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FAITH ON TRIAL

SERIES: THE GREAT ADVENTURE

By Steve Zeisler

Trials fascinate everyone. We are drawn to the drama of the courtroom. An obscure couple from Modesto, California became celebrities as members of the media gave close attention to the murder trial of Scott Peterson. And, of course, those who are already celebrities, such as Kobe Bryant and Martha Stewart, gain greater notoriety when they're on trial.

I think the reason for our fascination with a person under examination is that we know that eventually our own choices are going to come under scrutiny. In the end we'll have to answer for our lives to the Judge of all. Our hope as Christians is that the righteousness of Another will clothe us in that day.

We have come to the point in the story told in the book of Acts when the apostle Paul is denied opportunity to continue as a church-planter and leadership-developer, because he has been placed in Roman chains. Throughout the rest of this book, he will not be free. Five different times in chapters 21-26 Paul will be put before a tribunal of some kind. In one case it's a mob. In other cases it's more organized. Twice his examination is before Jews, three times before Romans. In this message we'll gather all these events together and learn the lessons of Paul with his faith on trial.

Let me make a couple of observations about the way Luke wrote this book. It's part of a two-volume history of the Christian faith, the other volume being the Gospel of Luke. He wrote them together and addressed them to a man named Theophilus, who was a Roman official of some kind, probably living in Rome, who needed to answer for the gospel in the context of Roman society. One of the things Luke was very interested in doing was making the case that whenever a Roman authority was called to make a pronouncement about Christians, he always found them innocent. This happens throughout the book of Acts, including the three Roman settings in chapters 22-26. One reason Luke wrote this book was to make the case that Rome had no reason to fear insurrection by Christians.

Another thing we can see if we compare these two documents is that the trial of Jesus was very similar to the examination that Paul undergoes. The story of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem included his arrest, the antagonism of the Jews, the trial before Romans, and finally his execution. Paul's experience is very similar, and Luke is telling the story that way deliberately. Paul's journey to Jerusalem is resisted by his friends, he is alone, and he is captured by a Jewish mob. They yell the same sort of phrases they yelled about Christ: "Rid the earth of him!" Paul is placed in Roman custody, he is declared innocent, and yet he is denied justice for the sake of expedience. All of those things happened to the Lord as well. So the Christian servant is being put in the same circumstances as his Master.

As I mentioned, there are Jewish settings and Roman settings where Paul answers for his faith. The Romans didn't care much about the religions of conquered peoples. They were pragmatists. They loved power and empire, believed that armies ruled everything, and were comfortable with the religions of

their empire as long as taxes were paid on time and no one made any waves. We'll observe these attitudes when Paul is on trial before Romans.

The Jews, on the other hand, wanted Paul dead. They feared and hated him. They sought to assassinate him after trying unsuccessfully to end his life by a mob uprising. The ferocity of the Jews was fueled by hatred of Gentile empires, a warped zeal for God, and spiritual blindness. The remarkable thing about their antagonism and determination to kill Paul is that he understood them better than anyone else, as he will make plain more than once.

With that in mind, let's turn to Acts 21:35-22:5 and take the first of two snapshots of Paul, if you will. In the first he is set before a crowd of Jews, and in the second he will stand in the center of a circle of Roman inquisitors.

Seizing an opportunity

When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Away with him!"

As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, "May I say something to you?"

"Do you speak Greek?" he replied. "Aren't you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the desert some time ago?"

Paul answered, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people."

Having received the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic: "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense."

When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet.

Then Paul said, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished."

Paul goes on to tell the story of his journey to Damascus, the bright light that confronted him, and the voice from heaven that spoke words of tenderness to him: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He tells how he was received by Ananias in Damascus and treated with kindness there, and how he came to faith because the Lord had spoken to him from heaven. He tells further of his trip to Jerusalem, now as a Christian, where the Lord appeared to him in a vision in the temple and said, "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles" (22:21). But when he utters the word "Gentiles," the crowd is again set off, and they begin to shout, throw dust in the air, and call for his death.

What can we learn from this? What example are we shown?

A faithful witness

The first thing we must observe is the courage of the apostle Paul. Be clear about what has happened to him here. Use your imagination. He was going about his business, completely innocent of anything he would ever be charged with. Neither Jews nor Romans, neither those who loved the temple nor those who loved Caesar, had any reason at all to fear him. He had not taken a single misstep. Yet a mob set upon him, grew in anger, and was in the process of killing him, the text clearly says. It was acting as only a mob can. These people were filled with hatred and began to stomp him to death, pulling at him, pounding, picking up whatever implements lay nearby. It says that the Roman soldiers had to lift him off the ground and carry him away in order to separate him from the crowd. But the Roman commander who saves him assumes he's an assassin. A bit farther on in chapter 22 this commander is about to have him tortured as a vicious criminal with a cat-o'-nine-tails. Nobody has Paul's good in mind.

We hear Paul say at the end of the chapter that he is a Roman citizen. That could have saved him from this whole mess even in this first moment. But he doesn't play the "citizen card" until late in the day. What choice does Paul make in these extreme circumstances? "Let me talk to the folks who are trying to kill me. Give me an opportunity to say to them what they need to hear." There's extraordinary courage in this, isn't there? He is so certain of the truth of the gospel, convinced that these folks who are calling for his life need to hear what he has to say, that he sets aside his need for self-protection in order to speak to his enemies. I don't think we can overstate the courage we see here. And the reason for Paul's courage is that he himself was captured by something so great that he can't help but speak of it. "Woe to me," Paul will later say, "if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16.)

As Paul begins to speak, he says, "I know exactly what you're like. I have done to people what you are trying to do to me. I have felt what you feel. I have responded with the same zeal to the same offenses. I know exactly what's driving you. But you're dying, and you don't know it. And I know that there's an answer that you are blind to."

The second thing we can observe in this text is Paul's humility. He doesn't castigate his enemies or call down curses on them. He doesn't say that God will deal with them for their affronts against his Son. He identifies with them, and that is a beautiful example to us as well.

I would even suggest that the issue of Paul's use of language is helpful for us. It says that when he speaks to the commander, he speaks in Greek. That's what convinces this commander that he isn't the Egyptian terrorist that he thought, because that man wouldn't know Greek. Paul is gentle in his speech: "May I say something to you, sir?" And he is given a hearing. When he turns to the crowd, he speaks in Aramaic, and that quiets them, because that's the language they grew up with, the language that is nearest to their hearts. This use of language suggests something about our witness in the world: we ought to figure out the best way to speak to people in their own idiom. How can they hear best? What words can we use? What manner of speech? What type of communication has the most likelihood of succeeding with someone? We should take the time to understand them rather than just firing off in all directions in the communication style we're most familiar with.

Third, Paul's focus in his message is on the intervention of God. He doesn't say, "I finally realized through my own study that I was wrong in my approach." He says, "God dramatically intervened in my life." The underlying point of the intervention from heaven is that if God has spoken these things, then we must hear them. Our message should not be as much about ourselves, our journey, or our discoveries, as the God who knew us well enough to find us and speak to us. Paul hated Christians, and the Lord cared enough about him to speak to him. He is offering these folks the same opportunity. This message centers on the intervention of Christ, and that has to be the center of our message, as well.

Finally, in this Jewish court Paul appears to fail utterly. In fact, there is no evidence anywhere in all of chapters 21-26 that anybody listens to him. I believe that actually there are conversions during this period of his ministry, but Luke does not record a single one. In every case, at the end of the day, Paul is rejected and dismissed. But he persists. He doesn't require positive feedback in order to be faithful. He knows what his calling is. He knows the word of Christ that needs to be spoken. And he continues faithfully, undeterred under extreme circumstances. Again, that suggests to us that we ought to be willing to experience disapproval in order to be who we need to be and say what we need to say.

The second text I want to take us to is mostly in chapter 26. This text describes a completely different setting. There is no violence. It's a courtly environment in which there is calm, orderly discourse.

Showing love to enemies

Because of an assassination plot by the Jews, Paul was taken from Jerusalem to Caesarea. Caesarea was the center of Roman authority in the region. Most of Rome's military presence was there. Paul was taken before the governor Felix. Felix was a corrupt man who basically wanted to be bribed. No one bribed him, so Paul languished under house arrest for two years.

The Roman governor who came to power after Felix left was named Festus, and he was perhaps a bit more reasonable. He also heard Paul's case, and decided to call in Herod Agrippa, who was visiting at the time. The Herod family was well connected with Rome, and Herod Agrippa had a small kingdom in what is now Lebanon. They needed to make some decision about this prisoner left over from Felix's reign. Let's read 25:23 to set the scene:

The next day, Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high ranking officers and the leading men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in.

Agrippa and Bernice were brother and sister. They were also sexual partners, which gives you some notion of the values of those who were making these decisions. Four generations of Herods are mentioned in the New Testament, and every one is decadent, lustful, proud, and personally ruined. This man, Herod Agrippa II, is as the others have been. Yet he is called in to hear this case. The audience room where court is convened is probably ornate, perhaps marble. Agrippa and Bernice come in "with great pomp," perhaps with trumpets playing and seats of honor set up for them. Festus comes in with his retinue. Soldiers and important people are gathered around. We might imagine them looking down on the center of the room from a higher level. And then the prisoner is brought in.

There is a description of the apostle Paul that dates back to shortly after New-Testament times. It says he was short, bowlegged, bald, and had a hooked nose. Some of his contemporaries said that Paul was not a very effective speaker. He has been set aside for two years, locked up under house arrest without any opportunity to live out his calling—not a heroic, commanding figure. He's standing here by himself, surrounded by all of this Roman arrogance, and he tells his story a second time.

He recites another long description of his journey to Damascus and the word of the Lord Jesus that came to him from heaven and interrupted everything that his life had been about. Let's pick up the account in 26:16-18. Paul tells how the Lord spoke to him on the Damascus road:

“Now 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 what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from

darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

Paul says, “The reason I’m preaching these things is to offer you hope in Christ, the opportunity to escape the darkness surrounding you, to have your sins forgiven.” Instead of just telling his own story, he’s looking around at these bigwigs and saying, “You don’t have to live the way you do, clawing your way up through the political intrigues of Roman power structures, wanting the approval of corrupt Caesars, believing that all there is in this life is money and power and soldiers, as if that’s enough to live for. I’ve come to bring a message to Gentiles like you.” We realize how much he cares for these people who are his enemies, just as he cared for the Jews who wanted to kill him. These rulers are dismissive of him, treating him as a contemptible fool, and still he reaches out to them.

Paul continues in verses 19-27:

“So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. But I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”

At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.”

“I am not insane, most Excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. The King is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”

Now, Agrippa was part Jewish. He had lived in this land all his life and had grown up knowing the Jewish Scriptures. Verse 28:

Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

I believe that this was another dismissive, disdainful statement. “What do you think, that you can make *me* into a Christian just like that?” Verse 29:

Paul replied, “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.”

He means, “I would love for all of you to come to faith in Christ and have what I have.”

Festus has interrupted Paul and called him insane. Agrippa interrupts him and calls him insubordinate. But Paul continues to speak to them what their hearts need to hear. The resistance he gets from both Festus and Agrippa indicates, I think, that he is beginning to penetrate through the veneer to the hearts of these men, who know that they have sins that need forgiving. But they end the discussion by refusing

to hear any more.

The witness of godly character

Paul loved these enemies just as he loved his enemies in all of these settings. He did his best to speak to them in language they could understand. He never backed down from speaking the truth they needed to hear. Paul could have resented his captors. He could have tried to cut some deal with them. He could have rained down judgment on them. But what he did was appeal to them. If we summarize this section of six chapters when Paul is time after time put in the dock and made to answer for his faith, what we see in him is faithfulness, love, thoughtfulness, courage, and humility. Time after time people heard him speak the truth authoritatively.

What lessons can we take away from this?

The courage of Paul is daunting to me. I'm more often fearful than anything else when it's going to cost me something to answer God's call. I look for ways to avoid having to pay a price for my faith. Yet this man stepped forward every time.

Paul was patient. He could have shaken his fist at God for setting him aside and letting him languish in prison for two years. Yet he let the Lord do what he would do in his own time. He knew that he would someday stand before Caesar in Rome, because he had been told that by the Lord, but when it took time and he was denied his rights, he didn't fight back. When I examine myself, my failures in courage are matched roughly by my failures in patience.

Finally, Paul's love for his enemies is also a powerful rebuke to me. It most often seems to me that you should treat people the way they deserve to be treated. It's hard for me to identify with folks whom I find difficult (especially those who have the same kind of sins I have). But Paul loved those who were his enemies time after time, as the Lord called him to do.

We are witnesses. Our lives are being examined, and our statements and actions are leading people to conclusions about our Lord. It is inevitable. But what kind of witnesses are we? What sort of faithfulness is there in us? The challenge of these texts is daunting. I find myself more heartbroken than anything else. But our God knows that we're not who we ought to be, that we have a long way to go yet, that there are pockets of resistance we should turn from, that there's failure we need to confess. And instead of being done with us for our shortcomings, he invites us into his presence to be strengthened, changed, to have the opportunity to confess and turn from who we've been.

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