

Acts 23

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[0:00] I'm going to continue our sermon series in Acts. So we've been following the journey of the Apostle Paul as he moves in this final section of the book, chapters 21 through 28, which takes the Apostle Paul from Jerusalem all the way to Rome.

And at this point in the story where we're going to pick up today, Paul's basically been arrested in Jerusalem for his own protection. A crowd was ready to tear him away in anger, and the Roman official, the Roman Tribune, sort of saves him from the angry crowd.

And this morning we're going to look at how this Roman official is going to put him before the Sanhedrin, before the Jewish ruling council, hopefully to get to the bottom of what's going on, of why Paul has been causing so much turmoil in the city.

So let's look together at Acts 23, and let's pick up actually with verse 30 of chapter 22. Let me read this for us.

But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why Paul was being accused by the Jews, he, that is the Roman Tribune, unbound him and commanded the high priests and all the council to meet.

[1:18] And he brought Paul down and set him before them. And looking intently at the council, 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, God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall.

Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law, you order me to be struck? Those who stood by said, would you revile God's high priest? And Paul said, I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, you shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.

Now, when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in 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 had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledged them all.

[2:26] Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, we find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him? And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.

The following night, the Lord stood by him and said, take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.

So, let's pray together. Lord, we're thankful that we get to gather this morning and listen to your word together. And God, we ask that by your Holy Spirit you would meet with us, and you would cause this passage of Scripture to come alive, not just in our hearing, but in our hearts, God.

So, Lord Jesus, we ask that you would come and you would make yourself real and make this passage do its work in our hearts for your name's sake. Amen. Well, I don't know what you think, but I think that it is often easy to get distracted from the main thing.

I was in the DMV the other day to update my registration, my car registration, and I noticed that there was this sign on the wall at the end of this immensely long line where the workers were sitting at their windows to help the people.

[4 : 00] And this sign said something to the effect of, no obscene language will be tolerated. If you're being rude or violent, we'll make you leave immediately. And then it said something like, our overriding mission is to treat everyone with respect and to be courteous in all our interactions.

That was their mission at the DMV. And, you know, I couldn't help thinking, well, you know, I'm glad that they want to be respectful and kind, but after waiting in this long line, shouldn't your mission be to process licenses and registrations as quickly and as accurately as possible?

I mean, you're the DMV. That's why you exist, right? I'm glad you want to be nice, but I just want to get this errand done so I can get on with my life. Well, it's easy to pick on the DMV, isn't it?

And I know some of you work at the DMV, and thank you very much for the work that you do. I'm glad you put up with people like me every day. But it just struck me as a funny example of how it's easy to lose sight sometimes of the main thing.

Of course, as Christians, it's easy to do the same thing, isn't it? There are all sorts of things that the Christian faith contains, all sorts of implications for how we live.

[5 : 16] All sorts of ideas and doctrines. You know, the Christian faith is sort of like this lush and expansive garden, and around every turn in the path, there's a new beauty to behold, a new scent to take in. But, you know, amidst all that, we can lose sight of the center.

We can lose sight of the main thing. But our passage this morning is one of those passages that brings us back, that sort of re-centers us and re-positions us once again on the main thing.

In chapter 22, verse 30, where we picked up, we're told that this Roman tribune wants to know the real reason why Paul is on trial.

And, of course, there are lots of ways of answering that question, right? Paul's on trial, we might say, because he's been falsely accused of defiling the temple. That's what we saw in chapter 21. So maybe that's why Paul's on trial. But underneath that accusation is a sort of growing animosity and even hatred towards Paul because of his stance towards the Gentiles.

[6 : 25] He thinks that Gentiles can become members of the family of God without getting circumcised, without coming under the law of Moses. And in the first century, that was incredibly offensive to many Jews. So maybe that's the real reason why he's on trial.

But, you know, instead of trying to defend himself on any of these fronts, Paul goes right to the center of it all. The real reason underneath all the reasons.

And in verse 6, Paul puts it like this. It's with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I'm on trial. That's what's really going on here, he says.

That's the main thing. That's the reason under all the reasons. The reality and the hope of the resurrection. Now, as you look over that paragraph again, you might be thinking, it sort of seems like Paul's just being a little savvy or shrewd here, doesn't it?

Crying resurrection in the middle of the crowd, in the middle of the council. He sort of perceives that the council's made up of two opposing parties on this issue. There's the more sort of liberal Sadducee party who are pretty skeptical about any kind of afterlife, any sort of soul or spirit, let alone anything like a bodily resurrection.

[7 : 43] And then there are the more conservative Pharisees who sort of will take all of that, hook, line, and sinker. And Paul, sensing that his back's a bit against the wall, it seems like he's found a strategic way to divide the council and get them fighting each other rather than ganged up on him.

So, cry resurrection in the middle of the crowd and let the argument begin. You know, it's like crying bomb in an airport and watching everyone run and get crazy. But at the same time, is Paul merely being shrewd here?

Is he simply splitting the double team so he can get out as quickly as possible? In other words, is he being a bit insincere? Well, we have to admit that it was a good strategy on his part.

But I don't think that's all it was. It would seem that Paul isn't merely throwing down the resurrection card to cause a fight or to create a diversion.

But rather to get the real issue out on the table. To just come right out and name the 400-pound gorilla in the room.

[8 : 56] After all, doesn't all the conflict that Paul finds himself in, all the disagreements, all the disputes, really come down to one thing? The hope of the resurrection and its fulfillment in Jesus?

I mean, after all, think about it. Why are good, faithful Jews like Paul even talking about Jesus in the first place?

I mean, anyone crucified by the Romans, as Jesus was, didn't really qualify as the long-awaited Messiah in the minds of most Jews. And yet, here they were.

Fanning out like a flame, women and men, proclaiming that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth was indeed Israel's true king, the Messiah. That God raised him from the dead, surprising everyone involved, and demonstrating him to be the one that they had waited for.

And in addition to that, why were these Christians doing such strange things? Why were they, after all, eating with Gentiles, the people that they had spent thousands of years resolutely not spending time with?

[10:16] And why were they saying such audacious things, like circumcision wasn't necessary anymore to be included in God's people? Wasn't that like saying that the law of Moses just didn't apply in the same way anymore?

What could have possibly led them to say and do such things? And again, was it not the resurrection?

That in Jesus Christ, in his resurrection, God's work of new creation had begun. That God's work of putting things back in order after sin and the fall had brought chaos and death, that now, in and through the resurrection of Jesus, the world was being put right again.

The one thing the law of Moses couldn't actually do. That men and women were being put right, not just with one another, but even with God himself, through this risen Jesus.

And so all the things that got Paul in so much trouble really all came back, as he says here, to the reality of the resurrection.

[11:29] After all, if Jesus hadn't been raised, Paul probably wouldn't be there on trial before the Jewish high council. I'm sure he could have found much better things to do with his time. We read from 1 Corinthians 15 a little earlier in the service, and there we heard how central to Paul and all of the apostles was the gospel and the resurrection to the gospel that they handed down to the churches.

God raised him from the dead. But you know, Paul goes on in that same chapter, as many of you know from reading it, to say that, look, friends, if Christ has not been raised, then our faith is futile, empty, and vain.

And so again, it all comes down to the reality of the resurrection. And you know, that's actually pretty good news. It's good news for lots of reasons, but I think we see that it's good news for at least two reasons in our passage here.

And we see the first reason in verse 1, where Paul says, I've lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.

Paul could honestly look back over his life and say, I have a good conscience before God. Now, of course, Paul doesn't mean that he never sinned, that he was perfect.

[12:53] Rather, he means that he always had strove to live with integrity, to follow God's will, to ask for forgiveness when he fell short.

In other words, he was saying, look, there's no ongoing blatant pattern of contradiction in my life, holding what I hold, believing what I believe, proclaiming what I proclaim.

He felt that God could look at his life and at his message and be pleased. Now, the high priest Ananias apparently doesn't think that's true.

And the first thing he does when Paul says such a thing is order him to be struck straight on the mouth, which was sort of a sign that Ananias was accusing him of blasphemy.

Anyone who could utter such a thing was a blasphemer and needed to be struck immediately. Now, what does that show us?

[13:57] It shows us that there's this massive gap between how Ananias understands a life of integrity before God and how Paul understands it, right? Now, of course, the irony historically is that this Ananias was sort of known to be a completely lousy and immoral high priest.

He was violent and he was greedy and no one really liked him. And he constantly broke the law, historians tell us, with little remorse or repentance. In fact, his very action of having Paul struck on the mouth is sort of evidence of his bad character as Paul's stern rebuke in verse three shows doing that was actually against the law.

So here's Ananias sort of claiming that Paul is blaspheming while at the same time himself not following the very law by which he claims to be judging Paul. So Paul denounces Ananias as a hypocrite, calls him a whitewashed wall and that makes us a little uncomfortable.

We think, oh man, did Paul sort of go off the rocker here? Was this a fit of rage? Die, whitewashed wall. How dare you strike me? No, well, I mean, I think Paul's sort of just being clear and speaking truth to power and not being afraid.

But of course, when Paul sort of rebukes Ananias for hypocrisy, he doesn't realize who he's talking to. He doesn't realize the office that this person occupies.

[15 : 25] Someone points out, is this how you're going to talk to the high priest? And you know, since this was an impromptu sort of gathering of the council at the tribune's request, it was probably the case that Ananias wasn't wearing his sort of distinctive high priestly garb.

And since Paul hadn't been a resident of Jerusalem for about two decades, he probably didn't even know that Ananias had occupied the office, which is probably why he had no idea who was talking to him. In any event, as soon as Paul sort of realizes that he's misstepped, he refrains from saying anything further about Ananias and says, I was wrong.

Okay. But anyway, the important point or the important question really is, what in the world allows Paul to say that he's got a good conscience before God when his lifestyle is apparently so offensive to everyone around him on the council?

I mean, this is the sort of highest Jewish council in the land. These are the guys who call the shots and they're the ones who are saying, Paul, you don't fit. What accounts for such a radical difference?

And again, I think the answer has to be the resurrection. Paul is operating out of the understanding that Israel's king had arrived in Jesus and that through him, God's new creation was being sprung on the world.

[16 : 47] In Christ, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, Paul would say, but now, a new creation. And you know, I think in many ways, we Christians today can find ourselves in a very similar situation to Paul.

Paul, and here's what I mean. I mean that the shape of a life that's pleasing to God in light of the risen Jesus, a life that is full of integrity and wholeness and a life that makes sense in light of Jesus' resurrection will often be confusing or even offensive at times to those who don't accept the reality of the resurrection.

Okay, in what ways? Well, here's one. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that the way to God has been opened up through him and through him alone.

That Jesus' death and resurrection has dealt with sin once for all and reconciles us to God when we place our trust in him. That we're saved, in other words, through faith in him and not through anything else.

And don't you see that this salvation through faith alone in the risen Christ ends up being the great leveler of all the ways in which we try to prop up our identities and make ourselves better than each other.

[18 : 12] And isn't that what's at the root of so much of the offense of the high council? Here are the people who built their entire life around keeping the Jewish law and hear Paul saying, actually, that's not it.

This is what Paul saw so clearly that not even those God-given regulations were able to make someone more acceptable to God. That Jews were no better off than Gentiles. That the righteous are no better off than the tax collectors and the sinners.

But all of them come as equals to God through Christ and Christ alone. Which means that people who would normally have never spent time together now around the risen Christ are eating together and praying together and serving one another and participating in deep fellowship.

You see, the resurrection was breaking all sorts of boundaries that the comfortable, normal society said shouldn't be broken.

Across race and gender and class, people were coming together as equals. And that made a lot of people confused and even uncomfortable and sometimes offended.

[19 : 40] And that ought to be the case today that around the risen Jesus is gathered people of every sort coming as equals to him and seeing one another as full of equal dignity and worth.

So on the one hand, the resurrection starts to make us more accepting of differences and less tied to our old identities. But you know, on the other hand, the resurrection also gives shape to a very peculiar life of sacrifice and obedience.

You see, the resurrection of Jesus means that for believers, the best is yet to come. If we will be raised with him, if our bodies even are going to be raised incorruptible and in glory in a new heavens and new earth, then there's a future ahead that far outstrips any satisfaction or pleasure that this present life could offer.

which means that any sacrifice that we make now, no matter how hard, no matter how grueling, no matter how inconvenient, is infinitely worth it.

In fact, I think so much of Christian discipleship makes very, very little sense apart from the resurrection. And not just because the resurrection declares Jesus as Lord and therefore the one who has the right to tell us what to do, but it also makes not much sense in another way.

[21 : 13] I mean, think about it. Why follow Christ's teaching about radical generosity or sexual fidelity and purity or self-giving service if this life was really your only shot at happiness and fulfillment.

That would be insane. Wouldn't it? No one would actually do that. But if this life was actually being swept up into a new life, if in Christ the future to come were the consummation of all of our longings here, longings that money and sex and power only hinted at, then faithfulness in these areas suddenly makes complete sense.

I mean, think about it this way. People save for retirement without question, don't they? Because they think that every little sacrifice they make before the age of 65 is going to increase their capacity for joy after they retire.

every quarter I get a financial report telling me that if I would only put in X more dollars a month into my whatever it is, 403B or 401K, then oh, look at how much more money I would get when I retire. It would be exponentially more. Friends, how much more will Christ have in store for those who have made sacrifices for Him in this life.

[22 : 50] We cannot dream what beauties are in store in God's future when He liberates creation from its bondage to decay and sets us free along with it just as He's shown us He's going to do in the resurrection of Jesus.

And the greatest gift of all of that is going to be God Himself to delight in Him and to enjoy Him, to be present with the one who came up with the idea of pleasure and joy in the first place.

Imagine what it must be like to be with that one forever. What sacrifice wouldn't be worth the joy of that? And if Christ has been raised then we can know that no sacrifice is lost and every sacrifice will carry its own abundant reward.

So the resurrection gives us this good conscience before God that seems so strange from the outside but is so full of integrity and purpose on the inside.

But we see here that the resurrection doesn't just impart a good conscience but it also gives us and it gives Paul in our story a great courage. Look at verse 11.

[24 : 07] Jesus Himself comes to Paul in the night and speaks a word of courage to his heart and He assures Paul that Paul will reach Rome that even though things look as bleak as could be that even though his defense before the crowds in chapter 22 and his defense here before the council in chapter 23 seem to have actually done very little good even though his life is in total danger and even though the opposition seems to be growing Jesus promises Paul that he must also testify in Rome.

And the rest of chapter 23 starting in verse 12 the second half of the chapter that we didn't read together we see Jesus starting to make good on that promise right from the start.

We learn there that 40 men take an oath to murder Paul. They hatch this plot to assassinate him on the way to the next council hearing but it seems just in time Paul's nephew hears of the ambush and he hurries to warn Paul and Paul sends him to the tribune and then again it seems just in time Paul suddenly being escorted by the Romans under heavy guard out of Jerusalem into Caesarea. And in Caesarea he will appear before one of the most powerful secular rulers in the region and if that's not all he's going to arrive in Caesarea with a letter essentially declaring his innocence Claudius Lysias this tribune who's been keeping track of Paul in Jerusalem writes in verse 29 this letter to the governor and says I found that he was being accused about questions of their law but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment.

Paul ends up leaving Jerusalem completely vindicated. And don't you see friends Luke doesn't mean for us to see all of this as mere coincidence.

[26 : 06] No the risen Lord who came to Paul that night and said keep up your courage has been orchestrating and working the whole time.

In fact this whole chapter has actually been a fulfillment of Jesus' words. In the gospel of Luke chapter 21 Jesus tells his disciples that after he's gone to the father they're going to lay their hands on you and persecute you delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake.

And then Jesus says this will be your opportunity to bear witness. Paul's imprisonment and trial in the hands of the risen Christ is an opportunity to bear witness.

and an opportunity he would have had in no other way it seems. I mean think about it would Paul have been granted a meeting with this Jewish council in Jerusalem had he just sort of requested it? The one who was sort of public enemy number one. Hey by the way can we get together and have a chat? Probably not. And we can be nearly certain that Paul would have never been witnessing to the elites in Caesarea without what happened in Jerusalem.

[27 : 27] And there's no doubt that had Paul made his way to Rome on his own accord as a free man and not as a prisoner as he intended to do there's no way that he would have arrived waiting for an audience with Caesar's own court.

No, the resurrected Lord took Paul's trials and imprisonment and turned them into these incredible unique opportunities to bear witness.

And friends the same is true for us. It is no mistake when you find yourself questioned or maybe people raising eyebrows at you or maybe even getting a little offended.

Friend these are moments that your Lord has ordained for you to be able to step in and bear witness. And the resurrection of Jesus gives us the same great courage that Paul had.

You see, the promise to arrive in Rome is obviously peculiar to Paul, particular to him. But the fact that the resurrected Lord will work our trials for our good and for his glory is a promise that belongs to absolutely every believer.

[28 : 52] John Newton, the hymn writer, once wrote, everything is necessary that he sends. Nothing can be necessary that he withholds.

Everything is necessary that he sends. It's all a part of his plan. And nothing can be necessary. Nothing can be necessary that he withholds. That's the confidence and courage we have in Christ the risen Lord.

You see, friends, after all, if Jesus Christ was able through his resurrection to turn the worst evil into the greatest good, when he died on the cross and rose again, if he was able to turn the evil of the cross into our salvation, then surely, friends, he can take any lesser evil that comes our way and make it a servant for our good.

And that's why it's so critical that we don't lose sight of the main thing. Of all the things that can vie for our attention and fill our vision, this is the thing, this is the one thing we need to keep central.

This is the thing that can't lose its place. Because when we keep the resurrection central, our lives before God are filled with this good conscience and our lives in the midst of trials are filled with a great and indestructible courage.

[30 : 24] Friends, is that true for you today? Are you clinging to this resurrected Christ and finding that good conscience and that sure courage?

Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we praise you as the resurrected one, the one before whom one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that you are Lord.

Lord, help us, your people, to be doing that even now, to be setting you apart in our hearts as Lord and to be finding in that God the great confidence and the great peace that comes in knowing you.

Lord, for those who are here this morning who are wrestling with the reality of the resurrection, if it seems like something that's just so hard to wrap their minds around, I pray that you would help them to understand it and to ask good questions and to explore it with friends.

And Lord, for those of us who profess a belief in you, Lord Jesus, as the risen one, O Lord, would we keep it central and would it be like the star that guides us through every storm and every night sky.

[31 : 47] Lord, we pray this in Christ's name. Amen. Well, friends, we're going to respond and we're going to close by singing a song about who Jesus is and what he's done and particularly in the last verse of this hymn about the power and the reality of the resurrection.

So, let's stand and let's sing together. Let's sing together. Come behold the wondrous mystery In the dawning of the King He, He, the theme of heaven's praises Roped in frail humanity In our longing In our darkness Now the light Of life has come Look to Christ Who condescended Took on

flesh To ransom us To ransom us Come behold The wondrous mystery He, the perfect Son of man In His living In His suffering Never trace No state of sin See the true And better Adam Come to save The hell-bound man It's the great And sure fulfillment Of the law In Him we stand Come behold Come behold The wondrous mystery Christ the Lord Upon the tree In the stead Of ruined sinners Hangs the Lamb In victory See the price Of our redemption See the Father's plan Unfold Bringing many sons To glory Grace on measure Love untold Come behold The wondrous mystery Slain by death The God of life But no grave Could e'er Restrain Him Praise the Lord He is alive What a poor taste Of deliverance How unwavering Our hope Christ in power Resurrected As we will be When He comes When He comes When He comes What a poor taste Of deliverance How unwavering

Our hope Christ in power Resurrected As we will be When He comes Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah All right friends That's the end of our service Let me just point out A couple quick announcements Before we go Tonight we're going to Continue our series In the book of Revelation So if you ever wondered What that strange book held Come on tonight And we're going to Continue just working through it Verse by verse Also Next Sunday Our Sunday school Are starting up again At nine o'clock So there's going to be An adult class downstairs Starting on the topic of prayer There's a description of that In the bulletin I hope you'll check that out And I hope you'll come Next Sunday To start attending that class Last thing

[36 : 15] In your bulletin I'm not sure we pointed this out At the beginning of the service John did you point this out? No okay So in your bulletin You found this really cool looking Blue card About the I Heart New Haven Day of service coming up So this is a way for you An easy way for you To sign up For that big sort of Inter-church way Of serving our city And loving our city So if you fill that out Some of you probably Already dropped it In the offering basket You can give it To any of the staff members Or anyone who looks like They know what they're doing On your way out We'll also have these In the bulletin Next week too So you can sign up then The website's on there too Let me end with a benediction From the book of Ephesians Paul says Now to him who is able To do far more abundantly Than all we ask Or think According to the power At work within us To him be glory In the church And in Christ Jesus Throughout all generations Forever and ever Amen Brothers and sisters Go in peace

Thank you.