

Eruption in Jerusalem

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you.

Please overrule by your Holy Spirit in what I say and what we think together. To the honour and praise of Jesus Christ. Amen. Last week we were playing with the metaphor of sailing because of someone's idolatry.

But it was actually thrown up repeatedly by the text of the book of Acts. Paul was travelling by sea from Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia to the city of Jerusalem. And his journey we saw was interspersed with times of wonderful and rich fellowship along the way.

But the dominant metaphor for today has changed. It has to be something more like volcanoes or eruptions. For that is what happens, as Amy said, when Paul finally gets to Jerusalem.

Humanly speaking, it is a disaster and tragic to behold. But theologically speaking, from the divine perspective, as we stand back and consider this section in the light of the whole book, it is a success.

[1 : 1 7] Indeed, from the divine point of view, theologically, the events are all perfectly situated and perfectly executed. What happens in Jerusalem is hardly unexpected and is indeed crucial to God's plan of getting the gospel firmly to Rome, the heart of the empire.

So, as disaster followed Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, so too with Paul. As with the master, so with the servant. The servant. The servant.

Firstly then, we see that Paul was arrested in the temple. Now, I won't read all of these verses again, but just sort of pick out some of the key and choice expressions. We notice in verse 27, the Jews from Asia.

When the seven days of the Nazarite vow, when the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, men of Israel, help.

We notice that it's not the Jews from Jerusalem that are at least initially the problem. It is the Jews from Asia. Now, of course, the word Asia has changed its sense from those days to ours.

[2 : 2 8] In the 50s of the first century, it referred to the Roman province of Asia. There's a map, I think, coming up here behind me. The Roman province of Asia, the chief city of which was Ephesus.

So these Jewish ideologues have come a long way in their pursuit of Paul. And like all true ideologues, the Judaizers see their opponent as irredeemably bad and worthy of cancellation. These men really are full-on fanatics. Look on the map at the distance they have travelled. If you can see on your left, the Roman province of Asia and Ephesus as its capital, they've come right across the eastern Mediterranean to get at this person.

We might say get back at this person, remembering the great riot that has already occurred in Ephesus. So not content to hound Paul out of his two-year-long ministry in Ephesus, they are like a dog with a bone.

At all costs, this man must be pursued and crushed. The irony is that in this self-righteous fervour, they resemble no one more closely than the young Saul of Tarsus himself in his hounding, persecuting days.

[3 : 5 0] The pre-Christian Paul was just like them. And what do they cry out? Verse 28, they cry out, men of Israel, help.

Our passage today is a study in rhetorical styles, that is, ways of speaking. We all know ways of speaking affect what is spoken. Ways of speaking affect people's perception of what they're being told.

How something is said affects how it is heard. Often the words are spoken by the various speakers in this story so as to pack a punch and intimidate the listener's hearing and understanding.

That can work positively and it can work negatively, as we all know. Here it is negative. Notice the cry for help is not for their favourite Beatles song.

In verse 28, they're crying out, men of Israel, help. They are portraying themselves as the victims. The victims, though in obvious numeric supremacy and with adequate resources to chase him across the eastern Mediterranean, they're still crying out, help.

[5 : 02] Notice also the hyperbole, the exaggeration. This man, this is the man who's teaching everyone. And notice, everywhere. Everyone, everywhere.

Against the people and against the law and against this place. And we might add, and teaching against motherhood and apple pie and little girls and kittens. When we're in the fanatic's frame of mind, we can never be satisfied with the weight of simple, clear statements that we can't improve them by inflating them.

Pumped up for rhetorical effect, these guys are. Why? To pack a punch, of course. Is it misinformation? Is it misinformation? Or is it disinformation? That is, deliberate misinformation.

When they drag Trophimus, the Ephesian, into their arguments. Notice in verse 29, they'd previously seen Trophimus, the Ephesian, with him in the city.

And they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. Supposition is, of course, proof. To the fanatic, everything testifies to our point of view.

[6 : 12] We come then to the Roman rescue in verses 31 to 35. This is a long and particularly lively section, like firecrackers going off or Tom Thumbs.

If help is on the way, it comes from the most unlikely source, the Romans. This is one we didn't see coming. And which apparently the prophet Agabus didn't see coming either.

Back in Paul's passion narrative that we studied last week, Agabus clearly spoke of how the Jews at Jerusalem would bind Paul and deliver him over to the Romans.

Here it's the hands of the Romans that deliver Paul. And so we find that our text today is started with Romanesque words. I've underlined them in my iPad here.

Verse 31, the tribune of the cohort. The tribune is the guy in charge of a thousand soldiers. The cohort. Usually that was about 600 soldiers in the provinces.

[7 : 09] It was expanded. It could be up to a thousand. We notice in verse 32, at once he took the soldiers and centurions, the guys who were over a hundred, ran down to them.

When they saw the tribune, there he is again and the soldiers. Verse 33, the tribune came up. In fact, this tribune becomes very significant in the narrative of the next two or three chapters.

So much so we're even given his name. But that's next week when our brother Roy is back preaching. This all throws us around if we're attentive readers of the Bible because we expect a passion narrative just like the Lord Jesus Christ's passion narrative.

But Paul's one is turning out to be a variation on that theme, not a carbon copy. The Roman rescue is truly astounding. In the short term, Agabus the prophet, from the previous section, Agabus the prophet was not fully correct.

But in the long term, he is correct. It will be the Romans who will finally execute Paul. Roman condemnation on the anvil of Jewish rejection.

[8 : 17] Agabus got the long term picture right, not the short term details, which by the way tells us something about New Testament prophecy, but I'll leave that for you to talk about later.

And so we find at the end of this section, verse 35, when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd.

Now there is a picture for you. Here is Paul crowd surfing like at a rave concert on guess what? Roman hands. What is going on here?

The Pauline passion narrative is moving, not so subtly, from the Lord, the dominical passion narrative. He's being saved by the Romans.

And we come to the familiar taunt in verse 36. These electronic things have a habit of turning off when I least expect them. The mob of the people followed, crying out, where have you heard these words before?

[9 : 22] Away with him. If you've ever read one of the four Gospels, you've heard those words. It's there in Luke 23, verse 18. It's there in John 19, 15. The familiar taunt is, Away with him.

Familiar in that recalls the words of the Jewish crowd before Pontius Pilate, some 25 years before. Away with this man and released to a barbarous who'd been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder.

Give us a murderer, but get rid of this righteous man. John's Gospel, chapter 19, gives us the same terrible reminiscence. Away with him. Away with him.

Crucify him. Their hatred and enmity is intense, as it was with Paul's master. Notice here, how the next little section, again, keeps our attention by interrupting the dynamic.

We come now to a little paragraph of what I've headed gentlemen both. Because the tone of speaking the rhetorical style changes dramatically.

[10:33] We have one extraordinary scene after another today. Hard up against such blind hatred, we're surprised by a startling scene of two ancient world gentlemen in a polite, respectful, yet penetrating exchange.

The tribune is looking more and more like a good bloke, we might say in Aussie parlance. He's looking like a good bloke. Mind you, Paul approaches him in a way that is noticeably respectful. See those words? In verse 37, may I say something to you? To which the tribune picks up on his being a Greek speaker and infers that Paul must be the notorious rabble-rouser whom we now from history was at large at the time.

Roman historian Josephus mentions these sicarioi, these assassins, the dagger guys. No, says Paul, I'm a Jew.

You've got the wrong man. Christians have got nothing to do with Jewish revolutionaries. In verse 39, I'm a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city.

[11:42] On the contrary, Paul, far from being a brigand or one of these dagger guys who would sidle up beside people in the crowd and just, I gather they still do it in Cairo, unfortunately.

Far from being that, Paul is from Tarsus, which was a distinguished place. It was economically, socially, above, way above the average in the centre of education.

Perhaps in our country, it's a bit like a university city, like Armidale. Paul's saying, mate, I'm from the Armidale, not the Charleville, or the Karnamala. And so we come, secondly, to Paul's defence, which is the heart of this passage, most of chapter 22.

I'm going to flick through these things fairly swiftly. Firstly, Paul's language, verses 1 to 2. Brothers and fathers, notice the difference there.

Brothers and fathers, those older than him, hear the defence that I now make before you. And when they heard that he was addressing in the Hebrew language, probably Aramaic actually, Hebrew language, they became even more quiet.

[12:53] In view of the shouting and the beating and the inventing of half-truths that's been going on, Paul's language is noticeably anti-inflammatory. In the same way that he's just used the Greek language deferentially, to good effect, so he now does so with Hebrew, presumably Aramaic, the local Hebraic language.

Again, as with the true boon, he is respectful, brothers and fathers. In doing so, Paul gives us a model of what the book of Proverbs thinks is important for all our interactions, especially in conflictual situations.

Let me remind you of them. A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15.1 On a few verses further on in Proverbs, a gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.

15.4 Or under the new covenant, James reflects the same sentiments. Know this, my beloved brothers, that every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

James 1. As a young Christian, I used to think, yep, that's right. When I'm angry and saying the wrong things, it's just destructive. As I've grown a bit over the last four decades in the Lord, I think the anger of God does its work mostly when we're speaking what is right and conceptually accurate.

[14:29] When such things are said with anger, they are more dangerous, almost like the torpedo is more dangerous when it's accurately targeted on the submarine.

Because in the kingdom of God, we don't live in the realm of conceptual accuracy. We're not disinterested in that. But in the kingdom of God, we're interested in the righteousness of God.

The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God even when my arguments are true. and possibly most of all then. If the cap fits it, wear it, dear brothers and sisters.

It certainly fits for me. And so we come to Paul's credentials, three to five. There are nine of them. Paul carefully crafts the presentation of his credentials, carefully, wonderfully, given that all of this is impromptu, but of course for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, out-tumble nine things.

Firstly, Hebrew. Well, we've already dealt with that. He speaks to them in their own voice. It settles them. He's not speaking down to them. He's speaking as one of them.

[15 : 45] His summary word for himself, he's carefully chosen, I am a Jew. Not a child of God, not a child of the covenant. There are a hundred expressions he could have used. I'm a Jew.

He's majoring on the common ground. Thirdly, he's from Tarsus, Silesia, there in verse three. Possibly, with the inference, that Tarsus is a heck of a lot closer than Ephesus, just by the way.

He's come from a city that is closer to the heartland of the kingdom of God than his detractors.

Fourthly, he's brought up in this city. See that there in verse three.

Brought up in this city, he educated the feet of Gamaliel. Brought up in this city, though born outside this city, Paul knows both the Gentile world and the mothership of Jerusalem.

Fifthly, Gamaliel, educated at the feet of, which is the classic expression of respect and adulation.

Educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers.

[16 : 50] Gamaliel was the premier teacher of the day. And for those with an historical sense, which I hope is you all, this is the same Gamaliel we met back in Acts chapter five.

He was the guy who'd cancelled the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. He'd cancelled them to let the apostles go about their business undisturbed. I'll read to you from Acts chapter five when the apostles had got themselves into hot water by preaching about Christ.

Men of Israel, take care. This is Gamaliel speaking to the Sanhedrin. Take care what you do with these men. In the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men, let them alone, for if this place or this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail.

But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God. He dared to articulate that thought to the Sanhedrin.

So the big G, Gamaliel, was not just a superb Bible teacher. In the early days of the Christian movement, his voice was one of principled agnosticism as to its worth and enduring value.

[18 : 06] Paul references him. Paul is referenced in the example of the great Gamaliel who was one of the voices of moderation and rational consideration of the early Christian movement.

Lost my power again. I don't bring a paper Bible because, no, don't stay there, brother, because I've got all here. It's too heavy and we can't afford all the luggage in the plane.

So I carry this gadget which has 200 commentaries in it as well. Okay, he's zealous for God. That's the sixth one. Notice that.

Being zealous for God as all of you are this day. Here he is again. Majoring on the common ground. You guys are zealous for God like the great figures out of the Old Testament. So am I.

We're all zealous for God here, he's saying. We all want to honour God. He's appealing to the common ground and their zeal which he shares. Seventh, he's a persecutor or at least a former persecutor.

[19 : 15] Verse four, 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 there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

He's a persecutor and hence he speaks with that special authority of the former fanatic. The special authority of one who's walked around in the arguments of those now lined up against him.

I know your world he's saying. He knows their world, he knows their rage, he shared their rage, he was the kingpin of their rage.

Currently, he is an outsider to their anti-Christian pogrom. But historically, he's an insider to it as well. We're up to number eight, but who's counting?

[20 : 18] With the knowledge and consent of the whole council of elders, the Sanhedrin, they wrote letters sanctioning his persecution of the Christian church.

It's likely that Paul himself had been a member of the Sanhedrin. Ninthly, he's no armchair persecutor. He was out there doing it.

I journeyed toward Damascus to take people out. I was doing what you are now doing. The next paragraph changes slightly.

We move from Paul's credentials to Paul's appointment in verses six to eleven. And he goes on to tell them of an experience he's had, an ecstatic experience of revelation of God, a theophany, an appearance of God.

Verse six, as I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon, a great light from heaven suddenly shone. As I read this, can you please listen for the two motifs?

[21 : 24] The light and the voice. The light, the voice. A great light from heaven suddenly shone. Verse seven, 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 am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting. Now those who were with me, verse nine, saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me.

And I said, what shall I do, Lord? And the Lord said to me, rise, go into 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 into Damascus.

Light, voice. Now just listen for a moment. We don't have this text on the screen. Listen for a moment as I just read to you from one of the ancient texts that Paul would have memorized.

It's called the prophet Ezekiel chapter one, verses 25 to 28 and listen for light and voice. And there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads.

[22 : 42] This is Ezekiel encountering the glory of the Lord. When they stood still, they let down their wings and above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne.

In appearance like sapphire, seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. And upward from what had the appearance of his waist, I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire, enclosed all around.

And downward from what had the appearance of his waist, I saw as it were the appearance of fire and there was brightness all around him. Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around.

And Ezekiel concludes, such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face and I heard the voice speaking.

This is biblical *deja vu*. Paul is claiming in unmistakable language to have had an experience of God akin to Ezekiel 700 years earlier.

[24 : 03] And he's saying, I didn't go looking for this. I wouldn't go looking for what I was blinded by. He didn't go looking for it, he was blinded by it. At the heart of his mission, Paul is convinced it's the exercise of a will not his own.

He's not the one in charge of his ship. His life has been mastered as all true Christian lives have been masters. And we've heard these little ones today, what a lovely way to start the service. That's what basic Christianity is. Giving up the rule of my life and the right to a self-appointed life. His life has been mastered and not by him.

He's been yanked into service, chain-ganked, pressed, enlisted in a word appointed. Notice that the word appointed is there twice. In verse 10, rise and go into Damascus and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.

And it's down there in the words of Ananias in verse 14. And he said, the God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the righteous one and to hear a voice from his mouth.

[25 : 18] I was thrilled to read someone I haven't read recently or for some years. The great New Testament scholar who's now in heaven. His name is F.F. Bruce. He said that this word appointed goes well beyond being chosen or selected.

And it even goes as far as in his words, handpicked. He has a sense of a careful appraisal of the resources one has at one's disposal. It's as if the Lord is saying, I've got this mission, I want the gospel to go to the Gentiles, I've got all these people, these men and women who are my resource. I'll choose that one. Saul of Tarsus, insider to Jerusalem, insider in the Roman world.

He's not just appointed, he's handpicked. Just how brilliant was the Lord's handpicking, the rest of today's story will tell us. But in verse 12, we move the focus to Paul's brother in the faith, that is Ananias.

And one Ananias, verse 12, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who live in there, notice how his rhetorical style is again and again and again, catered to the audience to whom he's speaking.

[26 : 37] Devout man according to the Torah, well spoken of by all you guys in the audience. Though Paul was handpicked, he came into being as an apostle in fellowship, in a community.

The paragraph on Paul's brother serves to both tell us more of the divine commission while endorsing others in that commission, endorsing others in the new Christian movement who were well spoken of by all the Jews who live there.

And at the heart of Ananias' testimony is quote, the righteous one, verse 14. And he said, the God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the righteous one and hear a voice from his mouth.

At the heart of his passing on what he'd been given is the term, the righteous one. Predictably it too, like the light and the voice, has Old Testament precedent.

If you're new to our church, let me just say an apologetic word, that was a long Old Testament reading today. Why do we religiously read all these passages from the Bible because we're convinced that a passage like 1 Samuel helps us read and understand all the books of the New Testament.

[27 : 57] That's why we do it and I'm so thankful we do. The righteous one was a commonly accepted way of speaking of Israel's coming Messiah. And so, if you look on the screen behind me, Isaiah 32, behold, a king will reign in righteousness and princes will rule in justice.

Each will be like a hiding place from the wind, a shelter from the storm, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.

Or Isaiah 53, the famous servant song, out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied. By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

Praise God. Zechariah chapter 9, verse 9, rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion, shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem, behold, your king is coming to you, righteous and having salvation as he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

At the heart of what this man has to say is the righteous one of Jewish expectation. salvation. But there's an implicit challenge.

[29 : 17] Paul's main purpose here is not to evangelize, but he can't help himself evangelizing, and so I must do likewise. Verse 15, for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you've seen and heard, and now 16, and now why do you wait?

What's stopping you, Paul? Stop and rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name. coming after Paul's interrupted Nazarite vow, the previous chapter, we can't help feeling there are two senses in these words.

A, joining the Christian way doesn't mean a repudiation of purity and holiness. Remember the Nazarite vow was a way of demonstrating and claiming the righteousness of the covenant newly established.

So by doing this and by saying this, wash away your sins, calling on his name, these new Christians are not disinterested in the holiness issues that dominate Jewish discourse.

Far from repudiating them, we're amplifying them through the death of Christ for sin. And B, the customs and practices of the old covenant just didn't really cut it.

[30 : 32] I wonder that the people didn't shout out in annoyance after verse 16. Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins. These are the people whose lives are relentless pouring out of animal sacrificial blood.

The customs and practices of the Old Testament need the perfecting implied by Paul and later provided by the letter to the Hebrews. You haven't fully tasted, he's saying, the washing away of your sins.

That is, the washing away of the penalty of sin and the power of sin. I'm going to change my rhetorical style.

What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus. You can join in if you want. Oh, precious is the flow that makes me white as snow.

[31 : 40] No other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus. Dear friends, your sins troubling you, mine is troubling me this week, anger, disaffection.

Your sins troubling you, perhaps for our visitors today or for old members of the congregation like me. The problem for us as Christians, I think, is not that we're sick of our sins, but we're not sick to death of our sins.

It's only when we're sick to death of our sins that we go to the death of Christ as the answer for sins. You're annoyed by your sins, we'll join six billion people.

Everybody's sick of their sins. But it's only the true Christian who is sick to death of our sins, who knows that there is no release. There is no way out of this spiritual addiction infinitely worse than alcoholism.

Sick to death of our sins where the blood of Jesus, his sacrificial blood paying the penalty for my sins and the power of my sins is washed away.

[32 : 56] And how do we wash away our sins like these young kids this morning? We wash away sins by calling on the name of the one who shed his blood for sins.

So let me ask you again, please come and talk to me or our senior pastor Roy. Are you sick to death of your sins? Or are you just merely sick of your sins?

There's a profound difference. sin? The person who's sick to death of their sins has nowhere to go but to the saviour who shed his blood for sins.

In verses 17 to 20 we see this great apostle is appointed to fail.

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

[34 : 00] about me. Verse 19 Paul says Lord they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you.

It's all so familiar. Like the other Old Testament prophet Jeremiah Paul was appointed to fail.

He would not get the reception he longed for but like his saviour vindication would come on the other side of sacrifice and death. Now let's notice what finally pushes the Jewish crowd over the brink.

Verse 20 And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him and he said to me go for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.

Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said away with such a fellow from the earth. What's the offensive word? Not a swear word though in the Jewish consciousness it is.

[35 : 15] He used the word Gentiles. This is ever so familiar because this is what happened in the life of Jesus Christ way back in Luke chapter 4 in the Nazareth synagogue in his manifesto early in his mission where Jesus dared to reference the Old Testament's exoneration of the Gentiles who came to seek Israel's saviour and who were preferenced over the Israelites.

Back in Luke chapter 4 Jesus had said truly I say to you no prophet is acceptable in his hometown but in truth I tell you there were many widows in Israel in the heavens were shut up for three years and six months a great famine came over the land and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath in the land of Sidon would you believe to a woman who was a widow.

There were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha none of them was cleansed only Naaman the Syrian. Let's have a look here yeah. And when they heard these things all in the synagogue were filled with wrath and they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built so they could throw him down the cliff.

What really sets them off is not Paul's credentials. Not the claim of heavenly manifestation of the Lord. Not the claim to have been appointed by the righteous one Jesus the Messiah.

They're still keeping themselves together. Not even his claim to a trance like experience in the temple akin to Samuels and Isaiah's. What is it? It's the maddening mention of the Gentiles.

[37 : 03] Those knotty nosed creatures. Those dreadful as somebody might say deplorables to whom the Jew imagined himself superior.

This is the real issue that they are so angry about and Holy scripture is putting its finger on. It's the extinction of their religious privilege.

If Paul is right then their visceral gut level disapprovement of the Gentiles is wrong. Dear old Dr.

Stott, John Stott wrote a wonderful book called *The Cross of Christ*. But the first book I read as a Christian 45 years ago was by a man named James Denny who deeply influenced Dr. Stott. This was written in 1902. He was a Scottish theologian and pastor. And he wrote a marvellous book that is still a marvellous book. And it's there in every second page of Stott's *The Cross of Christ*.

[38 : 09] And in that book he said this, Is God a God of Jews only? Paul asks in Romans 3.29 as he contemplates Christ set forth as a propitiation in his blood.

Is the great appeal of the cross one which is intelligible only to people of a single race? Or to which only those who have had a particular training can respond? On the contrary, there's nothing in the world so universally intelligible as the cross.

And hence it is the meeting place not only of God and man, people, but of all races and conditions of men with each other. There is neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female, born nor free there.

The cross is the basis of a universal religion and has in it the hope of a universal peace. But now the crunch comes for all of us who have piously nodded at these sentiments for years.

Because Denny concludes with these words, But of all Christian truths which are confessed in words, this is that which is most outrageously denied indeed. There is not a Christian church nor a Christian nation in the world which believes heartily in the atonement as the extinction of privilege and the leveling up of all men to the same possibility of life in Christ, to the same calling to the saints.

[39 : 35] The spirit of privilege in spite of the cross is obstinately rooted everywhere, even among Christian people. This is what they are so angry about.

If what you're saying, Paul, is true, our privilege is gone. It's the old friend of the human heart and particularly the masculine heart.

It's called power. But that's not where the passage ends and so not where we should end. Thirdly and finally, Paul and the Roman Tribune.

Away. There's the word again. Up to this word, verse 22, they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live.

Again, in today's narrative, we have this infamous word, away. But this time, they add to it the ancient world's equivalence of the cancel culture. For he should not be allowed to live.

[40 : 38] Delete him. So blinded by hatred, are they, that the other person, the other, is assumed to be unworthy of existence. He's not merely somebody with a different point of view.

He's taking up space. He's consuming oxygen. We increasingly hear these frightening cancel statements in our public discourse.

And we've had their horrific implications normalised through overuse. People with whom we disagree are no longer those with a different opinion or think differently. They are now a waste of space.

Auschwitz and Flossenberg are wading down the road from that line of thinking. But of course, our kids and grandkids are hearing so little about the Holocaust. So impoverished is their education in history.

verse 24, Roman rescue number two. And all the Romanesque words start appearing for me, they're underlined in purple. Verse 24, the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks.

[41 : 42] Verse 25, when they'd stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion, a Roman citizen comes in. Verse 26, when the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, what are you about to do for this man is a Roman citizen?

It's got Roman purple all over it, this final paragraph. The text is again dotted with these Roman words that we saw earlier. Mind you, initially the rescue is going to be at the price of a flogging. Examined doesn't mean pass the test and hand out the papers and give them to the monitors. Examined means torture. Examined really means torture. Logic being that the tongues of the wicks will loosen the tongue of the prisoner.

But we also see here Roman reason, 25 to 29. So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately.

And the tribune also was afraid for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he bound him. Again, the Roman authorities are almost speechless with surprise when Paul again makes a polite inquiry.

[42 : 50] 25. Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned? Well, the poor tribune.

Not only is this poor wretch in front of them, Paul, a Roman citizen and therefore legally cannot be subjected to such treatment, but his social standing is higher than the guy who rules over the thousand.

It's higher than the tribune examining him. Here's another turn up for the books. Just who is this pathetic but increasingly impressive individual? Who can speak urbanely in both Greek and Hebrew?

Who is a poster boy of Jerusalem's religious establishment and one of Rome's distinguished cities? Who is unashamedly pro-Jewish while at the same time pro-Gentile?

The answer is, of course, that he is the one appointed, handpicked, by almighty God to take the message of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome.

[43 : 57] From the heart of the kingdom of God to the heart of the empire, the one handpicked is indeed the perfect choice. Which leads me to three final reflections and applications.

The first application, as is probably true in every passage of the Bible, is worship. I hope your heart is like mine, taking off like a jet plane.

The first application is for us to worship and adore him. This is not a second best application, it's the first. Let these passages wash over you, listening for their resonance with today's passage.

Psalms 150, I'll read just the last, the first few verses. Psalm 150, praise the Lord, praise God in his sanctuary, praise him in his mighty heavens, praise him for his mighty deeds, praise him according to his excellent greatness, such as we've seen today.

Or how about this one from Isaiah 55, for my thoughts, says the Lord, are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than yours, and my thoughts than yours.

[45 : 09] For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth.

It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that for which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I send it. Just like the word of the gospel in the book of Acts.

So worship, I think, of our wonderful God who handpicked with such genius. I think that's the first point of application. The second one is admiration. Admiration for our great apostle.

If almighty God has done a superb job, so has Paul, by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Luke chapter 12, I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God.

But the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God. And when they bring you before the synagogues and rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say, Luke 12.

[46 : 29] Haven't we received a master class in this today? And a master class not just in the content of his testimony, but the manner of his making it. 2 Corinthians 13.

Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration. Comfort one another. Agree with one another. Live in peace and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

All the saints greet you. Paul hasn't set out to have a fight. He's aimed for the restoration of Israel, for comfort and agreement.

He sought to bring people together under the unifying grace of God in the gospel. But when the fight is joined, neither does he retreat from it, but conducts himself as the Christian gentleman should.

Paul will go on to say in the Roman letter, chapter 12, if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. It's not always possible, but it's always possible to try.

[47 : 39] So, worship of our sovereign God, admiration for our wonderful apostle, and imitation of them both. Ephesians 2, we may not be apostles appointed for a unique distinctive role in the history of the church, but we are disciples called to follow our saviour in the words, works he has given us to do.

Ephesians 2, verse 10, for we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

is this passage of the Bible relevant to us? In the long shot, of course it is. There's no passage which isn't. And the good work we most naturally think of in the volcano of today's passage is speaking up for Jesus.

1 Peter chapter 2. You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Last quote, 1 Peter 3. Even if you should suffer for righteousness sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks for a reason for the hope that is in you.

[49 : 09] Yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that when you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ may be put to shame.

For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. Let's pray. Our Master in heaven, we pray that by your Holy Spirit, who penned these words through the gifts of the apostles and Luke, your Holy Spirit would now illuminate these words and write them on our hearts, we ask.

Please bring forth in us the fruit of righteousness that we all find so difficult to render up as a thank offering to you. So bless and keep us today and thank you Father for the wonderful time of witnessing these young lives devoted to the Saviour.

Please would you sustain them and bring them safely to your heavenly kingdom as us all. In Jesus' name, Amen.