

Guilty until proven innocent

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[0 : 0 0] Well, our justice system in the United Kingdom is said to be innocent until proven guilty.! And the Human Rights Act 1988 provides citizens in our country the right to a fair and public trial! or hearing in relation to both criminal and civil matters. And so Article 6 of the Human Rights Act says this, everyone charged with a criminal offence shall be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law. And it's meant to be a fair and just principle so our society operates and functions well. But you would have noticed as we turn to our reading in Acts chapter 25 that there is a different principle at work because as the Apostle Paul faces trial after trial he is often presumed to be guilty even though he is innocent. And that's why Paul has to defend himself again and again. In fact, in these closing chapters of Acts chapter 21 to 28 he defends himself five times against significant people. So chapter 22 he defends himself before a mob in Jerusalem. Chapter 23 he defends himself before the Sanhedrin. That's a Jewish ruling council. Jewish religious leaders. In chapter 24 he defends himself against the Roman governor Felix. Chapter 25 the Roman governor Festus. And then chapter 26 King Agrippa.

Again and again and again Paul is having not just to defend himself and his own life but he's defending the gospel the good news of Jesus Christ. He's defending the message that he was proclaiming which was and is Jesus died and rose again. And that is the heart of the Christian message. So if you've just stepped into church today for your first time the core the substance of the Christian faith is that Jesus died and rose again.

And so that demands a response from us. Now this afternoon we're going to look at Paul's fourth defense not just because we're looking at history here but because in each of these trials as Paul defends himself he is defending the gospel of Jesus Christ which is what we must also do as followers of Jesus.

Paul defends himself. And when we do we'll often find that we are opposed because of what we say and what we believe. We're opposed because we don't really fit with the current cultural narrative. Much of what the Bible teaches and what Christians believe flies in the face of what our society today thinks. And so Christians can often be seen as bad citizens of society. As if somehow Christians because of what they believe are a real danger to the social fabric of our country. And yet what we see here in Acts chapter 25 is that it is through these trials, it is through the opposition, it is through the grief and the hassle that you get for following Jesus that God often does his work. He gives opportunities to proclaim the good news of Jesus whatever the circumstances of his people are. Which is surely what Luke wants to teach us as he records Paul facing trial after trial making defense after defense. He's showing how none of this opposition that comes actually stops God's work. In fact the opposition that comes is used to advance God's work and make it spread further further and wider. And so we need to know this whether we call ourselves a Christian or not that God uses all kinds of circumstances to advance the mission of Jesus in this world. And so I'd like us to look at three things this afternoon, three things to see in this passage. First of all, religious opposition.

opposition. Secondly, political operation. And thirdly, Christian opportunity. So while religious opposition comes and political operation is active, Christian opportunity comes. And that's good news. So first of all, religious opposition. The opposition against Paul here comes from Jewish religious leaders. So Paul is stuck in prison for two years years. And the governor has changed from Felix to Festus. Probably should have a bit more imagination and thinking of governors who didn't begin with the letter F. But anyway, Felix to Festus. Felix gave no verdict on Paul, even though he was innocent. And now Festus takes over Paul's case. And Paul is still public enemy number one for the Jews.

[5 : 06] And so Festus travels to Jerusalem to meet with the Jewish religious leaders, the Jewish establishment. And they waste no time in presenting their case against Paul. And so they see Festus, this new governor, as another opportunity to get rid of Paul once and for all. So verse three says, they requested Festus as a favor to them to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way. There's a sense of deja vu here, isn't there, that they just keep trying to kill Paul. And here's the thing. These are religious people who want him dead.

So to his credit, Festus stands firm. Verse four and five. Festus is no doubt suspicious, but he seeks to let justice take its course.

And so he convenes the court. He lets the religious leaders bring their charges against Paul. But because Paul's done nothing wrong, then they've got nothing against him, nothing they can prove. And their charges are basically summed up in Paul's defense in verse eight.

Then Paul made his defense. I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar. So notice that the allegations are both religious and they are political. Against the law, against the temple, religious, against Caesar, political.

So Paul's accusers couldn't get him convicted on the religious charges. That's why they get the Roman governor to try and convict him on some kind of political charge.

[6 : 48] So they've already said that Paul is a troublemaker, making him out to be an enemy of the state, not just an enemy of the Jews. And Paul's defense is that he's done nothing wrong.

Either religiously against the Jews, against the temple or politically against Caesar, against Rome. And so Paul's defense is to present himself as a loyal Jew, not broken any Jewish laws, and as a loyal citizen of Rome, not broken any Roman laws.

And so the opposition against him comes from the Jewish religious establishment, from people who claimed to believe the Old Testament scriptures. And they were all about obeying the law of God, all about those commandments not to kill people.

And yet the irony is they're the ones who want to kill Paul because he's speaking about Jesus. And so their claim to be the people of God is false because they're actually enemies of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And it's this kind of hatred or opposition to Jesus and his message and his messengers that continues today. And so we shouldn't be surprised because Jesus said it would be this way if we were his disciples, if we were his followers.

[8 : 18] In fact, he said to his disciples, if the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. He also said in John 16, they will put you out of the synagogue.

In fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they're offering a service to God. And I'm sure that's what Paul's opponents were thinking, that by killing Paul, they were offering a service to God.

And that's why Islamists want to kill Christians all across the world, because they believe they're offering some kind of service to the God they worship.

And so can you see how false religion has always opposed the true message of God, which is centered on Jesus Christ. And so we shouldn't be surprised when opposition to Christianity comes, whether it be from our media or our social commentators or our political elites.

But nor should we be surprised when it comes from the religious establishment either. Because like the Jewish establishment in Paul's day, the religious establishment of our own day can claim to be on the side of God and yet be an enemy of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[9 : 40] And I'm thinking about the current debates going on in the Church of England. They're about 10 years behind the Church of Scotland. So the established church, whether it be in England or in Scotland, has basically abandoned in its legislation, biblical teaching on human sexuality, which has resulted in those who hold on to the gospel of Jesus Christ, considering breaking from and leaving the Church of England, as has happened in the Church of Scotland.

So can you see how opposition to the Church of England doesn't always just come from those outside the Church of England? It actually comes from the religious establishment as well, from those who would profess to be the Church and yet are enemies of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so that's why we shouldn't be surprised if we believe the good news of Jesus, if we speak the good news of Jesus, if we seek to live out the good news of Jesus, then we will meet all kinds of opposition, even from religious people.

So that's our first point, religious opposition. The second point is political operation. So Festus started well, but he was a politician.

And as with all politicians, there is the temptation to give in to political opportunism, to please the people rather than do what's right.

[11:11] So verse 9 says, So Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?

So Festus is surely concerned for justice, but he also sees this opportunity to keep in with the voters, with the Jewish people. And that's when he starts to play this political game.

So he didn't just have power, he also wanted popularity. But in his attempts to be a people pleaser, he fails to do the right thing at the right time.

Festus was aware Paul had done nothing wrong, and yet he was more concerned about his own position and reputation than he was for justice. And yet Paul is not going to accept the injustice any longer.

So fearing that Festus would give Paul over to the Jews unfairly and unjustly, he exercises his rights as a Roman citizen. So look at verse 10 to 12.

[12:16] Paul answered, I am now standing before Caesar's court where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die.

But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar. After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared, You have appealed to Caesar.

To Caesar you will go. And so because justice wasn't coming for Paul, from anyone, He's left with no other option than to appeal to Caesar to go above Festus to the ultimate authority, the highest possible.

And so Paul could hope to be acquitted by Caesar because he'd done nothing wrong according to Roman law. Festus could not convict Paul because he was innocent.

And yet neither was he prepared to have Paul released. He wanted to keep in with the Jewish leaders. And so he kept him locked up.

[13:27] And so sending Paul to Caesar took the matter out of his hands. And yet Festus' problems weren't over because he asks advice from King Agrippa.

King Agrippa, verse 13 to 22, King Agrippa essentially concludes that this is a religious case.

Well, King Agrippa's not heard Paul yet, but it's Festus who says this is a religious case. So he's got no idea what to do with Paul.

And then look at verse 24 to verse 27. Festus said, So as a result of this investigation, I may have something to write.

So he's got no clue what to do with Paul because he's done nothing wrong. So Festus' political game backfires on him.

[14:49] Failed to govern justly and do the right thing. He had misused and abused his authority. A couple of years ago, we were down in London.

My sister-in-law was being sworn in as a judge at the Royal Courts of Justice. And there was a part to the ceremony, which she invited us to, where she had to swear in how she would conduct herself as a judge.

And this is what she had to swear. Complicated thing to swear.

And this came out in what one of the senior judges said to her after she took this vow. The senior judge said, You've always got to do what is right.

Popular opinion may think something else, but you're not to listen to that. You're to do what is right and true and fair. And that's what Festus failed to do here.

[16:10] And so how does this apply to us? Well, Paul, I think, shows us how we, as Christians, can respond to political opposition.

Because Paul here is a great example of why Christians can't let political powers abuse their authority. And so we're helped to see and how to view our response to those who would govern over us.

Because by appealing to Caesar, Paul was turning to the law for protection against injustice. And he expected the law to be fair and just.

He didn't just roll over and let the state treat him unjustly. He said he didn't want to escape justice or even death if he was guilty. But because he was innocent, he makes this bold move of appealing to Caesar.

Not just to get justice done, but to get to Rome. To testify about Jesus there. So what is it that we learn? Well, I think we're well aware that the secular and the legal and the political powers, the authorities, the authorities will often operate with inconsistency.

[17 : 28] They won't always be fair. And often, that's true when it comes to Christianity. Where doing what's right and just is actually less important to them than being popular.

Because politics does tend to move in whatever direction the wind is blowing, doesn't it? Or with the particular agendas that the political elites think that we should be pursuing.

Which means decisions tend to suit those who shout the loudest, who've got the most power, or who've got the most money. And that's why, like Paul, we actually won't always be able to accept every decision of the governing authorities.

Now, of course, in Romans chapter 13, we accept those authorities have been established by God, and we are subject to them.

But that doesn't mean that we should simply run with their agendas, or even quietly accept everything they do and say as right and good and true. Because in our own land, increasingly, government plans as well as laws come into conflict with Christian belief, don't they?

[18 : 44] Issues like religious freedom, or conversion therapy, or assisted suicide, or transgender ideology, and so on and so on and so on. And so it's hardly surprising that while freedom of speech is encouraged, very often some speech is called hate speech, if it's Christian speech.

And whilst tolerance is always promoted for anyone and everything, quite often it is not that we should tolerate Christians, or what Christians believe.

And yet Paul shows how Christians should stand up for what's right, even stand up for their rights, and never put up with unfair treatment by the state, or even be silenced by state-sponsored indoctrination.

Because while Paul willingly submitted to the authorities, it's clear he did, he also challenged the authorities when he needed to, because they were being unfair.

And so he used the system to protect himself, as well as to promote the gospel of Jesus Christ, which takes us to our third point. So religious opposition, political operation, and Christian opportunity.

[20 : 02] Now despite all Paul's trials, at the end of Acts, God uses them as opportunities for Paul to witness to Jesus Christ. And so the gospel is advanced through Acts, through the suffering and the oppression, and the injustice that Paul often faces.

So worldly powers and authorities, religious leaders, unjust imprisonment, can't stop the advance of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's what Acts is saying to us.

So everything that happens only provides more opportunities for the message of Jesus to spread further and wider. And so the cunning opposition of the religious establishment and the conflicting operations of the governing authorities simply result in fueling the spread of Christianity.

And so when Paul appealed to Caesar, it wasn't just because Caesar was his only hope for justice, but because Jesus had already spoken to Paul and said to Paul that Paul would be going to Rome to speak about him.

Acts 23, verse 11, Jesus said, The Lord, take courage as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.

[21 : 25] And what Jesus said to him is what drives the story forward. So Paul knew that every trial he faced was an opportunity to promote Jesus.

So verse 19, Festus, 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.

So we don't know how much Festus knew, but he knew what Paul stood for. He knew that the heart and center of Paul's message was Jesus Christ, because when Paul shot, he never missed a target.

I don't know if you enjoyed watching the Olympics. My favorite moment in the Olympics was when the Turkish pistol shooter, Yusuf Dikek, won a silver medal for basically standing there with his hands in his pocket and his pistol and all these other guys had all the kit, big lenses and earmuffs and he had a pair of simple specs and a pistol and he won a silver medal.

Hit the target, did not miss. He looked unimpressive, just had this kind of plain t-shirt, a beer belly, a pair of jeans, but he wins a silver medal.

[22 : 49] Now Paul looked unimpressive. For these important governors and rulers, he's in and out of prison. But what they knew was, we know what this guy's got to say.

We know exactly what he stands for. He keeps talking about this guy, Jesus, who was dead and he's claiming that he came back to life again.

Paul never missed the target. People knew what he was about. There was no doubt about Paul's message. And I wonder, do people know what we are about if we profess to be a Christian?

Do they know who is most important to us? Jesus Christ. Do they know the message that we live by? That Jesus did die in history and we believe he rose again from the dead and so we trust in him.

Because Paul was able to proclaim this message to these powerful rulers in a way that would not have been possible had he not been caught up in this Roman justice system.

[23 : 57] So Jesus chose Paul as his instrument. This is Acts 9, 15 when Saul was converted. Jesus chose Paul so that he would go to the Gentiles and to the Jews as well as kings and rulers to share Jesus with them.

And so when Paul appealed to Caesar he wasn't just pulling some kind of clever maneuver he was enabling the message of Jesus to spread further and wider and reach all kinds of people even governors and kings and emperors.

And shouldn't that be a great encouragement for us if we are followers of Jesus Christ because whatever your circumstances in life right now or mine whatever we are whatever our job is if we have one or don't have one whatever we are doing whoever we currently have contact with our social network our circle of friends no matter what is going on in our lives right now we can be sure just as Paul was that we are in the place and we have the position and these are the people that we are to share Jesus with because God has ordered our lives just like he'd ordered Paul's God has arranged our circumstances just as he had ordered Paul's God gives us unique opportunities to bear witness to Jesus just as he did for Paul and so isn't that how we should view every day when we wake up in the morning I'm not in the wrong place I'm in the place where God wants me to be I'm not amongst the wrong people but these are the people that I am to share Jesus with so as we close the true message of Jesus and the true messengers of Jesus will face opposition it might come from the religious establishment it might come from politicians it might come from ruling authorities who knows but yet even in all of that opposition there is opportunity for Christian witness and so that's why we should never despair with the state of the religious establishment we should never despair with the injustice of the political authorities or the laws that those who govern our lands make and we should never despair when we feel we are suffering unjustly because we are a follower of Jesus Christ because the gospel of Jesus Christ gives us a hope that is greater than anything else this world offers and a confidence to hold fast to that message even in public life because it gives us a meaning to our trials and to our suffering and that's why we should take encouragement from the life of Paul shouldn't we because even if it seemed like nothing was being achieved

Paul stuck in prison for two years God was working his plans and his purposes out for this world to advance the good news of Jesus Christ and as God was doing that he was also working out his plans and purposes for Paul's life one man's life and so Paul could trust God and so can we no matter what we're facing right now God knows what he is doing in every situation and so let that truth sink deep into your heart as one of God's people and trust God but if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian then also trust God don't trust in your power don't trust in your circumstances because what tends to happen is that when your circumstances are going well and when life is comfortable then you become proud you think it's all down to you and yet when life becomes complicated and it's challenging and your circumstances aren't great then you just are full of despair and it's because our circumstances don't ultimately give us the hope and the joy and the peace and the security that we crave as human beings that only comes from

[28 : 27] God and so even if our circumstances aren't great we have hope that our wise and good and loving heavenly father knows exactly what he is doing and so we've got to trust him trust him that's why Jesus is the key to this passage just as Paul was innocent as he proclaimed Jesus so Jesus himself was innocent of all the charges against him and yet Jesus was prepared to be the guilty one even if it meant suffering and dying on a cross for your sin and mine and so when we see

how Jesus who was at the very heart and center of God's purposes suffered and died in agony in order to accomplish God's plan now we can trust that God knows exactly what he's doing he knew what he was doing in the suffering and death of

Jesus and so he knows what he's doing with you and me life only makes sense in Jesus hope only comes from Jesus because Jesus is enough for whatever we face so whatever trials you might face right now or you may face in the future you might not see what God is doing but you can be sure God will be doing his work in and through your life so trust him let's pray together