

The Purposes of the Lord Will Stand

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Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 0 0] And so we come now to our Bible reading. So please do grab a Bible and turn to the New Testament to Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, chapter 25. Later on in the service, Paul Brennan will be preaching to us, carrying on his current series in these final chapters of this momentous book in the New Testament.

And we've seen the way that the risen and ascended Lord Jesus has been working powerfully through all things to get the apostle Paul, through many difficulties and trials, that little bit closer to Rome, where he had to go to proclaim the gospel.

Rome back then, of course, was a very strategic city in the ancient world. And with every chapter that goes by, every verse that goes by, Paul is moving closer and closer to that city.

And it's all because of the Lord Jesus. So let's read then, Acts 25, and we begin reading at verse 1. Hear the word of the Lord.

Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul.

[1 : 1 5] And they urged him, asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem, because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way.

Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea, and that he himself intended to go there shortly. So, said he, let the men of authority among you go down with me.

And if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him. After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea.

And the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove.

Paul argued in his defense, neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense. But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?

[2 : 3 7] But Paul said, I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well.

If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death.

But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar. Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, To Caesar you have appealed, to Caesar you shall go.

Now when some days had passed, Agrippa, the king, and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus. And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, There is a man left prisoner by Felix.

And when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face, and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him.

[4 : 0 0] So when they came together here, I made no delay. But on the next day, took my seat on the tribunal, and ordered the man to be brought.

When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. Rather, they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion, and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.

Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar.

Then Agrippa said to Festus, I would like to hear the man myself. Tomorrow, said he, you will hear him. Well, amen. And may God bless to us this, his word.

Well, please have that chat from Acts open in front of you. Spend a few moments together now thinking about this chapter together.

[5 : 19] Now, I wonder if you thought, as I did at the start of this week when I started preparing this, and as it was read out earlier, I wonder if you thought to yourself, here we go again.

Another government official, another trial for Paul, surely Luke, the writer of our account, has made his point by now. Surely.

This is the fourth time we've had Paul here in front of some sort of magistrate or governor. The fourth time, and there's more to come. Surely that's it.

Surely we've got the point by now. You might wonder, did Luke run out of energy as he was coming to the end of the Acts of the Apostles? Was he giving up editing as he got to this point?

We've seen this many times. Well, surely not. Luke has put together a very carefully ordered account for us. Every word counted.

[6 : 18] There were no mistakes. Nothing is left out or included by accident. It's all deliberate. So we need to ask, as we come to a passage like this, which seems very similar to some of the ones we looked at recently, why does Luke keep hammering away at the same point?

Why does he keep going on about Paul having to defend the gospel? Why include these repeated trial scenes? Well, I take it that we need to hear it.

And we need to hear these things again and again. It's no accident. The constant opposition that the gospel is often met with is not an easy reality to come to terms with.

It is uncomfortable. It's hard. And we are at odds with the culture in so many ways. We're at odds with our colleagues, our friends.

On key ethical issues, we are on the wrong side of history, they would say. And none of that, as Luke makes clear, is beyond the Lord's control.

[7 : 26] These chapters we're in the middle of here, these latter chapters of Acts, are a vivid illustration of Proverbs 19, verse 21. The writer there says, Many are the plans in the mind of man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.

It is the purpose of the Lord that will stand. And there are two things in particular the Lord has purposed for Paul here, and there is nothing that's going to stop them from coming to be.

The purpose of the Lord will stand. And the first of those purposes is the promise that we've mentioned already in the last few weeks. And it's the promise of Luke, chapter 21, verse 10, where Jesus says to his disciples, They will lay their hands on you.

They will persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness.

You'll be delivered up, even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends. And some of you, they will put to death. You will be hated for my name's sake.

[8 : 40] But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance, you will gain your lives. Those were Jesus' words to his disciples towards the end of Luke's gospel.

And that is one of those promises that we're seeing bared out here in these chapters of Acts. The Lord's promises will stand. That's the first. The second is the promise God made to Paul just a couple of chapters back.

Just look back with me to chapter 23, verse 11. This is a key promise for the last chapters of the book of Acts. This is after Paul has appeared before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

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

God promised Paul, you will go to Rome and testify about me there. And nothing is going to stop that from happening. That's what Luke is showing us here.

[9 : 47] The passage of time. The enemies of the gospel. Even human courts and magistrates. All those things are in God's control. And none of them are going to stop Paul from getting to Rome and declaring the gospel there.

Many are the plans of men. But it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand. That is the truth that Luke is hammering into our minds and our hearts over these few weeks.

We need to grasp it. The Lord is sovereign. He is in control. Perhaps we feel like we've been here before. We have. These last few weeks. We've heard these same truths. But this is where Luke is taking us.

And this is where we need to be. These are truths and realities that we need as God's people today to grasp. And lay hold of and cling to.

So three things we're going to see tonight. First, verses 1 to 3. Here's the first thing that Luke is showing us. He's showing us the tireless enemies of the gospel that we'll need to endure.

[10:53] The tireless enemies of the gospel that we'll need to endure. Now look back one verse to the end of chapter 24. And just notice there.

It says, When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Portius Festus. And desiring to the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

It's been two years since Paul was in Jerusalem and then taken to Caesarea. Two years since the plot to kill Paul was uncovered. Two years that Paul's been left imprisoned by Felix.

Two years have passed. And yet, the enemies of Paul are still seething. They're still plotting. Just look at the first few verses here of chapter 25.

Two years have passed. And Festus has taken charge as governor. Now three days after Festus arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul.

[11:55] They urged him, asking as a favor against Paul that he might summon him to Jerusalem. Because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way.

It's exactly the same tactic that they were trying to get away with two years ago in chapter 23. Lure Paul back to Jerusalem and kill him on the way.

You see, the enemies that Paul had, they were unceasing. They were tireless in their opposition to him. They hadn't forgotten Paul. And they still wanted him dead. They wanted him gone.

And the Jewish leaders, they saw their opportunity. Start of verse 2 with the arrival of the new governor, Festus. He's not even a week into the job.

And the Jewish leaders, along with some of the leading Jews in the city, they try to work up a good working relationship with him. And savvy as they are, they realize this is the moment to realize their ambitions against Paul.

[12:57] The governor, they reason, is hardly likely to kick up a fuss. This early on in his governorship over some prisoner who's been there for two years.

And so, they urge him to send Paul down to Jerusalem. They ask it as a favor, verse 3. But their real motive, of course, is that they want him dead.

And we're seeing here not only the reality of the existence of Paul's enemies. We've seen that before. But we're seeing the depths of the hatred towards the man.

Theirs was an opposition that did not fade with the passage of time. Theirs was an opposition that was determined and tireless. And that comes as no great surprise to us if we've read through Acts before.

At every step along the way, there are enemies of the gospel. And Luke is teaching us, again and again, to be realistic about that reality.

[14:02] He is teaching us to expect such opposition to, at times, be tireless and determined. Even years may pass, but that hostility is still there.

But that's not just a Luke reality. You don't just find this in Acts. This is a Bible reality. And the Bible is clear that behind those who oppose the gospel here and now today, there is another enemy.

A bitter enemy of God and an enemy of the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, who died and rose again. An enemy of the message of repentance and faith.

An enemy that humanity first encountered in the Garden of Eden. An enemy that spoke lies and deceived. The enemy is called Satan.

And God promised, even then, that there would be enmity. That is, ongoing hostility. There would be enmity between him, between Satan and God's people.

[15:09] Particularly between God's promised Savior and all those who follow him. And all through human history, that enmity has been bubbling away.

And it erupts onto the page of human history all the time. It's all over the Bible. You read it through. All the time there's opposition cropping up, bubbling away. And it's determined. It's persistent. Opposition. And the experience of Paul and the early church that we're reading about here, and all God's people living through every age, is that that hostility and opposition will continue to be the earthly experience of God's people. Because we are engaged in an ancient battle against spiritual enemies. A battle that's going to bubble up on the page of human history all the time. And that is a Bible reality. But we also know that this great opponent of the gospel, we know that Satan is a defeated enemy.

[16:17] That is what Jesus' death and resurrection achieved and declared. But the Bible also teaches that this enmity, this hostility, it will endure until Christ returns and brings that final judgment.

Until that point, this enmity will exist. But even though that is the case, even though that enmity will persist until Christ returns, Luke is also teaching us that these enemies do not have the last laugh. You see, God's plans and purposes cannot be sidetracked or taken by surprise by enemies of the gospel. In fact, what we see here in the book of Acts is that Paul's enemies, through their plots, through their schemes, they only seek to propel Paul towards his final destination, his goal. The actions of his enemies only seek to push Paul towards Rome, not away from it. And so we see that God uses the persistence, the determined attacks of the enemy to further his great plans to bring salvation to the world.

And that is a great encouragement, isn't it? That's what we're seeing in these last chats of Acts. Despite that determined opposition, each of those moments is actually pushing Paul towards Rome.

[17:52] Satan thought he had struck the ultimate blow to the seed of the woman when he nailed Jesus to the cross. But even that, even that moment, the most devastating of blows only served God's purposes.

For his death on the cross, Jesus brought salvation to millions, billions, by dying and paying the price for sin. You see, it was not in spite of the greatest injustice against Jesus that God achieved his work of atonement, but through it, through those very acts of injustice.

That's how God was achieving his plans. It's just what the Apostle Peter says in Acts chapter 3 as he speaks about the crucifixion of Jesus. He says to those listening, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your rulers, but what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that as Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled.

God's plans wouldn't be thwarted, even by the hardest of enemies. You see, God works through the intentional and ignorant hostility of man towards his people.

He uses it for his own purposes. And so we would do well to grasp hold of God's providence when things seem to be very much against us, when the enemy seems hard on our face.

[19:28] Remember, God is sovereign. He is provident. Nothing's going to stop his plans and purposes coming to be. And in the end, in the end, the enemies of the gospel will be brought to justice.

And we will see in all its glorious technicolor and detail, we'll see what God was doing all the way. We'll see what he was doing in those moments that seemed darkest and most despairing. We'll see it. We'll see what God was doing and it'll be beautiful and wonderful. But for the moment, here and now, we don't have that privilege, that perspective yet.

One day we will. One day we'll see what God was up to. As we can see what God was up to here with Paul, we got that great privilege of seeing what he was doing.

But for the moment, our task is to trust God, to trust him. In light of what we see here in Acts, we can trust him.

[20:35] If God can do this, if he's sovereign, even in moments like this, then we can trust him. And it's a wonderful comfort when we have our eyes open to that great reality that we can trust God.

Especially in a time of great personal pain and darkness and struggle. When we feel that enmity we've talked about, when we feel that, to know that however evil things may seem to us, that God is at work in it all.

He's never out of his control. He's never lost sight of what's going on. And even through our darkest days, he is performing his wonders. And that's a great comfort, isn't it?

And that's what Luke's showing us in these opening verses. Imagine how Paul would have felt after all those years in prison, the enemy's still there. And that's the first thing Luke's showing us, the tireless enemies of the gospel that we'll need to endure.

But we can trust God through it. Second, look at verses 4 to 12. And we see here the line of defense that it's sometimes right to take.

[21 : 47] The line of defense that it's sometimes right to take. Now despite the best efforts of the Jewish leaders, Festus, verses 4 and 5, plays a pretty straight bat to their request to bring Paul back to Jerusalem.

He thinks about their request, but he says, no, you're going to have to come up to Caesarea and I'll hear the matter there. And some days later, verse 7, they're back in Caesarea and the tribunal takes place.

Now although we don't get the detail about what the charges were brought against Paul, other than that Luke notes that they were serious charges, we do get some idea of what was being brought against Paul by the brief outline we have of Paul's defense there in verse 8.

He says, neither against the law of the Jews nor against the temple nor against Caesar have I committed any offense. So it seems to be the same old charges against Paul.

We've seen this already week after week in the previous chapters. It's the same old things being brought up. Paul denies any wrongdoing on any charge.

[22 : 58] No case to answer. Now that should really have been the end of the matter. But Festus, despite generally being regarded as one of the better governors of the era, in the end he bows to the pressure from the Jewish hierarchy and he refuses to release Paul.

And in a bid to curry favor of the Jews, he tries to suggest, verse 9, moving the trial back to Jerusalem. Now to have agreed to Festus' suggestion would have been to sign a death warrant for himself and Paul had no intention of doing that.

He knew what the Jews were up to and there was no way he was going back to Jerusalem. And so in a spirited and forthright protest, verses 10 and 11, he appeals to Caesar.

It's the prerogative of any Roman citizen that when his rights are threatened, he can appeal to Caesar. And Festus has no option. He has to grant the request.

Verse 12. To Caesar you have appeals, says Festus. To Caesar you shall go. Now sometimes Christians are concerned about Paul's attitude in this matter.

[24 : 16] Why go to Caesar? But remember that God had already indicated to Paul that he should bear witness in Rome.

And remaining silent at this point, for Paul just to step back and just go with the flow, that would certainly have meant that Paul would never have reached the capital. He would never have got to Rome.

The cause of the gospel itself was under threat here. And Paul was absolutely right to employ all legitimate means to make sure that he got to the goal that God had for him.

To ensure that he got to Rome. And to go back to Jerusalem, well that would have been the end.

Paul was right to use the legal rights available to him in order to defend the cause of the gospel.

And for us, there will be times when it is right for us to exercise our legal rights in order to defend ourselves so that the gospel can continue to be proclaimed.

[25 : 20] That is a right thing to do. We currently have more legal protections than we perhaps realize. Despite what the mob on Twitter would want to shout down, we can say more than we think we can say, I think.

And so let's be brave to share our viewpoints on a whole range of matters and be prepared to seek legal protections if we need it. It's not wrong to do that.

The law is there to protect our freedoms at the moment and we should make use of that. It's not wrong to do that. We shouldn't hesitate to seek recourse to the law if it's necessary to do so, to prevent an injustice or to prevent the gospel being proclaimed.

That's why we support the work of the Christian Institute and other similar organizations, both in terms of their work to seek to influence and shape government legislation, but also the way in which it seeks to take up particular legal cases defending Christians on a whole range of matters.

That is the right thing to do. Here, in Acts, Paul is availing himself of the legal protections available to him and he appeals to Caesar and his course is set for Rome.

[26 : 47] But not before he has an opportunity to testify before yet another significant figure. This is our third and final point this evening.

Verses 13 to the end, we see the opportunities to testify that Jesus promises. By the end of this section, verse 22, although Paul isn't present at this point, he is granted an audience with King Agrippa.

Notice verse 22. The following day, Agrippa is going to hear Paul. Now, we'll look at that encounter next week.

But for now, let's make the simple observation that Paul has been given yet another opportunity to testify just as Jesus promised he would. Jesus said, as we mentioned earlier, that you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake.

This will be your opportunity to testify, to bear witness. And that is what we've been shown in these chapters time and time again. First, before the mob in Jerusalem, then the Jewish council, then before Felix, and then Festus, a Gentile ruler, and now before King Agrippa, the king of the Jews.

[28 : 13] Before governors and kings, Paul is being given opportunity after opportunity to bear witness just as Jesus promised. And while in many ways, Paul's circumstances were trying and frustrating and really very hard, in terms of the big picture, he was being given wonderful opportunities here to witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

It is just what Jesus promised would be the case. It's just what was revealed to Ananias, remember, back in chapter nine. Ananias is told about the chap Saul, who's just had the Damascus grow conversion.

And here's what the Lord says to Ananias. He says, go, go and see Paul, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel, for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

And Paul takes those opportunities to testify before Gentiles and kings. And we'll see that next week. one of the longest recorded speeches of Paul in the book of Acts.

We'll see that next week before Agrippa. Paul, as he's done everywhere he's gone, testifies to Jesus. This wasn't a disaster.

[29 : 48] These chapters in Acts, they're not a disaster. They were the plan. Jesus was seeing that his promises were going to be fulfilled.

That men were going to testify before kings and governors to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Now, we may feel at times under the weight of opposition.

We may feel a hostile enemy. We even may be caught up in the courts. we may feel like it's all gone horribly wrong. But do not forget that God is in control and that this is the pattern that he promises. We do not need to fear many other plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.

And he has purposed that his word will go to the ends of the earth. Chapter 1 verse 8, that is God's plan. He will give us opportunities to testify to our colleagues and friends and even before kings and governors.

[31 : 07] And so we need not despair, even though we're often tempted to. We need not fear, though we do feel the pressure. That is Luke's message to us this evening.

We can live confidently in this city amongst our friends and our neighbors. We can live joyfully even in the face of constant opposition because we know that Jesus is in control.

He is the king. We can keep on testifying to him because he is in control. His victory over death and sin and Satan means that we are secure.

Nothing can shake that. We don't know what is awaiting us around the corner. Just as Paul didn't. But Jesus does.

And there will come a day when all the opposition and hostility will be silenced. And every knee, every single knee will bow and every single tongue can confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[32 : 20] That day is coming and so we need not fear. Nothing will stop the Lord's purposes coming to be. Well, let's pray and then we'll sing our final hymn.

Let's pray. Father, we do thank you for your word to us this evening. And we do feel like we've been here before reading a chapter like this, but we do need to hear these things.

We do need to be reminded that you are in control. So Lord, help us. Help us to trust you. Help us to live by faith, knowing that nothing can thwart your purposes for your people. help us to trust you, we ask. In Jesus' name, Amen.