

Courageous Christianity

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: 14 July 2024

Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 00] Well, you're well aware that today is the final of the Euros, the European Championships, Spain vs England.! I'm not going to ask who you want to win the final, but it is proper football. The Euros is proper football.

In America, they call football American football, and it's not proper football. The ball isn't even round, it's hardly ever kicked, and the players just go overboard with all the padding and the helmets and all the rest of it.

So, I wouldn't say it's a proper sport. It's not real football like we know football. But the terms in American sports, whether American football or basketball or baseball, are actually very good. Because they speak of defense or defense, which obviously is defending against the opposing team, trying to score against you. But I like American sports because they also talk about offense. And offense is to attack the opposition in order to score.

So, why am I talking about football, real football and fake football? Well, what's the point? Well, as we've been tracking Paul throughout the Book of Acts, Paul up to this stage, up to this point, has essentially been on the offense.

[1 : 20] And what we mean is, he has been sharing the message of Jesus, people have been becoming Christians, churches have been planted, and the mission of Jesus has been advancing.

So, he has been on the offense, he has been on the attack, and the gospel of Jesus Christ has been spreading. But, what we see here, the moment Paul arrives in Jerusalem, which is the beginning of Acts chapter 21, as he makes his way into Jerusalem and then on to Rome, he then all of a sudden is on defense.

In other words, he is constantly needing to defend himself, but also to defend the good news of Jesus Christ, the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so, we read that big chunk this afternoon, because Acts 21 to 23 is essentially the Apostle Paul and his stay, his time in Jerusalem.

And then if you continue on from Acts chapter 21 through to 28, what we see is Paul being beaten up, arrested, imprisoned, brought to trial, as he makes this journey from Jerusalem towards Rome. And so, in Acts 21 to 23, we see how he, rather than be on the offense, is on the defense, how he defends himself and the gospel in Jerusalem.

[2 : 45] And yet, despite this, despite the pressure, despite being attacked, despite being put on trial, what we see is that Paul is devoted to Jesus Christ.

And he is prepared to face all of what comes to him because of his devotion to Jesus. And so, being involved in the mission of Jesus requires devotion, but it also involves difficulty.

But also, being part of the mission of Jesus means that we need to defend the gospel amidst the disputes that we will face. And that's clear from Paul's life here in this passage, but it is also the normal pattern of being a Christian.

Our devotion to Jesus will bring us into difficulty, and we will need to defend, not just ourselves, but the good news of Jesus with others. So, what we get here in these chapters is a picture of courageous Christianity.

And so, I'd like us this afternoon to look at two simple points. First of all, devotion brings difficulty. And this is the first part of our reading. And then secondly, defense brings dispute.

[3 : 57] So, first of all, devotion brings difficulty. Chapter 21. So, Paul clearly is devoted to following Jesus. That's why he had to go to Jerusalem and then on to Rome.

And Paul knew it would be difficult. He knew it would be dangerous. And that's why his friends actually don't want him to go. And we see that here. Paul is even warned by a prophet.

And so, basically, everybody is trying to stop Paul from going to Jerusalem. And, of course, they're concerned for his welfare because he's a friend. And yet, Paul is motivated by his devotion to Jesus

Christ and his gospel.

And so, he wants to go. Verse 13. We read, Then Paul answered, Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? Am I ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus?

So, Paul here is going for what is best, not just what is safe. He's going to Jerusalem even if it means he has to die.

[5 : 08] And that's the extent of his devotion to Jesus. And so, let's be clear. If we are to be devoted to Jesus Christ, then we must be ready for difficulty and even danger as we live the Christian life.

Because it can be tempting to go for the safe option rather than the best option. Our natural human instincts are for safety and they are for security and they are for comfort.

And because of that, it means that we can often rationalize our following of Jesus Christ to the extent that we want to avoid anything that might be hard or anything that might be difficult.

And I'm sure we've seen this happen. One of my friends in Manchester, he's involved in church planting and he told me the story of how when he was going to go to Manchester from Liverpool to church plant that his Christian family said to him, I'm not sure that's really a good idea.

And the insinuation was that he would be a bad husband and he would be a bad father if he were to uproot his family from their comfortable life with their comfortable jobs and their nice home in Liverpool to then go to Manchester.

[6 : 33] A situation that was full of uncertainty and there was no guarantee that it would all turn out well. As it happens, it was really difficult and moving from one place to the next.

And he now leads a church, co-leads a church of around 300 people and most of those are new Christians. But even those from his family who loved him and wanted what's best for him were saying, we don't really think you should go and do this.

And that's what's happening with Paul here and his friends. And so we need to know that if we really are to be devoted to Jesus, then it may involve upheaval for our family.

It may mean relocation to a new place, a new home. It might be uncertainty over our future. It might mean challenges with our finances and basically a less comfortable life.

And that's why the temptation can be to stick with what is safe rather than do what is best. And even if others, Christians, give wise advice to us, it might just be risk-averse advice.

[7 : 52] That is safe advice, but not the best advice. And so see what happens here with Paul. Verse 14. Paul essentially entrusts himself to the Lord. When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, the Lord's will be done.

So the other believers came to see that Paul must do what's best, not for himself, his own comfort or his own safety or his own security. But Paul must do best because he's devoted to Jesus for what is the best for the gospel.

And so rather than rationalize and to try and discern things by human wisdom, they say, well, it's God's will. Let's trust him.

And then Paul's devotion to Jesus is seen again in the second half of chapter 21. Because when Paul arrives in Jerusalem, he receives a welcome and then a warning.

Verse 17 to 21. So some are concerned that Paul's telling Jewish believers to ignore the law of Moses. Of course, he wasn't. And so they devised a plan to show how Paul still observed the law.

[9 : 02] So verse 23 and 24 tells us the plan. So do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rights and pay their expenses so they can have their heads shaved.

Then everyone will know that there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. Now, Paul didn't need to do this thing that the people were saying would be a good thing to do.

And yet Paul is willing to do what is best for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ, because that's his priority. And so as we apply this to ourselves, if we are going to be devoted to Jesus, then it will mean we're going to need to be making constant decisions on how best to follow Jesus.

On a daily basis, whether in the big things or in the small things, we're going to have to choose not what is best for me and my comfort and my safety and my security, but what is best for Jesus and his gospel.

And that's what Paul is doing here. So there will be for us some things that we don't need to do, or some things that we don't feel like doing, but we'll go and do them because they're the best thing to do for Jesus and his gospel.

[10:28] And that's why devotion to Jesus often results in difficulty for us, as it did in the past.

As it did for Paul. So just look, verse 27 and 28. When the seven days were nearly over, some of the Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple.

They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, fellow Israelites, help us. This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place.

And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place. So the Jews here, not content that Paul is doing a good thing, stir up trouble for him by saying, this man Paul is against our people, he is against our law, and he is against our temple.

And for Jews, nothing could be more offensive than to speak against God's people, God's law, and God's temple. And so they made it sound like Paul was attacking everything that was important to them.

[11:52] And so Jerusalem is then in this uproar. Verse 30. The whole city was aroused and the people came running from all directions, seizing Paul. They dragged him from the temple and immediately the gates were shut.

While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in uproar. He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd.

When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Did you get that? They tried to beat Paul to death.

And Paul deliberately went to Jerusalem knowing that something like this would happen. And he only makes it out alive because he's arrested. Verse 33 to 36.

The commander comes and arrests him and they take him away. And it's so violent that Paul has to be carried out for his own safety. His life was in danger, not from those who didn't believe in God, but actually from those who did believe in God, the Jews.

[12:56] Because they were so passionate about their religion, could not stand Paul and their perception that he was speaking against it. And so they're ready to lynch God's servant and reject God's message.

They don't want their religion to be disturbed by Jesus, the very one their whole religion pointed to. And that has been the problem with religion ever since, hasn't it?

People can be very religious and yet fail to be devoted to Jesus. And yet Paul's message throughout Acts, the message throughout the whole Bible, is that it is only Jesus Christ who puts us right with God as human beings.

And yet so many people, whether it's the Jews in Acts or whether it's religious people today, believe that we can be acceptable to God because of our religious background perhaps, or because of the good things we've done, or because of the life that we live.

And yet, God doesn't accept us on the basis of anything that we do. But because of what Jesus has done through his death and resurrection.

[14:08] And that's why the gospel of Jesus humbles our pride by telling us that we can't possibly be good enough for God. And yet it affirms our worth by telling us that Jesus died to do what we could never do for ourselves.

And so it's only when we know what Jesus has done for us, and the security and the peace that flows from that, that we will be devoted to Jesus and be ready to face anything that comes our way. And so that's our first point. Devotion brings difficulty. So don't be surprised if you are a Christian that life is difficult. Don't be surprised if you're contemplating becoming a Christian, and you do become one, that life will be easy.

It won't be. That's not the Bible pattern. Secondly, defense brings dispute. And this is chapter 22 into 23.

So what happens is that Paul attempts to defend himself before the crowd in Jerusalem. So at the start of chapter 22, the word that Paul uses for defense is the Greek word *apologia*, which is where we get our word *apologetics* from, which essentially means a verbal defense or a reasoned argument.

[15 : 30] And so Paul does this here. He makes a reasoned defense. He gives an argument to help people understand why they must believe in Jesus Christ.

And he defends himself and his gospel by giving his testimony. And this is the second of three places and acts where we get the conversion story of the apostle Paul.

And he shares his testimony to tell them about Jesus. He speaks in Aramaic, but he addresses them as brothers and fathers, essentially to stress his Jewishness.

And this is a way to counter the accusation that Paul is anti-Jewish, he's anti-law, and he's anti-temple. And so Paul highlights three things in his defense.

And the first is his background in Judaism, chapter 22, verse 3 to 5. So Paul had this Jewish upbringing. He was brought up in Jerusalem.

[16 : 33] He studied under the famous Gamaliel, Jewish teacher. He was zealous for God just as they were. He also persecuted Christians just as they were doing. And he tried to punish them and throw them into prison.

And so this is the perfect opening for his defense, his defending the Christian faith amongst the Jews, because he's emphasizing that nobody could be more Jewish than him.

He was just like them. And yet something happened to Paul that changed everything. And so the next part of his defense, after he gives his background in Judaism, in verse 6 to 11, is he then shares his encounter with Jesus.

He says, I met Jesus and he transformed my life. So Jesus confronted Paul, saying, verse 8, I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.

And then he mentions this man, Ananias, a masterstroke in his defense, because Ananias is highly respected by the Jews. And then he reported what Ananias said about him, verse 14 to 16, which is this, So Paul's declaring, His job is to declare that Christianity is the fulfillment of the Jewish faith, that Jesus is the righteous one who fulfills the Jewish scriptures.

[18 : 13] He's the promised Messiah, the Christ that they're waiting for. And so Paul's not just trying to defend himself here. He's giving a reasoned argument for why Christianity is true and why these Jews need to believe in Jesus.

And he does so by explaining how he, like them, had got it all wrong. But Jesus confronted him and turned his life around and made him a witness for him.

And so the third part of Paul's defense, in verse 17 to 21, is his commissioning by Jesus. So Paul's saying, I'm speaking for Jesus because Jesus told me to.

And so he has to obey. That's why he goes around telling Jews and Gentiles the message of Jesus. Now, of course, Paul is unique.

But if we belong to Jesus, and Jesus has confronted us, and we now belong to him, then our job is to bear witness to him.

[19 : 19] Which means making a defense. Defense, it means giving a reasoned argument to other people about why they must believe in Jesus. And we'll need to engage with people like Paul did.

And as we do that, we'll need to be able to share our personal story of how God has changed our life through Jesus. It's interesting because right now, but also probably in every age, everybody's story is valued and important and worth listening to.

Most podcasts are about people's life stories, about what's influenced them, about what's changed their thinking or their living. Most TV shows or self-help books are all about how your life changes. So everybody has a story. And our culture loves hearing people's stories. And so what better opportunity do we have today than to share our story of how God has worked in us through Jesus and transformed our lives.

Like Paul, our story can be part of a powerful witness to Jesus. Saying, here's where I was before, here's what I thought, here's how I lived, Jesus met me, here's how I changed, and here's how now I want to live my life.

[20 : 47] Because it's powerful, the power of personal story. But it's as Paul shares his story that his listeners completely lose the plot. And so his defense of Christianity brings him into dispute with his listeners.

Paul's mention of the Gentiles seems to light the fuse for the Jews and they explode. They want Paul dead. And so a riot breaks out and Paul was in danger.

And again, the commander comes to Paul's rescue and orders him to be flogged. Now a flogging would involve a Roman scourge or a whip, which was a whip with these long leather straps or

thongs that had bits of metal or nail embedded in them.

And when somebody was flogged, this whip would go into their bare back and would pull out chunks of their flesh. And so when somebody was flogged, their back and their limbs would all be messed up and bloody.

And so Paul here, what he does, instead of undergoing the flogging, he challenges it because he's a Roman citizen. Which is interesting because Paul avoids this flogging in Jerusalem, whereas he takes a flogging in Philippi, earlier on in Acts.

[22 : 10] Why does he do this? Well, surely Paul is asserting his rights for the sake of the gospel. Again, he is doing what is best for the sake of Jesus and the good news, the gospel of Jesus.

And so he takes whatever he can and leverages whatever advantage he can take so that he can proclaim the good news about Jesus to more people.

Paul's always thinking about what is best for the gospel. What's the best thing to do in this situation? And surely we have got to do the same because as we do, well, others may dispute, but God can use the opportunity to impact people.

And basically the rest of the story of Paul's life is he defends the gospel, but it brings him into dispute with all kinds of people. And so the incident here leads to the next one where Paul gets the opportunity to speak to the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Council of the Jews.

And it doesn't end well because as soon as Paul speaks, he gets a punch in the mouth. Chapter 23, verse 2. And then what happens next?

[23 : 33] Well, he says, he realizes he's speaking to the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees did believe in the resurrection. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. So Paul says that he's a Pharisee, rather shrewdly, so that the Pharisees and the Sadducees start arguing with one another and the council is divided.

And yet the meeting descends into chaos and Paul's dragged away before he's ripped apart. And then he's rescued for a third time by Jews, angry Jews, who want him dead.

And so can we see how devotion to Jesus and defending the message of Jesus always brings Paul into difficulty and dispute?

So just imagine how Paul must have felt at the end of his time in Jerusalem. It must have seemed like an absolute disaster. What happened was he just got punched, beaten up, arrested, shouted at, and they tried to kill him.

Hostility, opposition, violence. And he must have been wondering, has anything here been achieved at all? Things could hardly have been any worse from his perspective.

[24 : 55] And yet, from the perspective of the Lord Jesus, it's actually job done. So that final verse we read, verse 11 of chapter 23, says this, 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.

That must have been a massive encouragement for Paul. Not only did Jesus come near Paul, he speaks personally to Paul and tells Paul that he has simply done what he was supposed to do, which was to testify about Jesus in Jerusalem.

And it was a reassurance that his time in Jerusalem wasn't wasted. And Paul would go to Jerusalem to testify about Jesus there, and that wouldn't be wasted either.

And so Paul could take courage from the Lord Jesus, because Jesus was still driving forward his mission. Jesus was still building his church.

And so let's never forget that, especially when we follow Jesus, and it's difficult, and it's sometimes dangerous, and it seems like nothing is happening, and it's just all trouble and strife.

[26 : 13] That's when we should never be tempted to think that nothing is happening, because God is using it to build his church, and Jesus is always with his people.

That's why we don't need to be afraid. And so as we wrap up these big, long chapters and Acts and Paul's time in Jerusalem, the question is, well, how do you and I, how do we remain devoted to Jesus?

How do we defend his gospel despite difficulties and despite disputes? Well, it's only as we remember the good news of what Jesus has done for us, because it's interesting how Paul's experience here actually reflects this, because some of what happened to Paul happened to Jesus. So Paul was compelled to go to Jerusalem where he knew he would suffer. Jesus deliberately went to Jerusalem where he knew he would die.

Paul was rejected by his own people. He was falsely accused. He was arrested. He was unjustly beaten. He was wanted dead. Jesus was rejected by his own people.

[27 : 25] He was falsely accused. He was arrested. He was unjustly beaten. And he was killed. Paul has this angry crowd. Shout out, rid the earth of him. He is not fit to live.

Jesus also had an angry crowd. Shout out, away with this man. Crucify him. Crucify him. So when we see how Jesus, who was at the very heart and center of God's purposes, suffered and died on the cross in order to accomplish God's great salvation plan, then we can trust that God knows exactly what he's doing.

So when you believe in Jesus and grasp that Jesus didn't do what was safe, no way. Jesus did what was best by dying on a cross to pay for your sin and mine.

That means then we can trust that whatever happens in our lives is not outside of God's purposes. Because Jesus has already faced the worst for us and because of us.

And so we can take courage knowing that because we belong to Jesus. He is with us. And because he is with us, there is nothing to fear in life or in death.

[28 : 50] And so the final question is, do you have that courage to live your life? No matter what you face in life, the only way to get through is by devoting your life to Jesus Christ.

because Jesus is the one who through the cross has already devoted himself to you. He has already declared his love for you.

And he is with you whatever you face. Let's pray together.