

Look back in verse chapter 22 I think. Never mind.

I think my notes led me astray here. Chapter 26. Look down there again with me. He says, To this day, I've had my help that comes from God, so I stand here testifying both great and small that nothing would come to pass but what Moses and the prophet said would come to pass, that Christ must suffer, and by that being the first to rise from the dead, that he would proclaim light to our own people and to the Gentiles.

And Paul is not dodging the subject here or dodging their charges. He is on trial because of the resurrection. He's on trial because God has exalted Jesus Christ to the right hand of God and gives forgiveness, peace, power, and life through belief in him.

That's what's turned the world upside down. The Christianity is about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's what kind of takes over the book of Acts, and that's what Luke is trying to tell us.

[40 : 44] It wasn't about a different view of the law. It wasn't about a different view of sacrifices. It wasn't about a different view of any of these other things. It was about a view about the resurrection. It was about a view about Jesus Christ, whom they killed and God raised and now we proclaim.

That's the gospel I offered you this morning, the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's the one mediator between God and man, the man, Christ Jesus, who is raised at the right hand of God and offers forgiveness and life to anybody who would trust in him this day.

But it's also what transforms the apostles. Now what changed Peter? The night of the Lord's crucifixion, where he denied the Lord three times.

What made him different here? What changed Paul? He's this Pharisee on the way to Damascus, on the way to killing more Christians.

Was it just kind of a novel idea or something like that? No! It was the power of the resurrection that came and took a hold of them. The idea is that what Luke's trying to say is it would transform these apostles and the church to stand up for truth against slander, mocking, beating, injustice, persecution, and death with calmness and courage is the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

[42 : 06] That's what he's wanting us to see. That's what he's wanting them to see. Luke takes us slowly through these last days of Paul to show us the power of the resurrection at work.

Paul doesn't give in. Paul doesn't panic. Paul doesn't deny Jesus Christ even in the face of numerous plots and threats of death. He walks with calmness and courage.

Luke doesn't want us to be amazed by Paul. Luke wants us to be amazed by Jesus Christ. The spirit that raised Christ Jesus from the dead dwells in him and empowers him.

That's what the original readers would have taken away. These verses about trials that seem to run on are teaching them to actually press on.

In just a few short years, Nero would be Caesar. And the persecution would start. The second century is even worse with Domitian, slaughtering tons of Christians.

[43 : 17] What they would have seen in this chapter is the courage to stand up for Jesus Christ. Whoever denies me before men, I'll deny before my father.

And so they need the power, though, to stand in it. We must walk in this way, too. After Paul finishes his final speech or his speech before Agrippa, Agrippa refers to Paul as a Christian, which of course he is.

Christians. But the name Christian was not a compliment. It was a form of ridicule and mocking.

At first, Christians were called saints, disciples, believers, brothers and sisters. But in Antioch, they began to be called Christians because they were unlike anyone else.

Because they were a new people who welcomed folks from all races and backgrounds. Because they were a new people who stood up for one another. Because they were a new people who banded together and faced opposition with calmness and courage.

[44 : 25] Because they were a new people who walked not in the powers of this world, not in the powers of prestige and prominence and authority that is earthly, but in the power of the resurrection.

And I wonder if you were there, would Agrippa crawl you, a Christian? Or would we blend in with the crowd?

Would our justice be just like the world? Alexander the Great was one of the greatest military generals who ever lived and he conquered most of the known world, actually paved the way for the gospel through the roads that he cut through that world.

before the coming of Jesus Christ. One night during a campaign, he couldn't sleep. He left his tent to walk around the campground, around the grounds, and as he was walking, he came across a soldier who was asleep on guard duty.

A serious offense. Could have been a capital offense. soldier began to wake up as Alexander the Great approached him, recognizing who he was or who was standing in front of him.

[45 : 40] The young man feared for his life. He says, do you know the penalty? You know what it is for falling asleep on guard duty? Alexander the Great asked, yes, sir.

The soldier responded with that quivering voice. Soldier, what's your name? Demanded Alexander. Alexander, sir. Alexander the Great repeated the question, what's your name?

My name is Alexander, sir. The soldier repeated a third time more loudly. Alexander the Great said, what's your name? Third time.

The soldier now meekly said, my name is Alexander, sir. Alexander the Great looked him in the eyes. He said, soldier, change your conduct or change your name.

I think these verses are saying the same thing to us. Change your conduct or change your name. the world does not need more sloganeers.

[46 : 54] The world does not need more party platform. The world does not need more political alliances. What the world needs is Christians who act like it and stand up straight in a spineless world.

You know, in actuality, these verses aren't odd at all. Like Luke's gospel, a large chunk is devoted to the last days.

Like someone else, it is predicted that suffering and imprisonment await Paul in Jerusalem three times. Like someone else, numerous plots and ambush and murder are planned and attempted on his life.

Like someone else, Paul's innocence is established and all the Roman rulers wash their hands of him. Like someone else, as history tells us, Paul proclaims the gospel until his death by execution in Rome.

Paul is a follower of Christ. That's what Luke's trying to say. He took up his cross and poured out his life. So too must we.

[48 : 11] Let us pray. Father in heaven, we humble ourselves before you. We confess that you are great and awesome and we worship you.

Though we come in heavy because of so many things going on in our world and we long for you to knit us together into a people that proclaim a world that does not belong in this one.

That we would be people who rightly and with integrity bear the name of Christian. We welcome people of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. We welcome people unlike us and different colors from us.

That we would be people who stand up for one another, who band together, who fight for one another and defend one another. That we would be people who are lights in a world that has grown very dark.

Though we're not doomsdayers because we know this world is not our home and you who promised are faithful. You'll bring us all the way home and yet, Lord, we want to press on with courage, calmness, and faith in these days to stand up for Jesus Christ.

[49 : 24] Whatever that might mean for our little body, let it be so. Let gossip and slander and all these things find no foothold in this body.

Let us walk in the fear of the Lord and in the confidence and comfort of the Spirit. We thank you. In Jesus' name.

Amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com.

Thank you.