

A Free Man on Trial

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Preacher: Tom Muir

[0 : 0 0] This morning, as I said. Now, most of us will know something of, if not the direct experience of, at least, we've maybe seen or read, the tension that exists in a trial scene.

Loads of our dramas, whether written, you know, an author like John Grisham's made a career out of doing this, or in films, sent around a dramatic trial scene.

You know, the tension that builds up over the course of a novel or a movie, as we move towards the dramatic trial scene at the end. And we see this in real life as well, don't we? There's some really compelling, there's some that really grabs the attention, even of a nation, we can think of maybe most recently, the Oscar Pistorius story.

Kind of gripped a nation and lots of the world's media. There's a funny sense in which as well, though, it's a bit voyeuristic, isn't it? And we're looking in on somebody's life because at the centre of this is, you know, who is this man or who is this woman?

What have they done? And are they guilty or are they innocent? And really, somebody's life hangs in the balance as we go through this trial scene.

[1 : 1 4] One of my favourite books, probably, I read it first when I was at school, and I've always loved it, it's *The Kill a Mockingbird*. But you know, the key thing about *The Kill a Mockingbird* at the centre of it is one man's innocence or guilt, and one brave lawyer's decision to commit his life, to trying to prove to a community who are against this man they perceive as guilty, that he's innocent.

You know, great real human drama where somebody's, the future of somebody's life hangs in the balance, and at the centre of it, of course, is the question of innocence and guilt. So we understand that.

We can connect with these kind of stories, as I said, even if we've never been involved personally in something as scary, as nerve-wracking as this. Now, in Acts chapter 26, Paul is, in a sense, on trial.

It's not his life isn't going to be decided in this particular meeting where he stands before Festus and Agrippa. This is more like a hearing. His trial is a process. He's on the way to Caesar, and he gets a hearing here before this king, Agrippa.

But there's something very different about this story. There's something that, when we read through what Paul says, there's something totally remarkable. And that's that Paul, as he stands here, as it were, on trial before these important men, before Festus and before Agrippa, Paul is already free.

[2 : 4 1] He's already pardoned. So what I want to do this morning is spend a little while looking through the chapter, finding out, first of all, how is Paul pardoned, even as he stands before these men, and secondly, following that, how does Paul, this pardoned man, live his life?

So first of all, how is Paul already pardoned as he stands before this judicial hearing? What do we mean by that? Well, the first question we have to ask is, how does Paul find himself here in the first place?

Why is Paul in this situation? Why is Paul on trial? The whole thing that happens around Paul is really borne out of confusion. As you read through from the Book of Acts from chapter 20, 21, 22, there's a great turmoil.

You imagine a community, you imagine a marketplace, and you imagine this man a couple of thousand years ago standing, and he's a changed man, and he's got a new message, and the people around about him, particularly the religious people, they hate the messages that he's got, and they react violently.

They react with, you know, they really hate what he's trying to say, and there's just mass confusion. If I go back to Acts 21 and verse 27, when the seven days were nearly over, some Jews saw Paul at the temple, they stirred up the whole crowd and they seized him.

[4 : 07] The Jewish community, the religious community, heard what Paul was saying, and they hated it, and they wanted to stop him. Shouting, men of Israel, help us. This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law in this place.

And besides, he's brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place. Then it says in verse 30 of chapter 21, the whole city was aroused. So you get a sense here of the drama and the turmoil that's going on.

This isn't a quiet incident. This is a major thing that's happening in the city. Paul becomes very well known, and he's very hated, and so he finds himself after he appeals to Caesar, he has the right to do that as a Roman citizen, before this man Festus.

Now there's also confusion because Festus isn't quite sure what to do with Paul, because all that's going on here involves religious tension. You know, the message that Paul is speaking into the Jewish religious context is about a new saviour, a new messiah, the fulfillment of this promise of a messiah, and Festus, the governor, isn't quite sure how to handle this.

Now what happens in this situation is, as Festus sends Paul, having appealed to Caesar, two Caesar in Rome, he also has to send with him a note, an explanation.

[5 : 30] Here is Paul, this is who he is, and this is why he's being sent before you. But you know, Paul's Festus, rather, isn't quite sure. So we get a sense, as we read through this, that Festus is keen to have another opportunity to hear Paul's story, and he invites Agrippa, the king, and his sister Bernice, because he wants backup, you know, and he wants somebody else to come along and to hear this man's story, and to give him a bit of an idea of how to deal with this.

How do I deal with Paul? Who is he? What's his story? Why are the Jews so angry at him? Maybe things can be made a little bit more clear.

So Paul brings clarity into the situation, because here he's given a chance to stand and to speak. He stands in verse 26, then Agrippa said to Paul, you have permission to speak for yourself.

Finally, Paul has a hearing. He can clear his name. He could stand up in front of them all and say, they're wrong, they shouldn't have arrested me, and this is my story, this is what has happened.

But he brings clarity here, but in a really interesting way. What he doesn't do here is he doesn't stand up and say, you know, the Jews were wrong to arrest me. I'm innocent and I should be let free now. How dare you heap me? I want to be let free.

[6 : 51] He doesn't say that. Chapter 26 doesn't give us just an intricate detail, step by step, answer of why the Jews were wrong to arrest Paul and why on every point they were wrong and why they should have let him go.

What he does instead is he ends up changing slightly the dynamic of who he is as he stands before, Festus and Agrippa. He goes from being somebody who's a defendant on trial to being a witness.

As he stands before them, what he ends up doing is just testifying to something that he has seen and something that he has experienced, and he testifies to another trial that he was on.

So he stands, you imagine the scene, he stands before Festus, he stands before Agrippa and his sister Bernice and all their importance and all their finery, and he has a chance to clear his name.

And what he says is, let me tell you about something else that happened to me. Let me tell you about another time I was on trial before another king. That's the story that Paul tells in chapter 26.

[7 : 56] What does he testify to? He becomes a witness. What does he witness to? Well, this is what we read in this chapter here. Paul wants, first of all, for the people who he's speaking to, to remember his background.

It's very important that they remember who he had been, the kind of life that he had lived. You look into chapter 26 with me. Look at verse 9. I was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus.

That was Paul's life. Paul hated the name of Jesus and he wanted to stop people worshiping Jesus. So that was who he was. That was what he wanted to do.

If you look back to verse 4, you see that this isn't something that he just decided upon when he was an angry young man. As a child, this was like the trajectory of his life. Look back at verse 4.

The Jews all know the way I've lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country and also in Jerusalem. He was a good Jew. He upheld the Jewish tradition and the Jewish faith.

[9 : 03] And as he became a young man and as he got authority and as he got status in his community, the passion of his life was against Jesus Christ.

And he wants the people who are hearing him to remember that. It's an important part of his testimony. So he brings clarity to the situation, to Thestis, by first of all saying, you remember, remember who I was, remember what my life was all about.

And then he brings clarity, further clarity, because he shows us, and he shows the people who are hearing him just here, that he was met by somebody.

He tells them that he used to travel about persecuting the Christians. That was his job. He went about with the authority of the chief priests. So the religious leaders gave him the authority. He said, go, with our blessing, go and wipe out the Christian communities.

So he says in verse 12, on one of these journeys, I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. And then he describes something so completely remarkable that absolutely changed his life.

[10 : 16] One of the most famous conversion scenes in the Bible, Jesus Christ appeared to him. In his glory, in blazing light, brighter than the sun, the risen Jesus Christ just appeared, just came face to face with Paul.

Stopped him in his tracks, completely stopped him in his tracks. And this is what Paul now wants to witness to, the hearing that he has. He wants to say to them, this is what happened to me.

This is my story. And as Jesus meets with him here, Paul's response is interesting, isn't it?

Should we just read what happens as Jesus appears to him from verse 14? We all fell to the ground and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

They just fell to the ground. Then I asked, who are you, Lord? Very little actually happens here in terms of speaking.

[11 : 25] Jesus Christ appears to Paul, Paul and his companions, aware of some amazing presence, aware of some powerful presence, fall to the ground in worship, in submission. And Paul says, who are you, Lord? So Paul goes from Jesus' persecutor to, as he's faced with Jesus, just on his face calling Jesus, Lord.

That says he can't help it. He's faced with the power and the glory of Jesus. And we can sometimes forget that, can't we? As we get very used to the idea of being Christians or Jesus as just a story, as somebody who we think is in our lives every day.

But really, what difference does that make to us? Well, this is Jesus who we worship in his power and his glory. So Paul testifies to this and Paul wants to really show Festus and Agrippa.

You know, all of this bother with the Jews. All of this turmoil and hatred has come about because my life was changed. And my life was changed because Jesus Christ appeared to me and he changed my life.

[12 : 38] How does Jesus act then? This is still the story that Paul is telling. Jesus Christ met him. Jesus Christ stopped him in his tracks. And Paul says, who are you, Lord? Well, how does Jesus deal with him?

And I'm talking about this. Here is the one man who was the biggest problem for Jesus' church. He was like strategic public enemy number one, Christian enemy number one.

And Jesus meets him face to face. So how does Jesus deal with him? Jesus does two things. He pardons him and he commissions him.

Two ways in which Jesus responds to him. And as we see this, we are shown who Jesus is and what Jesus is like. Many people today have mixed up ideas of who Jesus is.

It's really important for us to know really clearly what's Jesus like. Because if we're going to be called Christians, if we're going to be Jesus followers and worshipers, it's really important to know who we follow and who we worship.

[13 : 45] Jesus pardons him. Look at what he says in verse 15. Then I asked, who are you, Lord? At this point, Paul is exposed and almost just helpless before this incredible figure of Jesus.

What does Jesus do? Get up and stand on your feet. We remember back to a time like some of the prophets, like Isaiah.

Where Isaiah is faced with a sense of his own sin, inadequacy, smallness. He's tiny he is in Isaiah chapter 6 as God appears to him. And yet the Lord doesn't leave him on his face.

This is the way God deals with us. He doesn't come to us and want to meet us and want to show us who we are and our sinfulness before him and leave us there.

But rather what he wants to do is say, I've pardoned you. Stand on your feet. Stand up before me. Because, and this is linked, isn't it?

[14 : 46] Because, now get up and stand on your feet. He doesn't just pardon him, he commissions him. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and a witness. What an incredible mercy that is.

What is Jesus like? He's so gracious and merciful because he pardons him. And because he says to him, you who minutes and hours and for your whole life before that were against me.

You are against me and I want you to serve me. I want you to testify that you've met with me and that your life has been changed. It's almost instantaneous, isn't it?

When faced with his own wrong idea of who God is, when faced with his own sin and awareness of his need to properly understand who God is. Jesus says, stand on your feet. I want you to testify to me.

It's as clear as that. And it's as loving as that. He doesn't deal with Paul according to how his sins deserve, you know? Do you fear this morning that God is just angry at you and that he is just going to deal with you harshly because you don't deserve to be saved?

[15 : 54] The truth is that I don't deserve to be saved and that we don't deserve to be saved. But we come before a Saviour who is greatly merciful and who wants to meet us and who wants to have us stand before him and to say to us, pardon you.

But as we understand this, there's a tension, isn't there? In the kind of drama, crime, courtroom scenes that we may think of, what is supposed to happen?

Well, in, for example, to kill a mockingbird, you have an innocent man who is proved innocent. And that's right, isn't it? We want that to happen. The tension in a story can be a guilty man who has hired an expensive lawyer to try and just get him off.

And we don't want that because he's guilty and he should be convicted. But sometimes he's able to go free. What happens here? Paul stands before Jesus and he is guilty.

He's been a Jesus hater. He's been the number one persecutor of Christians. Jesus has him and we may think, is this wrong what God does here?

[17 : 07] Is this unjust? This goes against the grain. Paul stands before God and before Jesus and Jesus says, stand. I pardon you and I want you to be my servant.

Does that offend us? It's not even as if God kind of gives him probation. It's not even as if he stands before Paul, Paul stands before him and he says, I've got you now.

You're guilty before me. In order to please me, I want you to do this. I want you to spend so long doing good works and then I'll maybe accept you.

We understand this as well in our judicial system, don't we? We understand the concept of somebody having to wear a tag or being given out on bail.

If you read the sports pages this week, you'd see the Manchester City player, Carlos Tevez, drove his car when he shouldn't have done. He was banned and he didn't have insurance. Why on earth he did that?

[18 : 10] We'll never know. Maybe he has some good reason. He drove his car when he shouldn't have done and he got caught. But he didn't go to jail. The worst punishment didn't happen to him. Instead, he was given 250 hours of community service.

Now as Paul stands before Jesus here, Jesus doesn't say, right, you're on probation. Impress me. He doesn't say you're getting 250 hours of community service.

And so we think, well, where's the justice? Paul is guilty. But Jesus has just said, go free. How do we reconcile these things? The only way we can reconcile these things is by understanding who it is that Paul stands before and where he's come from.

The only way we can understand this is to understand that Jesus Christ has the right, the absolute right to pardon Paul, only because this is the risen Jesus.

And he's risen from the dead. And he's died put to death by his own people.

[19 : 18] And as he dies, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, experiences his Father, God's anger at the sin of the world so that he can pay for the sins of people like Paul.

So that he has the right to appear to Paul. So because he has the desire to come to Paul and say, I pardon you. I know that you hate me, and I know that your life has been against me, but I pardon you.

Jesus has the right to do that because he paid for Paul's sins already. When he was crucified, when he was killed, and when he, in that incredible way, in that terrifying way, experienced God's anger, his Father's anger at the sin of the world, not his own sin, the sins of Paul, my sins, our sins.

He took the punishment for our sins. And so Jesus has the right to pardon me, though I don't deserve it, and he has the right to punish you and all of us, though we don't deserve it, because he has paid for our sins.

What does this tell us about God? What does this tell us about who God is today? Loads of people have, again, very different ideas about God. People have fear of God.

[20 : 43] People hate God because they think he's just a big bully in the sky who wants to scare people into living on probation. It's the opposite, isn't it? It's not that we're given a life to try and impress God, so that maybe at the end, he'll say, you've been a good member or a good adherent or a good free church person or a good model person.

That's not the Gospel message. That's not the testimony of Paul that he says to Festus in a grippa and that he passes on to us this morning.

It tells us, the Gospel message tells us that Christ is raised and that he is powerful. A glorious Jesus Christ appears before Paul, and that is the Jesus Christ who we need to meet face to face.

We won't experience him face to face as Paul does. But if you don't know Jesus Christ, then he wants you to pray to him. He wants you to speak to him and to say, Jesus, I need to meet with you.

I need to know you as my God, and I need to be forgiven by you. That's the prayer, that's the meeting with Jesus that we all need to be able to testify to and to be able to experience.

[22 : 02] What else does it tell us about God? It tells us that he's in the business of bringing people into salvation. This is what God wants, even though we don't deserve it.

Did Paul deserve it? And it tells us that we should call him Lord. That Jesus Christ who we follow is Lord.

And that has huge implications, obviously, for the way we live our lives. It makes me ashamed when I think of the times in my life where I've been really casual about being a Christian, been really casual about who Jesus is.

Jesus is somebody who I occasionally think about. Jesus is the immensely powerful Son of God risen at the Father's hand. And it's good for us to think about that.

It's good for us to remember that. So can you imagine when we all will one day meet him face to face, can you imagine not calling him Lord? We will all one day call him Lord, but what we have to understand is that it is for us to call him Lord now and to recognize who we are before him now.

[23 : 18] So this is really what Paul does, is he stands before Festus and he stands before Agrippa and he says, I want to tell you about what happened to me. I want to tell you about who I met. So Paul points away from himself.

He doesn't say, I am innocent and I should be set free because of these things. He says, let me tell you about somebody else, Jesus Christ, who, King Agrippa, is much more powerful than you are.

So this is the way in which Paul, a man on trial, is a pardoned man, a free man on trial. He's already free.

He's able to stand before these men because he's already pardoned. He's met with the living Jesus and he's free. How then, secondly and lastly, does this free man live? What's his life like?

Well, the first thing that we see him doing, of course, is just testifying. This is what we've been talking about, isn't it? This is what Paul wants to do. He wants to give his life. He has to give his life to testify to what Jesus has done for him.

[24 : 23] In chapter 26 verse 16, Jesus says to him, get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and of what I will show you.

And of course, notice how tenderly Jesus deals with him here because Jesus goes on to say, I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I will be with you. Do you remember what Jesus said to the disciples at the end of Matthew?

As he commissions the disciples to go out in his name, baptising, calling people to be Christians, I will be with you even to the end of the age. Jesus speaks tenderly and compassionately to us as he calls us to be his witnesses.

He doesn't say just go and get on with it and you'd better do a good job of it. He says, testify to what I've done for you and I will be with you.

In verse 20, talks about the scope of his mission, first to those in Damascus and then to those in Jerusalem and all Judea and to the Gentiles also. I preach that they should repent and turn to God.

[25 : 33] And in verse 28 as well, he testifies even to the person who's got him on trial. Now, how do you think he had the courage to do that? This powerful man that he was standing before, who was about to send him on his way to Caesar, he even challenges Agrippa.

Then Agrippa said, go back to verse 27, sorry. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do. Because what Paul's saying to him, of course, is this Jesus didn't come out of nowhere. Agrippa knew something of the religious conflicts that were going on here and Paul's saying to him, you know that the prophets testify that the Messiah will come.

And of course, the message here is that this Messiah, well, this is Jesus. So he says to King Agrippa, who he stands before, King Agrippa, do you believe this?

And of course, Agrippa kind of evades the question. Agrippa said to Paul, do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian? And notice what Paul says after this. And isn't it interesting that in the middle of his trial, what a hard life he had, a short time or long, I pray God that not only you, but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.

Paul doesn't kind of glory in his handcuffs and say, you know, I'm living a miserable life and everybody else should too. But what he's saying is, regardless of the fact that I'm on trial, I'm a free man.

[26 : 54] I'm pardoned because I've met with the King Jesus. And because of that, my life, whether difficult or whether easy, whether I have plenty or whether I have nothing, the focus of my life will be the risen Jesus and the fact that he pardoned me.

So Paul's life is a life of testimony, but it's also, and I think this is important for us to recognize, important for us as Christians to recognize that it's also the testimony to live a holy life.

And finally, if you look at verse 20, he's called to testify, first to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and all in Judea and to the Gentiles.

Also, I preach that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. Now, what's important here is not saying, by your deeds you'll be saved, but it's saying, my message is that you would repent, that you would turn to Jesus and that you would be saved, that you would be pardoned.

Remember that Paul came face to face with Jesus and Jesus pardoned him. Then, why would you not want to live? I ask myself the question sometimes, why would I not want to live a holy life, a life that imitates Jesus, a life that is like Jesus and the honours and that loves God as a result?

[28 : 20] It's important we see Paul writing about this elsewhere in Galatians, for example. Galatians chapter 5 verse 13, you and my brothers were called to be free, but do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather serve one another in love.

So there is this concept, isn't there, that comes up in what Paul's speaking about here, that having believed the way that Paul lived and the way that we are to live as a Christian people, we have this idea nowadays that to be holy is dull, boring.

Imitators of Christ, therefore be imitators of Christ. That's what we are called to do. That's the best calling that we can have to be able to say to the world, to our friends, to our colleagues, let me tell you about somebody who changed my life, Jesus Christ.

And I just try, this is where I try to live my life in a way that honours him. So that's our calling this morning, every one of us. And so it's not for us to say that God can't save us.

It's not for us to say, I'm too bad, because Paul wasn't too bad. It's not for us to say that God doesn't want to, because maybe my family aren't the right family, or I haven't received the call.

[29 : 38] On the basis of Paul's testimony of his own experience, he expects Festus and Agrippa to respond to his witnessing. And that's the message that we have today, and that's the message that Jesus expects us to respond to.

So it's not for us to put barricades in the way and to say, this message is not for me. It's for us to see the message and the experience of Paul, and to say, that's what I need.

So this is the experience of Paul. This is how Paul was able to live for Jesus, because this experience, this meeting with Jesus, dominated his life.

But it wasn't just a past thing. It was an everyday thing, and an everyday situation, and every experience that he went through. He had met with the risen Jesus, and he'd been pardoned by the risen Jesus, and he'd been sent on his way as a messenger to others of the risen Jesus.

And we pray that we would meet with Jesus, and that our lives would be changed as a result. We pray. Lord, thank you for the bold testimony of Paul.

[30 : 52] But we thank you, Lord Jesus, that you were gracious, so gracious to just meet with him and pardon him. Though he had not earned his salvation, though he was even an enemy of Jesus, we see your grace and your mercy.

We need you this morning. We need you to work in our hearts, help us to see your love and your goodness, and to testify to what you've done in our lives. In Jesus' name, amen.