Live the Story

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Date: 23 November 2025

Preacher: Tim Suffield

[0:00] Amen. Hang on friends, don't quite sit down quite yet.! I'm just going to pray. Lord Jesus, we do come knowing that you bring us to a Father who loves us,! who we have no right to get to, but yet we find ourselves welcomed because you die in our place, rise to gift us life, ascend to the right hand of the Father above, and gift us the Spirit so we can meet and know you.

And we are so grateful. Amen. Amen. Now go for the city. Thank you. I mean, you can stand while I preach if you like. Very Eastern Orthodox of you.
Good morning. My name is Tim. We are going to be opening the Bible together now. So if you've got a Bible with you, if you want to turn to Acts chapter 22, I will be working through, sorry, the very end of Acts chapter 22, and I'll be working through that and many more chapters in just a minute. Just before I get into it, I just want to kind of highlight something and give a little notice. In fact, what you can just hear at the moment are some of our friends in what we call our Lighthouse group, which is our group for adults with various additional needs that we are so glad are with us every Sunday.
In fact, the first time that Helen and I, we were just starting to explore, would we come here or not? We just started talking to Andrew. We visited here on a Sunday. And the thing that stood out to both of us most was we were sat kind of over there at the back trying to be moderately inconspicuous. [1:35] And then in the middle of worship, someone in the Lighthouse group starts crying out and saying, can someone pray for me? Now, we came from a church that was quite performance-focused, and that would have been a sort of moment for everyone.

Oh, gosh, what's going to happen now? What we really loved was that no one batted an eyelid. Someone went over and prayed for the lady who was asking to be prayed for. She visually, excuse me, visibly encountered the spirit, and sort of the meeting carried on and nothing was made of it, because it's normal, because everybody is welcoming, and it's kind of part of who we are.
I think that's a really wonderful thing. I think it's a thing we should really celebrate. Now, I'm telling you this partly because I just want us to notice, and they've just gone out to their group where they do things that are kind of more appropriate for them while I preach, but notice and enjoy the fact that they're with us, but also because that group is led by two people who work very hard and could genuinely do with some help.
And so if you're thinking, oh, I don't know how I do that, and it doesn't necessarily have to be help doing the signing that Sue does, that you could learn that if you'd like to, but if you're thinking, oh, I wonder if I could help.
I don't know what that would involve, but could you either come and talk to me afterwards, and I'll put you in touch with Sue, who can talk to you about what would be involved, or drop an email into the office, which is connect at harvestchurch.uk, and say, I'm kind of curious, and again, we'll link you up so you can have a conversation.
[3:07] They are so thin on the ground that it's possible they can't keep doing it, and I think that would be a real shame. I mean, if we have to, we have to, but I think it's wonderful that they're with us. And so if we are able, if anyone else is thinking, oh, yeah, I could volunteer to do that, that would be great.

Okay, so this morning, we are in Acts chapter 22, 23, 24, 25, and 26. Yeah, interesting.
I mean, I don't know who puts together these. My wife is saying, you did this to yourself. That is true. I was about to say, I don't know who put these things together, but it was me.
So, I am not going to read all of it for you, which, I mean, in one sense is a shame, because the best bit is when I read the scriptures, right? You don't necessarily think that, but we should think like that.

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This is the word of God. I'm not going to read all of it for you, but I'm going to take us through the story and read little selections along the way. So we're going to dive in and out of these kind of four-and-a-bit chapters for the first part, and then I'm going to make two observations about what's going on.
[4:17] So, we're starting where we left off last time. Paul has been imprisoned. By a Roman tribune. There's been a bit of a riot, which seems to happen quite a lot for him, and mostly for his safety, they've taken him into prison.

And, well, let's jump straight in. Verse 30 of chapter 22. But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he, this is this Roman tribune, he unbound him, that's Paul, and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and brought Paul down and set him before them.
Okay. So, this tribune has seen the riot. He's taken Paul into custody because clearly there's a problem, and he's mostly for Paul's safety, but he's thinking, if he's done something wrong, we should do this properly according to the law.
There should be some sort of trial. He's clearly a terrible person because they all hate him. So, let's find out what the problem is. So, he gathers the Jewish chief priests, and they arrange a trial.
This leads to a trial by the high priest. Paul manages to offend absolutely everyone with some vicious sarcasm. So, in the middle of the trial, the high priest says something to him, excuse me, no, the high priest asks him a question.
[5:42] Paul tells him the truth. The high priest commands that Paul is struck on the face, which happens, and Paul then responds viciously with an attack on the high priest because this is an unlawful thing that's happened.

And everyone goes, you can't say that to the high priest. And Paul goes, sorry, I didn't see the high priest. And everyone is looking at him thinking, is he short-sighted?
Because he's very obvious in his robes in front of him. His point being, I don't recognize this man's authority, and he is not behaving like the high priest being unlawful in the way he's trialing there.
And then, I'm going to jump down to verse 6.
Now, when Paul perceived that one part, this is of the group who were gathered, one part was Sadducees and the other Pharisees, these are two groups within the Jewish religion who have different views on things, he cried out in the council, brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial. And when he'd said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the assembly was divided.
[6:57] For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. So, after he's offended the high priest, and everyone's getting a bit heated, he looks around and he thinks, hang on, I can see this.

Now, I'm going to tell them the truth because this is about the resurrection, but they are immediately going to fall into a division between themselves and argue about it and stop thinking about me. So, he's being a little bit tactical as well.
So, he exploits their divisions. But in so doing, he highlights something, which is that the heart of the message that he preaches is about the resurrection of the dead.
That's the heart of what Paul would preach, about the resurrection of the dead. And then the trial breaks up. It doesn't really get anywhere.
They have a good old argument, but they don't really know what to do with Paul because they're too busy arguing with each other. All of a sudden, all the Pharisees are like, we love this guy who they hated a minute ago because he appears to be standing with them and they aren't able to do anything about it.
[7:59] And then, verse 11, the following night, the Lord stood by him. So, Jesus appears to Paul in the night and he says to him, take courage. So, Paul is feeling discouraged, perhaps unsurprisingly.

He's in prison. He's just been to a trial with some people who would like to stone him to death. Take courage. For as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, this is where he is at the moment, you must also, you must testify also in Rome.
So, Jesus says, take courage. You've got to tell people the truth here. You're also going to tell them the truth in Rome. Okay. He gives him direction.

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But also, we're not told the whole story. Because if we know the end of it, we might think, yeah, Jesus, that's true, but when he gets to Rome, he's going to be executed.
Is this good news that you're telling him? Is this encouragement that you're giving him all that encouraging? I mean, Jesus would say, yes, but it might feel like he's not told the whole story.
[9:12] I think that's often true. I wonder if you've ever noticed that in your Christian life, that Jesus says, go here, and you're like, oh great, it's going to be amazing, and you think, and he didn't actually say that, and then, it isn't when you get there, but you are following him and doing what he asked you to do.

What happens next is, there is a plot to kill Paul. So the Jews think, we will arrange for him to come and be tried again, but that won't work because he's too canny, so we're going to make sure there's a band of guys there to kill him on the way.
We'll overcome the Roman guards, and we'll have him murdered. Paul's nephew hears about this, comes and tells Paul. Paul sends him to talk to the Tribune. The Tribune goes, this is a problem, we can't have people murdering prisoners, this is not due process, and thinks, I'm going to, we'll take him off and send him to the governor who's up in Caesarea, and we'll do that in the night because we're going to make sure that he's safe on the way there, but also, this is kind of slightly too big a problem for me, this is causing quite a lot of political dissension here in Jerusalem.
I need someone more serious, more official, to sort it out. So they do that. He's sent off to a man called Felix, who is the governor. Felix calls the high priest because he wants to know what is the problem with this guy, do you want to kill him?
They make accusations of Paul profaning the temple, and what they're really concerned by is Paul's been hanging out with Gentiles, people who aren't Jews. That's the core of their concern.
[10:44] And so we then get into a second trial. We're now all the way into chapter 24, into verse 14. So Paul is in the middle of this trial, and I'm jumping into his explanation of himself.

He says, But this, I confess to you, that according to the way, that's what Paul would have called Christianity, 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. Again, the resurrection is central to what Paul is telling them.
This is the core of what he says is getting everyone so het up and wanting him to be killed. And then Felix's governor chats with Paul at some length because he's kind of curious.
He's got a Jewish wife. He's sort of vaguely aware of some of the Jewish law and scriptures and he wants to understand a little bit better. So down into verse 24.
[12:09] After some days, Felix came with his wife, Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed.

That's interesting. Felix was alarmed and said, go away for the present. When I get an opportunity, I will summon you. At the same time, he hoped that money would be given him by Paul, so he sent for him often and conversed with him.
When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Portius Festus and desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.
Felix is curious but confronted. Paul talks about righteousness, self-control and the coming judgment and Felix has an, oh my word, you mean I might have to give an account to this God you believe in?
That doesn't seem fair. But he's kind of interested-ish and he keeps talking with Paul, but we're told really because he, earlier in Paul's speech that I didn't mention, Paul said one of the things that he's done going around the churches is he's gathered money for the poor in Jerusalem and brought it back with him and Felix has gone, you can get money out of these people.
[13:28] Oh, okay. So he keeps talking with Paul in the hope that he might get a bribe to let him out of prison. And that obviously doesn't happen because Paul doesn't have access to that kind of money and I don't think it would even occur to him that that's a thing you might do.

But they keep talking. He keeps presenting the gospel to him and two years pass. So Paul is in, you might picture a kind of jail with chains. He's in house arrest.

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It's not quite that harsh. People would be able to come in and visit him, but he can't leave. He can't go anywhere. He doesn't have his freedom. In this time, he writes the letters to Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon that you might know from the New Testament.
He's spending his time writing to lots of these churches. But he's stuck for two years. Waiting. Hang on, I thought Jesus said I was going to go to Rome.
But he's stuck in prison waiting. It's often like that. Not only that Jesus would say go there and you think it'll be wonderful. And it's mixed.
[14:33] Some of it is much harder than you thought. But also, it takes a long time. Jesus says, go over here and you think, you mean tomorrow? And he's like, no, I mean, 15 years.

You need to, I need to prepare you for it and that might take quite a long time. This is, after all, preparation. I'm sure lots of things happened for Paul in that time.
But things to our benefit too. But with books I just mentioned of the New Testament and maybe more, he wrote for us, for those churches. Yes, but also for our benefit in that time.
That is time well spent. But for Paul, it probably didn't feel like that. And then Felix is sent off because governor's changed. That's how it works. You know, you do your terms, someone else comes in.
He goes off wherever he goes off next and this guy called Festus comes in. And he, it is like, I don't know, basically the whole thing starts again. He's like, I don't really know who this guy is.
[15:32] I don't really get it. They seem bothered in Jerusalem. I'll send him up there. He offers to Paul. How about I send you to Jerusalem to be tried? Thinking, you've been in prison a long time. You don't seem to be guilty of anything. Let's get this cleared up.

And Paul knows how that will end. And so, chapter 25 now into verse 10. But Paul said, I am standing before Caesar's tribunal where I ought to be tried.
To the Jews, I've done no wrong as you yourself know very well. If, then, I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die. I do not seek to escape death, but if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them.
I appeal to Caesar. Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, To Caesar you have appealed. To Caesar you shall go. Paul's a Roman citizen.
He has the right to do this. It's brave, because this is not the kind of thing that usually ends well for you if you turn up to the Roman emperor trying to plead your case, but he's thinking two things.
[16:42] One, he comes up with a way to avoid coming down to Jerusalem to some people who are going to kill him, but he's thinking in his head, Jesus said, I'd go to Rome. Ah, okay. Maybe now's the time I appeal to Caesar.

Interesting, isn't it, that Jesus says, you'll go to Rome. Paul has to act. It's not like he just sort of sat there and eventually someone sends him. He has to say, well, therefore I appeal to Caesar. He kind of cooperates with what Jesus has said will happen.
In words like that, when Jesus says, go and do this thing, you have to actually go and do it. He gets the choice to participate.
So, what happens next is Festus thinks, I am going to look like a fool if I send this man to Caesar because I can't even tell him what his crime is.
I don't really understand it and I, for my career, thinks the governor, if I send this guy to Caesar, yeah, he might just kill him, but he's also going to think I'm a right fool and that's not going to play well for me in the rest of my career.
[17:52] I need a reason to tell him he's going. So, he thinks, I know what I'll do. I'll call the local Jewish king, a guy called Agrippa. He probably understands this stuff and between us, we'll come up with a reason to send, we have to send him to Caesar, now that's the law, but we'll come up with a reason that makes sense and is going to make us not look like fools.

So, he calls Agrippa and Paul goes into his third trial. This guy, Agrippa, he is, this is the fourth Herod. You meet in the New Testament, there's been a, one before his father died at the start of Acts, but his uncle, I think, was the Herod that Jesus met with just before he died and then his father was the Herod that tried to kill Jesus when he was a baby.
So, lots and lots of Herods in the New Testament, but he's another one of these Jewish kings. And he understands Judaism, he cares, and so he is interested to hear what Paul would say.
So, now in chapter 26, so Agrippa said to Paul, you have permission to speak for yourself. Then Paul stretched out his hands and made his defense.

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I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews.
[19:13] Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently. My manner of life from my youth spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem is known by all the Jews. They have known for a long time, if they're willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion, I have lived as a Pharisee.

And now, I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our 12 tribes hope to attain as they earnestly worship night and day.
For this, I hope, I am accused, excuse me, and for this hope, I am accused by the Jews, O King. Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?
Again, he says, the real reason, the real reason I'm on trial is because I'm telling people that God raises the dead. And then, beyond, after that, he doesn't argue.
He refers to the Bible a little bit, but he doesn't argue. He tells his person's story at great length. I won't read it all to you, but he tells the story of those first few chapters in Acts when we first meet Paul, kind of 9 and 10.
[20:19] He relates it to the king. He describes how he met Jesus on the Damascus road. He tells how that felt. He says what happens next. He then talks about his journeys around all the cities and planting churches.

He just tells him the whole story. Tells him his own story and how he's seen God act. He starts saying, I used to persecute the church. I tried to kill Christians.
And he talks about meeting Jesus on the road and being commissioned by him. And he talks about becoming a witness to Jesus and being persecuted himself. And then if we jump down to verse 22, he says, To this day, I have had the help that comes from God.
And so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass, that the Christ must suffer and that by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.
So he tells his own story and he says, My story really is about this, that Jesus died and rose and that that is good news for all people, not just for the Jews.
[21:33] And then they have a good old debate and they send him to Rome. And we'll find out what happens next in his very eventful journey in a ship and then off to Rome over the coming weeks.

But he is trying to be obedient to Jesus' word to him from two years before. He faces three trials and at the center of each of them he says, You know what we're really talking about here?
It's the resurrection. So two things I'd like us to, so that's the story. Two things I'd like us to notice. Firstly, what does Paul do, especially in this final trial when he actually gets the previous story, he didn't get much chance to talk.
He kind of got to say a few words and then it all dissolved into chaos. When he gets a lot of time to chat with King Agrippa, what does he do? He tells him his own story. I think that's interesting.
It's a very powerful thing to do, to tell him his own story. That's what we should do with other people when we can. You know, when people talk about telling your friends about Jesus, it does not necessarily mean, oh, I've got to kind of get out a couple of pint glasses in the pub and a beer mat and try and do the bridge diagram and help people figure out what the gospel is.
[22:52] I think that's a good thing to do, by the way, but that's not necessarily what it is. Often it will just be just telling people your own story. And that might be how you first became a believer, but it might also be how Jesus has helped you more recently or this thing that's happened or that thing that you've seen him do.

Just tell your friends stories about your life because you probably do that anyway, right? That's how you talk to your friends. You tell them stories about your life, but remembering that hopefully, if you're following Jesus, the heart of so many stories of your life is Jesus.
And so you end up talking about him anyway because you're just chatting about your life. It doesn't have to be complicated. The evangelist and YouTuber, some of you might know, Glenn Scrivener, like, says there's two little phrases that he likes to use to teach people to tell others about Jesus.
And the first is, that's what I love about Jesus. As in, he'll just, he's just chatting to someone that you know, and then he'll say, well, that's just talking about life, about their challenges, about your

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challenges, and they'll be like, that's what I love about Jesus because when I faced that, I found that he was with me through it.
And you might think, is that evangelism because I haven't kind of shared the gospel? Yeah. Just talk to your friends about Jesus. And the other phrase that he uses is, that's what I love about the church.
[24:16] I wonder if you realize that the church is your best aid in telling your friends about Jesus. In fact, so often when I've been talking to people, they've found that the thing that they're interested in, a question they'd often ask is, why do you have so many friends?

And what they mean is, you keep telling stories about, they're like, what did you do yesterday? I was like, oh, I was with a friend and we did X. I was with a friend and we did Y. We did this thing or that thing. And they're like, you seem to have a lot of different friends.
It's like, oh, that's just the word I pick when I mean someone from church. That's what I love about the church. Equally, when you're like, oh, they're telling you about this hard time they're going through, and you're like, oh, about my church because they really stood with me.
One of the most attractive things right now in this particular cultural moment about following Jesus is that you get this. ready-made community in a world where no one has any.
No one's got any friends. No one knows anyone. And you get planted into this community where you get to know lots of people. Now, that in itself doesn't save, but it is deeply attractive to people enough that they're often curious to come and investigate.
[25:36] Just talk about your life. Talk about your life with Jesus. Talk about your life and your church. You'll be surprised how many people are curious. That is, if you like, an evangelism strategy.

The world runs on stories. We all live and believe stories all the time. So tell yours. We've all got one. No one can turn around to you and say, that's not true, because it happened, right?
They might not entirely believe you, but they know it's your story. You'd be surprised how effective that can be. And then the second thing I'd like us to notice is that Paul's story is the gospel.
Did you notice that? The core of each defense, okay, he tells his story, but the very core of each defense he gave in those three trials was the resurrection. In fact, his own story ended in the resurrection, having just told a story of his own resurrection, moving from one sort of person through this death-like encounter into someone completely different.
And that is the true Christian hope. The resurrection. That Jesus was raised and that we will be raised. That's what we expect for the future, right?
[27:01] Not just, someone's excited. Not just heaven when you die. We sometimes talk like that and sometimes it's just shorthand and that's okay.

But theologians talk about, or when you, you know, if you die before Christ returns, you go into what they call the intermediate state, which is the really cool thing that Jesus called being in paradise or the garden to the thief on the cross, where he's like face-to-face encounter with the Lord and joy. Great. He's like, that is not the ultimate hope. Oh, okay. It gets better than that, does it? It's like, yes. Because that, in essence, is disembodied.
But we're, you're not like a whole person without a body, without your body. And so the Christian hope is that Jesus has risen, we read there, as the first to rise, because everybody will rise and then be judged.
judged. And then those who know Jesus will live with him forever on a renewed, resurrected earth. In bodies. With jobs.
[28:12] And doing ordinary kind of things, but without any sin, which will sound absolutely nothing like the world as it is now. That's the Christian hope. And actually, it might sound odd, that's better than disembodied face-to-face with Jesus.

Because it's whole. And it's actually the undoing of everything that went wrong in the world. It's really good news. If I'm honest with you, sometimes it's all that gets me out of bed in the morning. When things are, oh, I didn't really mean that to be a joke, actually. When things are genuinely really difficult, and when you think, I've seen a lot of death. I have seen a lot of death.
What is the point in this? It's like, well, one day, one day everything sad will come untrue. One day, everything that dies in Christ will rise.
One day, the world itself will be turned on its axis and be as it should be forevermore. One day, Jesus is the first fruits, we're told, of the resurrection, as in that we look at him and go, oh, it's going

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to be like that for everything.
[29:27] Yeah. Yeah. Everything raised and changed and transfigured and made wonderful. That's the Christian hope. It's worth living for.

And did you notice? Paul had three trials. He went before a high priest. He went before a Roman governor. And he went before a Jewish king.
Does that sound like anyone? That's what happened to Jesus the night before he died. Okay, it took two years for Paul. But Luke is deliberately, like, the reason he doesn't really tell us much of what happened in that two years is he wants us to spot this.
Paul's story looks like Jesus' story. His story is the gospel, if you like. It mirrors Jesus' story. Because that's what we do. We follow Jesus.
We live his story. I don't necessarily mean you're all going to find you have three trials before those three particular people. That would be very odd. But he does promise us a death and resurrection story.
[30:30] He does promise us a die to self and rise again story. And that is good news when you're in trouble. Because life follows death every single time.

Tell his story. Sorry, excuse me. Tell your story. Live his story.
That's the Christian life. What we're going to do now is the band are going to come and we're going to sing his story like we often do. And we do that because as we sing in worship his story, the gospel, we remember it and we get it under our skin.
And we're very, very slowly reformed towards thinking like, oh yeah, kind of subconsciously, that's what my life's meant to be like. Yeah, it is. And his story changes everything.
I think that's really good news. Why don't we stand together? I'll briefly pray and then we'll sing.
Lord Jesus, thank you so much that you would go ahead of us into new life.
[31:48] Thank you so much that you would say that because you died in our place, we get to rise with you. Thank you so much that our future is resurrection.

We're really grateful. Help us to live it. Help us to tell it. Help us to know it. Amen.

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