

Defending Your Faith and God's Way

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[0 : 00] Well folks, as we turn to that passage, please do have it open in front of you. We'll be dipping in and out of it, so it'll be great if you have it open in front of you in the pew Bibles, if that's convenient for you.

Let us pray before we think about this passage together. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, when we come to a passage like this, we have questions. We have maybe doubts of what it could teach us.

Father, I pray that you would help me to preach faithfully. Father, would you bless the meditations of our hearts and the words of my mouth.

Would it all be pleasing to you, our wonderful rock and our redeemer. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Now, have you ever read a story, watched a movie or seen an episode series and it doesn't quite pan out like you think it would.

There's that moment where you're following along, everything is happy and fine, the story makes sense, but then something happens and it throws it. It throws you completely off.

[1 : 12] You're left shocked, unsure of what will happen next. You are confused and you have questions. That's similar to where I think we find Paul this morning.

He's been one of the most well-known people in the New Testament who went from town to town, telling people about Jesus, planting churches, encouraging Christians.

But then last week in Acts chapter 21, we saw that he was told he would be bound in Jerusalem and handed over to the Gentiles. That is not what you would expect of this great apostle.

What good can come from this, we might be asking. Now, maybe you found yourself in that situation as well. Questioning why God has placed you where you are.

Why God has placed you around the people that you are around. It all seems hard and you have no idea what good could come from any of this. Well, two things we can learn from Paul this morning as he found himself in a similar situation.

[2 : 19] Always be ready to give a reason for your faith in Jesus and remember that God's ways are not your ways. Now, we'll cover that passage that Alistair read to us under two headings that summarise the teaching points of these verses.

But also that help us think about how to apply this passage to our lives. Let me give you a quick overview of what happened in the passage. So a group of Jews were angry with Paul and they gather a mob.

They create absolute chaos with false accusations and they try to kill him until the Roman authorities step in. Then Paul asks to speak to the crowd who just tried to kill him.

And he tells the story of his own life and what God has done. He then stands before the religious high court and another chaotic scene breaks out.

There's another plot to kill Paul, but it is all discovered by the Romans who, as we'll see next week, take steps to keep him safe. Now, what can we learn from this historical retelling of one man's story intertwined with courtrooms, with chaos and with religious customs?

[3 : 33] Well, we can learn that we always need to be ready to give a defence for our faith and that God's ways are not our ways. So let's look at this passage together with those two things in mind.

The first thing we see in this passage is that Christians should always be ready to give a defence of their faith. Always be ready to give a defence. Now, last week we looked at the beginning of Acts chapter 21 and saw that Paul was told he would be bound in Jerusalem and handed over to the Gentiles.

And people begged him not to go to Jerusalem. But Paul says in Acts chapter 20 verse 22 that he is compelled by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem.

And the prophecy from last week happens in verse 27. Read it with me. When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple.

They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him. Now, these are probably Jews from Ephesus because of verse 29 where it tells us that they recognised one of Paul's travel companions and assumed that Paul had taken a non-Jewish friend into the temple.

[4 : 48] Look at their accusations in verse 28. They say, Fellow Israelites, help us. This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place, meaning the temple.

And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place. See, these men are accusing Paul of things they haven't actually even seen themselves.

But they've assumed. They are hostile and lying in order to get the result they want. They want Paul dead. Now, this is a pattern we've already seen in Acts before, isn't it?

Paul is accused of teaching against the Jews, against Jewish law and against the temple. But this time they create a mob. And verse 30 says that the whole city was aroused and people were running from every direction to join in.

The Romans arrive and they bind Paul with chains and try to figure out what all the commotion is about. But look at verse 34. The crowd is confused.

[5 : 56] One shouting one thing, one another. They have no idea what they're even there for. This has all come about through hostility and lies.

Now, what would you do in a situation where people have already started beating you to death? I think you'd see the police coming and you would welcome the rescue, wouldn't you?

You'd go into custody. You would try to get as far away from the mob as humanly possible. It is our natural instinct to run from danger, to preserve our lives, to keep on fighting for another day.

What does Paul do? At the end of verse 39, Paul says, please let me speak to the people. Paul responds to the hostility and lies of the crowd with honesty and loyalty.

Look at chapter 22, verse 1. Paul says, brothers and fathers, listen to my defense. Paul begins like this to highlight their shared heritage and also his respect for the Jews.

[7 : 06] He doesn't go in all guns blazing. He isn't wanting payback. He isn't out to launch an attack on them. He simply wants to be honest about who he is and how his life has been changed.

So Paul tells his story. He tells them what happened to make him so different from the Paul they maybe remember from a few years back. The Paul who went around persecuting Christians, who spent time going from town to town hunting Christians and throwing them in prison.

Now we've already heard Paul's story before in Acts 9, haven't we? And we'll hear it again in Acts 26. But maybe as Alistair read it to us, you thought that it sounded a little bit different.

That there were additional details or phrases used that we haven't seen before. Now why is that? It's because Paul is intentionally using words and concepts that would be easy for Jews to understand so that he can witness to them.

He's highlighting that he is one of them, that they have the same background, but he's also highlighting his Jewish pedigree. He's showing them his religious CV, which for a Jew was very important.

[8 : 22] And so in verse 3, Paul says, I am a Jew born of Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, meaning Jerusalem. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors.

I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. He then says how he persecuted Christians and even brings in the high priest and the whole council in verse 5 as his witnesses to the man he used to be.

But something changes, doesn't it, in verse 6. Paul says on traveling to Damascus, about noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me.

And Jesus spoke to Paul from this bright light and asked, why are you persecuting me? Now again, notice how close Jesus is with his people.

Jesus doesn't say, why are you persecuting my people? Jesus says, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And for a Jewish audience, that bright light from heaven in verse 6 would make them think of nothing else other than God's presence, because God's presence was revealed to them in the Old Testament by a bright light.

[9 : 42] So Paul has been blinded by this light and is told by Jesus to go to Damascus where he'll meet Ananias, who Paul describes in verse 12 as a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there.

See, the accusations against Paul are that he is disregarding and encouraging Jews to disregard the law. He highlights that Ananias was a devout observer of the law.

So with each little phrase, Paul is showing respect and being honest about his life story, highlighting that along the way he has met faithful, devout people who are all doing the will of God.

And then in verse 14, after Paul has miraculously received his sight, Ananias says, read with me, verse 14, the God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the righteous one and to hear words from his mouth.

Now at this point, every Jew would know that the righteous one is a reference to God's promised Messiah from the Old Testament, the one who would come and save God's people.

[10 : 56] Then in verse 16, Paul is told to call on the name of Jesus, God's Messiah, to be saved through his death and resurrection and to be baptized. Now that is abundantly clear to everyone in this crowd listening to this.

Paul isn't hiding anything. He isn't holding anything back. And so far, they've listened to him until verse 21, where he says, then the Lord said to me, go and I will send you far away to the Gentiles.

Now the crowd hear this and they go wild. They conclude that the only good outcome from this is that Paul needs to die. They work themselves into a frenzy and in verse 23, they start throwing their cloaks and dust into the air.

Expressions of lament, condemnation and anger. But notice through this whole interaction, Paul hasn't once gone on the offensive.

He hasn't attacked those who attacked him, but he has faithfully and honestly relayed the story of his life and how Jesus changed him. Friends, as we go into a world that is increasingly moving away from the Bible, a world that is becoming increasingly antagonistic towards Christianity, a world where it feels like Christians are being sidelined for our faith, attacked maybe on every side, we need to do two things.

[12 : 29] First, we need to remember that Christianity, that the church has been opposed from the very beginning. This is nothing new. And yet, the Lord has continued to grow his kingdom, hasn't he?

What started some 2,000 years ago with a small number of followers is now a number, a group of billions of Christians worldwide. Nothing will stop God's plan for people to hear about Jesus Christ.

No amount of opposition will prevent the kingdom of God from growing and God will never, ever leave his people. The pattern throughout Acts and arguably throughout the whole of church history is that the gospel grows as it is opposed.

See, when we become Christians, we are signing up for a life of being sidelined, a life of difficulty, a life of constant spiritual battle where people will try to silence us, people will try to stop us talking about Jesus, people will question our beliefs and the way we live our lives.

But it is a glorious, glorious life of forgiveness, a glorious life of a relationship with our Creator and a life of eternal significance because we are living and working for God, the one who holds all things together and one day we will be in his presence forever.

[14 : 00] That is the future that awaits every Christian and no amount of opposition should hinder us from living for Jesus. The second thing we need to remember is that like Paul, we should always be ready to give a defense, always be ready to explain to people why we have hope in Jesus, why we live our lives for him and why they should listen to the message of forgiveness and peace with God that is offered through Jesus' death and resurrection.

And the way we do that is important. The manner in which we speak with people about Jesus really matters. The only offensive thing about any Christian sharing the gospel should be the gospel itself.

The gospel will naturally offend people. The Bible makes that clear. But like Paul does here, we need to be honest and respectful to those we share the gospel with and why we trust Jesus.

Now this goes for in-person discussions and online interactions and the way we live our life. How many of you became Christians because someone was trying to win an argument rather than winning the person they were talking to?

How many of you became Christians because someone pointed out your hypocrisy on a Facebook post comment? I'd say probably next to none. The way we speak to people about Jesus really matters.

[15 : 35] The life of a Christian should be one of constant witness to the goodness of Jesus and so we always need to be ready to give a defense. But the second thing we see in this passage is that God's ways are not our ways.

God's ways are not our ways. So this crowd have just absolutely lost it with Paul and the Romans have to step in again and protect him but their means of getting to the truth also wasn't really ideal.

Read verse 24 with me. The commander ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and interrogated in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this.

See the Roman commander wanted to get to the truth of why the crowd was so mad at Paul because at this stage Christians were seen as a subset of Judaism. They had no idea that Judaism and Christianity were different.

That realization would come later on in the Roman Empire. So the commander decides to get to the truth by torture. And they stretch Paul out to be flogged but it all comes to a halt in verse 25 when Paul asks the question is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?

[16 : 57] See Paul knew that it was illegal to beat a Roman citizen without a fair trial and a guilty verdict. And so he uses this to his advantage as he has done before in Acts and so they retreat with their tail between their legs.

Verse 29 says they withdraw immediately and are alarmed. Now this might sound like a minute detail but it gives Paul the opportunity to stand before the high court of the religious leaders in Acts 23.

Look at chapter 22 verse 30. The commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews. So the next day he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the members of the Sanhedrin that's the Jewish high court to assemble.

Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them. Paul stands before this group of men and basically says in chapter 23 verse 1 I'm innocent of the charges you bring against me.

The only thing I have done is exactly what God has called me to do. Now he isn't saying he's a perfect man but he's saying that he has been faithful in carrying out his calling from God and the chief priest hears that and orders the man standing next to Paul to punch him in the face because he doesn't want to hear anything from this perceived blasphemer and Paul responds in verse 3 by saying God will strike you you whitewashed wall you sit there to judge me according to the law yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck.

[18 : 36] Now at this point Paul could be denouncing faithless and corrupt leadership within the religious leaders of Jerusalem but it's more likely that he's just responding out of anger.

I mean he's just been beaten by a mob nearly flogged by the Romans and now he's standing before the very court of religious leaders who are supposed to recognize God's work and he gets punched in the face.

Paul is a human. He gets angry to be honest if that was me I would be raging but then he composes himself and after finding out that it was the high priest he had snapped at he says in verse 5 brothers I did not realize that he was the high priest for it is written do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.

Paul's being smart here. He's using the Old Testament law as part of his apology highlighting as he did with the crowd earlier on in the passage that he has respect for the Jewish leaders and their shared heritage and so Paul gets to speak again and very cunningly because he knows the political feel in the room he says in verse 6 read it with me my brothers I am a Pharisee descended from Pharisees I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead and again this unleashes chaos because the Sadducees other religious leaders who were present didn't believe in the resurrection but this isn't quite like we see in the House of Commons in Westminster so you've probably seen clips of the different parties of the House of Parliament shouting across the benches at each other right laughing and passing what I assume are little jokes about each other's policies and character etc when it all starts to get a bit heated in the in Parliament the speaker says order and it may take a few moments but it goes quiet there is no speaker in this Jewish courtroom they are divided and it gets so heated the Romans have to take

Paul away because it became so violent verse 10 says that they feared he would be torn to pieces now put yourself in Paul's shoes his own countrymen people who he maybe even studied with people who he maybe stood shoulder to shoulder with in debates as they were praying in the temple people who maybe he even looked up to I've just tried to kill him twice can you imagine the betrayal he would feel imagine the pain he'd be in both physically and emotionally but I can also imagine him sitting there thinking I used to be these guys I have been on the other side because Paul went from being the persecutor to the persecuted Paul can speak so well to these people because he used to be in their shoes and many of us will remember a time when we weren't Christians we all know to some extent what it's like not to know the truth about Jesus and it should give that should give us a deep empathy and love for people rather than an attitude of I'm better than you because that's not true it should conjure in us a love for a world that is lost without

[22:13] Jesus Paul must be so hurt at this point but do you see that God is not distant God cares for his people look with me at verse 11 the following night the Lord stood near Paul and said take courage as you have testified about me in Jerusalem so you must also testify in Rome now from a human perspective we might be tempted to look at Paul's time in Jerusalem and think that it was an evangelistic failure we have no record that anyone came to faith the only thing we know is that chaos and confusion ruled and yet Jesus appears to Paul and encourages him whilst this must be hard and maybe confusing for Paul this has been part of God's plan for the spread of the gospel from the very beginning remember back to Acts chapter 1 verse 8 where Jesus said to his followers you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all

Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth all of this going on is part of God's plan that will take the gospel to places of power to people in power and to people who aren't in power why because every single person needs to hear about Jesus now when you're feeling completely out of place questioning why you are where you are questioning maybe even why you're here why has God put you in the place you are at that specific time prayerfully consider that you have opportunities to share the gospel maybe that's why God has placed you where you are Paul is here in the midst of this crowd who want him dead why to share the gospel you may be in a job that has no future prospects you may be looking to move house and it's just not coming about and you are getting frustrated could it be that God has placed you in those social networks to share

Jesus with people think and pray why has God placed you where you are God wants all people to hear about Jesus so maybe that's why you are in that classroom that you really don't like maybe that's why you are in that particular flat with some housemates that you really struggle with maybe that's why you are with work colleagues who just wind you up the wrong way share Jesus with people God's ways are not our ways Jesus words in verse 11 confirms Paul's own understanding of his calling to go to Jerusalem from chapter 19 verse 21 and the word spoken through the high priest in chapter 9 verses 15 to 16 Paul was set aside to take the gospel to the Gentiles and he will suffer for the gospel that happens as another plot is discovered in chapter 23 verses 12 to 22 to kill

Paul and he will eventually end up in Rome God's ways are not our ways we are not promised a bed of roses we're not promised a pain and suffering free life we are promised that a life of humble submission to Jesus and faithfully living for him will lead to a life of suffering and persecution and rejection but it will also lead to people hearing about Jesus and some of them coming to eternal life in him God has a plan God has a mission and nothing no chaotic group of religious leaders no Roman commander no slander from your work colleagues no insults from family or friend members no oppression or persecution will ever stop God's plan from happening we're not all called to do something spectacular we're not all called to go to the far off land and proclaim

Jesus to hostile people but we are all called to go to the people who we live next to to live faithfully and to proclaim Jesus to them we all know those moments that take us by surprise whether it's in stories movies or in real life we're left with questions and we are confused asking ourselves what good could come from any of this that's where Paul found himself in a similar situation this morning and we can learn from how he dealt with it and do the same in our lives too Christians always be ready to give a defense of your faith always be ready to tell people why you have hope in Jesus and always remember that God's ways are not our ways let us pray together heavenly heavenly father with the ups and downs of life we realize it's so easy for us to feel that you have abandoned us we look at our lives we look at our world and we think that you maybe have turned away father we thank you for the truth of your word that you never leave your people lord would you help us to live according to your will help us to have good conversations with people about Jesus help us to willingly and openly share our faith and point people to the hope that we have that eternal hope eternal life that is found through Jesus and his death and resurrection and help us remember that your ways are not our ways but lord doing this by ourselves is impossible we need you by your holy spirit to come and give us strength to give us opportunities and to give us boldness to take them when they arise father help us be faithful as we serve you in Jesus name we pray amen