

# **The Defence and Confirmation of the Gospel**

*David W. Gooding*

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NOTE: For a fuller coverage of this subject, see David Gooding's *True to the Faith, The Acts of the Apostles: Defining and Defending the Gospel*, Section Six. (Myrtlefield Expositions)

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## The Apostolic Defence of the Gospel as Practised by Peter

*Psalm 69:1–9, 20–26; 109:1–8, 26–31; Acts 1:15–26*

It is, my brothers and sisters, a sincere and genuine pleasure on my part to be with you here once more on this missionary occasion in Greenwood Hills. A great pleasure to see again friends whom the passing of the years endears ever more deeply to our hearts, and a great pleasure too to meet, for the first time, many who hitherto have been known to me only through their reports in the Missions magazine or elsewhere, and have been little more than faces—handsome faces, I hasten to add—in the Missionary Handbook.

I look forward as usual to the encouragement of being with you this week, to be stimulated by your fellowship and friendship, and by the example and the power of your zeal for the Lord.

Let us begin our study this afternoon by reading some Scriptures in honour of our blessed Lord, whom we love and whom it is our chief concern to serve.

### **Overview**

I have a special reason this year for being pleased to be allowed to address you. It is on my heart to think with you in these days on the topic of the apostolic defence of the gospel. That is, the defence of the gospel as practised by the early apostles, and in particular by Peter, recorded in the early verses of Acts; and then subsequently the defence and confirmation of the gospel as performed by Paul, to which Luke devotes a third of the whole of his work.

Then, this being my theme, it had been my intention to hold up these two apostles and their defence of the gospel for our admiration and, of course, as is appropriate, to our copying; but I had no sooner determined to hold up their example to us all than it occurred to me that there was a problem with these two apostles and their defence of the gospel.

There is, as you are probably aware, a sizeable body of very weighty and grave opinion held by godly men and women of unquestionable theological rank—a great body of opinion, which says that both these apostles got their defence of the gospel completely wrong.

Paul undoubtedly did, they say. When he set about defending the gospel, as Luke honestly records it, he compromised the very gospel he was meant to defend, fluffed its main issues, so that God was obliged to bless him—if he blessed him at all—in spite

of his ruinous defence of the gospel. We shall deal with that problem on the next occasion.

So, I have it in mind to start on the very ground floor of this topic, and discuss with you now Peter's defence of the gospel, and the way he prepared his fellow believers for the witness they must give to the risen Lord. But here too the theologians are at my heels, for they tell me that not only did Paul get it wrong, but Peter, if you please, in spite of his keys and all that, got it wrong as well. He went and advised the early church to appoint an apostle in the place of Judas, which he never ought to have done. He got the church off on a wrong footing, right at the beginning of their witness to the Lord Jesus.

I said to myself, as I sat in my study thinking about this, 'Well now, here is a pretty state of affairs indeed!' I wanted to hold up Peter as an example to us all and, lo and behold, I must deal with this thorny problem.

And then a stroke of enlightenment came upon me, and I said, 'Ah, here is the obvious solution, my boy. You don't need to settle the problem at all, because the men and women to whom you will be speaking on that Monday afternoon are men and women of profound love for the Lord Jesus and the highest respect for the Lord's apostles and, to that extent at least, they agree with them. They are men and women, moreover, of long experience and mature and balanced spiritual judgment.'

Said I to myself, 'You don't need therefore to solve the problem at all; you can constitute them as a jury. You can put the case *against* Peter, and you can put the case *for* Peter, then you can let them decide, retire and come to their verdict, and towards the end of the week inform you what the result should be.'

So that's what I propose to do. I'm now about to constitute you all as a jury of the Supreme Court. I'm going to argue first the case against Peter, then the case for Peter, and I'm going to ask you to deliver the verdict; if not today then perhaps tomorrow, or at least by Friday. Perhaps I ought to warn you, as the presiding judge, that, as you busy yourself as jury members deciding the case for and against Peter, you will presently find yourselves caught up in an altogether different case, a case of immense magnitude—the biggest legal case that the whole universe has ever had to confront.

### **The case against Peter**

According to Acts 1, Peter led the early Christians to choose out two men as possible candidates for filling the office of apostle from which Judas had apostatised. They then put these two candidates for the office before the Lord and felt that the Lord indicated to them, by means of the casting of lots, which of those two men he had chosen to fill the office of apostleship. The lot falling on a certain Matthias, he was then invited to join the college of the apostles.

'But,' say some dear theologians and responsible men of God, 'surely Peter and the Christians were obviously wrong?' It was the intention, so they say, that the vacancy should be filled, but certainly not by Matthias. It was the intention of the Holy Spirit to raise up Saul of Tarsus after his conversion and appoint him to this lofty and senior

position as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter, by his precipitated and unwise action, went and filled the office with this Matthias.

Everybody can see, so the argument goes, what a desperate mistake he made, because, in the end, with the appointee of the Holy Spirit—namely Paul the Apostle—to the twelfth position, Matthias had to fill the thirteenth position. And any schoolboy knows there can't be thirteen apostles, but only twelve. After all, when the heavenly city descends from glory, and there are seen to be twelve foundations to the city and names upon the twelve foundations, there will not be room for a thirteenth apostle. So Peter, we may presume, made a mistake. And, they say, perhaps that isn't altogether to be wondered at. Peter was rather impetuous, wasn't he? Notoriously so.

If you ask these theologians, 'Why has Luke recorded this, and why does Luke quote the holy Scripture which Peter claimed justified his action?' the reply comes back: 'Oh, yes, the two psalms that Peter quoted did indeed indicate that Judas' place should be filled. Peter's mistake was that he jumped to the conclusion that it was his responsibility and the other apostles' responsibility to fill the place, and thus he anticipated what was in fact the prerogative of the Holy Spirit himself. It was the Holy Spirit that was going to fulfil the injunction of the psalms, "Let his camp be desolate and his office, let another take"' (69:25; 109:8).

And if you say, 'But how could Peter have got his understanding of Scripture so terribly wrong?' the reply comes back: 'The answer is simple; he was delivering his verdict in the days before Pentecost—before the Holy Spirit had come—and therefore he was not yet illuminated and enlightened by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, though he revered holy Scripture, he came to a very human and mistaken interpretation of the implications of those two psalms. But later on, when he stood on the day of Pentecost, imbued and filled with the Holy Spirit, of course then we are to believe he got all his interpretations of holy Scripture right.'

If you ask, 'Why then has Luke recorded this sorry mistake on the very first page of his history?' the reply will come back: 'Well, at least it serves to warn us how we always need to be dependent upon the Holy Spirit, both in his interpretation of Scripture and in its implication of its injunctions, lest we run too speedily and suppose we know what Scripture is saying and commanding, when all the time our interpretations are inadequate—the mere result of an unenlightened human intellect.'

Thus far then, the case against Peter. I hope you have its details clear.

### **The case for Peter**

In answer to the charge that he spoilt the determined number of the apostles and elected a thirteenth when there should only have been twelve, those who stand for Peter say that Paul never did regard himself as one of the twelve apostles, for when he reports the appearances of our risen Lord he says as follows:

He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he

appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Cor 15:5–8)

Here it is pretty obvious that ‘me’ stands in contrast to the twelve and Paul was not including himself in the twelve, but regarded himself separately from their number.

When those who argue against Peter say that the Holy Spirit dealt with Peter’s fault by proceeding to ignore Matthias thereafter (Matthias is never mentioned again in the whole of the New Testament), those who stand for Peter in the matter will reply, ‘But that’s no argument at all. Most of the other apostles are not mentioned elsewhere in the whole of the New Testament after Acts, so what does that prove?’ Well, nothing in particular!

And once more, when those who are against Peter urge that he made his interpretation by his mere human intellect—unenlightened by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit who did not descend until Pentecost—those who stand for Peter point out that Peter did not first get his understanding of the Old Testament from the Holy Spirit when he came at Pentecost, but in those breathtaking Bible readings when the risen Lord conducted him and the others through the whole of the Old Testament, expounding to them in detail the things concerning himself.

Having been with the Lord, listening to his forty days of exposition of the Old Testament, if Peter still got his interpretation of the Old Testament wrong, those who support Peter will say, ‘That will begin to undermine our confidence in our Lord’s teaching.’

There we have the case against Peter and the case for Peter. When you have had time to ponder and discuss the question, I shall look forward to hearing your verdict as to what I ought to believe about it myself.

### **The case of immense magnitude**

But, of course, we cannot leave matters there, for, when all is said and done, this is a minor matter compared with the gigantic thing that we must now discuss—*the witness to and the defence of Jesus Christ our Lord*.

Let us give a moment to consider the background to the decision that Peter came to, and to which the church came to, in those ten days of prayer and waiting upon God, between the ascension of our Lord and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The forty days were now passed, but what momentous days they had been. We cannot possibly recapture the stunned awe as the apostles had heard the report of the women; how they had run and seen the empty tomb, and then, to their amazement, the risen Lord himself had appeared in their midst in the Upper Room. The overwhelming fact had dawned upon them: ‘The Lord is alive.’

And then there had been those constantly repeated appearances in the course of those forty days. Not one appearing or two, but so frequently repeated that those starkly supernatural appearances became almost the normal thing, as the apostles were

schooled to count upon the resurrection of Christ and the reality of the unseen world as the real world, the normal world, of which our present world is but a shadow.

There had been the evidence that our Lord was alive—marvellous evidence, indisputable proof. He had said, 'See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have' (Luke 24:39). He wasn't merely telling them that he was the same Jesus as they had known before, though he was telling them that of course; but in saying, 'It is I myself, not just a spirit,' he was telling them something wonderful about the resurrection. To be, 'I myself,' the Lord Jesus had to have a risen, glorified body, for a human being that doesn't have a body is incomplete.

Then there had been the wonderful, breathtaking evidence as he called for fish and ate before them. I suspect they may have been a long while washing the grease off that plate after the Lord had gone back to glory. Marvellous evidence, that old fishbone and a bit of grease on a plate, that they had not suffered a delusion, nor a mental aberration. The hard evidence was before them that the Lord was alive: he had been in their midst and had eaten with them.

And who shall tell the wonder of those long Bible readings, whether on the road to Emmaus or in the Upper Room, as he had opened their minds to understand holy Scripture and pointed out to them throughout the Pentateuch, the Prophets and the writings the things concerning himself?

And they had followed his solemn charge, 'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth' (Acts 1:8). The charge terminated with the indescribable wonder, as they saw him ascend into glory.

In God's mercy and our Lord's wisdom, the apostles were given ten days before the Holy Spirit should come and launch them upon their witness for the Lord; ten days in which they gave themselves to prayer, when they could contemplate the task that now lay ahead. They were clear as to what they had to do. They had to be, as Peter phrased it, 'a witness to his resurrection' (v. 22). They were to herald the fact to the world that the Lord, whom this world had crucified, was risen again.

This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. (2:23-24)

But along with it they were aware that they had to do more than merely witness to the simple fact that he was risen, for the resurrection of our Lord carried far-reaching implications. The resurrection of just any man would have been a wonderful thing, but the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead was God's vindication of all that Jesus Christ had ever said, done or spoken.

#### *Qualifications necessary to be an apostle*

And so, when it came to choosing an apostle, rightly or wrongly, to fill Judas' place, Peter laid it down that such a man must have certain qualifications.

So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection. (1:21–22)

He must be one of those that, from the very baptism of John—from the very beginning, right up until the ascension of the Lord Jesus—had companied with the apostles and with the Lord; had been a first-hand witness, not only of his resurrection, but of all that the Lord Jesus had said and done and stood for among them in ‘the days of his flesh’ (Heb 5:7). To that too he had to be a witness.

#### *The cleansing of the temple*

And if you ask, what indeed, and what in particular had they to witness to, short of all he had ever done or said, there was one thing that at this stage would have been to the very forefront of the apostles’ minds. It was scarcely more than two months since they had stood in Jerusalem’s temple courts and watched the Lord Jesus as he had cleansed the temple, thereby earning the undying hatred of the chief priests and scribes (Mark 11:15–18).

Of course, it wasn’t the first time that our Lord had cleansed the temple. At the very beginning of his ministry, with flashing eyes and cord of whips, he had driven out from the temple the merchants who were changing money and selling animals and birds for sacrifice, saying, ‘Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade’ (John 2:16). At that point in his career, the crowds would perhaps gladly have welcomed that gesture as the kind of thing Messiah, when he came, would be expected to do—here was a reforming Messiah. But in the last week of his life here on earth, when our Lord had gone up to the temple and once more had cleansed it, it had proved to be the last straw for the temple captains, the chief priests and the high priest himself. They decided to be done with this unwanted disturber.

You see, on that occasion our Lord Jesus, in the hearing of the masses of the people, had virtually accused the temple priests of being corrupt thieves and robbers; abusing religion to make money out of people’s souls, selling the good gift of God’s salvation and thus filling their bank balances as they made religion a way of making money. And it was at that stage, Luke tells us, that the high priest determined to destroy him, before his influence undermined the confidence of the crowd in the temple and in the priesthood. Our Lord had followed it with a parable, you remember, that showed the priests and the people that he understood exactly what the situation was.

#### *The Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Luke 20:9–18)*

They were not content to be tenants, but wanted not only to rob the owner of the fruit of the vineyard, but in the end they saw what they thought was their opportunity to rob the owner of the very possession of the vineyard. So, as they saw the son of the owner coming they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours’ (v. 14).



It was evident to everybody who stood in the temple courts that day that our Lord understood what the high priests were about to do to him because of his testimony against them.

Scarcely more than two months had passed, and now the apostles began to wake up to what they must do. They must go to that same temple, stand in front of those same priests and the same crowds, and testify that Jesus was risen; and therefore witness to the fact that our Lord's denunciation of those high priests was true. This was God's verdict against them and their evil of turning religion into a moneymaking machine. When that dawned upon the apostles they found they had a problem, and the problem was not lack of courage. The problem was Judas.

### **The case of Judas Iscariot**

Had they now got to go up into that temple and accuse the high priest to his face of having debased his holy office in order to make money? What do you think the high priest might reply, and what would the crowd who stood around reply?

'And what about you? Didn't one of your own crowd do worse? What about your Judas—wasn't he one of your chief apostles? Wasn't he, indeed, the treasurer? Didn't he use inside knowledge of your habits and usual whereabouts in order to be a guide to those who arrested Jesus? Didn't he do that for money, and with his ungodly gain he bought a little estate outside Jerusalem?'

The crowd knew all about what happened to Judas:

(Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) (Acts 1:18–19)

Even at this long distance, we can hear the crowd talking, like they still do today.

'That's formal, organised religion for you. It doesn't matter whether they are the Establishment with their mitres and their gowns, or whether they're some newly formed little sect; in the end it all comes to the same thing. Behind it all is money, big houses, estates.'

They said it then and they say it now, don't they? As unbelievers point to the hoarded treasures in Christendom, or joke about TV evangelists, the more thoughtful will have a little bit more sophisticated comments.

'Ah, well, I suppose that's human nature. But now, look here! Isn't it your claim that Jesus Christ is the Son of God? You claim that there is hope for all who trust in him, that one day he's going to come and introduce an age of peace and glory and justice. But how do you expect we're going to believe your message? How will he put the world right if, when it came to choosing a treasurer for his little band, he couldn't choose somebody a bit more reliable than Judas? And if Christ's own treasurer is going to run off with the funds, what kind of faith can we put in the Christian claim that one day Jesus is going to establish righteousness in the earth?'

They had a problem, don't you think? How would the apostles answer it? Their first line of defence was simple. Taught by the Lord Jesus, they had come to an understanding of their Old Testament that showed them that this defection, this treason on Judas' part, had in fact been prophesied in the Old Testament.

Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. (v. 16)

'What the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand about Judas had to be fulfilled,' said Peter. It had to happen—notice the past tense of the verb. What did Peter mean? Well, simply this: what Judas did was prophesied of in the Old Testament, and therefore it had to happen because Scripture had to be fulfilled. In the same sense as our Lord himself argued, 'Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' (Luke 24:26).

Why was it necessary? Because, in this context, the Old Testament Prophets, the Psalms and the Law had prophesied that the Messiah would suffer; and since Scripture had prophesied it would happen, it had to happen. From that stems a very simple argument. The fact that Jesus Christ our Lord suffered at Calvary is one of the strongest arguments that he is the Messiah, for in his very suffering he fulfilled what the Old Testament had prophesied Messiah would suffer.

So it is with the case of Judas. If Peter's claim is true, that, according to these two psalms, Judas' treason was prophesied in the Old Testament, then the fact that he actually betrayed the Lord Jesus is not evidence *against* our Lord's being the Messiah—it is evidence *for* his being Messiah. And therefore at this point Peter isn't afraid that the crowd will discover the fact that the treasurer of the early Christian band had defected. Rather, he will go out and advertise it and let all the world know that Judas betrayed his Lord. Let them know it; let them use their own language for Judas' field, and call it Akeldama.<sup>1</sup> Let the press repeat it; we want them to know, because Judas' betrayal of the Lord is a fulfilment of Scripture, and therefore evidence that Jesus is the Messiah.

#### *The significance of Psalms 69 and 109*

We must go a bit deeper, mustn't we? For that argument to be reliable we have to ask, what made Peter think that Psalms 69 and 109 had anything at all to do with Judas, or even with our Lord for that matter?

Let me remind you of the historical setting of these psalms. In each of them we're told that it is a psalm of David, and David had written in them how the nation, or some of the nation, had turned against him.

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<sup>1</sup> Aramaic: אַלְדָּמָא; field of blood.

*Psalm 69*

In verses 8–9 we read of how zeal for the Lord's house had apparently consumed him, thereby incurring a great deal of displeasure, wrath and unpopularity on the part of the nation. His own kin had rejected him. Something terrible had happened; the Lord himself smote David, and David immediately acknowledges that he deserved it, 'O God, you know my folly' (v. 5).

But what David was concerned about was that there had been a band of people who had put their trust in him. They had seen him as the Lord's anointed, and were prepared to go through thick and thin with David. But when this calamity happened and the Lord smote David, the danger was that this band of his followers would lose their faith in him and come to be ashamed of him and ashamed of their faith. Therefore, David cries out in the psalm that God will come and vindicate him and demonstrate to all and sundry that God is on his side.

*What made the apostles think this had anything to do with the Lord Jesus?*

1. Their own experience. They had stood with him on the first occasion in the temple, when he'd made his whip of cords and driven out the beasts and overturned the moneychangers' tables. They'd watched his flashing eyes, his holy indignation, and the Scripture even then had struck them: '[They] remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me"' (John 2:17).

Just before he was arrested, on the very last night he was with them, they had heard him say, 'Don't be surprised, gentlemen, if the world hates you, for it hated me first before it hated you. As [Psalm 69] says, "They hated me without a cause"' (see John 15:18, 25).

2. And then, of course, they had listened to our Lord in the forty days as he expounded these psalms, taking David's experience as prototypes of his own experience.

Let not those who hope in you be put to shame through me, O Lord God of hosts; let not those who seek you be brought to dishonour through me, O God of Israel. For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonour has covered my face. (Ps 69:6–7)

When the Lord was gone, what memories they would have had as they thought over these two psalms. Not one of the one hundred and twenty in that room would have failed to see the point (Acts 1:15). They had watched our Lord and his zeal for the house of God. They had stood valiantly by him, until at last the troops had come and taken him to court; the court had condemned him and they had seen their beloved Lord upon a tree. Of course, now they knew that he had suffered not for his own sins, but for theirs. Oh, what memories would be theirs.

But, how ashamed they had been in those desperate hours, when they had seen the leaders of the nation's religion strutting past the cross of their beloved Lord, saying,

You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross . . . He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.' (Matthew 27:40, 43)

'You can see he's bogus. He said he would destroy our temple. Well, let him destroy it now if he can, but he's nailed to a tree.' No stroke of lightning had come to consume them, and in those ten days the apostles would remember, until their cheeks burned red, how ashamed they had been of the blessed Lord at that crucial moment. They had run off and deserted him, and had come within a hairbreadth of losing their faith completely in Jesus as God's Son and Messiah. None of them would need to have had it proved to them that David's experiences in Psalms 69 and 109 were relevant to the Lord, and relevant to their own situation.

And now the Lord had risen and they were looking forward to the promised coming of the Holy Spirit. What wonderful days these would be. Our Lord had said that 'when [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement' (John 16:8).

#### *Psalm 109*

As the apostles thought of it, they began to see the relevance of Psalm 109 as well; being the poetry it is, it casts David's troubles in the form of a legal dispute. David has been accused, and falsely accused. He prays that God will now act to vindicate him, so that all the world may see that God is on his side and the accusations are false. David's hope was that God would stand at his right hand to vindicate him.

It is an interesting metaphor. In an ancient law court, when a prisoner was accused, the lawyer for the prosecution would stand at the man's right hand and accuse him. And when the prosecution had had their say, then the lawyer for the defence would rise up and stand at the right hand of the man on trial, in order to try and prove his innocence.

David thinks of himself as being in a great court, and counsel for the prosecution has come up and slandered him disgracefully with a pack of lies. He cries out, 'O Lord, when that man's turn comes to be judged, let Satan stand at his right hand to accuse him,' (see v. 6 KJV). Then David adds, 'But Lord, intervene for me—I trust you to come and stand at my right hand, so that I may be vindicated' (see vv. 21, 27, 31).

Was that relevant? Oh, surely; for now, as we ponder the situation, we've long since lost sight of Peter's little difficulty and we are in the presence of the biggest law scene that the universe will ever see.

Jesus Christ claimed to be God's Son, and the religion, politics and Greek civilisation in this world joined together to slander the blessed Lord, nailing him to a cross, saying that he deserved to be crucified. The dear apostles had grown ashamed of him and run off. And now God had intervened. He raised him from the dead and set him at his own right hand, and declared him to be the Son of God with power, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (Rom 1:4).

God had intervened to take the case out of the human court. He's removed it to the supreme court of the universe and given its verdict: Jesus Christ is demonstrated to be right.

When [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father . . . concerning judgement, because the ruler of this world is judged. (John 16:8-11)

With what joy they awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit. He shall witness to these things. 'And you too,' said the Saviour, 'shall witness alongside him' (see Acts 1:8). Oh, my brothers and sisters, I do not say it happened, but I can imagine them almost running to the temple. They had a chance now, when before they had been ashamed to stand in public and be witnesses for Jesus Christ, their Lord.

Poor Judas; you might almost pity the man, mightn't you? He too had had the chance for this supreme dignity, to witness to the deity of Jesus Christ our Lord, son of the owner of the vineyard. But he'd thrown it away to make a little money, to buy a field, to have a weekend house, but his field was the ruin of him and all Jerusalem could see it. Why did it have to be? Peter said that it all had to be, because it was written in Scripture that Judas would betray him. But why did Scripture say that Judas would betray him? Because, if it hadn't said it, he wouldn't have needed to have done so, to fulfil Scripture.

*We are all unworthy tenants*

And if we asked the question, I think the answer comes back at the deepest level of all: 'Why did God allow it so, and why has God published it as a part of the Christian gospel that when his Son was crucified he was betrayed by one of his followers?' It was because it goes down to the very heart of the diagnosis of the human position upon our planet. Oh, yes, the Jews rejected the owner's Son and cast him out of the vineyard, but we can extend the parable, can we not? Who of us has not ever been guilty of living in our little world, forgetting that we're tenants, stewards of goods that belong to another? We've lived as if we own it.

The world outside goes further: they say there is no owner. And while they may be sizeably religious as Jesus Christ keeps his distance, if he comes pressing his claim they do to him still what they did in Jerusalem—they nail him to a tree. At Calvary, as they plunged the cross into planet earth and opened earth's heart, like the coal of a great volcano, the underlying rebellion and independence of our human race against God burst forth its molten lava and showed what lies in every human heart, apart from the grace of God. We like our own little lives and we want to be owners—we don't like the thought that we're tenants.

Even the atheists might ponder this story. They say there's no owner up there and it's up to humankind to keep the universe going.

I saw a very interesting suggestion just recently in a scientific magazine—you might like to join in! It said that, to stop the whole universe going down the drain of some great black hole one of these days, we might engineer putting a lot of material down the black hole and plugging the hole up. Some hope!

If our universe depends upon mere human effort for its hope of a reign of peace and joy, then let them ponder Judas and his field. You see, they say that, in transforming his field into a cemetery to bury strangers in, the priests were doing a charitable thing. The idea was that foreigners could now be buried in Jerusalem, so that when Messiah comes and the resurrection takes place, they will be at the hub of things when they rise from the grave to meet the Messiah.

But if the atheists are right, and Jesus Christ is not risen from the dead, there isn't going to be any resurrection and, according to the scientists themselves, one day the sun up in the sky will explode, become a red giant and, in that moment, little earth will not merely be our cemetery, it will be humankind's incinerator.

### **The case for defending the gospel today**

We have the indescribable honour of going out and defending the Lord Jesus. Yes, the verdict has been given, but ours is the privilege, led by God's Spirit, to explain it and help to justify the verdict before men. How shall we do it? (I leave aside the question whether Peter was right to have another apostle appointed, as we've got other pressing matters to cover.)

How shall I convincingly witness to the blessed Lord, whom God has vindicated as son of the owner of the universe: owner of every square inch on earth and all that's in it? I can tell you how the early church did it. They came to feel that if Jesus Christ is the owner's son, then all must be his. Some sold their houses and brought the money to the feet of the apostles. Some sold their houses, but used their right (unlike Ananias and Sapphira) of remaining stewards of what God had given them. Some didn't sell their houses, but used them to entertain the believers and as bases for the furtherance of the gospel. Of all it could be said, 'No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common' (4:32). This witnessing and defending the verdict of our Lord Jesus Christ was a costly business.

But it is not costly if our message is true, and Jesus Christ is the Son of God and heir of the whole universe. What can I lose if I let go of all that I have in the cause of his glad service?

Shall we pray.

And now Lord, from these stirring, historic events, we turn to ourselves and to thee. We address thee as Peter addressed thee, 'Oh thou, who knowest the hearts of all men,' and at this moment we beseech thee to read our hearts afresh. We praise thee for the dignity thou hast given us that we might be witnesses to thy dear Son. And now, with thine eye upon us, meaning it as best we know how, we say afresh, 'Naught that I have my own I call, | I hold it for the Giver; | My heart, my strength, my life, my all, | Are His, and His forever.'<sup>2</sup> Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> James G. Small (1817-1888), 'I've found a friend, O such a friend' (1866).

## The Defence and Confirmation of the Gospel as Performed by Paul

*Acts 19:28–32; 20:26–31*

A noticeable change comes over the book of the Acts of the Apostles in 19:21, as Luke ends the fifth section of his work and enters upon the final stage, the sixth part of his history. Whereas before, in the chapters that have preceded, Luke has concentrated our attention on Paul as he has gone hither and thither throughout the Roman Empire preaching the gospel, now in this final section of his work he concentrates our attention on Paul, not preaching the gospel so much as defending the gospel.

The distinction between preaching the gospel on the one hand and defending the gospel on the other is not a hard and fast distinction; the borderline is often very thin and crosses easily from one to another.

Already Luke has represented Paul at times having to stand up and defend the gospel against the false accusations that were brought against it. Now he will show us Paul mainly defending the gospel. But of course you cannot always defend the gospel without straying into the preaching of the gospel, and Luke records that vivid and delightful scene where Paul was at the investigation before Agrippa (ch. 26). Beginning by defending the gospel, he apparently forgot himself halfway through. Seeing that, as the king, Agrippa was the judicial enquiring authority, but as a sinner he needed a Saviour, Paul burst out in his impassioned way, 'Oh, King, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe' (v. 27); and he came within a hairbreadth of leading the monarch to Christ, even in that legal court. We should not therefore suppose that defence of the gospel is somehow the enemy of the preaching of the gospel.

There have been some, and still are I suppose, that, tired with the excessive emphasis upon apologetics, have reasoned that defending the gospel is not a wise thing to attempt. Some see it almost as a strategy of our enemy that gets us away from our prime task of preaching the gospel. Such people will tell us that defending the gospel never leads a person to Christ; it is the *preaching* of the gospel that leads men and women to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus.

They borrow sometimes the words of Spurgeon, who observed that he would no more think of defending the word of God than he would of defending the lion. 'What you want to do,' said he, 'is not to defend the lion, but open the cage and let the lion

out, and the lion will defend itself. So with the word of God,' said Spurgeon, 'you don't defend it, you let it out—you preach it, and it will defend itself.'

That last observation is true indeed, for, if we do take God's word seriously, we shall find from time to time, it is the word of God itself that is defending the gospel.

### **The case for Christianity**

The passage before us this morning, and in these ensuing mornings, God willing, is a brilliant example of the way the Bible itself records how to go about defending the gospel and the need to defend it.

By the time you arrive at this juncture in history, though the gospel had not been in progress for very many years, all sorts of curious notions had spread around the Roman world as to what the Christian gospel was. There were many misrepresentations, many deliberate slanders, mixed in with a great deal of sheer ignorance. If those slanders had been allowed to go unanswered, there would have been a danger in many cities of the Roman Empire, amongst thoughtful people as well as among the ignorant, that people would have rejected Christianity without actually ever hearing what Christianity stood for.

And therefore now at this juncture, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit of God, Paul broke off his fruitful ministry at Ephesus, where he had positively been teaching and preaching the gospel, and determined in his heart to visit first Jerusalem and then Rome. Doubtless, the intention in his heart was that in both places he should defend the gospel from the slanders and the false implications that had been thrown against it.

Some of the misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the gospel were simply ludicrous. We are told by Luke about the commander-in-chief of the Roman forces in Jerusalem, who rescued Paul from the murderous mob that came to assassinate him in the temple. Educated and powerful man though he was, he had the impression that Paul was an Egyptian, the former leader of a terrorist gang numbering some four thousand. He was quite prepared to treat Paul in the manner appropriate to terrorist gang leaders who lead people in political subversion (ch. 21).

Other misrepresentations were more sinister. It appears from Luke's account of Paul's trial before Festus that the high priests in Jerusalem had deliberately misrepresented Paul as preaching a gospel that was thinly veiled politics (ch. 25). In this, of course, they were doing the same thing as had happened in the city of Philippi, where the Romans had gone to their governors and complained that Paul was teaching a form of political Messianism (ch. 16).

The danger and the potency of that slander of the gospel was that it was very specious. At that time in the Roman world there were Jews who had an exposition of their faith that was sheer politics. They professed to believe in the coming of a messiah, but the Messiah, as they understood him, would be a political leader who would raise armies in the fashion of the Maccabees and lead them in military confrontation against the Roman state, thus attempting to deliver Israel from the imperialists. When Paul



came to Philippi and elsewhere, preaching that Jesus was the Messiah, it was so very easy for these enemies of the gospel to represent the gospel he preached as nothing other than a political message, aimed at breaking the structures of the political system.

Of course that is a view deliberately adopted in certain parts of the world by Christendom, but it never was and never will be the gospel of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. If authorities get the impression that the Christian gospel is actually a political measure, designed to overthrow the political structures of the state, then alas for the gospel; you may well expect the authorities to come down upon it like the proverbial ton of bricks.

And therefore, in many a court and in many a legal hearing, Paul was obliged to argue the case for Christianity and to make it quite clear that Christianity was not a form of politics. Even many of the Jewish believers in the city of Jerusalem were under a misapprehension as to the nature of the gospel Paul preached.

#### *The question of circumcision*

Throughout the Roman Empire Paul had preached that salvation is not by works; it is not by religious ceremonies, but altogether through faith. It is the gift of God. He had preached therefore in no uncertain terms that circumcision is neither necessary for salvation, nor does it contribute anything to salvation, but that Jew and Gentile stand on exactly the same footing before God. All alike are sinners. There is no difference between a circumcised Jew and an uncircumcised Gentile. Jew and Gentile must be saved, both of them, on exactly the same terms – not by works, nor by circumcision or religious observation, but totally through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

But that gospel of Paul's had been misrepresented, as rumour will do and as enemies of the gospel will delight to do. So much so that the believers in Rome had the impression that, in flagrant disregard for the Old Testament word of God and exercising an imperialism over the conscience of Jewish believers, Paul had demanded that Jewish believers everywhere refrained from circumcising their children, and that Jewish believers everywhere forsook immediately all those God-given precepts given in the Old Testament Jewish religion.

That was a complete misrepresentation, of course. Paul had done no such thing. On one occasion Paul deliberately had Timothy circumcised so as not to offend the conscience of Jewish believers who still felt themselves bound by conscience to observe the rites of the Old Testament (16:3). Therefore, it was necessary that Paul meticulously should explain the gospel that he really preached and win the hearts of his fellow believers, the Jews of Jerusalem, and thus lead them on into the greater light of the Christian dispensation.

#### **The case for defending the gospel**

You may say to me that defending the gospel doesn't get any converts. Well, perhaps that isn't its prime objective; but it can often help, in taking out from before the feet of people all the stumbling blocks on the road that will eventually lead them to faith in

the Lord Jesus, can it not? Defending the gospel in that way has an exceedingly practical and spiritual task to perform.

Recently, as some of you know, the dear missionaries in Africa decided that my education was not yet complete, and that something should be done about it. They graciously invited me to visit Kenya and Nairobi and I arrived in the mission station at Nyankunde to see the great works that the missionaries have done.

I found there an American girl, the daughter of a surgeon who had been a friend of one of the missionary surgeons in the hospitals at Nyankunde. I discovered that the young lady was not a believer, but the Christian women on the station had been doing a marvellous job in their evangelistic Bible studies with her, so that when I arrived she was teetering on the very edge of salvation. But there was a stumbling block. The dear girl had been brought up in her university to believe that evolution is the only possible explanation for the origin and development of our universe, and therefore to believe the Christian gospel seemed to her like committing absolute, deliberate intellectual suicide.

It was a simple matter to sit down by her side and point out what her university teachers, not being good scientists, had never told her—that there are many atheist scientists, scientists that don't even believe in God, who nevertheless hold the opinion that evolution is unscientific, unproved and unprovable, and riddled through with all kinds of absurdities. Hearing what she ought to have been told at her university, if they had been good scientists—that there is another side to the scientific question—she found the obstacle removed, and in a few hours had invited the blessed Lord into her life.

I was myself in Soviet Russia recently, where I was invited by a headmistress into a state school run by the government. Her request was that I should talk to her pupils throughout the whole school on the topic of *Christianity*. She asked in particular that I would deal with the historicity of Christianity.

What would you have done? You say, 'I would have taken the opportunity to preach the gospel from John 3:16.'

Well, in the end I did my best to get that in as well! But I had to remember that those children, like generations of Russians, have been brought up to believe that Christianity is nothing but a legend, a myth invented in the third and fourth centuries AD. Therefore, they dismiss the whole thing as mere fairy story and never get within miles of treating it seriously. It was an amazing pleasure and privilege to stand in that state-run school and argue the case for the historical evidence of Christianity.

What would you do if, in your area, a newspaper printed an article to the effect that the Bible has been copied out so many times that you can't possibly accept what it says as valid and true? Would you not spring to its defence?

What if other people, for their own reasons, represented you as a nasty little sect, who employ the method of brainwashing, a veritable threat to the teenagers—something like the *Moonies*. Wouldn't you rise up and defend your gospel from such slanders? Well, if you don't, there's many a respectable parent that will never investigate what you actually stand for, but to their very best they will see to it that

their teenagers never come within shouting distance of you. Therefore, a defence of the gospel is an exceedingly important and practical thing, and goes hand-in-hand as a partner with the positive preaching of the gospel.

You will observe what importance Luke attaches to this matter, that he devotes no less than one third of the whole of the Acts of the Apostles to recording Paul's defence of the gospel, first of all in Jerusalem and then in Rome.

There are five major movements of thought in this final section of his work.

1. Paul's journey from Ephesus to Jerusalem.
2. In Jerusalem itself, defending the gospel first before the Christian believers and then before the Jerusalem mob, as he stood on the stairs of the castle. And finally, before the Sanhedrin, summoned together by the Roman commander of the army.
3. In Caesarea, before the Roman governor Felix.
4. Again in Caesarea, first in the court held by the Roman governor Festus, and then the judicial hearing before King Agrippa.
5. Paul's journey from Caesarea to Rome, where he settled down for two years, waiting for that tremendous opportunity when he should go in before the highest authority in the whole of the Roman Empire and have the privilege of defending the gospel in those exalted circles.

Oh, what a man he was. He has to lament in his second letter to Timothy, 'At my first defence no one came to stand by me' (4:16). I wonder why not. Where were the believers? Where were his teammates when this extraordinary privilege was granted to their colleague Paul to go in, albeit at the danger of his life, not so much to preach the gospel but to defend the gospel and the honour of Jesus Christ his Lord before his imperial majesty, Nero himself?

It's not given to all of us to be a Paul, but when he records in his letter to the Philippians that he was set for 'the defence and confirmation of the gospel' (1:7), that is a joy given to us—to many of us at least, in our different ways.

I think of a young Malay convert, the only one in her family that knows the Saviour. Upon her shoulders too come the responsibilities of defending the gospel, not only by her word, but by her behaviour in her family. What an honour!

Suppose you were the only Christian in your missionary village, overwhelmed with the vast numbers of sheer unbelief around you. What an honour it is that you stand, not only to preach the gospel, but you yourself are there as God's messenger to defend the gospel.

The subject of Paul's defence of the gospel, in the sense of demolishing the accusations that had been brought against it, must occupy us tomorrow, and we leave it for now.

## Paul's journey from Ephesus to Jerusalem

Today, we concentrate on the story of his journey from Ephesus to Jerusalem and, in particular, on two major events. I suppose the biggest story of all is the story of his impassioned plea to the elders of the church at Ephesus, which he delivered to them in Miletus.

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. (20:28)

Not now *defence* in the sense of *arguing* against all the slanders that had been brought against it, but defending the church in the sense of *protecting* it against the dangers that came from without and from within.

As we read Luke's record of Paul's impassioned appeal to those elders to guard and defend and protect that church, we doubtless feel within our hearts that Luke has his eye on us as well. We too are called upon to defend the flock of God in this particular sense. Only here of course, there can sometimes creep in a danger. The defence of the church, like many another Christian ministry, is not without its subtle temptations and dangers.

### Methods employed in defending the gospel

The history of the Christian church is studded with marvellously glorious examples of men and women who have stood and given their very lives for the protection of God's people and for the purity of his church. But then, on the other hand, the story of Christianity is littered with examples of men and women who have meant well in protecting the church and defending the truth, but dark motives and unregenerate urges somehow welled up into their hearts and they defended the truth with methods and passions that were not truly Christian.

Sometimes when we observe the methods and behaviour of men and women who profess to be protecting the truth, the methods they use appear to contradict the very values they are supposed to be protecting. It raises the possibility that although, as far as they know, their motives are genuine—desiring to protect the truth and the church—they could be self-deceived and the motives somewhat different, if the truth were known.

Surely it is no accident therefore, that, before Luke records Paul's plea to the elders of the church at Ephesus to protect the flock and to care for the church of God, he first treats us to a detailed description of certain other people who rose up to defend their particular faith; namely, the citizens of Ephesus (ch. 19).

Just before Paul was due to leave the city, there broke out a tremendous commotion in the city of Ephesus. Practically the whole of the citizens gathered, stampeding into the theatre and, 'for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"' (v. 34).

You say, 'Whatever are they doing?'

Well, ladies and gentlemen, they're protecting the truth as they saw it. We mustn't criticise them unduly, must we? For it is very natural and instinctive in all of us that, if something we hold dear is attacked, we shall spring to its defence. We would scarcely be sincere, and we certainly would not be worthy, if that which we hold to be dearer than life itself is attacked and we didn't spring to its defence. It is understandable therefore that, when the citizens of Ephesus felt their faith was being attacked, they should rise in its defence, and hence the riot took place in the city. We cannot criticise them for defending, or wanting to defend, what they held to be true.

We are presumably at liberty, however, to ponder, and indeed to criticise, the methods they used. Just listen to them shouting for two hours on end, and nobody can get a word in edgeways. If Paul had ventured into that theatre at that moment, like a pack of wild animals they would have torn him limb from joint. Must we not ask, what was this truth that was driving them to its defence with these methods? What was their real motivation? Who was this Artemis that they were protecting? We do well to ask, for very often the basic values and ideals that people protect and believe in will control and colour the methods they use in its protection.

### **Artemis**

'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians,' they cried. But who was she? The origins of the worship of Artemis are lost in the mists of ancient history, but by the time Paul had come to Ephesus, Artemis was a mixture of various elements.

#### *Protector of the young*

In the first place she was looked upon as a virgin goddess, whose primary task was the protection of the young of animals. Therefore, she was supposed to slay anybody who would injure nature and the animals of the wild. Curiously enough, she was also regarded as a huntress.

Someone may ask, 'How can she reconcile her role as a protector of the animal world with her role as the patron deity of hunters?' But then, if you have observed the ways of true hunters, they are concerned – and never more than in these days – with the protection of the wild animal, aren't they? We've had a lot of fuss, and rightly so, about the excessive hunting of the elephant. Members of all kinds of green parties urge us to stand up for the protection of nature. Hunting has to be carried on, therefore, to manage the stocks; but true hunting is concerned for the animals.

#### *Protector of women in childbirth*

Artemis was not only the virgin goddess who protected the young of animal life, she was also, as her many-breasted image indicates, the protector of women in childbirth. If you ponder those things for a moment, you will see the fascination that Artemis had for the people of the ancient world. Who of us hasn't felt the wonder and the mystery of nature, as we've observed the young of animals being born: the wonders of the mystery of creation and the marvels of a little babe in its mother's arms? What a marvellous and magnificent thing nature is; and you couldn't contemplate it, if you

were really human, without feeling your heart instinctively go out so that you would want to protect these wonders. And rightly so.

### *Deifying nature*

We Christians surely should be willing and ready and eager, genuinely to protect the nature that God has given; but Artemis was more than that. In Artemis the ancient pagans had deified nature; they had set up nature as their goddess. And when men and women deify nature, eventually you may expect trouble; for when they come to defend it the danger is that they will use nature's methods, raw nature's methods. If you appear to threaten even an old, patient cow when she has a calf, you'll soon see what the cow will do. You'd better not threaten a lioness with her cub, for if you do, nature will rise to protect its offspring and tear you limb from joint.

Hence the blind fury of the mob at Ephesus, baying like wild animals. They felt their Artemis was endangered, so they behaved with raw instinct and would have destroyed their enemy if they could have got hold of him.

### *The tourist trade built around her*

There was another element in the defence of Artemis that eventually got submerged in the riot—the religion of Artemis was very profitable when it came to the tourist trade. The temple of Artemis at Ephesus was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. They had thousands of tourists coming, and people like the silversmiths were making a lot of money from the little shrines and knick-knacks that they sold in the tourist shops to all the pilgrims. Demetrius at one stage admits it (v. 25). He hurries to explain it's not the money he's really interested in; it is the fact that the truth of his religion is at stake. But the unholy mixture of money and instinctive raw nature shows what really lay at the heart of this particular defence of the faith.

Wouldn't it be a lovely thing to be able to say that whenever Christian people have arisen to defend the faith, as they have a duty to do, they have always defended it with absolutely pure motives, and always with unwaveringly Christian methods? It is not so, my brothers and sisters, and assembly history itself has been littered by sad battles and warfare, ostensibly claiming to stand for the truth, that have left God's people maimed and broken and sometimes, indeed, insane.

### **The values Paul was protecting and the methods he used**

In chapter 20, Luke brings before us Paul and his address to the elders. From that address, so well-known to us all, I want to choose this morning the values that Paul was protecting and try to show that the methods he used were consistent always with those values.

His speech to the elders, as we know, is in three parts. Central to the speech is his appeal to the elders:

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from

among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. (vv. 28–30)

But that central appeal is flanked on both sides by Paul's lengthy statement of his own practice and therefore his own example. An exhortation is always more palatable to those who receive it, if it is sandwiched by a good dose of practical example of the person who does the exhortation, is it not?

In his preliminary words therefore, to the elders, Paul shows himself to be an absolutely prodigious worker, a man of lionhearted courage.

You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance towards God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. (vv. 18–21)

'I have not shrunk,' says he, 'whether it is before the tremendous burden of toil, in preaching and praying and visitation and counselling and exhorting the congregations and visiting the individuals—I have not shrunk from those prodigious labours.

'I have not shrunk before the daunting prospect of having to declare the whole counsel of God, however unpopular it might be. I have warned people that they must repent; I have reminded them of the eternal judgment; I have called upon them to believe—I have not shunned to declare the whole counsel of God.'

#### *Paul's motives in preaching the gospel*

But as we survey that ancient man Paul and watch his extreme labours, what shall we make of him? What were the values that drove him? Was he empire building? Was this some vast ego trip? Was he, in the words of the Saviour to the scribes and Pharisees, compassing sea and land simply to make proselytes to himself? (see Matt 23:15). What were the real motives and values that drove his prodigious labours?

He tells us:

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. (vv. 22–24)

There you have the secret of his motivation, there are his values. First of all, 'the gospel of the grace of God.' Oh, that superlative grace; I needn't remind you how it shines out in the writings of the apostle.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Eph 2:8–9)

But it shone out also in the methods he employed to preach that gospel. Holding out his hands to the elders at Ephesus and pointing to the hard skin, he could say:

I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. (vv. 33–34)

This is a long way now from Demetrius the silversmith; defending the truth in Corinth because under the counter his bank balance was getting low due to the preaching of the gospel, and he needed to restore his industry of making trinkets to sell to the tourists.

'I've left you an example,' Paul says, 'of working like I have worked, to pay my own expenses and the expenses of my team—you should so work and help the poor, and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than to receive"' (v. 35).

I've not forgotten that Paul elsewhere lays it down that they who preach the gospel shall live of the gospel: 'In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel' (1 Cor 9:14). It is an ordinance of the Lord that it shall be so. But Paul wasn't talking here to missionaries; he was talking to the elders of a church.

#### *Practical implications in preaching the gospel*

When we have said that, we should remember how important it is for teachers and for elders who teach God's word, not merely to be theorists. As we teach the grace of God, we must remember the words of the Lord Jesus, who provided us with salvation free of cost, and to remember that it is more blessed to give than to receive. We have a bounden duty not merely to preach the word, but to work so that we can support the poor.

It was this that led our blessed Lord to cleanse the temple, as we spoke about yesterday. How enraged he was when he saw men making money out of religion and turning the temple of God into a place where the Sadducean high priests might reap a good fortune. He had come to announce God's marvellous grace—'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son' (John 3:16 KJV). Said he to the Samaritan woman, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water' (John 4:10).

The magnificence of the free gift of God was what drove Paul. How could he fluff that gospel by giving the impression that the gospel had to be bought from the Christian preacher? And not only the grace of God in the gospel, but the grace of Christ in appointing him to be a preacher of the gospel. Oh, Paul never forgot it.

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. (Acts 20:22–24)

'I don't know what will happen to me,' he says to the Ephesian elders, 'but I know what the Holy Spirit is saying: that bonds and imprisonment await me; and if death



itself awaits me, what do I care? What is life's value compared with this? That I should complete my ministry that the Lord Jesus has given to me and stand before him one day and say, "Lord, I've done what you gave me to do," and receive the smile of him whose smile will be all our heaven.'

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (1 Tim 1:12-15)

'Oh, the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant. I ravaged the church of God. I put my fist in the fair face of Jesus of Nazareth and he not only saved me by his grace, but in pardoning me he dared to trust me and appoint me to his service.'

Paul never forgot it. Manful, truthful, faithful; standing for the truth, but with a memory that always reminded him that he once had been a rebel himself, and stood where he stood simply by the grace of God.

*The values that motivated Paul in preaching the gospel*

A sense of the grace of God and a sense, as we so often say, of the value of a soul—the solid, real and true evaluation of the human soul and its eternal destiny.

Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. (Acts 20:26)

Here was no dilly-dallying, preaching just to please his congregation. Before him were the awful realities. As he stood looking at men and women, he knew that they would rise to be princes and princesses of God, or descend into the sub humanities of the lake of fire. 'I didn't shrink,' said he, 'to preach the need for repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus.'

*What values were these elders to protect?*

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. (v. 28)

We come to the very heart of the matter. He beseeches them to watch the flock and to care for the church of God, which he has bought with the blood of his own dear, darling Son.

Let us for a few seconds fall back once more and consider this staggering story. Here is no goddess Artemis. The pride and joy of their exhibitions in the tourist centre attached to the temple of Artemis in Ephesus was a showcase with an image that fell down from the sky. It brought the tourists flocking in their thousands. What a curious mistress nature is, if you deify her; what tricks she'll play upon you. The image that fell down from the sky was nothing other than a burnt-out meteorite, some of the

debris of the universe that nature was scrapping and had no further use for it. These unfortunate Ephesians were bowing down and paying their hard-earned drachmae to have a look at this bit of wastage from the universe, and they yelled their heads off like wild animals, standing for this *truth*, if you please.

Ah, we protect a different system of values. Not of a God that was so weak he fell down from heaven; but oh, the wonder of it, the transcendent Lord deliberately coming down from heaven to Bethlehem, Gethsemane and a cross. Here was no Artemis, the nature goddess, that, if you were seen to attack her, would rise up in sheer instinct and tear you limb from joint with her claws. Listen to the story of Calvary again. This is the true God who,

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree. (1 Pet 2:23–24)

And when we attacked him as his enemies, and kicked his shins and crowned his head with thorns, this is God: he loved us while we were yet enemies and the shepherd died to save the sheep.

*How should the believers defend a gospel such as this?*

Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. (vv. 18–19)

‘If you suffer unjustly, but for Christ’s sake,’ says Peter, ‘wouldn’t you endure it, so that you might bear the better witness to your masters to the gospel of Jesus Christ, who himself bore your sins in his body on the tree?’

Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, when they see your respectful and pure conduct. (3:1–2)

‘You converted women,’ says Peter, ‘your husbands are brutes and they maltreat you. You know all about their other affairs, but since you’ve become a Christian things have got very much worse, haven’t they? How shall you witness to these heavenly values and to him who, for your sake and your husbands’ sakes, endured the cross? Find it in your heart, if you can, to accept the suffering and bear patiently with your erring husbands. Who knows but, by your testimony of patient suffering, you might even lead them to the Saviour?’

*How shall we protect and defend these values?*

Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you. (1:18–20)

We are a long way from the worship of Artemis and the making of silver shrines. 'Fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock,' says Paul (Acts 20:29). Peter, John and Jude also warn us about them:

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them. (2 Pet 2:1)

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. (2 John 1:7-8)

For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Jude v. 4)

They deny the very Lord that bought them: the virgin birth, the deity of the Lord Jesus, his bodily resurrection, the inspiration and integrity of his word. Oh, what wolves they are. They empty Christianity of its true value and its real treasure. Wolves that come in and turn the very grace of God into an excuse for worldliness and licentious living, emptying salvation itself of its genuine value.

We are to guard the church from perverse men from the inside, who will develop all their funny little theories and then demand that you follow them, because their theory is *the* truth, and when you watch their methods it becomes doubtful whether it's the truth they're standing for. In fact, they're indulging in a form of embezzlement. They're taking *the* disciples, bought with the blood of God's darling Son, and taking them to *themselves*<sup>3</sup>, as though the church belonged to them.

*What resources do Christians have?*

And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. (Acts 20:32)

Oh, that lovely treasure: 'the word of his grace'. God forbid that we should lose our nerve in this modern age and give people the impression that the word of God is some bitter pill that couldn't be expected to attract our young people, unless it be liberally coated with the sugar of entertainment. This word of God is able to build us up and to give us an inheritance among them that are sanctified.

Oh, I say, we're a long way from Artemis, who fell down from the heavens; so weak she was, that bit of old meteorite. We talk about a word of God, and a risen Saviour who is able to give us 'an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us' (1 Pet 1:4).

The Lord use his word again so to amaze our hearts with the vast wealth and treasure that we have in Christ, that we in our day shall spring to the defence of the gospel and of the church, whenever those values are attacked.

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Gooding emphasises these words.

Shall we pray.

Blessed Lord Jesus Christ who, when we stood in danger of the wolf and lion, came as a good shepherd, and laid down thy life for us sheep. We can never repay thee, but we pray now thy grace, that the value of thy person and of thy work shall so fill our hearts that we may spring and grasp every opportunity that comes our way, helped by thy Spirit, to defend thy name, to defend thy glory, to defend thy people, to defend thy word. For thine own name's sake. Amen.

## Paul's Defence of the Gospel (2)

*Reading: Acts 23:6–10; 24:14–16; 26:2–8*

### **Introduction**

The final chapters of the Acts of the Apostles contain some of the most vivid writing in the whole of the sacred canon of Scripture. Leaving aside the fact that Luke, I believe, was inspired of the Holy Spirit as he wrote this book, what he has produced reveals Luke himself to be a consummate artist as well as an exceedingly accurate historian.

Chief among the delights of those who love literature and good things is his description of the tremendous storm which Paul and his fellow passengers had to survive on their way to Rome. It is famous throughout the world for the vividness and accuracy of its nautical technical detail: for its knowledge of the way a ship is handled, for its knowledge of tides and winds, for its accuracy in plotting the journey of that wounded craft until it eventually arrived through the storm in the cold light of a morning on the shores of Malta. Seamen have found it a wealth of information on the nautical methods of the ancient world. Geographers delight in it because they can trace with accuracy the voyage, the journeys, the routes that the ship was driven, and where it eventually landed. Many historians have been compelled to admit that Luke, not being a seaman himself, must have been travelling with Paul and witnessed this very voyage because he was there on the ship. In spite of the conditions, he noticed with keen, observant eyes all that the captain and the sailors did. Incidentally, Luke also makes this claim himself.<sup>4</sup>

In these chapters Luke creates for us, often with a mere stroke of the pen, characters that live and move in our imaginations. I hope they do in yours.

There is that delightful description of that fox, *Felix*, coming down after the trial where he had deliberately not given a verdict so as not to offend either party, and pretending to be interested in spiritual things (ch. 24).

Haven't you missionaries known such people? Getting a long way into the explanation, the righteousness and self-control and judgment to come, he suddenly found he had a meeting to attend, and said, 'I will see you again on this matter.' But it is all so obvious, as we read this story, that he found Paul's preaching getting

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<sup>4</sup> Note the references to 'we' in chapter 27.

uncomfortably near his conscience. He hasn't been interested in spiritual things; all the while the purpose of his supposed spiritual interest was the hope of getting a bribe.

Or there is the *Roman tribune* in Jerusalem (22:2–29). He was astonished to find that Paul was a Roman citizen by birth, and in the heat of the moment he said, 'I paid a great deal of money for my citizenship!' (22:28). It opens the window on the corruption of the civil service of the Roman Empire, where Roman citizenship was very often up for grabs if you could pay the appropriate official a big enough bribe. And there's that delightful touch when he wrote his letter to Felix, the governor of the province (23:26–30). In arresting Paul, and not knowing he was a Roman citizen, the commander-in-chief had committed a very grave crime in having Paul bound and stretched, ready for a scourging. When Paul stopped him by revealing he was a Roman citizen, he had been very frightened because it was a most serious offence under Roman law to scourge a Roman citizen, particularly when he hadn't been tried, let alone condemned.

So, in his letter to the governor in charge of the province he says, 'I came upon Paul when the crowd was trying to murder him in the temple and, knowing he was a Roman citizen, I delivered him,' managing to cook the books a little bit and get the chronology and timetable wrong. The marvellous thing is that Paul never blabbed on him.

And then, of course, there is *Paul himself* in the court where the investigation has been carried on by *Festus* in the presence of *King Agrippa* (chs. 25–26).

It begins so stately, but in the end Paul uses the opportunity to preach the gospel. As he tells Agrippa what it is he preaches throughout the Roman world, he lapses into the language that he would use to advertise the titles of his lectures on the billboards in Ephesus, or elsewhere. It's a pity that it doesn't come across in English; it is exceedingly vivid Greek.

And I can't resist mentioning the pomposity of *Tertullus* (24:1–8). Not all lawyers are pompous, but this one was. Hired by the Jews to represent their case before Felix at Caesarea, he began his speech with a marvellously pompous bit of oration that somehow got its Greek syntax all muddled up, and came haltingly to an end.

*Why is there so much repetition?*

As we see these figures, they move before our imaginations. They were real men; it's a real world that Luke is reporting for our instruction. That said, when we have read these stories as interesting stories, vividly told, we could perhaps be forgiven if we find some of the chapters a little bit confusing, for there is, apparently, so much repetition.

There are two judicial enquiries, not just one. There are two formal trials, not just one. On no less than two occasions Paul rehearses his conversion in detail. While it's all very interesting, the lay person like myself can pause, wondering, why all this repetition? If he's told his conversion once, why go into all the detail again?

And why do you have an investigation followed by a trial, and then a further trial and another investigation? And anyway, what is the difference between the judicial investigation and a trial? What is the point of all the massive repetition?

Further study, of course, will reveal that there is order in this apparent chaos of detail. The central chapters in this last section of Luke's work deal primarily, as I have said many times, with *Paul's defence of the gospel*. Defence now in its semi-legal sense of demolishing the accusation that has been levelled both against him personally, and against the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The middle chapters fall into three parts.

1. What happened to Paul at Jerusalem (21:27–23:10): the riot in the temple and the investigation before the Sanhedrin; to find out, if possible, why the crowds in the temple tried to murder Paul.

2. What happened to Paul at Caesarea (23:31–24:27). He was taken there for formal trial before the Roman governor, Felix, and an account is given of the trial. There is no verdict. Felix was too sharp a politician to have attempted to give the verdict, though in his heart of hearts he knew that Paul was innocent. He probably preferred to leave him in prison in the hope of getting a bribe from Paul, or else to please the Jews by the continued imprisonment.

3. What happened to Paul at Caesarea three years later under the governorship of the Roman, Festus (chs. 25–26). Luke spares us many of the details of the formal trial that Festus held and merely summarises it, followed by the lengthy account of Paul's statement at the judicial investigation before King Agrippa.

It is true, of course, that in all these investigations and trials, much has to be repeated. Indeed, the repetition is important when it comes to the statement that Paul gives on each occasion of what the real issue at stake was. He had been accused of all kinds of things, both vague and specific, and particularly the very damning indictment that he had been a leader of political subversion. It was exceedingly important, therefore, that Paul should make clear, on each occasion, what was the nub of the difference between him and the Jews who sought to prosecute him in the courts.

Three times over we have read it this morning, as we hear Paul brush aside the false accusations and expose to the court the heart of the matter. The fundamental doctrine of the gospel is, of course, Jesus Christ and his resurrection from the dead.

And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? (26:6–8)

He does what Peter tells us to do: 'Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or as an evildoer' (1 Pet 4:15). Your enemies will try to fasten all kinds of accusations against you. See, in the first place, that they are not based on fact. Then, don't put up with that kind of accusation, but clear your name whenever possible. Why? Because you must be ready to show what is the real difference between Christianity and all its detractors. Our Lord said:

Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets. (Luke 6:22–23)

But in these three major movements of thought in the middle chapters of this section, closer study shows that there were slightly different basic issues at stake. First, in the investigation in Jerusalem, and then on the two or three occasions in Caesarea.

### **1. In Jerusalem: Paul's attitude to the ceremonial law**

In his address to the Jews, the context shows that the prominent question at stake was Paul's attitude to Old Testament religion.

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. (22:3)

He believed, as we believe, that the law was laid down in the Old Testament by inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God. What attitude, then, would Christianity take to these regulations laid down by inspiration of God? As Luke records the detail, he is asking his readers to judge Christianity and its message by *its respect for conscience* (23:1).

### **2. In Caesarea: Paul's attitude to the civil law**

In the trial before Felix the context is different. This was a civil court, not primarily interested in matters of religion.

He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him. By examining him yourself you will be able to find out from him about everything of which we accuse him. (24:6–8)

The Jews accused Paul of having attempted to desecrate the temple at Jerusalem. This was a fit subject to be tried in a Roman civil court because the Romans themselves had laid down the law that, if any Gentile attempted even so much as to enter the restricted court in the Jewish temple at Jerusalem, then the Romans themselves would hand over the culprit to the Jewish authorities for summary execution under the law. It would have been a civil offence as well as a religious offence if Paul had, in fact, brought Gentiles into the temple and thus have desecrated the temple.

Felix, therefore, properly tried this case in his civil court, but Paul once more shows what the real nature of the gospel message is.

But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience towards both God and man. (24:14–16)

Here is Christianity talking of its ultimate expectation—there shall be a resurrection. That resurrection shall not only bring delight for the believer, it shall eventually summon and lead all to stand before the great white throne of God's final judgment. Christianity preaches it in its gospel.



And now Paul points out to Felix, the governor, 'I, who preach that gospel, seek by God's grace to live consistently with that gospel. Because I believe in a final judgment I always take pains to have a clear conscience not only before God but before men. I have not broken the civil law, your honour.'

'Why haven't I broken the law, and why didn't I bring Gentiles into the temple and profane the temple? It was not merely because the Jewish *ceremonial* law said I mustn't, but because the *civil law* said I mustn't. I believe that the powers that be are ordained of God, and being a Christian who believes the Christian message that there's going to be a resurrection and a judgment, when men shall stand before God, I scrupulously train myself to have a conscience not only clear before God but clear before my fellow men. I have deliberately observed the civil law.'

That is an important part in Christian apologetics, isn't it? In whatever country we are, many will judge Christianity and its gospel message by the attitude of those who profess to believe the message and *their respect for civil government*.

### **3. In Caesarea: Paul's attitude to political law**

In the investigations before Festus and Agrippa the context was again slightly different. In the trial before Festus the Jews had added specific charges, which Paul rebutted, as we gather from Luke's summary (25:1-8).

Paul argued in his defence, 'Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offence.' (v. 8)

Now the issue was not the ceremonial law given by inspiration of God in the Old Testament, nor merely a question of whether Paul would obey the civil law—the question was a political.

Apparently here the Jews, as they had done in Philippi, had accused the apostle of being a ringleader in subversion. 'These men who have turned the world upside down' (17:6) was never meant as a compliment to missionaries. It means these are men who have fomented political subversion all around the Roman world, saying there is another king, in treasonable opposition to his majesty the Caesar at Rome. If that had been true, Festus wouldn't have waited to send Paul to Rome. The case being proved, Festus would have executed him there and then.

It was, therefore, of the utmost importance that Christianity should clear itself, at the highest level, to show to the Caesar of Rome—bad man that he was, but one of those authorities appointed by God—that Christianity is not a message of political subversion. It does not work by political means to unseat the government of the day.

And it is still important, as you will know better than I, for the progress of the gospel in many a land, for Christianity to take its stand very clearly. The Christian gospel is not an arm of Western democratic government. Christianity is not the agent of some tyrannical system. Christianity preaches a king, but not a king in competition with the governments of this world. It is not treasonable, not even to her gracious

majesty Queen Elizabeth II, for an Englishman like me to stand and tell her that Jesus Christ is king.

One day he is coming, and when the King comes, then all earthly governments will be put aside and our blessed Lord shall reign from shore to shore. Oh, what a day when the King comes back. But until then, see to it that we preach the gospel and make it clear, so that the world can judge of the gospel by the reality of its actual message of hope for the world at large, unobscured by political consideration. His servants must follow in his blood-stained tracks and show *their respect for political law*.

We shall not have time to consider in detail Paul's defence in these three areas, so let me just sum them up again.

1. The gospel judged by its attitude to conscience, men's conscience in regard to the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament — Paul's defence before the Sanhedrin
2. The gospel judged by its attitude to the civil law — Paul's defence before Felix
3. The gospel judged by its attitude to politics, and by its message for the world at large — Paul's defence before Festus and Agrippa

We can briefly look at 2 and 3, and then turn our attention solidly on 1, because it's no secret that it's Paul's defence in number one that has caused most searching of heart among serious-minded students of Scripture.

## 2. Paul's defence before Felix

The Jews had brought all sorts of accusations against Paul.

For 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, but we seized him. (24:5–6)

1. They said he was a *plague* (a pestilent fellow, KJV). The word in Greek is a smear word. It carries political connotations, but it is exceedingly vague. 'A pestilent plague': the kind of word used when you want to suggest that the man is somehow politically doubtful, but you can't think of any particular thing to charge him with, so you try to smear his character by using a word like this. Paul had the wisdom not even to attempt to answer it.

2. Then they said that he was *one who stirs up riots* among all the Jews throughout the world. That was a bit more specious because the fact is that in many cities where Paul went to preach the gospel, there *had* broken out riots following his preaching. Luke, of course, has already made it clear who was responsible for starting the riots; Paul himself never lifted a stone to stone anybody — at least, not after he got converted.

In some places there were no riots, like Berea. Paul expounded the Scripture there in a godly and responsible fashion, and the Jews of Berea, being more noble-minded than the others, searched the Scriptures daily whether these things were so (17:11). The Jews in Berea were aware that what Paul said carried the most far-reaching

implications, but they had the good sense and good behaviour not to get excited and cause a riot, but to study Scripture logically and thoughtfully to see if these things were so. It was the Jews in Thessalonica that came down, stirred up the crowd and started a riot. And so it was everywhere.

Paul doesn't answer the questions about riots around the world because the riots in other provinces of the Roman Empire didn't fall under Felix's jurisdiction and Paul hadn't started them anyway. It was the Jews who started them, and Paul had been absolved from any charges by Gallio, the governor in Corinth (18:12–17).

3. Then they said he was a *ringleader of a sect*. Now, 'sect' is a multi-coloured word of many meanings, isn't it? The Sadducees were in the habit of looking upon the Pharisees as a sect, but they didn't mean it in a bad sense; they meant it in the sense of a religious party. But sect, of course, even in Greek, can have a bad sense, and in modern English, if you want to damn any religious movement, call it a sect.

It's frequently used as a tactic in Austria, for instance, where the churches and the newspapers delight to call the missionaries 'leaders of a sect'.

I like the reply of Floyd Schneider. When they were doing friendship evangelism, some of his acquaintances turned round on him and said,

'But you're a sect, aren't you?'

'Yes,' he says, 'of course, I am.'

'What? You admit you're a sect?'

'Well,' he says, 'I might as well, because that's what you believe, isn't it? And nothing I could say would tell you otherwise. Tell me,' said Floyd, 'please would you define what a sect is for me.'

'Well . . .' And then they couldn't.

So did Paul: 'All right, I'm a sect, then. But, your honour,' he said to Felix, 'I do believe all that the Prophets have spoken' (24:14).

It's a curious thing, you know, that sects—as the religious establishment is pleased to call them—believe the Bible from beginning to end, and very often that establishment doesn't actually believe much of the Bible at all. If it is sectarian to believe the whole of the Bible, then, brothers and sisters, let us be sects. I'd rather be a *sect* and believe the whole of Scripture than be *establishment* and cast doubt upon its sacred message.

4. And then they said that he had tried to *profane the temple*. Paul hadn't preached in the temple, or brought Greeks into it. It would have been foolish for Paul to have had an open air meeting in the middle of the temple in Jerusalem, even with those delightful and effective sketch boards! They weren't inclined to get converted; it would have caused a riot immediately and few folks, if any, would have heard the gospel message. There are times and places for all things.

But as I said, Paul came to the point:

They did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city. Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me. (24:12–13)

‘I did not profane the temple.’

‘Why not?’

‘Not out of mere policy so as not to start a riot, but because of the implication of the very gospel I preach. I believe there’s going to be a resurrection and a final judgment. I believe the authorities are appointed by God and I obey the authorities, not merely for fear that, if I don’t, they will imprison or even execute me, but I obey them like I pay my taxes: for the sake of conscience.’

It was a masterfully appropriate defence of the gospel message. God give us grace, as Bill<sup>5</sup> was saying last night, to see that our gospel message carries its implication into our own behaviour. It’s difficult sometimes, isn’t it?

### *The hypocrisy of the Sanhedrin and Felix*

These Jews, marvellous gentlemen that they were, stood in Felix’s court accusing Paul of having broken the civil law. Why was Paul standing before Felix and not being judged in Jerusalem? It was because a band of religious fanatics had put themselves under oath not to eat or drink until they had assassinated Paul. They hit upon a scheme, and went to the Sanhedrin to share it with them (23:12–15).

And the Sanhedrin agreed, if you please. They were going to ask the commander-in-chief to bring Paul down to the Sanhedrin once more, as though they were interested in finding out more about what he preached, and on the road there was this bunch of terrorists. They would have snatched Paul from the Roman soldiers and killed him. They were determining, therefore, to break both the law of God and man, and now they were in a Roman court, suggesting and accusing Paul of having broken the civil law.

And what about Felix himself? Roman governor, judge in the court, responsible to maintain justice in the Roman province, a man who had heard that Paul had come to Jerusalem with a collection of money from the Gentile believers for the Jewish believers in Rome. He knew there was a lot of money about and pretended interest in the gospel so that he might eventually pop the question to Paul and suggest that, if he really wanted his case to be heard more quickly, Paul could bring some persuasion to bear upon Felix and he might perhaps put the case forward a little bit.

As a man who reasoned of righteousness, self-control and judgement to come, Paul refused to bribe his way out of prison and give a gift to the man who was supposed to be upholding the law of the country. So he was left in prison for two years as a result of it, and was still in prison when Felix left the province (v. 27).

It can be difficult, but part of our defence of the gospel is that we obey the civil law out of respect for conscience and for God.

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<sup>5</sup> William MacDonald.

### 3. Paul's defence before Festus and Agrippa

This was, as I say, different. Paul had been accused of preaching political Messianism, treasonable to the emperor himself. Paul was delighted to get the opportunity to explain to King Agrippa what the Christian gospel really is; he was delighted to explain it to him because Paul knew the purpose of that investigation. Paul had appealed to Caesar, for he wasn't going to have the case settled in a corrupt Jewish court. If he was accused of political treason against the Roman emperor, then he would be tried before the Roman emperor himself, and not have some corrupt verdict delivered upon the gospel by corrupt priests and a corrupt governor, working in cahoots in Jerusalem (25:8–12).

He appealed to Caesar and that meant, therefore, that Festus, the governor, had to write a report for Nero Caesar on what the charges were. As far as Festus could make out, there didn't seem to be any charge relevant to Nero's court, but he had to write something. So, with Agrippa in attendance, he held the investigation to find out what he should have to tell Nero Caesar when he sent the prisoner on to him. Paul knew that every word he spoke before Agrippa would be taken down in evidence and it was not only for the court's ears, it was for the ears of the highest authority in the Roman Empire. Here the gospel stands on trial, to be judged by its message for the world at large.

*What is that message?*

Alas, we have little time consider it. 'And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers' (26:6). 'I stand,' says Paul, 'for the hope of Israel.' Oh, what a tragic thing it was, and the tears would have started in the eyes of the apostle. His own beloved nation had been chosen by God to exercise its unique role, to carry the line of God's redemptive purpose for our world. They were to hold the torch of hope for mankind against the hopelessness of the ancient pagan world, and then to hand on the torch of hope to Christians, to blaze it in our modern world that ultimately is as hopeless as the ancient pagan world had been.

*What hope is there for our world?*

Buddhism knows nothing of it. Hinduism has no hope. All it can say is that this world is an illusion and our highest wisdom is to escape from it as fast as we can, never to return. Science has no ultimate hope. Ah, I'd like to take my atheist friends sometimes and rub their noses a little bit in their hopelessness. What hope have they?

They say there's no God; so what does control us humans, then? How did we come here? What will define our destiny?

They reply, 'The blind forces of the universe, working without any purpose on the mindless material of the universe.'

So our marvellous intellects are prisoners in an ultimately mindless universe. And one day, the scientists tell us, the sun will explode and the earth will evaporate, and that will be the end of humankind as we have known it. We've got the intelligence to see

it will happen. We haven't got the power to stop it happen. Men and women without hope.

It's worse than that, isn't it? One day, sir, one day, madam, a little virus will get into your body. It hasn't got two pennyworth of sense in its brain. It will proceed to tear you apart—your brain apart, all your aesthetic sense, all your ability to purpose, all that you have counted dear—and leave you a corpse. And the irony is that, when it's done it, it won't even know. And you have the intelligence to see what is happening, what this senseless, mindless bit of stuff is doing to you, and you won't have power to stop it.

I say to my atheist friends, 'Come with me and talk to this lady. She's a woman of thirty-five, mother of two children, and she's just been diagnosed as having incurable cancer. What will you say to her?'

For myself, I shall say, 'My dear, I'm very sorry, but there is hope for you. You are made in the image of God. Like the rest of us, you've sinned, but there is forgiveness and there is redemption. Forgiveness now and bright hope for tomorrow because the blessed Lord Jesus has risen from the dead.'

God himself has already begun the great process of restoration of all things, for the dead body of the human Jesus Christ our Lord has come out of the grave. It's already started and one day that firstfruit shall be followed by a harvest, when creation herself shall be delivered from her bondage to corruption into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom 8:21). There's hope for you, my dear, I say. And if you will have God's Son as your Saviour, you shall be transformed and conformed to his image, and one day have a new body. And what is more, your very suffering, meaningless as it might now appear, can be taken by God and work for you an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Cor 4:17). There's hope.'

And then I say, 'Come on, you talk to the woman.'

And what will they say? 'Sorry, my dear, but there's no hope for you. You might as well blow your brains out.'

Where is the evidence for the hope? Not in men's politics, I assure you. Millions and multi-millions have been destroyed and slaughtered on our planet, not only in the past but in modern days, by men who have tried to implement their theories of bringing in a paradise.

There is hope, but where shall I look to see evidence of hope? In Israel, of course—the bearer of God's purposes of redemption through the ancient centuries, leading on to Jesus Christ our Lord, who is now risen from the dead. Here is hope for the tragedy, and Paul stood in a court before a Gentile judge and governor, accused by the Jews of the very hope that Israel stood for. It's a very sorry thing to see modern Judaism likewise having abandoned its hope. But I must not be tempted to stay too long, for I have difficult business ahead.

And we come finally to the first group of stories: the gospel judged by its attitude to men's conscience in regard to the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament.

### 1. Paul's defence before the Sanhedrin

And here I might as well be honest, because you all know it is no secret that serious students of God's word have held that on this occasion Paul got it all wrong, which, if it is true, seems a pity, doesn't it? Paul compromised the gospel, they say. He went to the temple, took part with certain men in the execution of their vows and was prepared, though he never got round to it, to stand with them in the offering of their sacrifices on the altar in the temple (21:26).

Of course, it did no good. Instead of placating the Jews, it enraged them and led to a riot and eventually to Paul's arrest, and for the next four years he found himself in prison. Whereas, if he had not done this unfortunate thing, he could have been a free man for the rest of his days. He was well intentioned, therefore, but not only wrong, seriously wrong. In being prepared to discharge that vow and offer sacrifices in the temple of Jerusalem, he was denying the sole sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ upon which the gospel rests.

Serious theologians have held this view. Campbell Morgan, to name just one of them in the past, but for all I know many of you here present this morning may hold it. I must speak with more than usual respect, therefore, because I take the contrary view and I shall need your sympathy.

When I was in Zaire with Rex Trogdon, I was due to preach on Sunday and we went to the local prayer meeting. One of the African brethren, realising the difficulties of translation, prayed earnestly to the Lord that as I preached my translator wouldn't go off into heresy. You'd better pray for me now in these moments that, in trying to defend Paul, I don't go off into heresy either!

#### *The charge*

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, 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.' (21:20–21)

Notice, please, this is not the general public; this is what the believers in Jerusalem have heard. They have heard that Paul insists that Jewish believers everywhere should stop circumcising their children, and compels Jewish believers who live among the Gentiles to forsake the Mosaic traditions, the food laws and other things.

The question arises: is that true? The answer is, of course, it is absolutely false. History has shown quite clearly what Paul preached in the gospel — men and women are justified by faith without the works of the law. No work of the law, circumcision or anything else, was necessary for salvation, nor could it contribute to salvation. Paul was as clear as daylight, and when certain people from Jerusalem came down to Antioch and tried to tell the believers that you have to be circumcised to be saved, Paul and Barnabas resisted them all the way up to Jerusalem and back (ch. 15).

Paul was absolutely clear: to preach that circumcision was necessary to salvation, or helped salvation, was absolute fundamental falsehood. But that being said, Paul

did not insist that Jewish believers should refrain from circumcising their children. Indeed, he himself took Timothy, grown man that he was, and had him circumcised (16:1–3). What for? Well, not to help Timothy's salvation, but out of respect for the conscience of his fellow believers.

Why had they a conscience? Because they believed that the Old Testament was inspired. It said the Jews ought to circumcise their children, and though they had become Christians they still felt that, as Jews, they ought to obey the inspired Old Testament Scriptures. Paul respected their conscience.

Now there are similar things, aren't there? If you go to certain parts of Scotland they think that the *Sabbath* is part of God's moral law. You may not think so, but if you want to preach the gospel to them you'd better not come riding on your motorcycle or Mercedes-Benz because they wouldn't listen to you. You would have to learn to adapt to their conscience, and respect it.

Paul is exhibiting the same balance of the gospel. Over the fundamentals of salvation and justification by faith he is absolutely unmoveable, and thereafter he shows complete respect for people's consciences. Why? It's not an accidental part of the gospel. Discussing such things in Romans 14, Paul explains that we must all give an account to God (vv. 11–12). Christ died for us that he might be Lord. When we stand before him, he'll want to know, 'Why were you circumcised?'

'Lord, I thought you said I had to be.'

'You did it because you thought you were obeying me? Well, you needn't have been circumcised, actually, but marvellous, you did it to please me.'

And to another, 'Why weren't you circumcised?'

'Lord, I didn't think it would please you. I genuinely thought I was free from it.'

'You were,' says Christ. 'You didn't have to be circumcised. That's good.'

'And why weren't you circumcised—you really thought you ought to be, didn't you?'

'Yes, Lord.'

'So why weren't you, then?'

'Well, there was that Gooding. He said I wasn't to be.'

And the Lord will say, 'Excuse me, who did you say?'

'Gooding.'

'Who on earth or in heaven is Gooding? Did Gooding die for you? What's he doing lording it over your conscience?'

#### *The freedom of the believer*

It is no small matter to decide personally before the Lord as a direct exercise of conscience, and some think Paul went a bit too far in that direction. He helped people to offer a vow, and he shouldn't have undertaken an Old Testament vow. Well, Paul hadn't undertaken one, had he? The men had already taken a vow when he arrived (21:23).

What does Christianity and the Christian gospel say to people who have taken vows? That when they become Christians they can disown their vows?



Here's a young lady and she's a believer. She oughtn't to marry an unbeliever, but in disobedience to the Lord, she's gone and married an unbeliever. That's too bad. Now you come along, and the girl is repentant; what do you tell her to do?

You say, 'So you took vows at your wedding, my dear, and you're saved by grace?'

'Yes.'

'Well, if you're saved by grace they don't matter. Abandon your vows!'

Is that what you say? Of course you don't. Christianity is not antinomian; it will say that we have to discharge our vows.

### *Old Testament types*

'But Paul compromised the gospel. He was prepared to offer sacrifices in the temple at Jerusalem.'

'And why do you object to that?'

'Well,' you say, 'to offer the symbol of a sacrifice in the temple of Jerusalem is in direct contradiction to the sufficiency of the sacrifice of our Lord. The sacrifice of animals was a type of a sacrifice of our Lord, and you can't have types along with the reality.'

What about circumcision, then? Wasn't circumcision a type? Yes, of course, it was.

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Col 2:11–12)

Circumcision, too, was a type; but as long as Jewish believers understood that circumcision didn't promote their salvation—that it was not a condition of salvation—and Paul saw that they weren't doing it in order to be saved, then he was happy for them to continue with that type, wasn't he?

My point is that circumcision was just as much a Jewish type of the work of Christ as the animal sacrifices were.

You say, 'That cannot be. You are getting into heresy. And isn't there a book written by an Englishman who lives in Ireland, on the Epistle to the Hebrews, that says that God called all Jewish people out of the temple, and that to continue with sacrifices now that Christ has offered his, is a denial of the gospel?'

Yes, there is such a book.<sup>6</sup> It isn't a very good book! But it would not be altogether to the point to quote it here, because *Hebrews* wasn't written when Paul stood before the Sanhedrin; it was written around AD 64.

In the early days God was gracious, wasn't he? Peter and the apostles, even Stephen, went up to the temple at the hour of prayer when the sacrifices were being offered (Acts 3:1). Stephen began to see that one day the temple would disappear. It was becoming obsolete (7:48). But God didn't force his people that very minute to leave it all; he gave them a period in which to decide.

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<sup>6</sup> David Gooding, *An Unshakeable Kingdom: The Letter to the Hebrews for Today*, Gospel Folio Press, 1989.

Why did he do it? Because God is a respecter of people's consciences. He'd given them his holy inspired word and demanded obedience to that word. He wasn't necessarily going to ask the early Christians to scrap it and leave it. He would give them time until they were fully convinced in their own mind that it was his will that they should drop the animal sacrifices and the temple ritual. To force it on them before their conscience was approved before God would have got many a Jew living in secret fear and disobedience of the Lord.

Now, as Paul stood before the Sanhedrin, that time of interval was getting towards its end. Indeed, when they tried to murder Paul and dragged him out of the temple and slammed the doors, perhaps the crowd were doing more than they knew. Soon the time of interval was finished and the Roman armies would come and destroy the temple. Until then, God gave his people time for their consciences to be biblically informed.

Therein, God himself sets us a lesson, and I conclude with two things.

### **Paul's witness to the mob on the steps of the barracks**

They had tried to murder him, they were baying for his blood and he asked permission of the commander to address them (21:39).

'Paul, why do you bother to do it? Man, you're just a lump of flesh and bone, you've just been dragged out of the temple, and this crowd is in absolute fury. What good do you think you're going to do, trying to defend yourself and talking to the people?'

What good would he do? Oh, but you don't understand Paul if you talk like that. With every bone in his body he loved those people and he must tell them the gospel.

For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. (Rom 9:3)

'Paul, it won't do them any good,' someone says.

'What do you mean?' says Paul.

'Well, they're a lot of raving lunatics, like a pack of wild animals.'

'I was like it once,' he says. 'I'm going to tell them my conversion. Who knows that some of them might get saved.'

### *God's mercy*

Why was there the interval of those long years before the temple was destroyed? Because God had mercy on them, even though they had murdered his Son. Paul knew his Lord, and he would bring the gospel of the Lord Jesus even to them. He told them how God had saved him and delivered him from this religious frenzy and madness and was now sending him to the Gentiles (22:21). At that they erupted: to think he would have the audacity to take their sacred Jewish things and take them to the Gentiles. They erupted like a pack of wild animals (v. 23). It was jealousy, wasn't it?

You say, 'Paul, you might have expected it. Fancy telling a sectarian Jerusalem mob that you were going to take the treasures of the Jewish gospel and give it to the Gentiles. What would you expect other than to get jealousy?'

Whatever did he do it for?

'Well,' says Paul, 'I did it on purpose, to provoke them to jealousy . . . and save some of them' (Rom 11:11, 14).

Who can measure God's mercy to those guilty men? The previous Easter their predecessors in the Sanhedrin had been responsible for crucifying the blessed Lord of glory, and now these wicked, disreputable unprincipled money-mongers, who were the aristocracy among the priests, were falsely accusing Paul.

What was he doing standing there? Because the wisdom of God had said that, after the crucifixion of Messiah, God would send his messengers. Now the day of judgment was drawing near: in a few years the temple would be destroyed (AD 70). And more than that, one day these men would stand before God. Oh, what shall those Sadducean high priests say when they see the wound marks in the hands of our blessed Lord?

Ah, yes, but what will the universe think of God Almighty, when he has to condemn them to eternal perdition? Will the universe say, 'But they didn't hear, God—they didn't have a chance'? No, they never will. Just as they were slamming the doors against Paul and the Christian gospel, God had Paul in the very midst of the Sanhedrin, showing the Sadducees that their accusations were false (21:30; 22:1–21). They were a lot of humbugs. The real reason is that they refused Jesus Christ their Saviour. Before they would be banished eternally, God would give them one more chance. If they refused it, that witness would justify God and his mercy in the coming day.

### **Our witness today through the preaching of the gospel**

You have a double ministry, my brothers and sisters.

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? (2 Cor 2:14–16)

'You are a sweet savour of Christ to God in them that are saved, and in them that perish' (v. 15 KJV). How marvellous the fragrance, when you go and preach the gospel and men and women turn to Christ. Wouldn't we all love the ministry? How heartbreaking it can be at times, when you've preached your heart out over many years, to see men and women finally reject the gospel.

You say, 'I've been a failure. There are those other missionaries and they get results, but I've never got results. People would seem to get so far and then they'd turn against God. I've been a failure.'

No, you haven't, my brother. No, you haven't, my sister. You're a savour to God. When those people stand before the final judgment and must be consigned to

perdition—and the universe looks on, saying, ‘How can God do such a thing as to confine them to perdition, they didn’t have a chance?’—then you will be asked to stand up as a witness. They will be reminded of those moments when you stood, pleading with them to be saved. They could have been, but refused, and your witness shall forever justify the name of a merciful God, who must consign those who reject the gospel to perdition.

It is a solemn ministry, but it is a fragrant ministry if it serves to justify the ways of God to men and women.

Shall we pray.

We thank thee, Lord, for these stories of those who preceded us in the faith. We thank thee for being part of this long, historical and noble tradition. Help us in our day, so to drink deeply of the love of Christ, so to be near him, to feel the pulsating of his heart, whose heartbeats are the heartbeats of God himself, that we shall rightly represent thee in the world, and be a fragrance to thee of Christ, both in them that are saved and in them that perish. For his name’s sake. Amen.

## Paul's Defence of the Gospel (3)

*Readings: Acts 27:9–10, 20–26, 30–36; 28:17–20, 23–30*

On Tuesday we began our study of the last major section of Luke's history and discovered that there were five parts to it. We studied the first of them, the beginning of Paul's journey from Ephesus to Rome and, in particular, its first major stage from Ephesus to Jerusalem.

In that first part, we came across two major stories. We discovered the way the citizens of Ephesus defended their religion, which was a form of nature worship. With them it centred around Artemis, the virgin mother goddess.

And then we considered also Paul's appeal to the elders at Ephesus, as he pleaded with them that they should be steadfast and persistent in their protection and defence of the church.

Yesterday, we went on to consider the three central parts of this final section of the history, and found them to be altogether taken up with Paul's defence of the gospel. At heart the defence was basically the same, because the crucial point was the issue of the hope of Israel and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus. But as Paul defended the gospel in the different centres in Jerusalem and in Caesarea, before the high priests and the Roman governors, we discovered that he had to defend that gospel in three different contexts:

1. By its respect for Old Testament law and human conscience
2. By its respect for civil law and governments
3. By its respect for political law and the glorious message of the gospel

### **Paul's journey from Caesarea to Rome**

Now we come to the last part of this famous last section of the Acts of the Apostles. Once more it is concerned with a journey: the journey that Paul now had to take from Caesarea to Rome for the purpose of defending the gospel before Nero Caesar, to whom he had appealed as the only hope of getting justice in the civil courts of this world.

#### **The storm at sea**

The main story in the course of this journey to Rome is the tremendous storm that wrecked the ship on which Paul and his fellow passengers were travelling. They came

within a hairbreadth of drowning, sinking to the bottom of the Mediterranean, before Paul ever had a chance to defend the gospel before Caesar at Rome.

You will see therefore, by Luke's own sense of proportion, that in this last section we are back with nature once again. Not now with Mother Nature, life sustaining and protecting, producing her young, with all the wonderful mysteries of nature that surround the birth and upbringing of the young of animals and humans; Mother Nature, with all her wonderful instincts and processes, which the Ephesians deified and worshipped under the name of Artemis.

We are back with nature, but now with impersonal nature and her gigantic forces, heartlessly regardless of human life, mindlessly cruel when she cares to put herself into one of her moods, amorally destructive.

If, in all the kindness of your heart you go to mend widow Jones' electric toaster and, forgetting to turn the electricity off at the mains, put your hand on a live wire and get a shock that nearly kills you, it's no good protesting to nature, 'Look here, this isn't fair. I was doing my best to be moral and help the widow in her affliction.' Nature cares nothing for your morality. The bank robber who's extracting his millions and knows about electricity, he gets away with it unharmed. Nature is amoral and always potentially lethal. It makes human beings look pathetically puny against its great forces; nonetheless, humankind must struggle just to survive, pitting brain and brawn against nature in an unequal contest.

What then shall we make of this story of nature's storms that nearly wrecked Paul and his missionary endeavour? Some would have us treat this story as a detailed allegory. As they hear Paul saying to the throng, 'Sirs, you should have listened to me and not gained all this loss,' they say, 'What a vivid picture it is of the ship of Christendom: the barque of Christ that, neglecting Paul's advice, has set forth on dangerous seas and, transgressing his commandments, has come to wreck and ruin. So that, now in glory, Paul has a right to chide us through his writings, "You should have listened to me, but take heart: though the church is in ruins we shall all get at last to shore on bits and pieces of wood and other debris of a once beautiful Christendom."'

Well, it may be that Luke intended us to read the story as a great allegory. For my own part, I think that must at least be a secondary reading of Scripture, and we shall have problems enough this morning if we content ourselves with reading the story at its most literal and basic level.

#### *The historical importance of this journey*

Paul, after all, wasn't going on a joyride, a cruise for the recovery of his health—though, God knows, he sometimes needed it—on the sunny and balmy waters of the Mediterranean in a tourist liner. He was going in chains on a smelly old corn ship, one of the great modern inventions of the Roman world, taking supplies from Alexandria in Egypt to feed the hungry mouths of the proletariat in Rome.

He was going in chains; but he was going as an ambassador in chains. Oh, what a dignity surrounds the little figure on board that ship. He was the divinely appointed

ambassador for Christ to the court of Nero, Emperor of Rome. Accredited to Nero's court by the Lord of the universe, the journey, therefore, was of exceedingly great historical importance.

The fact then, that nature was allowed to put on one of her storms and nearly sink God's ambassador to the bottom of the Mediterranean, surely raises a number of questions. When Paul did eventually get to Rome, we're told that he spent the two years before his hearing preaching the kingdom of God—the *kingly rule* of God. What, we ask, has the kingly rule of God got to do with nature's storm that nearly destroyed God's own ambassador?

We welcome American ambassadors in London—of course we do. We also notice the style in which they normally arrive. American ambassadors don't normally get washed up on the west coast of Ireland like drowned rats on the way to give in their credentials at the Court of St James in London. If they did, we should be so polite not to mention it, but we should quietly think very curious things about the power of the American nation!

*Why did God not intervene?*

Was this a way for the ambassador of the sovereign Lord of the universe to be treated by nature on his way to Rome? You will observe that, in all the long detailed account of the storm, there is no miracle. From the moment they boarded the doomed ship, to that cold, wild morning it broke up on the shore of Malta, there was not one miracle. No divine power calmed the sea, as some years earlier the sea had been calmed. When the blessed figure of our Lord arose in a storm-tossed boat amidst his frightened and scared disciples, and said, 'Peace! Be still!' (Mark 4:39), nature recognised her Lord and was calm. But no miracle now. All the passengers were saved, but only after two weeks of agonising suffering and fear, and a final inglorious, hair-raising scramble from the wreck through the surf to the safety of shore.

There comes the obvious question. Psalm 89:9 reminds us that God is the Creator and controller of nature: 'You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them.' Then why did God's kingly rule not order the Mediterranean to give his ambassador in chains a smoother passage?

### **The wonder of Nature**

As I ponder those things, I ask Luke's permission to turn aside for a while, and your permission too. (Some preachers have grasshopper minds and I more than others!) Let's turn aside, then, to consider nature as she is and the wonder of her, in spite of all her moods.

*God's providential control*

You see, the record of two thousand years of missionary endeavour shows that God has not significantly changed the basic way nature works in order to facilitate the spread of the gospel. Yes, of course, there have been miracles and what a marvellous

story they form. And we may observe in nature herself that the universe is not everywhere a fixed and predetermined system.

The great scientist Karl Popper<sup>7</sup> used to say that, in the working of the universe, you will find systems that are like clocks and systems that are like clouds. There are systems with intricate and massive mechanisms that are, so to speak, predetermined like a clock is predetermined. When one cog moves, all the others move irresistibly. There's nothing you can do about it, unless God intervenes by a miracle. There are other systems in this physical universe that are more like clouds that seem not to be predetermined in their movements, so that if a butterfly decides to have a stretch and wave its wings one sunny morning in Singapore, the motion of the air thus produced can eventually alter the cloud systems that control the weather in America.

And, said Professor Polkinghorne<sup>8</sup> in Britain recently to the nation, that simple fact of observation of the way God has organised nature's system—some like clocks and some like clouds—leaves open the fact that God is prepared to take us seriously.

#### *The reality of prayer*

It is not mere wishful thinking to suppose that our prayers can have an effect. Surely they can, for, even in the running of the universe, God has left systems open that are not predetermined, and we have the enormous privilege of coming to God, the transcendent Lord, as responsible servants to their master and making our requests known.

It was not a stupid childhood fantasy for George Müller to kneel with the captain on his transatlantic liner and pray that God should remove the fog to facilitate his arrival at a meeting where he felt he must preach.

#### *The ministry of angels*

And then, of course, we must never forget the ministry of angels. That is not necessarily miraculous either, is it? That's the normal working: 'Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?' (Heb 1:14). Granted, we do not always see them—perhaps we never see them. We are to take our Lord's words literally that, when it comes to little children, the angels have immediate and constant access into the presence of the King: 'I tell you that in heaven their angels always *see the face* of my Father who is in heaven' (Matt 18:10).

This is a delightful phrase, is it not? In an ancient eastern court, ordinary ministers were only allowed to enter the inner sanctum of the king's presence when they were summoned to do so. However urgent they felt their business to be, they must wait until they were invited to come in. But there were some ministers who had the privilege of entering the king's apartment at any instant day or night and, if need be, to wake his majesty from sleep, because their business was urgent. The description of such ministers in the ancient world was that they beheld *the face of the king*. Oh, what a lovely thing it is. It's not Mother Nature, merely concerning herself with little

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<sup>7</sup> Austrian Philosopher of Science, 1902-94.

<sup>8</sup> English theoretical physicist and theologian, born 1930.



children; their angels have ever and always immediate access, day and night, into the presence of the sovereign of the universe.

#### *The power of Satan*

Of course, there are some who say that his satanic majesty has a hand sometimes in the weather patterns that impede God's work. And they who say so quote the first chapter of the book of Job, where Satan was given permission to raise up trouble against Job. When God found it right that Job's faith should be tested, one of the results was that there came a whirlwind that demolished his house in an instant (v. 19).

Isn't it possible that, if the universe is in some part an open system, malevolent powers could at times, subject to the inscrutable wisdom of God, be allowed to play a part in it?

#### *The possibility of miracles*

And then of course, it would be altogether faithless of us to forget the possibility of sheer miracles. If angelic ministry is ordinary, then surely from time to time God has done miracles, the extraordinary, for the sake of his people and his work.

But, by definition, miracles are not moral, are they? The norm is that, even since Pentecost, God has let nature go on working as nature has always worked. Part of me says, 'I'm glad it's so.' What a wonderful thing nature is! It is an unequal struggle, but the struggle against the forces of nature is a marvellous story. It has had the effect of developing humankind and bringing out our latent ingenuities and possibilities.

What a tremendous school God put the infant human race into. He pointed out where there was gold, if Adam followed one of the rivers out of Eden down that way. Or, when the Israelites came to their promised land there was metal ore in the hills, and the Israelites took the hint and got working at it. What marvellous development of the human character and ingenuity has been the result.

Would you have had it otherwise? Early on, men learned that there were ways of dealing even with the potentially lethal forces of nature. If you knew how to do it, the same wind that blew your house down could be harnessed to drive the sails of your windmill to grind the corn. The same winds and tides and currents that stopped your passage across the sea could be harnessed to take you where you wanted to go, if you had the gumption to invent a ship and a sail. The power of gravity that keeps us human beings rooted to earth can be used to sling space probes away from earth to whatever planet you want to go to. I'd love to go, if I could be sure of getting back!

What a history, and it is only a tragedy that the whole story has been tarnished by human sin and arrogance. What a marvellous thing it would have been if man had never sinned, grown up like a child with his father, learned all about his computers in the school of God, and trained happily with God to one day take over the universe that God has created.

*The power of nature has not been subdued*

So, God has not altered nature significantly in order to facilitate missionary work. Nature is always unforgiving. Electricity will cook your dinner, or regardlessly incinerate you. And the missionary who jumps off 'the pinnacle of the temple' will find that God hasn't altered the law of gravity. Christians though we are, we still have to remember our place; foolhardiness in the face of nature is not faith.

Nature has not yet been subdued, let alone tamed. Modern aeroplanes with their radar can crash in fog, can't they? Sophisticated ships still have their backs broken in storms that take these great inventions and throw them about like straws in the wind. And if that is so, we should be wise, particularly as servants of the Lord, to face realistically the terms on which God's servants go out to evangelise the world. We may rely upon his fatherly control, his providential control of nature, on the ministry of angels, on the reality of prayer and its answers, on the possibility of miracles—but we have no guarantee.

We have no guarantee that a missionary will never be drowned, or die in an air crash; no guarantee that a missionary will never die of malaria or hepatitis. It would be unrealistic of us, wouldn't it, to suppose that, because we have devoted our lives to the Lord and go to serve him in dangerous places, we have a guarantee that we shall never perish in one of nature's storms, or be starved to death in one of nature's famines?

*The guarantee we have*

But we do have a guarantee. Let nature put on her most furious face, our guarantee is not that God's love will save us from ever experiencing nature's lethal powers, or save us from tribulation, famine, death or the deep. Our guarantee is this:

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38–39)

As we watch Paul go out and step on to that craft that nearly foundered in the Mediterranean, we remember these words which he wrote only a year or two before. He went through the storm and there was no miracle. We shall see that what brought him through, and all the passengers with him, was his steadfast faith in the love of God.

**Paul's interventions during the voyage**

In the course of this whole episode we notice with interest that Paul intervened four times to make an explicit statement. Let us briefly consider them.

*First intervention*

Paul advised them, saying, 'Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.' (Acts 27:9–10)

He appealed to the captain and owner of the vessel before they left Crete. His words were a warning to them and a warning to us against taking undue risk. As Paul overhears their conversation, that they intended to leave the safe harbour in Crete and risk sailing at this time of year to get a better harbour, he doesn't say, 'Yes, gentlemen, I'm a missionary, and nothing wrong could ever happen to me. I'm in the Lord's service, commended indeed, take any risk you like. It will sound good when I report it at the next missionary report meeting.'

No, no. He warned these men against taking foolish, undue and unnecessary risks with nature.

I must enter a caveat at once. You can't get through life without taking some risks with nature. The honest, hardworking farmer who sows his seed at seedtime has got to take a risk, hasn't he? Nature might follow that with a drought that rots his seed in the ground before it has a chance to germinate. That's part of life.

Columbus, or whoever it was, would never have discovered America if he hadn't been prepared to take gigantic risks with nature. And Livingstone, marvellous man, would hardly have pioneered Africa without taking risks, would he? Oh, what a story of those noble men and women, who have taken colossal risks in their pioneer work, and said with Paul:

But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. (20:24)

'I do not count my life dear to me. I take the risk and, if need be, perish under nature's powers, rather than multitudes should go down to the destruction of the lake of fire.' And, oh, the wonder of the little children that have shared the risks, all unknowingly, along with their missionary parents. Risks must be taken; and faith indeed sometimes seems to thrive on taking risks for God's sake.

But there is a difference, isn't there, in taking a calculated risk on the one hand, and sheer foolhardiness on the other? And one surely has to weigh up each individual situation, and in the calculation there will come the question, the weighing of the immediate goal to be aimed at, and the comparative worth of the desired objective.

To leave the security of a winter port in Crete, when every bit of nautical knowledge and know-how in those ancient days said that it was foolhardy to put to sea at that time of year, they were courting almost certain disaster. And to take that risk with nature, simply to get a more comfortable hotel and a better harbour to spend the winter in, that was not faith, was it? That was foolhardiness.

Soldiers mustn't complain if they have to be in the trenches and their socks get wet. It's no good saying, 'Mummy always told me I had to wear my socks, and I'm not prepared to get my socks damp in case I get a cold.' Soldiers must be prepared to be sacrificed, but soldiers are not supposed to commit suicide, are they?

The aim must be to survive in order to spread the gospel.

*Second intervention*

Paul stood up among them and said, 'Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you." So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we must run aground on some island.' (vv. 21–26)

Paul spoke a second lesson. It was when, for many a night, all hope had been lost of ever being saved. Now nature had made a mock of all their endeavours. The more expert they were and the more they knew about seas and tides and winds, the more certain they were that the next wave might send them all to the bottom. Nature terrified them with their own expert knowledge, and all hope had been removed that they should be saved.

You know, it's situations like that, isn't it, when we are up against them, that raise the profoundest human questions in our hearts? We may not be standing on the deck of a ship that seems to be foundering in the Mediterranean; but to stand by the cot of a baby who is sick with malaria, and to reach that awful spot when all hope has been taken away and nature seems to be doing her worst, regardless of our prayers and entreaties, regardless of the expertise of the doctors, it raises questions.

How fortunate we are to have the answer that the atheist doesn't have. Is there a purpose beyond nature? Is nature the whole stage upon which the drama of our life is worked out from end to end? Or is nature one temporary and sometimes rather unstable stage on which we play out a little of the drama, until we are called to a more glorious stage to finish the story amidst the joys of an unfading and eternal world?

Oh, thank God for the answer that came clearly that morning through the mist and the driving sleet of the Mediterranean. 'So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told, for there stood by me this night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve.' Marvellous words. We may take them to our own hearts this morning.

There is the story of a God who came down from heaven. This was no Artemis, falling down from heaven; no mere force of nature, but divine power linked with divine grace. 'The God whose I am, the God whom I serve.' For that night the angel had been commissioned to report to Paul that God had a purpose to send him to Rome, to witness for the gospel's sake to Nero Caesar. And because God had that purpose, all the powers of nature or hell combined could not destroy Paul before he had completed his service. For the sake of Paul and his service, God was prepared to save not only the crew, but all the other passengers.

*Why does God continue to maintain planet earth?*

Yes, I believe that story. Why do you suppose God bothers to maintain this planet earth in all its outrageous sin and rebellion against its Creator? Why does God bother to protect humankind? Why hasn't he long since allowed nature's powers mindlessly

to destroy the planet, as perhaps one day they will? The reason is this: that God had a plan and a work for the redemption of mankind, a people to be bought, and he waited the long centuries and maintained the planet until his Son, our Lord, came.

He maintains it still. It awaits the coming of its Lord and sovereign, and God will uphold it. He upholds all the machinery of the stage, the governance and its powers, in spite of their turmoil, so that the 'ship' and the messengers of Christ may complete their work before the Lord comes.

*Even Paul was not always sure of his plans*

Paul was not always so certain, was he, that his work was going to be carried through? He said he wasn't sure indeed which way he would have liked to go himself. He'd rather have preferred to go home, perhaps.

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me. Yet which I shall choose *I cannot tell*. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. (Phil 1:21–23)

To the elders of Ephesus, he confessed he didn't really know what lay ahead of him. The Holy Spirit was warning of trials and imprisonments; the possibility was he would be killed in Jerusalem. He wasn't always filled with certainty that the particular job he had in mind was so much the will of God for him that not even nature's storms could destroy him before he'd finished.

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, *not knowing* what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. (Acts 20:22–24)

Nor can we always claim that certainty, can we? Some of us may have to go home with some dear project that we've set our hearts on not yet complete. But we may draw from this happening the certainty that, if God does have a work for you, whether you are Paul or John or Jane Smith, then all the powers of nature or hell combined will not destroy you until God's purpose for you and your work has been completed.

When I was a farmer's boy on the land in England, the old farmers used to say, 'God's weather cannot hinder God's work.'

*Third intervention*

Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, 'Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.' (27:31)

From that confidence you will see what turn things took. The fact that the angel had announced in the name of God that no one should perish, and Paul and all the others should get to shore safely, did not carry the implication that God would send a battery

of angels and miraculously transport them to the shore. No angelic helicopter came, no angelic chairlift.

What was the secret that they managed to get to land and were saved? It was faith; but not the faith that sits down and twiddles its thumbs and waits for a miracle to happen. It was faith that gave Paul the confidence, the spirit, the psychological strength, to cope with the situation, and he took command of the ship.

It was he who saw that the crew, in their moment of panic, were about to abandon ship and save their own skins. But it would have been impossible to bring the ship to shore without those skilled seamen. It would take every drop of nautical knowledge they had, when the morning dawned, to steer that ship through the raging sea and through the breakers, up as far as they could to the shoreline. No mere amateurs or laypeople could have done it. They needed those seamen, and Paul, who saw it clearly, took command of the situation with the absolute certainty that God was going to save them. Yet he must use the means to be saved, and see to it that others did as well.

Faith is not unrealism, is it? Just sitting down and saying, 'I'm sure God is going to do something.' We must learn courageously to use the powers God has given us and the expertise, whatever it is.

#### *Fourth intervention*

And so Paul advised the captain, and the captain stopped the crew from going. And then, just before morning broke and they had to take that dangerous tactic to abandon ship and somehow try to get through the raging surf to the land, Paul said this:

Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you. (vv. 33–34)

Understandable, wasn't it? I suppose down below the galleys were all awash, and who would have had the stomach to eat anything? But now they needed food. Now wasn't a time to fast, for no angels were coming miraculously to transport them. They'd need every ounce of energy they had to scramble through the surf to safety. He encouraged them to eat their Kellogg's cornflakes, and it was part of the secret that they got safely through to land.

It is faith that gives us the strength not to give up in panic, or in childish, wrongly supposed, independence. It's faith that enables us to take mastery of our psychological condition, to overcome our fears and to strain every nerve to do everything within our powers and expert knowledge to command the situation in the interest of God and his work.

They got to shore on that occasion. It's no guarantee that we shall always get to shore, is it? Not, at least, the shores of this worldly planet. There will come situations, in public or at home, when we struggle against nature. It's instinct, isn't it? When nature threatens us on the one hand with our lives, it's natural to struggle, surely. And for some of us, one day nature will win, but as we go down, having lost our last battle

with nature, thank God we go down in the confidence that the final victory is ours, for the blessed Lord is risen.

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain. (1 Cor 15:58)

And if you don't make the shore of some 'Malta' on this planet, thank God you'll make the shores on that eternal world, where there is no sea.

## Paul in Rome

Notice how the book of Acts ends. When Paul got to Rome, he called the elders of the local Jewish community, first of all to explain to them what might have been seriously troubling their hearts. You see, he had called the elders of the Christian church at Ephesus in the first part of this section, hadn't he? Now, in the last part, he calls the elders of the Jewish synagogue—he gets ten marks out of ten in my book for that.

The only reason he was in Rome, humanly speaking, was because Judaism had treated him in the most abominable fashion. He could have been free. The Roman authorities had seen he was guiltless, but the Jewish communities, in not a few cities, and finally in Jerusalem, had hounded and persecuted him with deliberate malice. They would have murdered him many a time if they could, and it was to escape their perverted intrigues that he had to appeal to Caesar. That was why he was there.

It was no tea party going and standing before Nero Caesar. If he was your only source of justice, you had cause to be anxious. Yet, in his final epistle, Paul writes, 'So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom' (2 Tim 4:17–18).

So he calls the elders of the Jewish synagogue to explain what he was doing. 'I could have been free, but unfortunately our elders in Jerusalem spoke against me, so I was obliged to appeal to Caesar and I have come to put my case to him. I want to assure you, gentlemen,' he says, 'I shan't be telling any tales about you—not that I have anything to accuse my nation of' (see Acts 28:19).

Marvellous man; he wasn't the well spring of anti-Semitism. It was when the Christian church joined up with the world under Constantine that the church started to influence the government to cancel the laws that had until then protected Judaism, and the Roman emperors changed them until, hand-in-hand with the church, they started to persecute the Jew. What a sorry story, but it didn't begin with Paul, whatever some Jews say.

In spite of all their persecution that obliged him to appeal to Caesar to save his life and the testimony of the gospel, he says, 'Gentlemen, I have nothing to accuse my nation of.' He was a man like his Lord, who still loved his Jewish people:

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. (1 Pet 2:23)

They appointed a day to come and see him, and he explained the gospel to them. Some believed, but the majority rejected it. As they left, with a broken heart and no doubt tears in his eyes, Paul rehearsed to them Isaiah's prophecy:

You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them. (Acts 28:26–27)

What was it that Israel didn't see? The prophecy that Paul quoted to them comes, of course, from Isaiah 6. When King Uzziah died, Isaiah had a vision of *the King* and, as we close our study, I would like to draw your attention to him; to a beautiful feature of Acts' history that runs like a watermark through its very structure.

Acts is in six parts. They fall into two halves, three in one part and three in the other.

*The first part*, early in its course, has Peter talking about the Lord Jesus. He was raised from the dead, this kingly son of King David, and saw no corruption.

How was that?

'Well,' says Peter, 'the Scripture had said that he should not see corruption and it was impossible, therefore, for him to see corruption.'

For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. (Acts 2:27; Ps 16:10)

But there was a deeper reason. Let us now in the closing moments of this talk recall the words of Psalm 16, as it pictures Messiah speaking, telling us the sentiments and thoughts and exercises of his holy heart as he faced Gethsemane, Calvary and the grave.

I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. (vv. 8–10)

Blessed man; every moment of his life he had served God unswervingly. Never for a moment had he taken his eyes off his Father — 'I have set the Lord *always* before me.' Perfect, sinless, devoted Son of God. *Therefore* — 'because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken,' said he. We cannot say that ourselves, can we? But this morning we revel in him who could say it, and for our sakes won our redemption.

'For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.' He's saying that our planet earth may not be physically stable, but, thank God, the universe is morally stable. See that devoted life of God's *holy one*. The term means 'the devoted one', absolute in his obedience to God the Creator. If God had allowed that holy body to see corruption, then you might have concluded that the universe is morally unstable. But no, that is impossible.



*At the beginning of the second half of Acts*, Luke has Paul dwelling on the same theme (13:34). What guarantee have we that the blessed Lord Jesus will never return again to corruption? We have it in the words of the psalm and then in the words of Isaiah (55:3 KJV): 'I will give you the sure mercies of David' — the loyal, absolute, steadfast, covenanted mercies, promised through David. Put the two together: the devotion of Christ to his Father, and the devotion of God responding to his Son — absolutely stable and eternally indivisible. God raised him from the dead, never to see corruption.

This poor old planet is not all that stable, is it? There are earthquakes still that kill us, but, thank God, the universe is morally stable. The God who is behind it has honoured the perfect devotion and obedience of our blessed Lord: he has raised him from the dead and enthroned him in glory.

*The end of the first half of the book* comes in chapter 12. It is a gruesome little story of King Herod, who tried to ape God, allowed himself to receive divine honours, and was eaten up of worms and died. He did see corruption, and all earth's proud monarchs that attempt to defy the living God shall see corruption.

*But how does the book end?* With Isaiah's prophecy and, if you have eyes to see it, behind the prophecy is the wonderful vision: 'I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up . . . for my eyes have seen *the King*' (6:1, 5).

The Apostle John saw it and wrote it in his Revelation, and you see it too, do you not? Oh, my brothers and sisters, keep your eyes on the blessed Lord. Let nature do what she will; may God open our eyes to see the King, high and lifted up.

But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Heb 2:9)

In a few years you shall be with him, no longer the victim of nature and her powers, 'For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water' (Rev 7:17). God shall spread his tabernacle over you (v. 15 NASB). The sun shall never hurt you again, the moon shall not injure you — the day will be past when nature can put on her moods and destroy you. You shall reign eternally with Christ in glory.

My brothers, my sisters, in all your toil, trials and difficulties, keep your eyes on him. See the King in his glory and you will be forever, in the fullest sense, safe.

Shall we pray.

Oh, God, we thank thee that thou hast given us to know thee as we live in this far-off planet. We thank thee for the good hope that thou hast put in our hearts that this planet is only temporary. We rejoice to have the honour

of serving thee here, in a world where thy Son was crucified. We praise thee for the good hope and the certainty of thy word that, when thy work is done, we shall reign with Christ on high. We bless thee for what thou art doing, and that eternal work given into our hands, which being done here shall outlast this temporary planet and adorn the eternal city of God for everlasting ages. Give us ever to see the blessed Lord and to keep him before our vision, until at last he comes or we go home to him. For his name's sake. Amen.

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy.** He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.