

The Trilemma

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[0 : 0 0] Great, well it's wonderful to see you this morning. Folks, let me invite you to turn to Acts 17 and to have God's Word open in front of you because what Jackson said there is actually pretty much the point of the sermon.

Is what he is saying, what it says, is what he is saying true. So Acts 17 open in front of you, come with me to verse 7. And as you're turning there, let me tell you about a minister who lived in Edinburgh many, many years ago.

He free church to Scotland minister. He lectured at New College on the Mount. His name was Rabbi Duncan. That was his nickname, I think, because of his heart for Jewish people to come to know Jesus.

They called him Rabbi Duncan. But he was a very clever man and he talked about the biggest question that each of us as human beings face. And he called it the ultimate trilemma.

Quite like that, trilemma. And talking about Jesus, he said this. He said, Christ either deceived mankind by conscious fraud, or he himself deluded and self-deceived, or he was divine.

[1 : 1 0] There is no getting out of this trilemma. Okay, so here's the essence of what he's saying. When it comes to Jesus, there's a call that each of us need to make.

Deceiver, deluded, or divine. What is he? Who is he? I wonder if you've ever considered that in your life. Who is this man, Jesus?

The trilemma. Now, as you're chewing on that, let me tell you about the most dangerous thing that you could say in the first century Greco-Roman world. And it's straight in the passage, verse 7.

The most dangerous thing you could say, Jesus is king. If that confession is heard to come from your lips, then you're in some serious bother.

Because on the one hand, you're offending the Romans. You're a threat to them. Because the chant that's heard all over the empire in this day is, Kaiser Keros, right?

[2 : 0 8] Caesar is king. The king is Caesar. It's what you hear all over the empire. It's emblazoned on coffee cups. You will buy fridge magnets with it on. It's what people believe.

Caesar is king. Caesar is the one who's in ultimate power. Caesar is the one who dictates what is right and wrong. And so if anyone so much as gets a whiff of a claim that someone else might be setting themselves up as a rival, then you have to understand that that is not grounds for a debate. That is a qualification for death. Because for Rome, they hear about Jesus and Jesus equals deceiver.

And on the other hand, if you claim that is your phrase, Jesus is Lord, you're a threat and an offense to the Jews. Because the people have at the core of their very identity, the belief that there is one God.

And so when Jesus of Nazareth, he turns up from this backwater town of Nazareth in the Gospels, and he claims to be equal with God. No wonder the Jews wanted him dead.

[3 : 1 5] It's an offense to their whole way of living. For the Jews, Jesus equals deluded. And yet Paul in our passage today, he rocks up in these cities of Thessalonica and Berea, and with both his life and his lips, he dares to say divine.

Divine. And so here's the challenge that comes at us today. As we go about our everyday lives as followers of this Jesus, as disciples of him. On the school run, in the classroom, at the office, at home, as we care for others, as we live our lives in our marriages, as we live our lives in our families, as we live our lives with our friends, as people see us in action, both with our lives and our lips, the challenge of this passage is, will we dare to do the same?

I think that's what Luke is saying. Will you dare to do the same? Now, why would you do that?

That's the question to ask, isn't it? Why would you dare to do that?

Because to do it is to put yourself in some serious bother, I take it, in whatever culture you are in, living wherever you do across the world. Why would you choose to do it? Well, I take it, the heart of it is, is a deep conviction that there is just none like Jesus. That I've never met anyone like him.

[4 : 50] That I've never had a message like this. That there is no message like the gospel. That this Jesus loved me. That he gave himself for me. That he died for my sins.

That he was raised for my justification. That I would be right with this God. Not because of what I have done, but because of him. This message of who he is. I take it that there's no one like him. And so far from this being an exercise where we walk out this morning and feel guilty because we're not daring to do it. I take it this is just an invitation to come and meet Jesus. Come and know him. Come and have him transform your life. And we'll see the central character. One of the central characters in this is a man who has his life flipped upside down by Jesus Christ. And I take it they're just, here's all I want to do this morning. There are two timeless truths at the heart of this passage. I think they're just two truths that Luke wants his readers to see. We're just going to spend some time thinking about them, okay?

[5 : 53] And there are two claims about Christianity. And if you're here today and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, I invite you to get into what Luke is telling you here. All 2,000 years later, this is what he is saying about Christianity.

You ready for these? Here's the first one. Christianity, investigate it and you'll find it compelling. Verse one, what does Paul find and where does he go when he gets to Thessalonica? Come with me to the text. What does he do? Where does he go? Oh, he goes to the synagogue, do you see? As is his pattern, he goes to the Jewish meeting house.

Now, if you've been with us in the Acts series so far, and if you haven't, you can go on the website and check them out. You will know that that is a daring and a bold move. Because all the way through Acts, where is it that Paul has encountered the bother?

Where has he gotten trouble for preaching Jesus? It ain't really on the streets. It's in the synagogue. So that's a bold move. How often does he go?

[6 : 53] Again, seeing the text, he reasons for three Sabbath days. So Sabbath being the Saturday. Okay? So he's there for just over three weeks, which is not a long time.

But this is what he does. And notice the three words about what he does. I think these have got a lot to teach us here. What did he do? He reasoned with the Jews. Do you see the words in the text? He explained, and he proved. And I take it there are just almost three sides. I was going to say of the same coin, but that doesn't work, does it? You know what I'm saying.

There are three ways of describing the same thing. Right? So what he's doing is he gets the Old Testament scroll, and if you like, he lays it down. I think this is what the Greek words mean. He lays it down, pulls it out, and he gets people to understand what's going on. He's saying, let me show you in the scroll how Jesus is the fulfillment of everything that God promised here.

[7 : 52] Because this is not just Paul's hot take on Jesus. This is what Jesus said about himself. That it was all about him, that he was the very fulfillment of everything that the Old Testament story is leading up to.

And of course, Luke is the very one who recorded those words in the prequel to Acts in Luke chapter 24, right at the end. It's the same guy who's written both of them. Okay?

Luke 24, when Jesus is risen, when he talks to his disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus says to them, and beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself.

So this is a book about Jesus. This is what Paul is saying. You know, I remember a friend once telling me when they started reading the Bible through this lens, that it almost became like one of those pop-up books that you used to get as a kid.

Do you remember those things? You used to open it and it used to pop up. I remember he just said that. Every time I read the Old Testament, there was Jesus coming up. There he was. The story is about him.

[9 : 02] In the words of Sally Lloyd-Jones in her Jesus storybook Bible, every story whispers his name. Every story whispers his name. It's what Paul is saying to the Jews in the synagogue.

This is about him. Because they're living by the mantra. Do you remember the words of that U2 song many, many years ago? I still haven't found what I'm looking for.

If you're an Old Testament Jew or even a modern day Jew, who are you waiting on? Who are you looking for? Again, in the passage, you're looking and waiting for the Messiah.

This figure that God said he would be for his people, this figure he would send who would be a mighty savior king and who would liberate his people from their enemies.

He would deal with their biggest problem, their sin problem, and he would usher in God's rule. It's the Messiah. He reads about this figure.

[10:04] He will be the lion. He will be the mighty king who will rule for his people. And how will he be that mighty king? Because he will be the lamb who will lay down his life for the sins of his people.

And that's why Paul says, do you see the phrase, he had to die. He had to die for the sins of his people.

He takes the punishment that their sins deserve on himself. He is the lamb and he rose victoriously on the third day. He is the lion. And Paul's sitting there.

He's reasoning. He's proving. He's explaining that this figure that they're waiting on, he's come in the person of Jesus. And so here's Paul's point.

I'm going to sum it up. Jesus makes sense of the scriptures. And if I flip it around, the scriptures make sense of Jesus.

[11:07] And I just wonder if some of us need to be reminded this morning of who he is. In the same way that Paul reasons and he proves and he explains that Jesus is this savior, that you need to come to him for your forgiveness of sins, you need to come to him as the one who's come to give life, I wonder if some of us need to be reminded that this is who he is.

That this is no intellectual exercise that Paul is participating in here. This is about where people find life and hope and joy and forgiveness and renewal.

And they find it in this Messiah. And you can find it in this Messiah too. You want to come to him today and say, yeah, Lord Jesus, it's about you. The scriptures make sense of Jesus and Jesus makes sense of the scriptures.

And you see the reaction, some hear what he's saying, verse four, and they're persuaded. You see that in the text? They see it. Makes sense. The coin, penny drops. I keep saying coin this morning. The penny drops in their minds. And notice in passing, who? Who's responding to this? The Jews, the God-fearing Greeks, and the prominent women in culture. Again, I love, if you not love this, seeing this in the book of Acts, the diversity of the people who are responding to this message.

[12:27] They accept it. And yet others, they reject it. It's interesting, isn't it, that the Jews reject it.

What do they do? They go to the marketplace and they round up this mob. We'll come back to them in a minute. I just take it, troublemakers. They just love nothing more than a fight. They're up in arms, raging about this message.

I don't think they probably have a clue what the message is. Let me just ask again, if you're here today, if you maybe are caught up in this crowd rejecting Christianity, let me ask you, what reasons are you taking for yourself that you're rejecting it?

Could it be that actually you're believing what other people are saying about Christianity? You're believing what is written on the side of buses that there probably is no God? What was that famous one down in London? There probably is no God.

Stop worrying and get on with your day. You're believing what people are saying. Is that what you're basing it on? Or would you come and see the scriptures and see who Jesus is for yourself?

[13:27] Paul's forced out of the city and having only spent three or so weeks there, he gets to Berea down the road. And the same thing happens.

You see, they go to the synagogue and they speak the same message. This is verse 11. And the people in Thessalonica, what were they?

They were bad characters. But notice verse 11. What are the people in Berea described as being? Of noble character. And I think that's a deliberate contrast we're meant to see that Luke's bringing out.

It's the contrast we're supposed to see and I think it's the example that we're called upon to emulate. Because what did the Bereans do? Verse 11. They listened to what Paul is saying and they do so and see the word.

It's an awesome word. I love it. Eagerness. Which I take it just means they're sitting there thinking, wouldn't it be brilliant if what he said is true? Wouldn't it be great if it was true?

[14 : 27] Wouldn't it be great if Jesus really is this person? He did these things. Wouldn't it be wonderful if this were true? But they don't just swallow it. And I want you to see this and there's two E's here.

What's the other E in the passage? Do you see it? What do they do with this? They receive it with eagerness but what do they do? They examine it. They examine it. And so here can I just address the notion that is popular in our culture that faith is a blind leap in the dark.

Right? Like if you go to the library you'll find the Bible in the mythical section along with Hansel and Gretel and Jason and the Argonauts. It's another myth that people base their lives upon.

Would you see that Christianity is true based on evidence? In other words, if you read this stuff it will hold together. You know G.K. Chesterton who was a famous theologian from years ago.

He once compared our and get this okay he once compared our minds to our mouths. And he said when it comes to our minds they need to operate like our mouths. Right?

[15 : 34] We should think how we eat. Think about your mouth. He said the very reason that you open it is that you would close down on something solid.

And if something solid would enter your system and make a difference. The very reason you open it is to bite down on something solid. And he said it's exactly the same for your minds. Why do you open them?

You open them that you could bite down and base your life on something solid. And Luke's saying remember this historian come doctor who investigated these things right at the beginning of Luke chapter 1 that you may have certainty.

He's saying here's something solid. Here's something true in which you can build your lives. Let me ask you have you read it? Have you read the Bible? Have you investigated Jesus for yourself?

There is no greater pursuit that you could have in your life. Let me just plug two books which are really helpful for this and these are freebies. We've got a few of them in the back if you want one.

First one is called Are You 100% Sure You Want to Be an Agnostic?

[16 : 37] And it's a brilliant book read as a staff team a couple of weeks ago. Thinking about what is it you're basing your life and your trust upon. Come and grab it. I'll just put it on the stage afterwards so you can get it.

Another one is just called The Gospel. What is this message about Jesus? Who is he? Just a wonderful and succinct job of summarising it. But if you want to investigate Jesus these are great books but go to the sources.

It's what you do in a court of law isn't it? It's not hearsay it's sources. Did it actually happen?

Because this is what Luke is saying in this passage. He's saying if you get stuck in you'll find that this stacks up.

You get stuck in you will find that this stacks up. You see the Bereans they examined it. Does it stack up? Does it hold? And here's the million dollar question they asked themselves.

Verse 11 at the end. Is what he is saying and are the claims that he is making you see the words?

[17 : 42] Are they true? That's the question. Is it true? Is it true? Do you know who I feel sorry for?

I feel sorry for stand-up comedians. Do you know why? Because I don't envy the task of the pressure of having to come up with new material all the time.

constantly asking yourself have they heard that one before? Do you think they're going to laugh at that? Oh they won't. Oh they have. I better come up with something new then.

That pressure as a stand-up comedian to come up with new material. I just say not so with a Christian preacher. Right? You have to be committed to unoriginality.

It's all in the scriptures. You know every week when I'm preparing for the sermon I just take that line from the game show Catch Freaks and I make it my own. Remember that motto?

[18 : 45] Do you remember that line? What is it? Just say what you see. Say what you see. That's the question you need to ask in the years and the centuries that go on from this church family.

Is what the person up here is saying true? Is it right here? It's exactly what Justin prayed. I didn't even tell him to pray that. He prayed it. It's great. Is what they are saying true?

And if it's not question it. If it's not tell them it's not. Is what they are saying true? Is what they are saying what God is saying in his words?

Got to be committed to unoriginality. First thing about Christianity you investigate it you will find it compelling Luke is saying and the second thing and this will be a lot shorter don't worry you associate with it and you'll find that it's costly.

Verse 5 the jealous Jews you see how they gather a mob back in with their mob here bad characters from the marketplace I take it just local hooligans who love nothing other than a bit of bother and they riot and they riot and what's interesting here in the text is that Luke wants us to know about one man in particular do you see?

[20:00] do you see how his name comes up four times in these little verses here who is he? do you see him? Jason Jason Jason Jason Jason and I take it that's just an eyewitness detail that these things actually happened I take it it's another eyewitness detail to say if you wanted to go and find out that this happened Jason just lives over there he's here people knew him you can ask I love how the Bible holds up gives you people's names these things happened Jason's probably one of the locals who've just responded to Paul's message about Jesus and presumably he's the one who's housing Paul in silence during their trip to Thessalonica and just in the context of Acts do you see how he's playing the same role that Lydia's played back in Philippi I love it again a diversity of people who are involved in gospel work Luke's showing us the beautiful diversity of what Jesus is doing and see what happens to Jason they target Jason they run to his house look for Paul and Silas they can't find them but Jason will do and they drag them before the city officials you've got to notice all these verbs he's shouted at he's accused why because he is associating himself with Jesus you know see often these people that just have the t-shirts that say

I'm with him I'm with her and there's a big arrow that's it isn't it Jason is associating with Paul and Silas who are associating with Jesus and then these Jews they travel all the way to Berea which if you do the maths is not a short journey I think that's the equivalent I think if I'm right off the top of my head they're going to Glasgow to Edinburgh walk they really hate this message and track the chain of suffering Jason's suffering because before him Paul suffered and before Paul suffered Stephen suffered and before Stephen suffered Jesus suffered I take it this is the cross shaped life for all those who would associate themselves with this king and who would claim that phrase as their own Jesus is king can I just say if you're going through a really hard time just now because of that at university you're standing for a Christian sexual ethic you're in work where there's pressure on you to conform to say that there are many ways to God all these different ways that pressure can come on us that we feel the pain of suffering associating ourselves with Jesus can I just say be encouraged that your king went that way first

I take it this is the path for all those who would claim Jesus as their king but look at the nature of what they're saying about Paul and Silas verse 6 and I love this I want you to love it as well these men what have they done they've caused trouble everywhere but if you got an ESV here's what it says they've turned the world upside down love that do you not love that non-believers were saying about this Jesus revolution about Christianity way back in the day they've turned the world upside down maybe for Jesus and a bunch of unimpressive looking followers turned the world upside down love it the disruptive witness of Christianity is it's sending shockwaves through culture is it's challenging societal norms as lives are being transformed by the grace of Jesus as people are oozing radical love and obedience the rest of the culture like dead fish going down the stream and all of a sudden these alive salmon start swimming up the stream so it's going on in the words of 19th century author H.G.

Wells I'm a historian not a believer but I must confess that the penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very centre of history it's turning the world upside down because it's turning people's lives upside down right I love that in this one you make no mistake that to be a Christian is not just to sign up to attend something right it's not what Jason is doing he's given his life to Jesus and automatically he's committing his life to serve I love this and you start seeing the connections I've said I love this a lot you start seeing the connections all the way through scripture Jason is the person that's mentioned at the end of Romans 16 that Paul gives a list of people what that means is Jason is listed there as one of Paul's co-workers in other words Jason who was doing I imagine not a lot with his life before this happened all of a sudden what does he do his life is transformed he starts suffering but the joy that has come because of who Jesus is and his life is transformed and he joins Paul in his work he's probably a wealthy man that's what they reckon about this guy Jason because many understand it to be him who pays the bail money at the end you see that to calm things down in the midst of this riot he started using the things that God has given him his money his house his whole life in the service of this Jesus God turns lives upside down grace transforms and God gives people new purposes to live for when they come to know this Jesus doesn't mean you do a different job doesn't mean you travel to a different

part of the world but it means what we do now in our day to day lives there's a new purpose because whatever we're doing in word and deed we're serving the Lord Jesus as we begin to wind this to a close here's what I want you to appreciate that this was no verse 15 Paul heads to Athens this was no hit and run evangelistic mission

[26 : 07] Paul loves these people and he sends Timothy back to see how they're doing he gets to Corinth and he sends Timothy back would you go and see how they're getting on my heart is broken for them but I only got to spend three or so weeks with them I want to know how they're doing are they still going with the Lord how are they getting on and he writes in Corinth these letters in our Bibles known as 1st and 2nd Thessalonians again you just see how the Bible is fitting together here wonderful thing for you to do in your own time this week is read 1st Thessalonians in light of this a lot of it will begin to make sense two themes dominate those letters really quickly endurance okay Paul is pleading with them now that he's heard that they're doing well keep on going keep on doing what you're doing that they'd be even more convinced of the truth that they keep on going despite the intense pressures that are coming on them keep on going Christ is going to hold you he's got you he will see you home keep trusting him endurance and another example and I love this and you can see this in the opening verses of chapter 1 because they're keeping on going despite persecution and suffering and daring to speak for Jesus in their city just as Paul did

God is using that and word about that is getting around to the neighboring regions I love it and Paul says that that example and other people who are being encouraged by your example is ringing out like the noise of a gong all the way through the regions of Macedonia and Achaia people that they've never met people that they never will meet remember you don't just travel around in this day like we do people Christians all over the world who they will never meet and yet I've heard about these Christians and how they're standing and keeping going for Jesus and Paul is saying do you know how amazing it is that God is using this all over the world because of your example is that not encouraging?

that's not encouraging you'd find that if you're a believer in Thessalonica up against it my life's nothing special what am I doing? again friends let's just never underestimate what God can do through a simple act of obedience and faithfulness to him these believers are joining Paul in what he's doing God is using this in ways way bigger than they could ever imagine so Jesus Christ deceiver deluded God is seeing the invitation here to do what Paul is doing to do what the believers are doing to come and dare to say divine and just as we close I want to tell you about a guy called Campbell McLennan his nickname is Kumba thing about Kumba I've never met him I don't know if I ever will meet him in my life but here's the thing I feel like I know him and the reason I do is because my good friend Doogie keeps on telling me about him every time I see him used to play football with Doogie at university

Doogie would always tell me about Kumba okay Doogie wasn't a Christian at the time he played in the same football team at Kumba at university before I played with him and they're out one Saturday night in Glasgow and Doogie turns to Kumba and says I hear you go to church I hear you go to church you do that weird thing what's that all about?

maybe I can come along and see what it's about and Kumba says no no no Doogie you don't understand Christianity it's not just simply about attending church Christianity is about a relationship with Jesus knowing who he is and what he's done but at that point of the conversation the two of them are talking away at that point of the conversation somebody comes along and the conversation moves on and the moment's gone but that Saturday night the Wednesday night comes the next week and the boys you do it football you're going to run the laps around the pitches and at certain points you stop and you warm up together okay just do your stretches so they're doing that and they're all warming up together and Kumba says to Doogie do you remember how the other night I told you about how being a Christian wasn't just about attending church but I was about a relationship with Jesus and Doogie goes yeah I remember that in front of all the boys Kumba says but I never got to tell you why so Kumba starts in front of everyone just starts telling Doogie about Jesus it's great it's a conversation between two people with everyone else listening and Doogie's blown away by his bravery why would he do that in front of all those guys but Doogie's blown away he's intrigued and he joins Kumba an alpha course and in Doogie's words and he left me a whatsapp message this week

[30 : 51] I came to see in that course that the bible is true and he becomes a Christian and he traces it all the way back to Kumba and his faithfulness just to tell him about Jesus and so this guy

who I've never met I don't even know where he lives I don't even know what he does now but all I know is that his witness for Jesus hugely encouraged me and I hope it encourages you as well fast forward 20 or so years and Doogie's now the pastor up in Aberdeen and what's he doing he's working to tell others about Jesus and here's what it says in his Twitter bio you know what that is who I am how I got here what I do here's what he said someone once had the courage to tell me the truth about Jesus and it changed everything so there's the challenge for us today as we look at this example of what this early church what Luke is writing here in our lives think about what's happening tomorrow for you think about what's happening this week in our everyday lives with our everyday words will we dare to call them divine let's pray and so Father we just thank you so much for your word this morning and I pray Father for us some of us here today who are perhaps doubting the sufficiency of your words oh Lord thank you for what Paul writes in the letter of 1 Thessalonians about how these Thessalonians received it about how it came with a depth of conviction through your Holy Spirit

Father I pray that each of us Lord that you would help us to ground our lives on your word we thank you for what we've seen this morning that you are the good God of the gospel who can transform any and every life and maybe even for the first time for some of us today we would respond to the message of this Jesus and come to have life in his name by believing in his word Father we just praise you that you are the God of all grace and Father we pray that as your word continues to do its work in our lives that your spirit would come and plant it deep in us why? so that we would continue to grow as your people Father thank you for your love for us and we pray these things in Jesus' beautiful name Amen Amen