

Certainty

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Date: 10 July 2022

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[0 : 00] Thanks so much, guys. That's great. Let me pray before we dive into that passage together. Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope. My comfort in suffering is this.

Your promise preserves my life. Lord, I pray that this morning by your Holy Spirit, as we spend time in your word, you would give us hope. That we would find comfort in our suffering and that we would rely on and enjoy the promises that you make to us.

In Jesus' name. Amen. You always loved to visit Tudor Manor. Dr. Black was a fabulous host and he invited the most interesting guests.

Professor Plum and Miss Scarlet and Colonel Mustard, the whole gang. But this weekend, well, you just don't know who you can trust anymore because your host, Dr. Black, has been murdered and no one knows who done it.

Maybe that's a familiar story. It's Cluedo, right? The famous board game, the detective story turned into a game. I love detective stories. The Sherlock Holmes stories, I think, in particular, are especially good.

[1 : 19] I just love the way, as you watch or you read and the events unfold, you're constantly guessing and trying to work out who the murderer is. Who done it? You're using all your skills of observation to try and see what Sherlock sees.

But here's the thing. You can guess all you like. It's what makes it so gripping. We want certainty. But with those detective stories, you never can be sure.

But certainty is important to us, isn't it, I think, in life. For something to be rational and to make sense, to be true and reasonable, to know that one plus one equals two.

Maybe the mathematicians here are going to take me aside for that one later. But this is much more profound than that, I think. Because we also want to know, don't we, is there any certainty in the Christian gospel?

A certain hope that once we die, we might really live. That's the promise of Christianity. Is it true and reasonable to believe it?

[2 : 27] We're in this series in Acts. It's the second part of a two-part volume written by Luke, the doctor historian. And this is why he wrote.

In the first chapter of that first volume, he says this. I, too, decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke is writing to his mate Theophilus so that he might know, so that we might know, the certainty of these things, that is, the hope of life after death through Jesus.

And we've been in this second volume, Acts, and we keep coming back to that verse in chapter one. It's verse eight. You're probably bored of hearing it by now. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

And we've seen that happen as we've been in this book together, as the apostles receive the Holy Spirit and that message, it begins to go viral. And then with Paul, when Paul meets Jesus, it begins to make this move towards the ends of the earth.

[3 : 38] Paul, he takes the gospel to the Greek-speaking world. But that's not quite the ends of the earth, that, is it? What he really needed to do was get to Rome, because Rome is the hub of power in the ancient world.

Get to Rome, share the gospel there, and it really will go global. In fact, that's exactly what Jesus told Paul to do. Just a couple of chapters before the one we're in this morning, if you remember it,

the risen Jesus, he appeared to Paul, and he said to him, Take courage.

As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome. Except if you've been here the last couple of weeks, it doesn't look so good, does it?

Because where we join the story, as we said just before the reading, Paul, he's in prison. He's being passed from one official to another. He's always on trial. This plan to get to Rome, it looks like it's in tatters.

Last week, we saw Paul being accused by the Jews before this governor Felix, the Roman governor Felix. And now, this is two years later, Felix has retired, and this is where we join the story. [4 : 46] Felix is succeeded by this guy Festus, read for us by Beth. And Festus seeks the help of King Agrippa, read for us by Matthew. The help of King Agrippa in Paul's case.

And I hope as we see Paul before this king, we're going to see four ways that this gospel message brings certainty. Firstly, because it is power without pomp.

Because it has hope at its heart. Because that is a hope for all to hear. And because it relies on a response. We'll just walk through it together like that. So first, power without pomp.

Let's dive in at verse 13 with this king. King Agrippa, he's ethnically Jewish. He's reigning as the local king, but under Roman rule, as we said. And he visits Festus, the Roman governor.

And Festus tells Agrippa all about the argument between the Jews and Paul. But see in verses 18 and 19, read those with me. They, that is the Jews, did not charge him, Paul, with any of the crimes I had expected.

[5 : 47] Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus, whom Paul claimed was alive. Well, see, this is what it really all hangs on for Luke.

This was Paul's defense. Jesus died. Jesus is alive. And the king is interested. See what he says in verse 22?

I would like to hear this man myself. And so Paul is to defend himself again now before the king.

And I just want you to picture the courtroom as it's described in these verses.

As Agrippa and Bernice, they enter with great pomp in verse 23. They'd have been adorned in the deep purple of royalty, their cloaks trailing behind them, followed by a great procession of high-ranking military officials.

Picture them all in their ceremonial dress and all the prominent men of the city. And then there's Festus, no doubt out-pumping them all in the red regalia of the Roman official.

[6 : 50] If you're struggling to picture that, I guess it's something similar to what we might see today. Right at a royal wedding or the jubilee or whatever, as the queen is there in her royal robes, followed by all the big-wig military guys and all the politicians in tow.

This is the pomp. And then comes Paul. In verse 24, Festus said, King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man? Can you guys picture Paul?

Do you see this man? By all accounts, he was an unimpressive man. He was short and balding and bandy-legged. But even beyond that, he's been in prison for two years.

Picture what he must have looked like. Unshaven, unwashed, maybe a bit like me, but wrists and ankles in chains. Right?

He couldn't be in more contrast with the pomp that is around him. But remember what Paul's message was. Why is he there in the first place? It's all because Jesus died and rose again.

[7 : 53] It's because he follows a risen savior who is all about power without pomp. In some ways, I don't think that should surprise us. We kind of love that story, don't we?

And what is it about Sherlock Holmes that we find so fascinating about him as a character? I mean, yeah, he's a genius. He has a powerful mind. But in some ways, I think it's the surprise of that because he's also addicted to opium.

He's a scruffy dresser. He's massively antisocial. I think something about us is attracted to that sort of power without the pomp. And Jesus, well, he's the God of this universe.

He is infinitely powerful. He is the word by which the world was created. He is the word by which you were created. I was created. And yes, his courtroom in heaven is infinitely more glorious than anything the Roman Empire could have conjured.

And yet he became flesh, not as a worldly king, but as an ordinary child. Born in the outhouse of an inn, placed in a manger.

[8 : 59] He was from a backwater town. And he conquered evil, not with the sword, but by dying on a cross. And then when he rose again, he didn't appear with trumpets and an army, but to ordinary men and women, his friends.

You see, this Jesus is all about power without pomp. And I just find that so reassuring today, because no matter how hard we try to dress it up, to increase the production value and demand excellence in everything we do at church, to carry influence in the world, to have the appearance of power, worldly power, to look good to those outside the room.

Maybe even if we want to see regular miraculous power here. Well, how discouraging it is when that's what we've been looking for. Because we're not going to find it here.

The truth is, what we're doing here is pretty unimpressive. Christ's church doesn't look like much, and it's not supposed to. Because we follow a savior who demonstrated his power by dying on a cross.

It's power in weakness. It's power without the pomp. And that is so encouraging, because it means we don't need this thing to look powerful in order to have certainty about it.

[10 : 17] Instead, we see this is how God works through weakness. Ordinary men and women like you and like me. Just notice, and I'm going to break all the rules and jump right to the end of our passage.

In verse 32 of chapter 26. Agrippa said to Festus, This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.

You see, Paul always wanted to go to Rome. Jesus had told him that that was where he was going, to the center of power in order for the gospel to go global. And yet this is how he got there.

Bound in chains. A prisoner of the empire simply appealing to Caesar. You see, even when things seem to be going totally pear-shaped for the spread of the gospel, even when it looks as though Paul's mission to get to Rome is totally failing, God is powerfully at work.

And there's a wonderful comfort for us in that too, isn't there? I know that I am most prone to doubts, to questioning the certainty of the gospel when life isn't going to plan. I guess that's pretty normal.

[11 : 26] It's often trivial. I'm really just annoyed at God for not letting my plans come to fruition. But it can look more serious than that. It was for Paul. Think if I was thrown into prison for proclaiming the resurrection, if that was where I found myself, I'd definitely be facing doubts about the certainty of the gospel, wouldn't you?

And yet it's through Paul's chains that God is at work. It's when Paul's plans to go to Rome seem most unlikely that God is going to get in there and that the gospel is going to go viral.

And so in that moment, when we are most tempted to doubt the certainty of the gospel, we need to know this is how God is at work, through weakness, through power without pomp.

The gospel message also brings certainty with hope at its heart. This is our second heading, hope at its heart. We're into chapter 26.

Paul is given the opportunity to defend himself and he's grateful to be before Agrippa. See in verse 2 of chapter 26, he counts himself fortunate. Why?

[12 : 37] Well, in verse 3, it's because Agrippa is well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. So Paul, he's appealing to Agrippa's Jewish heritage.

And so he says in verses 4 to 6, basically what he's saying in those verses, I am a Jew and I've always lived as a faithful Jew. More than that, as the strictest sort of Jew, a Pharisee.

What Paul's doing there, he's establishing his credentials because he knows that Agrippa respects the Jews. And so he's saying it so that what he says next has a foundation.

See what he says next in verse 6? This is key. It is because of my hope in God, in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today.

He sort of repeats that in verse 7. It's the promise that the 12 tribes, just Israel, are hoping to be fulfilled. It is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me.

[13 : 37] What is this hope? Well, it's the hope that God would do something to defeat evil so that his people might live with him forever. It's the hope of eternal life.

But this hope is fulfilled in a surprising way, as we've seen, not by some great battle, but through death and resurrection. See here again, the resurrection of Jesus remains at the heart of Paul's defense.

Have a look at verse 8. It's a brilliant question. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? It's a really good question, that, isn't it? I mean, the resurrection is impossible. For many, I think this is the stumbling block to Christian certainty. Jesus seems like a good guy. His sacrificial death is inspiring. But resurrection is impossible.

And so it can't be true. But according to Luke, the resurrection is key to the certainty that he wants to give. You know, there really is, there's great evidence that Jesus didn't just stay dead.

[14:41] But before you accept that, you have to acknowledge this, don't you? If God exists, and if he is the loving creator of the world, if he has that sort of power, well, then of course he has the power to raise the dead.

Why should any of you consider that incredible? Maybe you're here this morning and you're interested in Christianity. Maybe you don't know loads about it. Or you've been around for a while, but you struggle with doubts about this, about the truth of it all.

If that's you, can I encourage you to just keep coming back to this? Because this is a question that's really worth pushing at. Did Jesus really come back from the dead?

Really, just personally for me, it's this question that convinced me of the truth of this faith of Christianity. Maybe it could do that for you too. Keep pushing at it.

In our text, Paul, he goes on to tell his own story. In verses 9 to 11, he tells Agrippa just how opposed he was to Jesus. In verse 11, he was obsessed.

[15:47] He literally hunted Christians. It's just worth noticing. See that Paul isn't scared to tell this uncomfortable bit of his story. He's not scared to tell Agrippa about what he was like before he met Jesus.

I've just finished reading a brilliant book about a man called Brownlow North. North was an aristocrat in the 18th century and he lived just however he pleased. He was infamous for his ability to drink and smoke and gamble the night away.

And then he met Jesus and he became one of the most well-renowned preachers in Scotland in his day. And one Sunday, he was due to preach to a large congregation when he received a letter from an old drinking partner.

And the letter accused him of deep hypocrisy. It outlined some of his grievous sins that he had committed in the past. And it threatened to literally stand up in that worship service and reveal to tell the truth about who Brownlow North was if he dared to preach.

And so when North did get up to preach, the first thing he did, he opened that letter and he read it in front of the church, admitting all of his past sin and then going on to explain how meeting Jesus had totally transformed his life.

[17:06] Friends, we must not be scared to admit what we once were. And whether you have a dramatic story like that or not, if you're here today and you have encountered the risen Jesus, and we simply do that as we spend time in his word and as the Holy Spirit works in our hearts, if you know Jesus, you have a wonderful story to tell.

Why? Well, because the world that we live in is without hope. We live in a hopeless world. We all live in the valley of the shadow of death.

But if you know Jesus, you know the man who faced that death and yet came through the other side. And so now you have a certain hope that you might do the same.

You've moved from hopeless to hopeful. And there is no greater story than this. Because it has hope at its heart. Right?

We see that the gospel message, it brings certainty because it is power without pomp. Because it has hope at its heart. And that hope is hope for all to hear.

[18:16] Our third heading this evening, this morning, sorry, hope for all to hear. As Paul encounters the risen Jesus, he's given a job to do. He's given a purpose.

See in verse 16, as Jesus speaks to Paul, I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and a witness of what you have seen and will see of me.

The purpose of encountering the risen Jesus is that Paul might become a servant. That his life might be transformed from persecuting Jesus to serving him in worship.

And more than that, to being a witness, to sharing this encounter that he's had with Jesus. Paul's is a life transformed into worship and into witness.

And exactly the same is true of us today. If you have encountered the risen Jesus for us, it is so that our lives might be transformed too. Into a life of serving him in worship.

[19 : 16] Guys, Jesus's purpose for the Christian is so much more than turning up or tuning in on a Sunday. But to get stuck in at church, get yourself on a rotor, help with the teas and coffees or with the youth ministry, join a small group, volunteer at food bank.

As we serve one another, as we serve our community, we serve and we worship Jesus. And not only that, because Jesus also has a purpose for us to witness to a watching world, to actively seek to share the good news of Jesus with the people around us, to tell his story from hopeless to hopeful.

It's the purpose of every Christian to worship and to witness. But Paul is also given a very specific purpose. See in verse 17 and 18, he is sent to the Gentiles.

That's just non-Jews. To open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light. This is huge, guys. Without this commission, you and I would never have had the opportunity to hear about Jesus.

This is such a key piece to our story. See in verse 20, Paul is fulfilling Acts chapter 1 verse 8. He shared it in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

[20 : 33] He goes to the Gentiles because this message, it's hope for all to hear. In verse 22, that looks like the small and the great alike.

We've seen that again, haven't we? As we've gone through this series, the gospel shared with all sorts of people. An Ethiopian eunuch, humble tent makers, Athenian philosophers, Judean kings. It's hope for all to hear. It's hope for me. It's hope for you. And so I guess of most importance this morning, do not write yourself off from this hope.

If you're here today and you think you couldn't possibly be a Christian, that the stain of your past is too deep, for whatever reason, you need to know, it doesn't matter who you are.

It doesn't matter where you come from. It doesn't matter how you feel about yourself. It doesn't matter what you've done. There is hope for you in Jesus. Jesus is more than sufficient for you.

[21 : 32] Would you take your eyes off yourself and what the world says about you and your sins and fix your eyes on Jesus and his mercy? For he will not disappoint. I just love that song.

Our sins, they are many. His mercy is more. And if you're here and you've written someone else off. I've said this before, but it's so important.

If you've decided that for whatever reason, someone you're trying to share the gospel with, or someone you're friends with, or someone you know could never be a Christian, you need to know that Jesus is more than sufficient for them.

And who are you to give up on them? Would we continue to share the gospel with the most unlikely people? And would we get on our knees and pray?

This is hope for all to hear. The gospel message, it brings certainty because it is power without pomp, with hope at its heart. And that is a hope for all to hear.

[22 : 33] As we come into land and we think about what to do with this message, we need to see that it relies on a response from all of us. You see, this is hope for all to hear, but it is not counted as hope by all who hear it.

Because not everyone will respond by submitting to Jesus and accepting the free gift of eternal life. There will be those who scoff at the gospel message.

And there will be those who simply sidestep it. Those are the responses we see in the passage.

See in verse 24 of chapter 26, as Festus shouts at Paul, You are out of your mind, Paul.

Your great learning is driving you insane. You're mad, Festus scoffs. Maybe you're here this morning, and if you're honest, this is really your heart response.

I suspect you're probably a bit too polite to actually laugh at us. But you can't help but think it's all a bit ridiculous. If that's you, consider how Paul replies in verse 25.

[23 : 40] I'm not insane. What I'm saying is true and reasonable. See, Paul has certainty about what he has seen. It's true. He says, I've seen it with my own eyes, but it's also reasonable.

C.S. Lewis said it like this. I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else.

Not only because he's seen it, but because it's reasonable. It makes sense of the world that we live in. But Festus scoffs. What does Agrippa do?

Well, Agrippa sidesteps. See, in verse 28, Agrippa says to Paul, Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian? See, that's not really a response at all, is it?

He's heard the message. He has everything he needs to respond. And he's decided to delay. To sidestep the issue. Which is crazy.

[24 : 46] It's like, imagine playing Cluedo. If you know how the game works, if you don't, forgive this analogy. But you've collected all the evidence that you need. You know that it was Colonel Mustard in the library with a candlestick.

But you think, I'll just keep playing the game for a bit. I'm having a good time. I don't need to do anything with this knowledge yet. Doing that, if you understand Cluedo, would just make no sense. You have everything you need. Why delay? And Paul's response to Agrippa in verse 29. Short time or long. I pray to God that not only you, but all who are listening today may become what I am. They have everything they need, these guys. They've heard the message. And yet, Fester scoffs and Agrippa sidesteps. But the response that the gospel message relies on is to submit.

As we've seen, it's submitting to live a life of worshipping Jesus and witnessing to what you've seen of him. When I was at university, I lived something of a double life, if I'm honest.

[25 : 52] I'd grown up in a Christian home. And so when I got to university, I felt a natural sort of attraction to church. And I went along most Sundays. I don't know what brought you here this week, but I was there every week.

And I think I believed what was being taught. But I was also living like all the other students around me. Heavily involved in the rugby club. No different to any of the other guys there, really. It's not that I scoffed at the gospel. But I definitely wasn't living in submission to Jesus. Mine was not a life of worship and witness. Because I'd done the sidestep.

And then one day, this Christian guy, he sat me down. He's now a very good friend of mine. And he really challenged me. He said, do you really believe this message? Because if it's true, it relies on a response.

What are you going to do with it? And so I decided that in that moment, what I really needed to do was commit to working out whether I really believed it was true. And, you know, the more questions that I asked of the Christian faith, and this remains true today, the more answers I found.

[26 : 58] The more I push the power without pomp, hope at its heart, hope for all to hear. The deeper I swim in the waters of the gospel, the more true and reasonable it seems.

And so can I urge you this morning as we finish. Wherever you're at in response to this message, if you've been a Christian for 50 years or for five, or if you're just thinking about these things for the first time, don't stop pushing at this.

Don't just laugh it off. Don't sidestep the issue. But seek answers to your questions. Because I really believe that this message is true, and it's reasonable, and it makes sense of the world that we live in.

And the best thing that you can do with your life is to submit it to Jesus. Allow him to take your life and shape it into one of worship and of witness.

Because this is the only place that you're going to find a certain hope. The truth is, however true and reasonable this message is, though, you and I, we're humans and we're weak, and we desperately need the spirit of Jesus to help us to respond to this message rightly.

[28 : 11] And we're about to sing this wonderful song. Would we make it our prayer together? It goes like this. When I fear my faith will fail, Christ will hold me fast.

When the tempter would prevail, he will hold me fast. And so just before we sing and as the band come up, let me pray. Shall we pray together?

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for Jesus, for his death, for his resurrection, for the promise of hope, of life after death.

But Lord, we confess we are prone to doubt as we struggle through life. Prone to forget the true and reasonable gospel.

And so would you, by your Holy Spirit, be present to us this morning and make your gospel known to our hearts, that we might worship you and witness of what we've seen.

[29 : 26] In Jesus' name, amen.