

Trial upon Trials

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 December 2023

Preacher: Rodney Weatherhead

[0 : 00] Good morning. My name is Rodney and I've been asked to give the preaching on God's Word this morning. Roy's on holiday, as we know, for a couple of months, a well-deserved break.

And yeah, so I get to bring us the next installment in the book of Acts. Why don't I pray? Now, gracious Father, we thank you for your Word. We thank you for these things that are written for our instruction.

And we pray, Lord, that we take these things to heart, that we might be people who honour you. In Christ's name. Amen. Well, I wonder if you find it harder to live as a Christian in our society these days.

Do you feel like there's a sense of growing injustice against those who are Christian? Feeling like there's opposition increasing against Christianity these days?

Well, many of us in our church would be familiar with some of the public challenges that have been happening over recent years. Court cases that have been brought against chaplaincy in schools.

[1 : 14] And the pressure that has been on our state government to abolish religious instruction in schools. Isn't it great that we can keep praying for that, as was done earlier?

Chaplaincy, religious instructions. And we can add to that the list of Christian schools that are accused of being against the laws of equality because of their faith-based codes of conduct.

Well, I certainly know in the university student ministry that I'm involved with, several years ago, there was a huge challenge brought against one of the Christian student groups in one of the Sydney universities.

The student union there was pushing for the Christian student group to remove faith-based requirements for their membership and for their committee members. They were pushing to change the constitution so that even non-Christians could lead the Christian group.

That non-Christians could determine the direction for this Christian student group. And the union was pushing for this all in the name of equality. And they were preparing to take the Christian student group to court.

[2 : 27] Well, in the end, after much trouble and heartache, the proposals were dropped because there was not enough legal basis to continue the court case.

Nevertheless, you can feel the pressure, can't you? The pressure and opposition that is growing. It can feel like that in our passage in Acts today, in Acts chapter 23 and 24.

There is legal action. There is the trial we have of Paul before the Roman governor, Felix. In fact, it's not just this one trial, is it?

It's actually part of a series of trials that fill up the last quarter of the book of Acts. And you may feel like many parts...

Sorry. The book of Acts is a book that you might like many parts of, you might be familiar with. But if you've ever read consistently through the book of Acts from beginning to end, you've probably got to the last quarter and you felt like it just gets bogged down in the tiny details of these court cases.

[3 : 39] I mean, think about the book of Acts with me. It opens with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The apostles are empowered to be witnesses. There's conversions of thousands and thousands, all of which begins in Jerusalem, then to Judea, then Samaria.

We get the dramatic conversion of Paul, who was on the road to Damascus, which begins a gospel movement to the ends of the world. Paul traveling around the Mediterranean, boldly proclaiming the message of the risen Lord Jesus that cannot be stopped.

It's full of drama, bold preaching, the church that's growing and growing. And then we get to chapter 21. And it's like the action just grinds to a halt.

You know, like when you've been driving on the highway in your car at 100 kilometers an hour and you come to a town and you've got to slow down to 50 kilometers an hour.

It's like a crawl. You just want to get to the other side so you can speed up and be on your way again. So why does Luke, the author, spend so much time on all these tedious trials?

[4 : 47] What happened to the miraculous powers of the Holy Spirit? What about the conversions? Why spend so much time on these obscure legal proceedings with Paul?

Paul. And what we have is not just one trial, but five. Five trials. Paul's on trial before the crowd, on trial before the council, on trial before Felix, which is our present one, on trial before Festus, and on trial before Agrippa, before finally he heads off to Rome.

And I get one sermon in Acts, and I get this one. The third of five trials. So what can I say that's just not a repeat of the other four? But I think there is still something to see.

I want to show you that Luke, the author, is doing two things. Two things at the back end of this book particular, which we see in this third trial. The third trial of Paul as he faces Felix, the Roman governor.

Firstly, I'm going to point out the way in which we see the passage, we see in the passage that Christianity is not illegal. And secondly, I'm going to explore how we see here that Christianity is not insignificant.

[6 : 05] Not illegal. And not insignificant. Well, throughout the five trials Paul faces, it's very clear he remains innocent.

Particularly in this trial, we see how Paul is declared innocent. In chapter 23, verse 29, the tribune advised in his letter that Paul is charged with nothing, nothing deserving of death or imprisonment. In chapter 24, verse 13, the accusers, they cannot prove their charges. In chapter 24, verse 27, Paul remains for two years in prison without charge.

And in the same verse, even when the next governor, Festus, arrives, he leaves Paul in prison to do to the Jews a favor. Again, showing there is no criminal reason to keep Paul there.

And if you were to keep reading the other trials, chapter 25, verse 25, with governor Festus, he says of Paul, I have found that he has done nothing deserving of death.

[7 : 16] And in the next trial after that, with King Agrippa, chapter 26, verse 32, he says, this man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.

So do we accuse Luke, the author, of just getting a bit repetitive? You know, like if you ask a five-year-old, I've got one of those, you ask them a summary, give them a summary of something that happened or a movie they watched, and all you get is the detail.

Sometimes just carrying on with all the unnecessary detail, and they just don't seem to do a very good job at summarizing in a few sentences what the main idea was. Is that Luke?

A five-year-old child excited about the details? Well, I don't want to accuse him of doing that, but I think he's doing it to reinforce a point.

He really wants us to see that Paul is innocent, and not just Paul, but so to the growing group of Jesus followers, that Paul and both the Christianity that he represents, that both Paul and Christianity are not illegal.

[8 : 34] There's something else in the detail, I wonder if you noticed, that these trials of Paul follow a pattern, a pattern that we've seen before. You know, like that moment of *deja vu*, when you feel like you've experienced this moment before.

What we have here with Paul is a moment of *deja vu*, a repeat of another trial. Are you feeling the sense we've been here before?

Another narrative earlier in the New Testament that likewise has lots of actions, with someone traveling around, preaching and being confirmed by all sorts of signs and wonders, and then slowing that action down to just a few days to focus on some legal proceedings.

Does that sound like the Gospels to you? The story that also spends a quarter of the narrative on legal proceedings, the Jesus, his arrest, his trial, his crucifixion.

There are a lot of parallels between the life of Jesus and the life of Paul, as we read about Paul in the book of Acts. In particular, there are some things we can see that Paul's trial follows the pattern of Jesus' trial.

[9 : 56] Here's some comparisons. Jesus and Paul are both accused by the Jews, both mobbed by them, and put on trial before the Jewish council.

Jesus and Paul are both brought before the Roman governor. With Jesus, Pilate finds no reason to condemn him.

Twice, in fact, in Luke chapter 23, we're told that Pilate tells the accusers that he finds no guilt in the man. Both Jesus and Paul have the Jews accuse them before the governor.

Even the wording of the way in which they phrase their accusation is almost identical. Both say, in both Jesus and Paul, they say he stirs up the people.

And in both cases for Jesus and Paul, justice was not done. You see, just as the governor, Pilate, delivered Jesus over to the will of the Jewish accusers, now in our current case with Felix, he denies Paul's release because, quote, he desired to do the Jews a favor.

[11 : 14] With all this, we can be left in no doubt that Christianity is not illegal. living in the Roman society, probably the most concerned about strict legal processes before our modern era, in this society, readers can have confidence that if they are Christian, they are not doing something that is illegal.

I think this forms part of Luke's purpose in writing his two-volume work of Luke and Acts. Both Luke and Acts are addressed to Theophilus. He says that he writes to show him the certainty what Jesus began to do and to teach and to show him the confidence that he can be a follower of Jesus.

See, Theophilus, by his title Most Excellent Theophilus and obviously sufficiently wealthy enough to be able to commission this work, he would have been risking a lot to associate with this new religion.

See, Roman law did accept various religions and frequently adopted them in. You know, they made all the Greek gods their own. But not just any religion, okay, only those authorised by Roman law were okay.

The Jewish religion was approved by Rome, but what about this new way? this way that sprang up from the Jewish religion but is different.

[12 : 49] That have a growing number of people throughout the empire worshipping differently, known as the way. People following the way of a Jewish man by the name of Jesus.

Is this okay? Well, the answer to someone like Theophilus would have been important because Roman law treated you as a criminal not just for doing the crime but for association with the crime. You see, association was as bad as the crime itself. So, could a man like Theophilus, could he be safe to associate with Jesus in this new way? Well, yes, says Luke.

Yes, you can. Christianity is not illegal. And more so, it gives confidence that Paul is a man who can be trusted and listened to. Half the New Testament letters are written by Paul.

His teaching, his warnings, his example to follow. Can he be trusted? Yes, says Luke. It is okay to listen to Paul's teaching and we should. Okay, so we've seen this first thing in the trial that in this particular moment in Roman time it is not illegal to be Christian.

[14 : 11] But what's this got to do with us? See, Luke gives us more than just information. It's not just a history podcast to listen to.

But Luke is giving us the experience of God's people who face opposition in the world. I mean, even in the later Roman times God's people did face opposition.

Down through the ages God's people faced the same thing again and again and a pattern that was there long before Paul's day and continues to this day. I mean, consider the Old Testament stories of Joseph.

Are you familiar with those? Joseph in Genesis 37 to 50. Joseph hated by his brothers, sold off into slavery, not because he was deserving it, but because they were jealous.

And Joseph, while he was serving in Potiphar's house, was falsely accused and put into prison. Yet all this was a will of God to take what the people meant for evil and to use it for good to keep many alive.

[15 : 19] God's love. Daniel and his friends, the wise men, the presidents, the satraps, they could find no guilt and no ground for complaint because Daniel and his friends were faithful and no error or fault was found in them.

And yet the jealousy of these men pushed them to create new laws targeted specifically against Daniel. But each time Daniel is shown again and again to be righteous and his God is declared to be the great and everlasting God most high above all.

The same goes through the prophets. All throughout the Old Testament, none of the prophets were fairly treated but persecuted. Do you see the pattern?

Even before Paul's trial with Felix, men and women faithful to the Lord God and his promises, faithful men and women are put on trial. Not because of wrongdoing but rather because those with positions of religious privilege, in their jealousy, they seek to oppose the righteous. Even when there's no legal right, they look for some excuse to put the faithful on trial and they create alternative reasons to accuse and to suppress.

[16:48] This is the pattern we see down the ages for Christians in all times and all places. Years later, after Paul's day, the Roman Empire did make new laws to target Christians and find reasons to imprison them.

And today, through all the world, we hear stories of Christians being imprisoned or silenced, despite the fact they're innocent. If you haven't heard much, you can find out more from organizations like Voice of the Martyrs or Barnabas Aid.

You can get their magazines because, or online, they tell us stories. Stories of Christians often unfairly treated for no other reason than being Christian.

here's a couple of stories that Barnabas Aid have shared recently. In the country of Laos, in Laos, a deputy chief of a village ordered a church of 18 Christians to cease meeting.

Authorities interrupted a worship service and threatened the believers with arrest and heavy fines if they did not comply. The warning also applied to two Christians who were attending the service from a neighboring village.

[18:08] An additional threat of a large fine was issued to the church in the event of any village residents falling ill or dying. These orders were issued even though Christianity is not illegal in that country.

The Lao Constitution, Article 30, explicitly states that Lao citizens have the right and freedom to believe or not to believe in religions. what about another story in Algeria?

Pastor Joseph was charged with allegedly holding an unauthorized religious meeting in a building not permitted to be used for religious worship. Thankfully, he was able to have an appeal hearing and have his original sentence of two years reduced down to one.

one. But in these stories, and so many like it, we hear alternative reasons being put forward to oppose Christians.

There's one country which has used COVID as a good excuse for suppressing Christians. Even now, long after the peak of COVID, church groups are not allowed to gather because of health safety.

[19:31] Even though it's not consistently applied to other groups of society, this country uses the data tracking that was implemented and rolled out during COVID to track movements and limit Christians from gathering with other Christians.

Christians. Again and again, countries, even if countries do have anti-conversion laws, making it illegal to convert someone from one to another religion, it seems so often opponents are not satisfied with this, that they must devise traps to try and catch Christian leaders and look for ways to create false accusations.

As it was for our Lord Jesus, so it was with his apostle to the nations, so it is for the disciples around the world, it's a familiar pattern.

Accusing Christians as though doing something wrong against society, just like what Acts 24, the accusers said. They claimed that the representative of Jesus there on trial was stirring up trouble and disturbing the spiritual well-being of this people.

Christians are falsely accused, even though usually there's no claim that can be properly laid on them. no reason for remaining in prison, yet so many face injustice and imprisoned for political purposes or some other favour.

[21:20] And we can be thankful that there are intelligent people who can defend the right of Christians. We have many even in our midst who are capable of doing this.

And it is good for us to keep defending the rights of Christians, where it is good to defend, or supporting organisations like Barnabas Aid who advocate for those facing injustice.

We should keep defending the rights that we enjoy as Christians in this country, to be able to practise our faith in all consciousness. We can be thankful for people who can and are able to do this.

But I want to remind us that the law is not enough. because there's something far more significant going on than just justice. Because Luke, the author, is showing us that yes, Paul is innocent before

the Roman court, but he's also showing us his testimony and witness to the Lord Jesus. Do you notice that Paul doesn't even try and prove his innocence? But he wants to persuade his audience of the significance of the resurrection of the dead. And that's the second thing that Luke is showing us.

[22 : 35] He's showing us that Christianity is not insignificant. And we see why. At the end of Paul's speech before Felix, he gets to the heart of the matter. Paul is on trial because of his belief in the resurrection.

Let me reread chapter 24, verse 18 to 21. Paul giving his defence. His defence. While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple without any crowd or tumult.

But some Jews from Asia, they ought to be here before you and make an accusation should they have anything against me. Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council other than this one thing that I cried out while standing among them. It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day. We can tell this is the crunch point and the heart of the issue.

Because as soon as Paul spoke about the resurrection, his speech is cut off. He is silenced. It happened before, before the Jewish council in chapter 23.

[23 : 49] At the mention of the resurrection, the crowd broke out in contention. They nearly tore Paul to pieces and if the tribune then hadn't stepped in to save him, Paul would have been torn apart by the crowd.

And often throughout the book of Acts, the resurrection of the dead is both the climax of the apostles preaching and the clash point for many in the crowd. And back with Felix again, the resurrection of the dead disturbs him.

Even after the trial, Felix and his wife privately send for Paul to hear him speak about faith in Christ. Paul does speak, as we read in verse 25, Paul speaks about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment.

Well, you might ask, where's the resurrection in that conversation? And I'll say, it's in the coming judgment. You see, when the Lord Jesus returns to raise all to life to judge, judge some to everlasting life and some to everlasting death.

And so what is Felix's response? He is alarmed. You see, the resurrection is not just a piece of obscure history about some guy named Jesus that happened in some remote corner of the province of the empire.

[25 : 20] The resurrection of Jesus crowns him as king, king of the world, crowns him king of the world to come. In the resurrection, Jesus is placed in ultimate supremacy over life now and over the realm of the dead and the life to come.

This is not insignificant. And more than this, the resurrection is not some add-on to the life as though it's a way to continue the good stuff we enjoy now and to have a happily ever after.

See, the resurrection of the dead has huge impact for life now. As Paul was speaking about Jesus with Felix and his wife, Paul spoke about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment. See, this is the impact for the resurrection for life now, to live with Jesus as Lord and to show this in righteousness and self-controlled living.

Paul modeled that in his unfair imprisonment. We see in chapter 24 verse 26 that Paul had the opportunity to get out of prison. Now, Felix, he couldn't explicitly say it, but by his actions he was offering, dropping hints that Paul just might like to pay his way out with a bribe.

[26 : 47] And I don't think Paul was dull. Paul didn't miss the hints because Paul lived what he spoke, righteousness and self-control.

And it meant that Paul was not going to give in to bribery even if it would get him out of prison. And Felix shows us something else about how Christianity is not insignificant.

With a two-year-long game that he played with Paul, keeping him in prison, Felix is simply avoiding the truth. Avoiding the truth about King Jesus and his coming judgment.

judgment. Because Christ's judgment at the resurrection of the dead does make big calls on life. Such big calls that people avoid this truth.

Maybe you've experienced this in conversations with your neighbors or friends. That so often their issue with Christianity is rarely about truth.

[27 : 50] I mean, take Felix, for example. He had a rather accurate knowledge of the way. And yet he delayed the case. Better, he thought, to keep Paul in prison than to deal with the truth and stand

with the truth.

Felix would rather take a path of corruption than to defend the truth of Paul's innocence and to deal with the implications of the resurrection. He's a man who would rather please people than represent truth.

See, knowing truth doesn't fix the heart. See, the issue that people have with Jesus and Christianity is rarely about truth.

It's usually unbelief. Unwillingness to accept what is true. See, at one level, unbelief is just keeping truth at a distance so you don't have to engage with it.

It's like hiding in the dark so you don't get exposed to the light. There's at least a couple of years, there's at least a couple of weeks in the year when I'm hiding in the dark, afraid of being exposed.

[29 : 01] It's the time of the year when the council arranged curbside collection in my area. People put out junk on their curbside to be collected by the council for free.

And the truth is so many good items that can be reused or are useful to others are there and shouldn't be there but are thrown out. But sometimes I'm afraid to collect it.

What will the neighbours think of me if I'm picking up rubbish from their junk piles? I'm afraid to be exposed. So I wait for night time.

I sneak up to the piles of junk and rescue some items I think would be useful. See, I don't want to be seen by the light of day while doing this lest my scavenging be exposed. Well, John's gospel gives us a similar picture of hiding in the dark.

Don't get exposed by getting too close to the light. See, Nicodemus, he goes to Jesus at night.

There he is sneaking in to see Jesus, afraid that someone might see him associating.

[30 : 08] And at the end of the conversation we have this summary. And this is the judgment. The light has come into the world and the people love the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil.

For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed. That's Felix, isn't it?

That's so many people unwilling to accept the truth about the resurrection, afraid of being exposed. So avoiding Jesus the light. As much as I like apologetics and all sorts of proof about Jesus and what he did, I have to remember that knowledge doesn't bring belief.

Paul wrote a letter to the church in Rome, Romans chapter 10. He says, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, if you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

It's not just knowing. It's taking steps towards trust, admitting that Jesus is Lord of your life, willing to submit to him, prepared to put your life in his hands in the judgment to come at the resurrection of the dead.

[31 : 32] See, Christianity is not insignificant. It makes a huge claim on your life and my life. Felix didn't miss this point, but he chose to delay and keep distant.

Just hoping that avoiding the real issue would avoid the implications of the resurrection. Perhaps I need to ask that of you too.

Are you someone who's come to trust in Jesus and to wait for his return from heaven when he delivers us from the wrath to come? Or are you someone who's learned a lot about Jesus, but you're still keeping distance?

Are you avoiding the truth? Are you delaying the decision to admit that Jesus is Lord, the one who will all have to give an account for our life at the resurrection of the dead?

If this is you, can I please urge you delay no more. Repent and receive forgiveness of sins that you may be saved in the coming judgment.

[32 : 58] But brothers and sisters in Christ, we have confidence. When we really do trust in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, we can have confidence to stand firm against all who oppose Jesus and his gospel.

As I was looking through Paul's trial before Felix, there's something I noticed that Paul didn't do. That is, Paul did not defend his rights, but he defended the gospel.

See, Paul sought not freedom, but sought the proclamation of the gospel. When he was given a chance to take freedom by offering a bribe to get out of there, he didn't.

His confidence was in the resurrection of the dead and that enabled him to stand firm. To actually plead the cause of the gospel more than to plead the cause for justice.

Already in the approach of Paul to Jerusalem over the last few chapters of Acts, the Holy Spirit has been testifying that Paul will face trouble in Jerusalem.

[34 : 13] Many of his companions persuaded him, tried to persuade him, don't go. But Paul went, knowing it would be costly and would cause suffering.

Paul is not seeking his own comfort. Paul is more concerned for the gospel than his own comfort. Yes, Paul simply states his innocence and his righteousness.

He knew his legal rights, but he didn't use his full legal rights to detract from the mission of the risen Lord Jesus. Even if he didn't know where his next meal would come from, Paul knew the significance of the resurrection and did not shy away from it.

I wonder if what you or I would do, what would we be tempted to do when we face the critics? As many in our parts of the world these days are facing more and more critics, when we're challenged to lessen the call of the gospel in our lives, when we're challenged to set aside some points of Christian living so as to be more accepting to society's expectations, what will we do?

Whether it's identity politics, gender issues, pressure on faith-based organizations, whatever it is, will we stand firm and identify with Jesus?

[35 : 47] Well, we can. We can with confidence because, like Paul says in chapter 24, verse 15, we worship the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have a hope in him that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. And we can stand in prayer for our brothers and sisters in Christ all around the world who are suffering simply for being Christian in their context.

We can subscribe to news and updates from organizations like Barnabas Aid. We can pray for the persecuted church, just like we're reminded on the 23rd day in our church's prayer diary.

Pray for justice. Pray for mercy. Pray for strength. that God, if what God chooses to do in his sovereign purposes, if he uses suffering of his people to declare the gospel and testimony of the faithfulness of Christ.

Pray for strength. And we can have confidence. As Paul wrote earlier in Romans 8, for tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, or danger, or sword, neither even life, nor death, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[37 : 09] Let me pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word again that teaches us that we are to have our hope in the gospel, to hope in the resurrection of the dead.

We pray for the people of the persecuted church worldwide, that they would have a strong and sure hope in the resurrection, that they would find refuge and peace in Christ.

Please strengthen them who are more concerned for the gospel than their own comfort. We ask God that you would soften the hearts of all those who are persecuting your people.

Particularly we pray for those in positions of power in the government. May they be merciful. And may they see the glory of Christ and bow the knee.

We pray for Barnabas aid and organizations like them. And pray that they can continue to provide practical aid. We pray that they can continue to financially support those who are persecuted.

[38 : 30] That we can be encouraging in prayer. Thank you for the way in which they raise awareness and contest against injustice. We ask, Lord, that you would enable those persecuted to entrust themselves to you, our faithful creator, while doing good.

Knowing that neither death nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.