

Acts 22:29 - 23:35

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[0 : 00] William Leslie was a missionary to the Congo. You might not have heard of him.! Anybody heard of him? Most people haven't. He was from Ontario, Canada.

He was a pharmacist until he was converted in 1888. Then he moved to Chicago. He had a growing desire to tell people the good news of the gospel and a growing desire as a medical missionary. He started serving in the Congo in 1893. In 1905, he and his wife Carly pioneered a work in Koala, Angola. There he overcame a hurricane and more mundane obstacles like charging buffalo and armies of ants.

Seven years later, they cleared enough of a leopard-infested jungle along the Koala River for a new mission station to be opened in Kanga.

Some villages surrounding that station in Kanga were still practicing cannibalism. They spent 17 years, Mr and Mrs Leslie, in that place, proclaiming the gospel. It ended on a really rocky note.

[1 : 06] William Leslie had a relational falling out with the tribal leaders and he was asked to leave the mission field without seeing any fruit from his ministry.

It didn't end like he'd hoped. He went back to the US after 17 years, a discouraged man. He believed he'd failed to make an impact for Christ.

He died nine years later. Failure hurts, doesn't it? Failure hurts. It is common to all who seek to serve the Lord.

That feeling that you've failed and you've not achieved the grand vision of glory that you set out for yourself in early days as a Christian. All the times you hoped you'd be able to share your faith and you were unable to do it.

It hurts when you remember those times. It hurts when you remember the times you've not owned, you've not stood up for the name of Christ in the workplace. It hurts when you've been asked a question and you've completely messed up the answer.

[2 : 18] It hurts, doesn't it, when you've failed to do the things that you dreamed you would do. Failure hurts. And it's very, very common. Jesus said, Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

But it doesn't feel like that often. Often we're crushed, aren't we, by the expectation that we've placed upon ourselves how often we have failed the Lord. It's far easier, isn't it, for you and I to remember the times of failure.

Isn't it? And so how does this passage help us with that? I've got three points. The first point is this. Paul, the apostle, is smashed against the rocks in this passage.

Paul is smashed across the rocks in this passage. I think the theme of the book of Acts, the melodic line of Acts, is one of wonderful encouragement, that the church of Jesus Christ is unstoppable, that the risen Lord Jesus Christ is building his church.

And as I've studied it, and as you've heard it preached, I hope you felt, wouldn't it have been marvellous to go along with Paul in some of those exciting parts of his journey? Imagine being on the road to Damascus when he's knocked off his horse and he sees Jesus, the risen Jesus, in all his glory.

[3 : 41] How exciting it would have been to follow him when he preached at the Areopagus in Athens and thousands of people listened to him. Many people converting to Christ.

Imagine what it would have been like to be with Paul in Ephesus in those two years, every lunchtime, him arguing, debating, preaching Christ. Many people are coming to believe the word of the Lord.

Go to Acts 2 and Pentecost. Thousands of people added to the church in one day. The church exploding with growth. In Ephesus, shaking the foundations of the economy.

But there have also been tough times, haven't there? Times when he was beaten up. Times when he was left for dead. Times when he was cast out of the city. Times of amazing gospel fruit and yet difficulties.

But exciting. Acts 23 is not one of those passages. If you could follow Paul anywhere, you wouldn't want to follow him to Jerusalem. And then on to Rome, at least where he is now.

[4 : 44] He's gone through a difficult time. Do you remember last week? He'd longed to go to Jerusalem. He'd got this offering for the church there from Gentile Christians to the needy church and he arrives in Acts 22 and he gets a warm welcome at the beginning.

But then he begins to hear about Christians who don't trust him, who don't believe his motives to the needy church. They think that he's trying to subvert God's law.

So James and him come up with this plan. They come up with this plan to convince the Jewish church that Paul is a bona fide Jew to the core. He shaves off his head.

He goes to the temple. He takes a vow. He purifies himself. And they hope that this is going to sort out the division in the church. But it's seen by someone and they start to tell lies about him.

They say, look, here is a guy who sought to bring a Gentile, a non-Jew, into the temple, which was forbidden. And then an angry mob drags him out to the streets and they try to rip him to pieces with their bare hands.

[5 : 51] They throw rocks at him. They try to maul him to death. He's rescued by the Romans because they want to prevent a riot. Amazingly, he's able to stand up and preach.

Normally, in Paul's ministry, when he starts to preach, things get better. He stands up to preach. Loads of people become Christians. But that isn't what's happened in Acts 22. At the start, everyone listens.

But at the end, by the time he finishes, they're baying for his blood. There's no convergence here. This is not a successful sermon. They want him dead and anything they can do to grab their hands on him, they throw at him.

The Romans snatch him away and he ends up in a Roman barracks, strung up, and he's about to be whipped and scourged. He's about to be tortured by the Romans and he's saved by the skin of his teeth because he's a Roman citizen.

And instead of being set free, he's thrown into prison overnight to face his accusers the next day. It's not a great week in the life of the Apostle Paul. And that's where chapter 23 begins. And it's at this point we see a man under stress and there's cracks in his armour.

[7 : 06] He's shown remarkable restraint. But in chapter 23, he's brought to face his accusers in the Sanhedrin. And in verse 1, looking intently at the accusers, Paul says, Brothers, I've lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.

But then verse 2, he's struck on the mouth by the order of an unknown figure. And Paul snaps. You get the sense he's had enough.

Remember, he's been beaten, he's been flogged, he's been thrown in prison. And then he says this, he says, God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall. And you sit there judging me. Are you sitting there to judge me according to the law?

And yet contrary to the law, you strike me. He snaps. He calls this Pharisee or Sadducee a whitewashed wall. What he says, in fact, is not wrong.

But it's a brutal insult. It's a way of talking about a tomb, a decaying course. It's the worst of insults you can give to a religious leader in that day.

[8 : 13] He flings it at him. And then he discovers that it's the high priest who gave this order. And he very quickly repents. Can you imagine how it would have felt to repent before that crowd to say I got it wrong?

I did not know, brothers, that this was the high priest for it is written, you shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people. It's not a great start and things get worse. He's probably at the end of his rope. He doesn't know what to do. He shouts probably the most divisive thing you can shout in a room where there's Pharisees and a room where there's Sadducees. He says, brothers, I'm a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees.

It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I'm on trial. It is electrifying. There is nothing more divisive and more dangerous than he can say in a room full of religious zealots.

Half of the people believed in the miraculous. They believed in angels and demons and resurrection and supernatural. And the other half did not believe in any of that stuff. And they forget for a

moment that they are after Paul and all of a sudden they go at each other.

[9 : 23] I was in the Shanachie pub once outside Ealing Broadway. It's a remarkable place. I was meeting, I was late, I was early for a meeting so I went in there and I was by the bar and suddenly, I don't know what happened but a bar fight broke out.

And so I'm standing there with my drink at the bar and there are punches being thrown and I'm right in the middle of it. I kind of joined it. No, I didn't join it. But there were stools, there were broken windows, there was no way out.

That's the scene here. It's all kicking off. It's like a wild west scene. Tables flung over, chairs get thrown, they're trying actually to kill each other. And Paul's in the middle of the chaos and then the sheriff comes in, he drags Paul out of it thinking he's going to be ripped to pieces.

You might think it's some kind of clever tactic for Paul but that isn't the case because in chapter 24 and verse 20 to 21 Paul expresses regret. He says, or else let these men themselves say what room doing they found me when I stood before the council.

Other than this one thing that I cried out that it is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I'm on trial before you this day. They can't find anything wrong with me except that I made this claim.

[10 : 45] Of course Paul isn't wrong in what he said but he knows it was a mistake, he knows it was a blunder, he regrets it. And in the midst of this Paul is thrown back into a jail cell.

What happens in Acts when Paul goes to jail? Start singing, church start praying, there's gospel triumph but not in Acts 23. Instead we see Paul, this image of him not saying anything.

How would he feel in that prison? Failure. That's how he would have felt. And I think this is probably one of the blackest moments in Paul's life and ministry.

Two simple applications I want to point out to you. Number one, the weakness and the humanity of Christian leaders. it's easy to put ministers and elders on a pedestal and to think that they don't make mistakes and that everything they say is right and we know, don't we, you know that that's not true.

And I don't want to go into great detail on this but it is obvious that leaders fail.

[12 : 07] And when your leaders fail please don't treat them like the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Don't hurl abuse at us, I trust that you will treat us with grace as we seek to treat you with grace.

It's an encouragement to me that Paul here blunders. He gets it wrong. He lets people down and he makes mistakes. The second application I want to make on this is that if you've not faced black and bleak days in your service of the Lord they will come.

You will. Those days will come when you let the Lord down and they will be hard. At those moments when you are so broken and you are so shocked by your own inability to serve the Lord that you don't know what to do and you break down.

Have you ever experienced that? If you faithfully serve the Lord those days will come. I've experienced a few of those times in my life.

I can think of a church plant that we tried early on in my ministry as a denomination and we raised ridiculous amounts of money to do this plant.

[13 : 25] We spent enormous amounts of effort to do it. And after four years no matter how hard we tried it just couldn't strengthen. It put an enormous strain on the planter and his marriage and after four years it collapsed.

I was at the meeting where I had to say we've got to stop. I caught the tube home and wept on the tube.

It was heartbreaking. Everything that had been put into it people that had given their lives to it and it didn't take. I can think of a situation in one of our congregations where I was asked to help and my input actually made things worse and kept making things worse.

I'd gone Zoom calls thinking I was going to help and come off the Zoom call having not helped.

There have been times when you've put your life in my hands as it were as a pastor and I've sought to try and help and serve you and to see the gospel put you back together and it's been like it's gone away from me I've dropped the ball.

And you carry that weight. And if you serve the Lord those matters those times will come.

[14 : 47] The question is how do you face those moments? How will you deal with such a thing?

When the words of Jesus who says my yoke is easy and my burden is light seem like the biggest lie ever how will you face that moment?

Well that's my second point. My second point is well first point was Paul hit the rocks the second point is the rock of ages stands by. Look at verse 11.

Standing by the rock of ages Paul is at the bottom of the emotional ditch he's in one of the most discouraging passages of his life and we come across one of the most encouraging verses in the whole of the book of Acts. the following night the Lord stood by him and said take courage for as you've testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem so you will also testify in Rome.

He hears in that cell the Lord himself speak to him. The Lord speaks and says as you've testified to me in Jerusalem you've not failed so you will testify in Rome.

and the words from his master and Lord speak to him though he's failed in his own eyes the Lord himself gathers him up and claims him for his own.

[16:11] And that's not what we would do. That's not what the world does is it? When we fail and we want to abandon ourselves and when we want to hide in our ditch what would the world do?

The world will abandon you. It will cancel you. But Jesus will not. That is not the way he works but it gets even better than that isn't it? The Lord himself stood near to Paul when he spoke those words. It wasn't a voice note. It wasn't a text message. The Lord himself stood near. He didn't send an angel to stand near Paul. The Lord himself the maker of heaven and earth came and stood with Paul in a stinking Roman jail.

The incarnated Lord left heaven. He who was born in a stable the incarnated Lord who left heaven and died on a cross leaves heaven again and comes to stand by his servant. He stands with him in that mess.

It's amazing. He stood near Paul. When did he do that? On that night the following night he needed to hear those words the most.

[17:24] That is when he came not a week before not a week after not a month down the line. Not when everything was going well right in the ditch is the moment the Lord showed up and gave Paul the most encouraging words he could ever have.

When he proved true those words I will never leave you nor forsake you. What a wonderful saviour to Paul and to us Jesuses. Paul has stuffed up and Jesus steps in and claims him afresh as his own.

You know the phrase Dutch courage? In the First World War soldiers were given rum rations twice a day and the medical reason was that the rum ration would combat the cold.

But it did another effect for a cold and frozen soldier. It didn't just warm his temperature but also it warmed a soldier's heart they said. And maybe gave them enough courage to stand up for what they needed to.

Because courage in a man at war can be a very powerful thing can't it? But Jesus doesn't want us to rely on Dutch courage. He doesn't want us to take a sip of whiskey and then we do something brave.

[18:46] He asks us to listen to his words this morning which are this take courage. Take courage. And the Lord Jesus he is the source of all Christian courage.

courage. The Greek word that Jesus uses here is only ever used by Jesus in the New Testament. In Matthew 9 verse 2 he speaks to a paralysed man who's brought on a stretcher to him and he says to that man take heart take courage.

It's the same word as courage here. Your sins have forgiven you. In Matthew 9 verse 22 there's a woman who's been bleeding for 12 years who touches his garment and is healed and Jesus says to her take heart take courage.

Daughter your faith has made you well. And when the disciples are afraid and they think they see a ghost walking past them on the water past their boat Jesus calls out to them and he says take heart.

Take courage. Do not be afraid. And this word take heart take courage uniquely belongs to Jesus. And he says to Paul and to all believers who are afraid in moments of failure and moments of doubt courage.

[20:00] take heart. I'm with you. And Christian courage solely belongs to Jesus and it only comes from Jesus.

And the application is this. Jesus is not far from any of you who serve him today. He's right beside you when you fall and when you fail.

Jesus does not reject you. He stands by you. And he's with you as it's not how the world works. It's not how we would work.

It's certainly not how idols work. But it is the way that Jesus works. And that's why Jesus can say to you take up your cross and follow me which is the heaviest burden that you can imagine.

And then he says to you my hope, my yoke is easy and my burden is light. And he's not saying to you take up your cross and if you drop it I'm done with you.

[21 : 03] It's over. He says to me I love you. I will not leave you. I will not forsake you. When we come to the Lord's table tonight will you come?

Because what do you hear at the Lord's table tonight? You hear the words I love you. I will not leave you. I will not forsake you. I've died for you. And you hear the Father say you are my child forever and whoever the Father puts in my hand no one can snatch away.

And so your security and my security as children of God is not based on what we've done but on the fact that he claims you because of the cross as his own.

Nothing, nothing works this way. Only the gospel. And if today you're hoping for anything else for your future or for your children or for your family or for your security it will fail you.

I promise you it will fail you. I guarantee you it. You trust in a partner. You trust in a marriage. It'll never give you the satisfaction that you need.

[22 : 16] You trust in having children and having a family. It'll never be what you want to do. You think that the job will give you the security and the image. Money will do it for you. It won't do it for you.

But Jesus will never fail you even when you fail him. He died for us when we were at our worst. He died for us when we were as far away from God as we could be and he's not going to let go of you. And that's my story. That's the story of so many in this congregation this morning.

Because it's true isn't it that in those moments when you've you've messed up the most it's in those moments where you break down that it's in those moments you discover what grace really means. And so hear him say to you this morning take courage I am with you. So the first point is Paul is smashed to the rocks.

[23 : 30] The second point is Jesus the rock of ages is standing with him and the third point is you can be carried through the rocks. Paul's words in verse 11 just look down there with me they are they are the easiest thing to say but then look at the next verse they're the most wonderful words verse 11 but then look at verse 12 the next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath that we will not eat or drink until they'd kill Paul.

There's 40 of them involved in this plot more than that but they go to the chief priests and the elders and they say that they are making a solemn oath not to eat anything until we've killed Paul.

It's a vicious mob of religious fanatics. Sanhedrin gets involved at this point so much for God's protection. There's a young man we don't know how old he is he's a young man he's actually Paul's nephew Paul's sister's boy he hears about the plot how did he hear about it we don't know and he goes and he takes the news to Paul and then Paul takes it to the commander and he listens to the plot and then this amazing thing happens verse 23 and he called unto him two centurions saying make ready 200 soldiers to go to Caesarea and horsemen throughout three score and ten and spearmen 200 at the third hour of the night and provide them beasts so that they may set Paul on and bring him safe and to Felix the governor.

And it looks like everything's going wrong isn't it? But God uses this insignificant person we don't know his age we don't know his name we don't know what he heard a person who everyone else has forgotten in order to bring about this great rescue for Paul and he doesn't just use this tiny insignificant nobody he uses the might of Rome as well can you see that?

To rescue Paul and not to just rescue Paul to take Paul from Jerusalem to Rome to the ends of the earth do you remember the theme of the book of Acts? You'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth that is Rome and so in this passage which on one level is so depressing on the surface level we see that everything in the world of the universe of the economy of everything is in the hands of God and from the tiniest person the youngest person in our church to the mightiest army in the world that they are nothing but a tool in the hands of almighty God to fulfil his purposes in this world Paul goes to bed of failure and he hears the words of Jesus and he wakes up and is given a kingly escort all the way to Governor Felix he wakes up in jail he goes to bed in a palace the next night carried through the rocks

[26 : 31] God will see it done the application is really simple isn't it God will see it done maybe you've been taught maybe you've heard this where people say to you God has a wonderful plan for your life you heard that?

God has a wonderful plan for your life and I think it's told a bit disingenuously really and tragically that is often told as God doesn't want you to suffer that God doesn't want you to go through a difficult time God wants you to have an easy life and that is not true it is a lie because anyone who reads the life of Jesus and who reads the life of Paul will know it's not true but it's not that God doesn't have a wonderful plan for your life God did have a wonderful plan for Paul's life it was a life of living for his king of making much of Jesus in every situation in adversity and in riches whatever opportunity he had whether it was in prison or the palace he proclaimed to Jesus and there's no more wonderful plan for your life than that but that doesn't mean that your life will be easy in fact the promise is your life will be hard but it is a wonderful plan that Jesus is with you as you go through it it's true isn't it

I don't know who said it but you are immortal until you've achieved the purpose for which God created you it's a wonderful plan and so in summary we get smashed against the rocks it is inevitable in Christian service but in those places you find the rock of ages standing closely by and Jesus is able to carry you through the rocks I've told you this story before but there's a little boy who was taken to a piano concert to the great Paderowski in the States little boy he was a bit bored before the start of the concert kind of went off from his mum and he managed to find a way onto the stage where he's oblivious to all the crowds that are around him he sits on the piano stool the grand piano and he starts to play chopstick on a very fancy piano he's not playing it very well and the crowd initially thinks it's really cute but after a few moments they get a bit bored and unruly and they're thinking to himself where's this guy's mother what's his mother doing and she's hiding away totally ashamed in her seat until the great composer Paderowski hears chopsticks being played he hears the crowds booing and he throws on his cloak as quickly as possible the great pianist runs out onto the stage he sees the boy playing and he leans over him and he starts to play a melody on either side of him he whispers in the boy's ear keep going my child don't quit keep playing don't quit I'm with you it's a wonderful story isn't it it's a preacher story so I don't even know whether it's true I want it to be true alright but it was and so we trust in Jesus this morning we know Jesus and we all have a tune to play and we're tinkering away at the piano and often it feels like we're playing chopsticks badly but we have a saviour lord who's filling in the notes who's making it beautiful who whispers in your ear this morning and at his table tonight keep going my child don't quit keep going I'm with you I'm right by your side do not give up keep going we'll make it the beginning of the story sermon I told you a story about Dr. William Leslie I didn't end very well for him but in 2010 a team of missionaries went to the Congo and Angola to share the gospel for what they believed was the first time they thought these people had never heard the gospel before and what did they find this is what they said when we got there we found a network of reproducing churches throughout the jungle each village had its own gospel choir though they wouldn't call it that they wrote their own songs and they would have sing-offs from village to village they found a church in each of the eight villages they visited scattered across 34 miles they even found a 1000 seat stone built by hand cathedral in one of the villages they learnt that this church got so crowded in the 1980s with people walking miles to attend it started a church planting movement and it spread to the surrounding villages apparently Dr. Leslie crossed the great river Kulu he spent months travelling throughout the jungle and he would teach the bible he taught the tribal children how to read and write he told them about the importance of education he taught them bible stories

Dr. Leslie started the first organised education in those villages took some digging by the team in the states to find out who Dr. Leslie was they only knew one of his names and they didn't know whether it was his first name or his last name they only knew the years that he was there and that he was a baptist by kind of theological conviction they discovered that he was Dr. William Leslie who died in 1984 in 1939 without knowing any of the results but William Leslie closed his eyes in this life and he opened them in glory with Jesus standing beside him and he discovered didn't he what Christ can do when we take courage with him standing by our side keep going my child don't quit

[32 : 50] I'm right here with you let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray