

Talk – Acts 22:30-23:35 – The Death Plot

Outline

Belief shapes what you do – take courage in Jesus

Defence Speech #2

Lesson Number 1: Hope in the Resurrection matters

‘Someday you will read or hear that Billy Graham is dead. Don’t you believe a word of it. I shall be more alive than I am now. I will just have changed my address. I will have gone into the presence of God.’

The Death Plot

Lesson Number 2: What we believe shapes what we do

Belief:

_____ **belief**

_____ **belief**

_____ **belief**

Take Courage

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Bible Reading/s

Acts 22:30-23:35

1 Corinthians 15:1-19

Central Truth

Belief shapes what you do – take courage in Jesus.

Purpose

In this sermon, I want my hearers to recognise that what you believe shapes what you do – and to Take Courage in living for Jesus.

CHECK TIME

Talk

Prayer

Dear Lord and Father,

‘Take Courage’ Jesus said to Paul. And indeed in Paul we see a man who testified under pressure to the hope and certainty he had, in what you have done, in raising the dead.

It is a hope that all should have as all die, but a hope that is often ignored or rejected.

Help us now, as we look at this account in Acts, to neither ignore or reject what is described – but instead to pay careful attention to what you have to say.

And help me to teach this passage well holding out your resurrection hope.

By your spirit, in Jesus, AMEN.

Belief shapes what you do – take courage in Jesus

- In my past I have had the privilege of doing a bit of youth work.
- And I want to tell you about a day when I took a youth group abseiling.
- 100 metre cliff, lots of kids – various levels of bravado.
- Lunch at the bottom – so a trade-off fear heights verse fear of starvation.
- One of the kids who was a bit of a bully hanging over the edge and freezing.
- Some one of the other kids whom he had often picked on, climbed out onto the ledge, shoulder to shoulder and asked – ‘Do you believe that I want to help you?’
- With nowhere to go, he eventually said ‘Yes’

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- And so his younger smaller mate said: ‘Take my hand’ and bit by bit they edged down the cliff and went to lunch!
- Tonight if there is only one thing that you take away from Acts 23 – then let it be this: **Belief shapes what you do – take courage in Jesus.**

Defence Speech #2

- Allow me to remind us of where we are in Acts.
- We are looking at the final section of the Acts of the Apostles – from Chapter 21 to the end.
- The Apostle Paul is under arrest - an mob of Jews had removed Paul from the temple court and were trying to kill him – their claim was that Paul was against their religion – because he was apparently speaking against his own Jewish people, their laws and their temple.
- To his rescue came the Roman Authorities – who eager to keep the peace, and not understanding the religious issue – had first removed Paul from the angry mob, and then having allowed Paul to address the people, had to rescued him again seemingly for his own protection.
- And so, at the end of Acts 22 – we find Paul in jail – and the Sanhedrin being called to hear his case.
- The Sanhedrin in the New Testament means ‘sitting together’ and that was what it was – in each major city, the Jews would have a ruling council or assembly (of up to about 70 people) who met to discuss matters of faith and practice.
- It wasn’t a law court – so it did not have justification over the state matters – which is why any criminal or civil issue would often have to be referred to the secular authorities of the city – which in Jerusalem was the Romans.
- That is why, both Jesus and Paul – find themselves before the governors and kings (or Caesars) – in the lead up to their deaths. You see, to send someone to their death was a capital punishment – the Sanhedrin could determine that someone was a heretic, but they could not pronounce the death penalty – that would be depend upon the Romans.

Illustration

- This is a bad comparison, but most denominations today have a ruling body – eldership, synod, general council – or the like – which gathers together representatives from around its region.

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- As members of the Anglican Church in Adelaide – we have SYNOD which meets annually. It has some say over church faith and practice but not over the laws of the land.
- Back to the Sanhedrin – it was made up of Sadducees and Pharisees.
 - To understand the difference. Sadducees were primarily concerned with matters relating to the temple (so if it had something to do with the running or order of the temple – then Sadducees would have an opinion).
 - Whilst the Pharisees were primarily concerned with matters relating to Jewish law and practice (so if it had to do with the way a Jew should live their lives day in and out, then the Pharisees would be the ones wanting to have a say).
 - They didn't always agree, as we will see – the same could be said today!
- So, Paul is brought before the Sanhedrin – and in Chapter 23, he begins his second defence speech.
 - It was short lived!
- Verse 1 'Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said. *'My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day'*
 - And with that – someone punches him in the mouth!
- You got to hope that Paul had not spent too much time preparing a long speech, because if that is the start, this is going to be a long day!
- It turns out that the High Priest had ordered that Paul be hit – perhaps he had already determined that Paul was guilty and so for Paul to claim that he had done everything in good conscience as a duty towards God – it would have sounded like blasphemy.
 - Paul reacts – quite strongly, by saying *'God will strike you, you whitewashed wall. You sit there to judge me according to your law, yet you violate the law by commanding that I be struck'*
 - Now remembering that over that last 12 hours or so, Paul has been...
 - beaten, arrested,
 - accused of being a terrorist
 - accused of being against Judaism, the law and the temple,
 - he was verbally abused,
 - strung up to be flogged,
 - thrown into jail and then
 - set before those who were calling for his death

you could probably cut him a little slack for reacting strongly against being punched in the face.

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- Be that as it may, I think the reason Luke records this incident is simply to draw out the point that those accusing Paul were being inconsistent, and really hypocritical in the way they were treating Paul.
- You accuse me of breaking the law, Paul suggests, but you have no problem breaking the law yourself.
 - I want us to come back to this inconsistency a little later – as we look at a lesson we can draw from this episode.
- Let's try and get this defence speech back on track – verse 6.
- Paul knowing that some of the council were Sadducees and other Pharisees he starts his speech again *'My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead'*
- And with that a squabble breaks out.
- Two lines of defence – that is all that Paul is given.
 - First statement interrupted by a slap in the face and the second interrupted by a squabble – and that is the last that we hear from Paul in this defence.
- The squabble comes down to religion differences:
 - the Sadducees, don't believe in resurrection – in any form.
 - The Pharisees on the other hand are happy to acknowledge that scripture speaks of a resurrection, and also speaks of angels and spirits.
- Paul presents a problem to them – he is proclaiming that he believes that there is a resurrection (not just that of Jesus, but of resurrection in general) – and he knows that because he heard it from a dead man who was resurrected (some would say an angel or a spirit). We know he heard it from Jesus himself.
- The Pharisees would be rejecting their own doctrine if they disagreed with Paul!
- Whereas for the Sadducees they cannot accept what he has just said because they would have to reject what they stood for – a house divided!
- The Pharisees, find themselves defending Paul saying (verse 9) *'We find nothing wrong with this man'*. Remarkable, because we would not be here had it not been for the Pharisees accusing Paul of doing wrong!
- You can imagine what the Roman authorities must be thinking as they watch this unfold – bonkers.

Illustration

- Imagine you join a board in the company you work for.
- And you enter the Board room to find that everyone on the board is convinced that the company has to move forward, but there is a clear division of which way forward!

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- So, the company divides and goes in two different directions – neither of which is sustainable – so both fold.
- What they believe shapes what to do!
- For Paul’s own safety, given the dispute got so violent, the Romans rescue him a third time and return him to the barracks.

Lesson Number 1: Hope in the Resurrection matters

- Okay here is the first lesson for us today.
- Even though Paul says very little here – it is clear that to him, **hope in the resurrection matters.**
- There are three defence speeches to come – in each, Paul speaks of the resurrection.
- For the audience he has before him now, largely Jews, this hope is actually their hope.
 - Their Old Covenant scriptures have pointed forward to a resurrection hope – a place where all the covenant people of God would rest after they died.
- Of all the New Testament writers Paul is very clear on the importance of the resurrection.
- Would you keep a finger or body part in Acts 23 and turn forward with me to 1 Corinthians 15 (page: 1139). Don’t let me leave you behind.

PAUSE

- Now here we see what motivates Paul. He knows Jesus as the resurrected Lord. He has seen Jesus, once dead, now living – and it is this reality which lies behind what he teaches.
 - 1 Corinthians 15:12 [*READ 1 Cor 15:12-19*]
- Paul questions, if Christ did rise from the dead, then how can *anyone* say that there is no resurrection at all (like what the Sadducees claimed).
- You see, you would be speaking rubbish!
 - if your aim was to encourage people to have a resurrection hope because of Jesus, but he in fact did not rise
 - you would be simply leading people astray
 - preaching is useless, faith is useless,
 - in fact your words are false, and what you have said (regardless of what God has said) is futile,
 - all those who have died holding to a resurrected hope are lost,

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- and believers in the resurrection today are to be pitied as fools!

- For Paul, the resurrection lies as an obvious result of what the Jews should have believed – from their own scriptures.
- But more than that, the resurrection was also the obvious result of what the Jews, Gentiles and Romans had witnessed in their lifetime - in what had happened to Jesus.

- Look at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15.
- Paul says – I want to remind you of the gospel, the good news which has saved you. Verse 3 [READ 1 Cor 15:3-9]
- Notice Paul says – this is what happened to Jesus...
 - He died – as scriptures said he would
 - He was buried – and after three days – he rose – also as scriptures said he would.
 - But if you don't trust scripture, then consider all the people that he appeared too after he died. Many of whom they would personally know.
 - Peter, the disciples, then five hundred men, then James, then the apostles and then Paul – my math says that is 513 men (not including the women and children we know he also appeared too)
 - That is a lot of people, who could confirm that a dead man was now alive.

- But place all that to the side for a moment.
- Paul has just called himself out. He has laid his cards on the table.
- He has preached as of first importance that Christ is living – he has preached that for the benefit of those who would believe.
- Now, in the face of opposition which is calling for his life – he is sticking to his story.
- What could he possibly gain by losing his life for a lie?

PAUSE

Illustration

- Sermons all around the world today will mention Billy Graham who went to glory this week aged 99.
- Billy Graham has been one of the most influential evangelists of the 20th century.
- And one of Billy's quotes that has been repeated over and over all week, is this: 'Someday you will read or hear that Billy Graham is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. I shall be more alive than I am now. I will just have changed my address. I will have gone into the presence of God.'

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- Billy Graham had in fact adapted that from a sermon given by Dwight L Moody – who was one of the most influential evangelists of the 19th Century.
- Both men stood unswervingly for what they believed.
- Both men preached a Resurrection Hope.
- Both men believed – and it shaped their lives right into death.

Application

- Friends, what place does the resurrection take in what you believe?
- You don't have to believe in Jesus for this question to still be relevant.
- What place does the resurrection take in what you believe?

PAUSE

The Death Plot

- Go back to Acts 23 – verse 12. Give that body part a rest.
- The next morning, the Jews formed a working group – a bunch of around 40 men made a vow that they would not eat or drink until they had killed Paul.
- They bring their death plot to the chief priests and elders from the Sanhedrin, who conspire with them to ambush Paul.
- Again, we see the inconsistency of the religious leaders. They did this to Jesus, and here they are in the thick of it concerning Paul.

- Somehow Paul's nephew hears about this plan and alerts Paul who sends him to the centurion who takes him to the Roman commander.
- And what we read next is the fourth rescue by the Romans as they send an escort of two hundred soldiers, and seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to take Paul to Caesarea under the cover of dark.
- Why listen to the report of a youth? – why send so many? – maybe it just indicates the respect that Paul now commands?
- Spare a thought for the men who hatched the death plot – they are going to be very hungry!

- With the escort, the commander sends a letter to Governor Felix.
 - The letter is total suck-up!
 - It gives a brief account of what has happened leaving out the parts where Paul has been treated badly and in fact presents what they have done for Paul in a much more admirable light.
 - What is key, is verse 29 – Claudius (the Roman Commandar), states that Paul is not deserving of death or imprisonment (at least under Roman law).

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- So, like his Lord, Paul is declared innocent – the first of numerous declarations (which you will see as we move through the following three trials).
- Chapter 23 finishes with Paul as a guest, under guard in Herod's palace.
- Ripping yarn isn't it?

Lesson Number 2: What we believe shapes what we do.

- Okay lesson number 2 – what we believe shapes what we do!
- To make this point, allow me to step us back a bit from Paul.
- In this account, we see the influence of belief on all the players in the story.
- In fact, I think it helps us to understand the place of belief in our world today.

- Often Christians talk about those who believe (us) and those who don't (them) – it is a contrast that often shows itself when we draw an unhelpful line in the sand and say – 'you're in and you're out'.

- May I suggest a little modification to the way we think about belief?
- Everyone does what they do because of belief.
- We all believe in something – what changes is the belief that we hold too. That which motivates what we do.
- Try this for size. Three different belief's:

First, there are many today who hold to what you could say is a **religious belief**.

- This is a belief that regulates the way that you view God (whomever he or she may be) and it shows itself in the way that we do what we do to 'keep God happy'.
- I think you see that in the way that the religious leaders in Acts are fighting to hold onto what they believe is right.
- For them, living according to tradition, custom, effort, law – all of which is aimed at obediently living so that they will be accepted by God when the time comes.
- You don't want to doubt their devotion – but what you will see is a damaging insecurity.
- Part of the reason why it is so difficult for them to accept that Jesus is the resurrected Lord and that through him and him only they are brought to God – it takes away from their ability to determine their own destiny and save themselves.

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- In the end, it exposes an inconsistency of belief – because what they each believe is determined by their religious practice as shown in the divide between the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Application

- Friends, it is very possible to be Christian today and yet still hold onto the error that your efforts are what earn your place with God.
- In a group this size, it is very possible that you consider yourself a Christian, and you base that upon what you do to earn favour with God.
- That is a religious belief, not a gospel belief.

Second – today there are also many who hold to an **irreligious belief**.

- This kind of belief does care about whether God exists or not.
- There is an apathy that is part of the way we live, that doesn't see any need to lift our eyes to anything bigger than what we know.
- An irreligious belief does not call for obedience to anything outside of oneself because it doesn't matter if God is there.
- I don't think it is that surprising that more and more people in our society might fall into this category – remove any teaching about God, or faith, or Jesus, or even religion from of the secular sphere and collectively we as a people lose our appreciation of anything or anyone who could be divine
– and instead we talk about mother nature, or ying and yang, and the goal of life becomes 'whatever makes me happy'.
- In our Acts account, the Romans have little understanding of the religious issues that are being presented by the Jews against Paul – they don't seem to care. Their desire is to keep the peace.
- What is good for you is good for you, and what is good for me is good for me, as long as we all get along – and if we don't then do what I say!!

Application

- Friends, can you recognise this is our world?
Perhaps, you can you recognise this in yourself?
- Anytime you place your rights or preferences before that of what is offered in the gospel, you have allowed an irreligious belief to shape you.

Third – there are those who hold to a **gospel belief**.

- This kind of belief is grounded totally in Christ.
- It recognises that regardless, Christ has accepted you.

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- It is a belief that sees Jesus for who he is – the resurrected Lord, who came and died,
not because that is what religion called for,
and certainly not because that is what the irreligious world asked for –
but because he wanted to call people to himself.
- So that when they die, like he did, they would also rise to life, like he did – for the purpose of bringing you to God.
- Gospel belief says – I am accepted in Christ, and so I will obey.
- That is what motivates Paul.
- You know, in Acts 23, why does Paul say he has fulfilled his duty to God in all good conscience – it is because he has a resurrection hope?
- He trusts Jesus – and knows that Jesus will carry him through whatever is to come – more suffering, more false claims, more opposition, more death plots – and if it happens – death itself.
- Have one last look at Acts 23 with me – to verse 11 – slam in the middle of chaos!
- After Paul has been wretched away from a violent council and right before he finds out there is a plan to kill him.
- Jesus appears. *[READ Acts 23:11]*
- ‘Take courage’
- Can you imagine, with everything going on around Paul – and bad as it seemed, what it would be like to have Jesus come and stand with him – and say ‘Take Courage’
- You have done what I asked – you have testified about me here, and I am sending you onto Rome so you can testify about me there – Take courage, you will make it through this.
- Paul knew there was more to come – because Jesus told him.

Application

- Friends, if you have a gospel belief, a belief that Jesus has done for you what you could not do yourself, then Take Courage.
- Whatever is in store, whatever is before you, no matter how bad – then if you are with Jesus, take his hand and Take Courage.
- Let your gospel belief shape the way you live.

Closing Prayer