

Paul on Trial

Acts 24

Acts is moving to its conclusion, as the gospel reaches Rome. Historians say that one reason Christianity spread as it did, was because of the way Christians suffered and helped those suffering. Indeed, the gospel eventually reaches Rome because of Paul's trials. How Paul responds to these has a lot to teach us.

Trials and Idols

Paul is on trial, and the lawyer's opening statement is very critical of him. How do you respond to criticism? For many, what others think of us *really* matters. We need their approval. If we don't get it, our world falls apart. It's the idol of Approval. This is dangerous because we will be tempted to say and do stuff to keep or win people's approval. Paul doesn't do that. He wasn't trapped by the idol of approval, so he could be bold and do and say the right thing.

But Paul is also at the mercy of others. His life is out of his control, and the need for Power and Control can also be idols. If they are, you will struggle with the uncertainty that trials can bring. You will worry and be tempted to do stuff to keep control, or stay in power. Paul doesn't respond like that. He is untroubled by the uncertainty that these trials bring, and instead he uses his insecure situation to talk about Jesus.

Trials can also expose the idol of Success. Paul is sidelined for two years. How must that have felt to a man keen to see the gospel spread? But what if your career stalls? If you get your sense of self-worth from success, you are in trouble. And the danger of the idol of success is that you will do stuff that you shouldn't do to keep moving up the ladder. You will sacrifice for it: your family, your health, your integrity.

The fourth idol highlighted by Paul's trials is Freedom. Paul is no longer free, but chained. If freedom is your idol, to be able to do what you want to do, go where you want to go, live as you want to live, Paul's chains would chafe you, and not just physically. And yet Paul is untroubled by it all.

How come Paul responds the way he does? Because of the two things he admits: he is a follower of the Way, and his belief in the resurrection.

Trials and Jesus

Paul says he cheerfully made his defence. He could say that because he knew that Christ was in control, no one else. He was a follower of the Way – and Christ is the Way, the one who takes our hand and guides us in the dark night of trials. That radically changes the way you see difficulties. You know that Christ died for you, that all his plans for you are from love, that he will turn everything for your good.

Trials and the Hope of Glory

The second thing Paul admits to is his belief in the resurrection. This tells you that this life is not all there is, so it has the power to transform the way you see trials. Resurrection day will be the day when everything is put right. It will also be reward day: not the instant gratification promised by idols, but the lasting joy of all eternity. But resurrection day will also be a day of justice: the day of coming judgment. So you don't need to avenge yourself on your enemies. Rather, like Paul you can use the opposition of others as an opportunity to lovingly tell them about Jesus.