

Acts 21:37-23:11 // Taking a Punch in the Face for Jesus

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 June 2025

Preacher: Jonathan Middleton

[0 : 00] We're in Acts chapter 21. There's a couple of different sections to read tonight, but stick with me and I'll help us through.

! So we're beginning on verse 40, so chapter 21, verse 40. It says this, After receiving the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic, Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense. When they heard him speak in Aramaic, they became very quiet. Then Paul said, I am a Jew, born in Tarshish of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison.

[1 : 10] As a high priest and all the council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

About noon, as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground. I heard a voice say to me, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Who are you, Lord? I asked. I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting. He replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. What shall I do, Lord? I asked. Get up, the Lord said, and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do. From there, Paul goes on to explain how he was led into Damascus. His sight was restored, and a believer named Ananias commissioned him to be a witness to all people.

[2 : 22] Paul then shares how, when he returned to Jerusalem, he had another vision of Jesus. And we'll pick that up in verse 21. In that vision, it says this, the Lord said to me, go, I will send you far away to the Gentiles.

The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, rid the earth of him. He is not fit to live. And we jump down to verse 30.

The commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews. So the next day he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the members of the Sanhedrin to assemble.

Then he brought Paul and set him before them. Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.

At this, the high priest, Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him in the mouth. Then Paul said to him, God will strike you, you whitewashed wall.

[3 : 28] You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck. Those who were standing near Paul said, How dare you insult God's high priest?

Paul replied, Brothers, Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, My brothers, I am a Pharisee.

Descended from Pharisees, I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead. When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.

The Sadducees say there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things. There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law

who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously.

We find nothing wrong with this man, they said. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him? The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them.

[4 : 41] He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring them to the barracks. The following night, the Lord stood near Paul and said, Take courage, as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.

Thanks, David, so much for reading. And let me add my welcome to you. I'm Jonathan Middleton, part of the staff team, if we've not met. I love Acts, the story of the early church, our story too.

So let's pray and ask for God's help as we come to dig into his word. Let's pray together. Our Father in heaven, thank you so much for your word to us this evening.

Thank you for speaking to us through scripture, living and active, sharper than any sword. And as we open this passage now, would you open our hearts too.

By the Holy Spirit, would you help us to hear what you're saying to each one of us. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

[5 : 59] Well, last time we left off, Paul's on the steps of the barracks and it's absolute carnage. He's been rescued from an angry crowd, pretty much the whole city, who literally want him dead.

The soldiers are hauling him back inside the barracks for his own safety. Now, if that's me, I'm thinking, phew, get me out of here. Shut the door and keep it shut.

But not Paul. He sees a gospel opportunity. He taps the commander on the shoulder, 21 verse 37, and says, may I say something to you?

But fast forward to chapter 23, verse 2. He's taking a punch in the mouth for his trouble. And it's not looking great for the spread of the gospel, at least humanly speaking.

So why is this story here in Acts? Why does Luke include it in Acts? Well, remember, Acts is the sequel to Luke's gospel.

[7 : 07] Luke told us in his gospel that his aim was to give us certainty about what Jesus began to do and teach. So what's Acts all about?

Well, it shows us that Jesus hasn't stopped. The risen Lord Jesus is still at work, by his Spirit, through his people, spreading the good news from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

That mission began in Jerusalem, and by the end of Acts, it's reached Rome. But it doesn't stop there. It keeps going from city to city, from people to people, from generation to generation.

And you're here this evening because that mission didn't stop in Rome. It kept moving, one bold witness at a time, until it reached you.

Now, maybe you're here, and you're not sure what you think about the Christian faith. You're not sure what you believe yet. Well, maybe someone invited you, or maybe you're just here because you're curious about the Christian faith.

[8 : 16] If that's you, well, you're so welcome. We're delighted that you're here with us. And what Paul says here gets right to the heart of what the Christian faith is all about. You're going to hear how his life was turned upside down by his encounter with Jesus.

And if you're here and you're a Christian, as many of you are, then think about this. Chances are that you're here because the reason you believe is because someone shared the good news about Jesus with you.

A parent reading Bible stories at bedtime, a friend, a flatmate, a colleague, a youth leader. And now it's our time.

We get to share the good news about Jesus. But here's the challenge. Sometimes, like Paul, you speak about Jesus and the reaction is, well, let's say, not exactly positive.

Maybe you feel like you've failed. But this part of Acts reminds us that God is faithful even when the results aren't obvious.

[9 : 35] So Jesus told Paul that he would suffer. He also told him that he would bear witness in Rome. And right here in Jerusalem, even in the chaos and the rejection, Jesus is keeping his promise.

So as we dig into it, here's what I think we're meant to come away with tonight. Two things. Firstly, confidence. Paul's gospel is the true gospel and God is still at work.

That's the first thing. Confidence in the gospel. Second thing is courage. Because this is our gospel too. And we get to share it with those around us.

And there's two main sections in this part of Acts. Two trials. A trial before the mob and then a trial before the Jewish high court.

And in both cases, Paul turns the trial into a testimony. Because in both scenes, it's not just Paul on trial. It's the gospel on trial.

[10:40] It's Christianity itself on trial. So firstly, trial into testimony part one. Right. So Paul creates a gospel opportunity.

He takes control of this difficult situation with a couple of master strokes. Addressing the Roman commander in Greek, he asks to speak to the crowd.

And verse 37, the commander, he's like, whoa, dude, do you speak Greek? I thought you were an Egyptian. And then all of a sudden, Paul switches to the local lingo. So chapter 22, verse 1, he says, brothers, listen now to my defense.

And that gets their attention. When they heard them speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet. So Paul shares his story. And like every Christian testimony, it's a before and after story. A story of transformation. This is what I was like before I met Jesus. And this is what I'm like after I met Jesus.

[11:42] A gospel transformation. And as you think of your own stories, we can learn from Paul's example about how he shares his testimony. So this is Paul's before.

So just look down with me and read from chapter 22, verse 3. Paul said, I'm a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city.

I studied under Gamaliel. Now just right there, Paul's dropped the mic. Because being trained under Gamaliel is a really big deal. That's like having the top rabbi as your personal tutor.

And I was trying to think of what the modern day equivalent might be. And at Cornhill, Scotland, where I did my training, get to study at the feet of not Gamaliel, but Andy Gemmel, who also happens to be a member here at St. Silas.

Mercifully, he's not here this evening. And the jury's still out whether Gemmel is the Scots version of Gamaliel. But the point is, Paul studied under the best of the best.

[12:53] He studied at the Top Gun Academy of Jewish rabbis. And Tarsus also. I didn't know about Tarsus, but when I did the research, Tarsus is like this thriving merchant city.

It's a city where people went, oh, oh, okay. You're not a country bumpkin. You're not some chuchter. You're an educated city dweller. You're somebody who's metropolitan.

Metropolitan. I studied under Gamaliel. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this way.

In other words, Christians. To their death. Arresting men and women and throwing them into prison as a high priest and all the council themselves testifying. I even got their permission to go to Damascus and went there to bring them to Jerusalem to be punished.

So he's telling his pre-conversion story. It's like his CV. Listen, I'm a Jewish intellectual. I'm zealous for the faith. I've got all the right credentials. He's building bridges.

[13:54] He's making connections. He's making points of contact with the people he's sharing his testimony with. I'm one of you. I'm just like you are.

That's who I was. That's basically what he's saying. But then I met Jesus and everything changed. So he moves on to his conversion in verse 6.

About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. And this is a story that we're familiar with. We've been working through the series in Acts because we first heard it back in chapter 9.

In fact, it's so important but Luke includes it three times in the book of Acts. This time we hear it direct from Paul. He goes, Listen, I was on the way to Damascus and Jesus appeared to me and he blinded me.

In verse 10, The Lord told me, Get up and go into Damascus. There you'll be told all that you've been assigned to do. And so then he moves on to Ananias and this is his commissioning. Verse 12, A man named Ananias came to see me.

[15:05] He was a devout believer and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, Brother soul, receive your sight.

So Paul experiences this amazing grace that we've just been singing about. I once was blind but now can see.

That's what he experiences. He experiences this miraculous healing and he receives this personal commissioning. And his mission is, Hey, you're going to go from here in verse 15. You'll be a witness for Jesus to all people. So that's what Paul shared. Paul's testimony. His before and after story.

Now I was down in Coventry a few weeks back at a conference for our Anglican network. And in the first session, a woman shared her conversion story, her before and after story.

[16:07] And afterwards, the guy interviewing her said, I love it. I love it. How every testimony is different and every Christian testimony is exactly the same.

Every testimony is different and every testimony is exactly the same. years ago, I visited an exhibition of these huge long exposure photographs by a Japanese photographer, Hiroshi Sujamoto, seascape photographs.

And each one was exactly the same size. The horizon dead center in each frame. Same format, same subject, the sea and the sky. But each one was completely different.

some with a dramatic contrast between dark sea and light sky. Others blending so gradually you can hardly tell where sea stopped and sky began.

That's like Christian testimonies. The form is the same. It's always an encounter with the Lord Jesus leading to new birth. But the experience is very different.

[17:13] Some are dramatic like Paul's, though not many as dramatic as Paul's. And others are gradual. Like if you grew up in a Christian home, the exact point of conversion might be a little bit blurry, but it's there all the same.

Every Christian story is different and every Christian story is exactly the same. If you're a Christian, you've got a powerful story to tell. And if you've never jotted it down before, why don't you make some notes?

Why don't you rehearse your story so that you're ready to share it with those around you? Now, of course, in some ways, Paul's story, his conversion, his commission is completely unique.

Paul, the Greek-speaking Jew, the former Christian persecuting Jew from Tarsus was uniquely God's man for the job at this unique point in God's big rescue plan.

Now, watch what happens next. Read with me from verse 17. When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord telling me, Quick, leave Jerusalem immediately because the people here won't accept your testimony about me.

[18:33] But Lord, I said, they know I used to hunt Christians. I even stood by approving when Stephen was killed. Then the Lord said to me, Go, I will send you far away to the Gentiles.

So, it's at this point that the crowd loses it. They totally lose it. But why? Why is their reaction like that?

He's already spoken about Jesus. That's not triggered them. I mean, verse 22, they shout, Rid the earth of him. He's not fit to live. They're tearing their cloaks, throwing dust in the air.

It's absolute mayhem. Why? It's because Paul dares to save us, 21, that the Lord sent him to the Gentiles, to the nations.

It's when he says he's being sent to the Gentiles that they lose it. That's what offends them. This idea that the gospel might be for everyone, that's why they lose it.

[19:40] Because the gospel threatens their sense of privilege and religious superiority. And today, well, people in Glasgow don't usually throw dust up in the air, partly because it would be mud and not dust.

But the same dynamic is at play. Most people are fine with you sharing something of your story with them. They may be even happy to hear how Jesus has worked out for you in your life.

But the moment they get a whiff of how Jesus might have implications for them, the moment they get a sense that the gospel might be personal, that's when the polite listening turns into polite rejection.

Sometimes not so polite. But if the gospel is true, then silence isn't loving. Do we care enough to share about Jesus?

If you're a Christian, then God has put you where you are, in your family, in your school, in your workplace, in your neighbourhood, not just to get by, but to witness, to tell people about Jesus, even if it's relationally costly.

[21:02] Like Paul here in Jerusalem, the results may not always be obvious, but gospel faithfulness isn't all about results. It's about obedience.

It's about courage. It's about trusting that God is at work. So that leads us on to our next scene, where Paul ends up before the Jerusalem Jewish ruling council.

Once again, it's not just Paul on trial, it's the gospel on trial. So secondly, trial into testimony, part two.

Right, so we're back to square one. The crowd's gone wild, again. Paul's dragged back into the barracks, again. But this time, the commanders had enough.

He figures a bit of good old flash and flogging will get the sense out of him, get some answers, but check out verse 25. As they stretch Paul out, he drops the line, is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen?

[22 : 00] Cue panic. That's twice now the commanders misjudged Paul. First, thinking he was an Egyptian rebel. Now he's about to flog a Roman citizen, and that'd be a career-ending move for him.

So the commander rushes in, verse 27, he says, tell me, are you really a Roman citizen? He says, yes, I am. And the commander goes, I had to pay a fortune for mine. But Paul goes, I was born a citizen.

Boom. Mic drop again. So the commander backs off fast. But now he's desperate to figure out what on earth is going on here. So he's like, let's clear the air, let's get this thing out in the open, let's get Paul before the Jewish leaders, let's get Paul before the temple bigwigs.

So chapter 23, verse 1, Paul looks straight at them and says, my brothers, I've fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.

At this, the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. Bam. This is less courtroom drama than barroom brawl.

[23 : 13] Paul fires back, God will strike you, you whitewashed woe. Woe. You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck.

Those who were standing by Paul say, how dare you insult God's high priest? Paul replies, brothers, I didn't realize he was the high priest.

So Paul kind of backs down here if you take it at face value. But hang on, does he? Hold on a minute, it seems unlikely that he didn't know who the high priest was.

His fancy garments, his seat of honor. He'd be sticking out like a sore thumb. There may even be an intentional contrast here that Luke wants us to notice.

Because isn't this the second Ananias that we've had in quick succession? So flick back a page and look at chapter 22, verse 12, where Paul's telling the story of his conversion.

[24 : 21] Listen to how this Ananias is described in 22, verse 12. A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there.

He stood beside me and said, brother Saul, receive your sight. Right, so you have this Ananias, respected, a devout observer of the law.

And if you go back and read the earlier account of Paul's conversion in chapter 9, there's this interesting detail that Ananias places his hands on Paul. So let's just check it out.

Let's go there, keep a thumb in our passage and flip back to Acts chapter 9, page 1102 in the church Bibles. So chapter 9, verse 17.

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it, placing his hands on Saul. He said, brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

[25 : 38] But back here in chapter 23, this Ananias orders others to place hands on Paul to hurt him. One Ananias obeys God's law, the other breaks it while pretending to uphold it.

So it makes you kind of wonder, was Paul being sincere or is it a large dollop of sarcasm? I didn't realize he was the high priest.

either way, Paul realizes that this isn't going to be a fair trial and so he throws the theological cat among the pigeons because it says verse 6 of chapter 23, then Paul knowing that some were Sadducees and others Pharisees called out, my brothers, I'm a Pharisee of Pharisees.

I'm on trial because of the hope of the resurrection. So when he says this, it all kicks off again. Why is that? Because verse 8, the Sadducees say that there's no resurrection.

Paul knows exactly what to say. He lights the fuse. He says, listen, R-E-S-P-E-C-T. No, he doesn't say that. He says, R-E-S-U-R-R-E-C-T-I-O-N.

[26 : 57] I think the spelling is right. Resurrection. That's the real issue that's going on here. That's the issue that's on trial, not Paul, but the resurrection. That's what's so offensive.

That's what's so combusive here. And just like that, verse 9, the Sadducees and the Pharisees turn on each other. There was a great uproar and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously, well, we find nothing wrong with them.

They're like, oh, he's one of us, right? And so it's like this comic strip punch-up and it descends into chaos. And if it were a graphic novel, it would be full of speech bubbles and fists flying.

And we're told it got so rough, it says the commander was afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them. So he pulls them out again. Now put yourself in Paul's shoes.

How would you be feeling? He's battered and bruised physically. Spiritually, he's been buffeted about.

[28 : 01] Who knows what kind of emotional state he would have been in. And so I love this in verse 11. I love this. The following night, the Lord stood near Paul and said, take courage.

As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you will testify about me in Rome. Isn't this a sacred moment?

Jesus shows up. Jesus himself. And he gives us assurance. Three reasons. Three truths.

For us to take courage also. Reason number one. Take courage because Jesus is present. Did you notice the wording in verse 11?

The Lord stood near Paul. Just the day before, if you look across the page to verse two, men standing standing near Paul, strike him in the mouth.

[29 : 17] Others stood near to hurt him. Jesus stands near to assure him. Isn't that just so very poignant?

Jesus isn't distant. He draws close, especially so in our trials. Paul could take courage because Jesus, the one who saw him on the road to Damascus, now stood near him in the darkness.

The same Jesus who found Paul when he was far off now walks with him through pain and trial. And he walks with us too. And so if you're feeling discouraged this evening in your faith or your witness, Jesus hasn't forgotten you.

He sees you. He stands near. Reason number two. Take courage because following Jesus means a cross shaped life.

Paul's story mirrors Jesus' story. And the way that Luke's written about Paul's time in Jerusalem is meant to remind us of Jesus' time in Jerusalem.

[30 : 39] Like Jesus, Paul set his face to go to Jerusalem knowing that suffering lay ahead. And Andrew showed us that last week. Like Jesus, Paul faces an angry mob and a kangaroo court.

Like Jesus, Paul's face was struck. Paul's resolved on taking up his cross. And we do well to recognize that for us too, following Jesus is very often costly in all sorts of ways.

But be assured, this is the pattern that Jesus walked and he walks it with us. Reason number three. Take courage because Jesus is faithful to his words.

Jesus told Paul that he would testify to the nations. Jesus also told Paul that he would suffer in doing so. That's exactly what's been happening here in our passage.

So when Jesus tells Paul in verse 11, he will testify about him in Rome just as he testified about him in Jerusalem. He's saying, listen, I've brought you here to Jerusalem so that you could speak the truth about the gospel.

[31 : 58] I've brought you here to Jerusalem so you could get to Rome. You know, you might be tempted to look at Paul's experience in Jerusalem and think this all looks like failure.

I think it's a brilliant reminder to us that from a human perspective, the gospel doesn't always look powerful, but it is.

the mission doesn't always look successful, but it's in God's hands. So let's hold on to the confidence that this gospel, Paul's gospel, is the true gospel.

And let's take courage that Jesus is with us. And he is faithful to his word. He will do it. He will build his church.

So if you've been discouraged, wondering if it's worth sharing your faith, remember this story in Acts. God doesn't waste your witness. So let's pray for the courage to open our mouths and let's ask God to give us confidence that what we are saying is true and powerful, even if it looks weak.

[33 : 18] Do you remember those two things from the start? Confidence and courage. That's what Jesus gives Paul and that's what Jesus gives you.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you stood near Paul.

We thank you that you stand near us, especially when we're feeling weak or afraid or down. Give us courage, Lord, to live and speak for you.

Help us to remember that you haven't left us alone but you are here with us by your spirit. And your gospel is powerful even when it looks small. So give us confidence in your words.

Help us not to be silent or ashamed. thank you for those who spoke the gospel to us. Would you now help us to take risks to do the same for others, even if it's hard, even if it costs us.

[34 : 26] Use our witness, Lord, perhaps in ways we may never begin to see the fruit of. God's word by singing.

If you're able to stand, please do so as early in the band leaders.