

“Let the Will of the Lord Be Done” (Acts 21:1-23:11)

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If you're joining us today for the first time, I'm glad you're here. You'll find that in this church, there's one thing we really try to focus on, and that is what God has revealed in his written Word, the Bible. We believe that the Bible isn't just an old book; it's also God's words to us, to let us know who he is, what he's like, what he expects of us, and how we can have a relationship with him. The Bible also tells us who we are, what our problem is, and how that problem can be solved. The Bible tells us how we can live for God.

We believe that God wants to be known and that God made us to know him. That's why God created us: to know him, to love him, and to worship him. But, from the beginning, humans have turned away from God. And the big story of the Bible is how God calls us back to himself.

We've been studying the book of Acts for the last six months. Acts is the story of what happened after Jesus lived on this earth, died on the cross, and was raised from the grave. Acts is the story of how the message of Christianity spread from Jerusalem, the chief city of the Jews, throughout the Roman Empire. Acts gives us a sense of how God makes himself known in this world. In order to know God, we need to know who Jesus is and what he's done for us. A lot of the action in the book of Acts concerns the apostle Paul, Jesus' specially commissioned messenger. Today, we're going to see what happens to Paul when he returns to the city of Jerusalem.

But before we do that, I want us to imagine something. Imagine that we live in a time when religious freedom is more restricted. Imagine that saying certain things in public, like telling people they are sinners, is illegal. Imagine that Jesus appeared to you today, in a vision or a dream, and asked you to go to Boston. Imagine that he asked you to go to some very public places: up Beacon Hill to the State House, Boston Common, Quincy Market, Government Center. Imagine that he asked you to go to those places and preach. Would you do it?

What if Jesus told you to go into the State House to tell Charlie Baker and the legislature to turn away from their sins and turn to Jesus? What if Jesus told you to go to City Hall to tell Marty Walsh that message? What if Jesus said, “When you go to those places, there will be some trouble. You will get arrested. But you will not be harmed”? Would you go?

Imagine that Jesus said, “When you go to those places, and you tell the powers that be that they are unrighteous and that they need to turn from their sins and turn to me, you will be arrested and will stay in jail for four years. But your case will be brought before the Supreme Court, and because of all of this, many people will come to follow me.” Would you obey Jesus?

Christians, not all of us will be called to do such things. But though we may not all be preachers, we may be called to do things that will get us in trouble, simply because we’re obeying Jesus. If you’re here today and you’re not a Christian, that may not make much sense to you. But one thing you need to know is this: Following Jesus is more important than obeying any authority on earth. Proclaiming the message of Jesus is more valuable than political freedom. The apostle Paul certainly thought so.

Today, we’re looking at a long passage. It’s hard to slice it up into smaller sections, so here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to read the passage, bit by bit, explaining what is happening to Paul. And then, I’ll explain what all of this means for us.

So, let’s begin. Last week, Paul spoke to a group of church leaders from the city of Ephesus. And now we see that he travels to Jerusalem, but not before making some stops along the way. Let’s read Acts 21:1-6:

¹ And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. ² And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. ³ When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo. ⁴ And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. ⁵ When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed ⁶ and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.¹

Paul and his companions, including Luke, the author of Acts, sail through the Mediterranean Sea, eventually taking a cargo ship to the city of Tyre, about 100 miles or so north of Jerusalem. When Paul arrives there, he spends time with Christians, and he stays with them for a week. We’re told that “through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem.” Perhaps the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the one true God, told these Christians that when Paul got to Jerusalem, he would be arrested. And then perhaps they decided that, based on that revelation,

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Paul shouldn't go there. It's not clear. But we know that Paul journeyed on to Jerusalem, so he ignored their warning.

Let's see what happens next in verses 7-14:

⁷ When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. ⁸ On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. ⁹ He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. ¹⁰ While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" ¹² When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴ And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

Paul heads to Caesarea, a city about 70 miles north of Jerusalem. While there, Paul stays with Philip. We last heard about Philip in chapter 8, when he told the Ethiopian eunuch about Jesus. Now, we're told that he has four daughters who prophesy. While there, the prophet Agabus delivers a message to Paul. Agabus is the one who predicted that there would be a great famine (Acts 11:28). Here, he does a bit of performance art, which reminds us of what the Old Testament prophets would sometimes do, acting out a message (see 1 Kgs. 11:29-39; Isa. 20:1-6; Ezek. 4:1-17). Agabus shows Paul what will happen to him. Paul will be bound and handed over to the Gentiles. When people hear this message, they act like the Christians in Tyre. They tell Paul not to go ahead to Jerusalem. They don't think going to that city is so important.

Paul wanted to go to Jerusalem to deliver money to the Christians in Jerusalem, money that he had collected from Christians in other parts of the Roman Empire (Rom. 15:22-29). He wanted to do this because the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were most affected by the famine that Agabus had predicted. He also wanted to do this to bring some harmony to Jewish-Gentile relations.

To understand today's passage, we have to remember the tensions between Jews and Gentiles. From the time of Abraham, about two thousand years before Christ, God revealed himself almost exclusively to the Israelites. When Jesus came to earth, the land of the Jews, Judea, was under the rule of the Roman Empire and many Jews lived in different places throughout the Roman Empire. The Jews were different than the Gentiles. They had different

religious practices, and the Jews in Judea resented the occupying Roman forces. But when Jesus came and died for sins and rose from the grave, the good news about Jesus spread to Gentiles. Suddenly, the question became, What must Gentiles do to become Christians? There were also other questions about whether Jewish people needed to continue to observe the law that God had given to Moses. Because of all the tensions between Jews and Gentiles, Paul wanted the Gentile Christians to share material blessings with their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters in Jerusalem, because the gospel had come from that place (Rom. 15:28).

Delivery of this collection was so important that Paul was willing to risk his freedom by going to Jerusalem.

So, in the next several verses, we see Paul arrive in Jerusalem. Paul is received gladly by the Jewish Christians in that city. But they have heard misleading reports about what Paul was teaching. Let's read verses 15-26:

¹⁵ After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁶ And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge.

¹⁷ When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. ¹⁸ On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

¹⁹ After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, ²¹ and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. ²² What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. ²³ Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; ²⁴ take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. ²⁵ But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality."

²⁶ Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

When Paul arrives in the city, he is greeted by James and the other leaders of the church, who glorified God when they heard what "God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry." But there was a problem. There were a number of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who were zealous for the law of Moses. And these Jewish Christians heard that Paul was telling the Jews in

other places not to follow that law. Now, Paul had never said that. Paul taught that Gentiles didn't have to follow the law in order to become Christians. Also, the council in Jerusalem had decided that in order for Gentiles to become Christians, all they had to do was turn away from idolatry and turn in faith towards Jesus. And Jews no longer had to observe the law. But didn't Paul didn't tell them that they had to stop following the law. James and the elders were afraid that there would be a division in the church.

So, they come up with a plan. They say that there are four men who are under a Nazirite vow. These men needed to purify themselves at the end of their vow, and that meant going to the temple, offering up sacrifices, and shaving their heads (Num. 6:13-20). So the church leaders in Jerusalem tell Paul, "Pay for their sacrifices, and purify yourself, since you had been among Gentiles in foreign lands [the concept is found in Num. 19:12]. This will show the Jews that you are dedicated to the law."

Paul follows this plan. When the time of his purification ended, he went into the temple. When he did, some Jews from the province of Asia, men from Ephesus, claim that Paul brought a Gentile into the temple. If Paul had brought a Gentile into inner area of the temple, it would be a big offense. The temple was the center of worship. Only the high priest could go into the innermost part of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and only on one day of the year, the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). Priests could enter into the Holy Place. Then, there were courts of the Israelite men, and women, and finally the Gentiles could enter into the outermost court. There were signs on the wall that divided the Gentile worshipers from the Jews that warned that any Gentile who entered would be put to death.²

Let's see what happens when Paul is accused of bringing a Gentile into the temple. We'll first read verses 27-30:

²⁷ When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, ²⁸ crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." ²⁹ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. ³⁰ Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran

² The sign read, "No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for what follows—death." Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 654.

together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut.

Trophimus is mentioned in chapter 20 (v. 4) as one of Paul's companions. Jews from Ephesus who were in Jerusalem worshiping saw that Trophimus had been with Paul in a different part of the city. But Paul didn't bring Trophimus into the temple. At any rate, this false charge caused a commotion, and Paul was dragged out of the temple.³

Let's read verses 31-36 to see what happens next:

³¹ And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. ³² He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. ³³ Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. ³⁴ Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. ³⁵ And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, ³⁶ for the mob of the people followed, crying out, "Away with him!"

The crowd at the temple wants to kill Paul. When the tribune, the leader of Roman soldiers in the city, hears that there is a mob forming, he brings soldiers quickly to the temple. The Roman Empire wanted to maintain order, so they were quick to put an end to riots. The tribune doesn't know what the commotion is about, but it looks like Paul is responsible, so Paul is arrested and brought into the barracks of the fortress on the edge of the temple compound.⁴

After Paul is arrested, he asks the tribune if he can speak to his fellow Jews, now that the commotion has died down. Let's read verses 37-39:

³⁷ As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek?" ³⁸ Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?" ³⁹ Paul replied, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people."

³ The gates of the temple shutting may be a real event that has symbolic meaning. The gospel was barred from the temple, the place of Jewish worship. Since this is likely AD 57, and the destruction of Jerusalem would occur in AD 70, the temple was nearing its demise. It certainly had been rendered obsolete with Jesus' ultimate sacrifice on the cross and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers, making the church the temple of God.

⁴ Notice how "Away with him!" echoes Luke 23:18. So much of what happens to Paul is reminiscent of what happened to Jesus. Yet there are some differences. Paul doesn't die in Jerusalem. And though Jews want to do him harm, he is rescued by the Romans, not put to death by them. (Though Paul did die for the faith about eight to ten years later.)

The tribune is surprised that Paul knows Greek. He then assumes that Paul was an Egyptian man who had caused trouble a few years earlier. This man tried to lead a rebellion of thousands of people. When the Romans found out, they killed four hundred of these rebels and their Egyptian leader escaped. The tribune wanted to make sure that Paul wasn't this man. But Paul says that he is from Tarsus, not Egypt, and he asks to speak to the people.

Before we read Paul's speech, I just want to point out a few things. One, Paul speaks in Aramaic, the language of the Jews of that time. The tribune doesn't appear to speak this language. Two, Paul retells the story of how he became a Christian. Since we've already heard that in Acts 9, I'm not going to explain the whole story again. Three, Paul points out how very Jewish he is. He is trying to show the crowd that what he taught was the extension of Judaism, not something contrary to the "God of our fathers." So now, let's read Acts 21:40-22:21:

⁴⁰ And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:

¹ "Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you."

² And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:

³ "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. ⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, ⁵ as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶ "As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. ⁷ And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' ⁸ And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' ⁹ Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. ¹⁰ And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.' ¹¹ And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.

¹² "And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³ came to me, and standing by me said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. ¹⁴ And he said, 'The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; ¹⁵ for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'

¹⁷“When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸ and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ ¹⁹ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. ²⁰ And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.’ ²¹ And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

Again, Paul shows how thoroughly Jewish his background is. Though he was born in Tarsus, he was raised in Jerusalem, and he studied with the rabbi, Gamaliel (Acts 5:34). He says that he was so zealous, he persecuted Christians, because he thought they were idolaters or blasphemers. In this story, he also mentions Ananias, the Jewish Christian whom he met in Damascus after he converted. He points out that Ananias was “a devout man according to the law” and was “well spoken of by all the Jews.” Ananias even referred to “the God of our fathers,” showing that they worshiped the God of Israel. Later, Paul says that he saw Jesus in the temple, showing that Jesus is not contrary to the God of Israel. In fact, Jesus is the Righteous One of Israel.

Paul also seems to suggest that all the Jews who want to persecute him because he’s a Christian can become like him. They, too, can put their faith in Jesus. They, too, can be baptized and be washed of their sins.

But the Jews here don’t seem to be interested. In fact, when they hear the word “Gentile” at the end of verse 21, they can’t listen to Paul anymore. They call for his death. Let’s read about their response in verses 22-29:

²² Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.” ²³ And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, ²⁴ the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this. ²⁵ But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, “Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?” ²⁶ When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen.” ²⁷ So the tribune came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” And he said, “Yes.” ²⁸ The tribune answered, “I bought this citizenship for a large sum.” Paul said, “But I am a citizen by birth.” ²⁹ So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.

The tribune doesn't understand what has happened because he doesn't speak Aramaic. So he doesn't understand why the crowd has reacted the way it has. Because he doesn't understand, he figures the best way to get information is to torture Paul, the apparent troublemaker. He is about to have Paul flogged, which involved getting whipped by a torture device that had a wooden handle with straps of leather that had bits of metal or bone on the end. Such a flogging could permanently maim or kill someone. But at that moment, Paul informs him that he is a Roman citizen. It was illegal for a Roman citizen to be tortured without a trial. In fact, Paul had a higher status than the tribune, since Paul was a Roman citizen by birth, whereas the tribune had bought his citizenship. Since it was illegal to do that, he must have bought his citizenship with a bribe. At any rate, because Paul was a Roman citizen, he deserved a trial, not mob violence or torture.

But since the tribune still doesn't know what's happening, he has the Sanhedrin, the council of Jewish leaders meet with Paul. Let's read about that in 22:30-23:5:

³⁰ But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them.

¹ And looking intently at the council, Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day." ² And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. ³ Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?" ⁴ Those who stood by said, "Would you revile God's high priest?" ⁵ And Paul said, "I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"

Paul begins to speak to the council. He tells them he has always lived a life before God according to his conscience. But when he does that, the high priest, Ananias, tells someone to hit Paul on the mouth. This shouldn't surprise anyone who knows Ananias. He had a reputation for being a corrupt priest, and he certainly was unlike the other Ananias in chapter 22, the one in Damascus who was devout. Paul doesn't know that Ananias is the high priest, so he explodes. He says, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!" That reminds us of when Jesus called the Pharisees whitewashed tombs (Matt. 23:27). They looked good on the outside, but were spiritually dead on the inside. Paul probably gets this idea from the prophet Ezekiel. During Ezekiel's day, God told the false prophets that they smeared whitewash on walls that were about to crumble (Ezek. 13:8-16). Paul may be saying that the old way of Judaism was about to

crumble. He says that they accuse him of not obeying the law, but they are the ones breaking the law because they aren't giving him a fair trial (cf. Lev. 19:15).

When Paul is told that he has spoken this way to the high priest, however, he admits that he was wrong. He quotes Exodus 22:28, which says that rulers shouldn't be cursed by their people. Paul demonstrates that he is the righteous one who is willing to observe the law, while the Jews who were opposed to him didn't mind bending the laws to deal with him.

After this incident, Paul has his chance to speak to the council. He makes a shrewd move. He is able to testify to the resurrection, which is a central part of the Christian message. Though he doesn't get the chance to talk about Jesus' resurrection, surely that's where he was going. Paul's move here is shrewd because it divides the council among themselves. By doing that, Paul is able to go into Roman custody. If he were put on trial by the Jews, his life might end in Jerusalem. Let's read verses 6-10:

⁶ Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial."⁷ And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.⁸ For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.⁹ Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, "We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?"¹⁰ And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.

Again, Paul testifies that he is thoroughly Jewish. He is a Pharisee. However, not everyone present is a Pharisee. The majority of the Sanhedrin were Sadducees, which was another sect of Judaism. They only accepted the first five books of the Bible as Scripture, and they didn't believe that at the end of time, the dead would be raised to life and the righteous would live forever with God. But the Pharisees believed that, and the Christian message teaches this. So Paul says that is being put on trial because he is teaching about "the hope and the resurrection of the dead." This move causes another commotion. The Pharisees say Paul is innocent, but the Sadducees don't agree. There is threat of another riot. In order to protect Paul, a Roman citizen, the tribune takes him away and brings him back to the barracks.

It's clear throughout this passage that Paul is following in the footsteps of Jesus. He gets into trouble at the temple and a crowd of Jews say, "Away with this man!" He is put on trial in front of the Sanhedrin and is about to be killed. But unlike Jesus, Paul doesn't die at the hands of Jews, and he doesn't die in Jerusalem.

At the very end of this passage, Jesus appears to Paul again, and tells him to be brave. Let's read verse 11:

¹¹ The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."

Jesus tells Paul that Paul did his job. Paul testified to Jesus in Jerusalem, and he would have the opportunity to do that in Rome. We'll see over the next few weeks how Paul gets to the most important city in the Roman Empire.

Well, that's a long story, you may be thinking. Interesting history and all. But what does that have to do with us?

One, this story shows that Paul was willing to endure anything to serve Jesus. He endured beatings, imprisonment, and, eventually, even death. All so he could do what Jesus wanted him to do. If you are a Christian, are you willing to do this?

If you're not a Christian, you should consider why anyone would be willing to risk freedom and even life for their beliefs. You should also consider this question: What are you willing to die for?

Two, Paul made a defense for himself (22:1). If you're a Christian, how would you defend yourself if your faith got you in trouble with the authorities? What would you say if your beliefs put you into conflict with others?

Some Christians are already experiencing that reality in America. Some Christians are facing pressure because they are living out their faith in public. Perhaps the better question is not: What would you do if you were put on trial for your faith? Perhaps the better question is: Is there enough evidence to convict you of being a Christian? In other words, do you live out your beliefs to the extent that others can accuse you of being a follower of Jesus?

But if there is evidence against you that you're a Christian, what would you say if you were on trial? How would you speak so that your defense isn't so much a defense of you but a defense of the Christian faith?

Perhaps there will come a day when I'm put on trial for being a preacher. Perhaps someone will accuse me of hate speech because I say that certain things are sins and are therefore morally wrong. If that happened, I would say that as a Christian, I'm a good citizen. I pay taxes. I obey the laws. I do these things because my faith tells me to. I would also appeal to the First Amendment. Paul appealed to the laws of the land, and we can, too. However, if the laws of the land come into conflict with the law of Christ, we must obey Jesus.

There's a lot I could say to testify to the truth of Christianity. But the point I would probably make is that Christianity is actually the most tolerant religion, worldview, or philosophy. It says that God has made all human beings in his image. Because we are God's unique creations, we should treat all others with respect and dignity. That doesn't mean I should agree with everyone else. That doesn't mean I can't speak the truth. But it means that I won't use force to get someone to agree with me. In other words, because Christians recognize that every person is made in God's image and worthy of respect, and that we should love even those who are our enemies, Christianity is actually the religion of tolerance. I would testify that all kinds of people—people from all different backgrounds, different countries, different skin colors, different ages, and different religions—have become Christians. Christianity is the true religion of peace.

But I would also say that I preach about sin not because a few people are sinners, and we hate them. No, I would say that all of us are sinners and all of us need to turn from our sin and to Jesus. That applies to everyone, not a particular class of people.

That might not get me out of trouble. But even if I were to face penalties, Jesus would be with me every step of the way, just as he was with Paul. Jesus was with Paul when he was on the road to Damascus, when he was at the temple, when he was in chains, and when he was in prison. The same is true for all of us, regardless of what we face. Jesus is with his people when they're at work, or in the courthouse, or the hospital. He with us always, in every circumstance, whether it's legal trouble, bad health, or anything else we may go through in this life.

If you're not a Christian, I want to thank you for being here and for listening. I want to make one more point for you. Paul was a man who persecuted Christians. He had them arrested. He cheered when a Christian died. He was opposed to Jesus. But Jesus turned Paul around. Paul was forgiven of everything wrong he had ever done. He was cleansed of his sin. The same can be true for you. You're no worse than Paul. And you're no better, either. You were made to know

God. You were made to worship him. And, if you don't have a relationship with Jesus, you don't know God and you're not truly worshipping him. And if you're not connected to Jesus, you will end this life without hope and without help. No politician, no amount of money, no good deeds will put you in God's good graces. But Jesus was treated like a criminal and he was put to death, even though he was innocent. He did that so that people like you and me, people who aren't morally perfect and innocent, can go free. Anyone who turns to Jesus can be like Paul, forgiven of his sins and unafraid to face the world, no matter what.