Paul on Trial
Acts 24

So we are into the final stretch of Acts, as Luke's account moves towards its conclusion. And that conclusion, of course, is the Gospel coming to the very centre of the Roman Empire, Rome itself.

And one of the things we've been seeing as we've being going through Acts, is how the message of Jesus, the good news of the gospel, which began in such unpromising ways, came to spread the way it did and turn the world upside down, the way it has.

And if you ask historians how come that happened, one answer you'll get is the way the early Christians suffered. How they conducted themselves in the face of persecution caught people's attention. There was something attractive about the way these guys handled suffering. But not just the way *they* suffered but how they cared for others who were suffering. You've probably heard of the letter written by one of the Roman governors of the time, who was just checking back to Rome about persecuting these Christians, because, well, they take better care of our poor and our sick than we do.

And as we enter these last chapters of Acts, and the gospel reaches as far as Rome itself, we're going to see that the reason that happened was because of trials and suffering, at least the trials and suffering in the life of Paul. That it was through trials that Paul and the gospel came to Rome.

Just to recap, Paul has completed three missionary journeys around the Mediterranean area. He had returned to Jerusalem but whilst worshipping in the Temple he was held by some zealous Jews and dragged from the Temple by a lynch mob. The Roman soldiers intervened, pulling him to safety. As they were taking him into the barracks, Paul asked to address the crowd, but when he started talking about how Jesus had commissioned him to take the gospel to the Gentiles, the crowd went crazy again. The soldiers dragged him into the barracks, and were about to flog a confession out of him when Paul told them he was a Roman citizen. In preparation for a trial he was made to appear before the Jewish council, but when he mentioned the resurrection he again had to be rescued by the Roman troops. Under armed guard he was then escorted to Caesarea, which was where the Roman governor Felix had his seat, and where Paul was to stand trial. Which is where we re-join the story.

And from this point on, Paul's life is going to be very different from what it has been to date. The man who could go wherever he wanted, stay as long as he wanted, talk to whomever he wanted, is no longer a free man. Now he's chained, and Paul begins to face his own sufferings and hardships. In more senses than one, Paul really is on trial. But the way he responds to these trials has lots to teach us.

And I say that because trials and difficult seasons in your life, for better or worse, can be some of the most defining times of your life. And you discover stuff about yourself, and about life, that you would never discover in the good times. And one reason for that is that trials can unmask our idols. Difficult times can uncover those things that we're really living for, what really motivates us, where we

really get our sense of significance and worth from, what we really trust in, and what we really believe about life. When times of trial or difficulty or uncertainty come on us, and strip everything else away, then often we come face to face with those things that have become ultimate things.

And yet, when Paul's life is on trial, he manages to face what he faces, and conduct himself, in exemplary ways, and this morning I want us to see why.

Three points: Trials and Idols; Trials and Christ; Trials and the Hope of Glory.

Trials and Idols

Paul's legal trial begins with the opening speech by Tertullus. Verse 2, 'And when he had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him.' And this guy Tertullus was probably a professional lawyer, hired by the Jewish High Priests to secure a conviction against Paul. And he begins his address to Felix the governor with what one commentator describes as 'almost nauseating flattery'. Verse 2-3, "Since through you we enjoy much peace, and since by your foresight, most excellent Felix, reforms are being made for this nation, in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude." And that's nauseating, because just about every bit of it was false, and Tertullus and the Jewish leaders knew it. Felix's term of office had been anything but peaceful. He was a brutal man, who had put down insurrections with brutality; he was hated by the people, and known for his corruption.

And that is who Tertullus is fawning over. But it's also in whose control Paul now finds himself.

But if that's what Tertullus says of Felix, listen to what he says about Paul. Verse 5: 'We have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. He even tried to profane the temple.' In other words, this man is a cancer on the face of society, he's a boil on the backside of humanity; he's a religious agitator, he's sectarian, and he's disturbing the *pax romana*, the very thing that it is your job, Felix, to preserve.

Now, how do you respond when you are criticised, when your wife or husband or colleague says something to you, or about you, that takes you down? How do you respond if it's true? Or how do you respond if it's not true? Or if not overt criticism, how do you feel if people simply ignore you, and don't consider you worth their time? And the reason I ask that is because for many of us, what others think about us matters. And not just in a passing way, it *really* matters. We want, we *need* the approval of others, and if we are criticised or attacked or maybe worse still, ignored, our world falls apart.

It's the idol of approval. And if what people think of you has become an ultimate thing for you, then when you face difficulties or opposition, especially when others are involved, whether at home, or at work, or because of your faith, and people turn on you, you're going to be in trouble. Because the very thing that matters to you, what people think of you, is being undermined.

And that's dangerous, because you'll be tempted to do stuff and say stuff you shouldn't, or not do stuff and say stuff you should, to keep or to win people's approval. And when it comes to matters of faith, rather than lose the approval of those around you, you might be tempted to water things down and compromise, so they stay your friends.

But Paul doesn't do that. In fact, later, in private, he is very clear with Felix, this man who now has power over him, and he tells Felix why Felix needs the gospel just as much as anyone else.

You see, in v24 Luke tells us that 'after some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla.' But Drusilla was Felix's third wife. According to the contemporary historians she was only 20, and stunningly beautiful. The problem was that she was also married to another man. But though Felix has the power to condemn or to release Paul, Paul doesn't fudge it, he doesn't water it down, he tells Felix, gently but boldly, that he needs Jesus: v24, he spoke 'about faith in Christ Jesus… he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment.' The very things Felix and Drusilla needed to hear. And he does so in ways that clearly got past the point of comfort for Felix.

So can you see how Paul wasn't trapped by the idol of wanting or needing the approval of others? And as a result he could be bold and courageous and do and say the right thing.

But the idol of approval is not the only idol that difficulties can expose. You see, in many ways, Paul is now at the mercy of others. He's not in control any more. He is caught between two forces far more powerful than him: the Jewish religious establishment that wants him liquidated, and imperial Rome determined to impose its peace. And Paul is no longer master of his own destiny. Instead he's at the mercy of a legal system that flatters and lies, and of a judge who looks for bribes. In other words Paul's life is now out of control, out of his control.

And if the need for power and control are your idols, and you need them to feel good and stay on top, then you are going to struggle with the uncertainty and insecurity that trials and difficulties in life can bring. You need to be in control, but now you're not. And as a result you worry and fret and anxiety rises.

But of course, it's not just trials that bring uncertainty is it? Uncertainty and not knowing what's coming next is a part of everyday life. In the students Bible Study on Wednesday, as we were praying for one another, it became obvious that a number of the guys are facing uncertainty about their futures, about jobs, about life after marriage, and maybe you are too. But if control is your god, you're going to struggle when life is uncertain.

And the idol of power and control is dangerous, because you'll be tempted to do stuff to keep control, or to stay in power. If someone threatens your position, you'll turn on them. You'll take out the opposition. You'll undermine your

colleague at work who you see as a threat. You'll bribe, and not necessarily with money, or use underhand means to bolster your position. Why? Because you need to control, you need to be in that position of power.

But Paul doesn't respond like that. He doesn't respond to Tertullus as a threat and meet hatred with hatred. He never plays the man; and he never tries to gain power over Felix with a bribe. You see, Paul's god is not power and control, and so he is untroubled by the uncertainty that these trials have brought. Instead he uses his insecure situation as an opportunity to talk about Jesus.

But the third idol in our lives that trials and difficulties can expose is that of success. You see, Paul, the great, globe-trotting, church-planting apostle is effectively side-lined for two years by his trial process. Two years! When you're ambitious, when you're driven, when there are all these things you want to do and accomplish, two years stuck in a prison cell, and that because of injustice, must have felt like an eternity!

But what about you? If your career stalls, or you are overlooked for a promotion, or the funding dries up, and you get your sense of self-worth from your success or your career advancement or your research output, you are in trouble, aren't you? Because now you can't feel good about yourself. Your sense of worth and significance has been broken.

And the danger of success as your idol is that you will do stuff to keep moving up the ladder, or to stay in the limelight, or to win that contract or to get that position, or get that paper published, that you shouldn't do, because you need it. Sadly, it's not just in films and TV programs that junior doctors sleep with their bosses, to win that promotion, and get that job. Why? Because when success is your idol you'll sacrifice for it. And you'll place your family, or your health, or your integrity on its altar. Because you need this to feel ok about life.

And yet here is Paul, apparently unconcerned about being shunted into a siding for 2 or more years. Now, as one driven guy to another, how does he do that?

But the fourth and final idol I think Paul's trials highlight is the idol of freedom. Paul is no longer free. It's not just that he's not in control, now he's contained, he's chained, he's restricted. Now, how would you respond if that was you? You see, if freedom is your idol – you need to be able to do what you want to do, go where you want to go, live as you want to live, and not be hemmed in, for life to be right; if you were Paul, you'd be in trouble now, wouldn't you? His chains would chafe you, and not just physically.

And of course the danger of freedom as your idol, is that you will become more and more closed in and locked in by your pursuit of freedom, as more and more stuff is sacrificed for it. And yet Paul is untroubled by it all.

How? How come Paul responds the way he does? How is he able to accept the disapproval of others, the loss of control, the prospect of being side-lined and the curtailment of his freedom without his life collapsing?

What is it that can give a guy like Paul the kind of poise and settled confidence in the midst of trial and difficulty that he displays here?

Well, obviously, these things weren't idols for him. But what Paul says in his defence tells us where his confidence was coming from when life was out of control. And it's the two things he admits to in his defence: that he is a follower of the Way, and his belief in the resurrection.

Trials and Jesus

Now, having heard all that Tertullus has said against him, and knowing the character of the judge, Felix, who's hearing his trial, how Paul opens his defence is remarkable. Verse 10: "Knowing that for many years you have been judge over this nation, I *cheerfully* make my defense." Cheerfully! Paul is untroubled, in fact, he knows a measure of joy, and gladness, and cheerfulness, in what he faces. Why?

Because Paul knows that it's not Tertullus or Felix who are in control here, it's Christ.

First, Paul denies having stirred up any trouble, but then he admits something: v14, "But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of my fathers."

Now the Way was simply a name that the early church called themselves – to be a follower of the Way was to be a Christian, because Jesus said he was the Way, and the Truth and the Life. Now every other religion says, 'do this or that, obey these rules, do these practices, and you'll find the way'. Or liberal secularism says, 'throw off all these rules, and you'll find the way'. Or self-help gurus tell you, 'be yourself, look inside yourself and you'll find the way'. But Christ came and said, I am the Way, follow me. And that's what Paul had done. He had put his hand into the hand of Christ to lead him.

In 1939, 3 months after the start of the second world war, with invasion by Nazi Germany a seeming certainty, King George VI made his Christmas Day radio broadcast. And in it he made famous a quote from Minnie Haskin's poem, *God Knows*. "I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown." And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way." So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night."

And Paul's gladness in the night of trial came from having done just that. He had yielded control of his life, not to Tertullus and the Jewish priests, not to Felix, but to Jesus. He had put his trust in Christ, the Way, as the one who could lead him through life with all its difficulties.

And when you do that, it radically alters the way you see trials. When you know that Christ is the one directing your way, it totally changes the way you see

difficulties. Because you know that he is the one who loved you enough to die for you, therefore he will not allow anything to happen to you that is not according to his loving purpose. You know, as the patriarch Joseph knew, that even what others mean for evil in your life, God turns for your good. You know that in all things –even trials and suffering – God works for the good of those who love him.

And knowing that God is in control when life seems to be spinning out of control can make you happy without making you proud. It can make you bold, without making you arrogant. And it can make you confident, without the need to flatter or bribe.

But the second thing Paul admits to is his belief in the resurrection.

Trials and the Hope of Glory
Verse 15: "Having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust."

And having a firm hope in the future resurrection, of which Jesus' resurrection was the first fruits, has the power to transform the way you see trials and suffering in this life, because you know this life is not all there is. So you can endure the pain and the sorrow of trial here and now, because you know that resurrection day is coming.

And resurrection day will be the day when everything is put right, and everything made new.

And it's reward day. You see, the problem with idols is that they make you these promises of approval and love, and power and control, and success and freedom, but ultimately they sell you short. But if like Paul, God is your God, and you are looking to the hope of the coming resurrection, then you know that is when the true rewards come, that's when the promise is fulfilled, when Jesus says, 'well done good and faithful servant, come and enter the joy of your master.' And living for resurrection day keeps you from living for the false promises of gratification now, and instead you live for the lasting joy of all eternity.

But finally, Paul doesn't just say resurrection of the just, he says resurrection of the just *and the unjust*. And if resurrection day will be reward day for those who trust Jesus, it will also be judgement day for those who refuse him. Which is why Paul talks to Felix about the coming judgment. And knowing that justice will be done can nail your need to take out your enemies, your Tertulluses, in this life. You don't need to avenge yourself, you don't need to get even or respond with anger and hate. You know that it's not just *your* future that is in God's hands, so is everyone's. Which is why Paul took the opposition of others, not as a chance to get even, but as another opportunity to tell them about Jesus.

Let's do the same.