

Can I Get A Witness?

Acts 21:17-26:32

As summer nears, one of my favourite time-off traditions is reading a new *John Grisham* novel. I love how he weaves a tangled web of action, adventure, and mystery, characters and plot twists that unravel in a trademark-Grisham surprise ending. But his latest book, *Framed*, departs from his classic legal *fictions* to tell the astonishing *true* stories of wrongful convictions, like the case of Kerry Max Cook who, at 21 was sent to death row where over the next 47 years he'd endure 4 separate trials before finally being declared *innocent*. *Framed* examines real-life trials, exposing incompetent investigators, planted evidence, jailhouse-snitches trading false testimony for sweetheart deals, witness tampering, racially-biased juries, and judges motivated more by headlines than the truth. The stories are as entertaining as they are heartbreaking. And as we near the end of our yearlong journey through *Acts*, we come to a story that feels like a chapter torn right out of Grisham's, *Framed*: the astonishing true story of the wrongful death-row imprisonment and four consecutive capital trials in the case against the Apostle Paul.

Starting in Acts 21, Paul arrives in Jerusalem where, as we learned last week, he expects trouble, warned by the prophet *Agabus* that he will be bound and likely killed. Upon arrival, he's warmly welcomed in by the believers, including James (*the biological half-brother of Jesus*), who warns of rumours swirling among the Jewish Jesus-followers that Paul preached an anti-Jewish message, proclaiming the Jesus-movement as a *breakaway from* the Jewish faith, rather than an *extension of* it. See, for early Jewish Christians, following Jesus wasn't a *new* religion, but the full realization of their ancestral faith. As the Jesus Way became a global movement, including and animating the lives of many non-Jewish people who weren't raised in or required to convert to Judaism in order to follow Jesus, the early Jesus-communities became a diverse mix of people

with unique histories, experiences, and ways of practicing faith, naturally led some *Jewish* Christians to wonder if *their* ways and traditions were being rejected altogether. For Paul and James, this clearly wasn't the case. Like most Jewish Christians, they continued to practice their faith in a uniquely Jewish way, simply *framed* around Jesus as their Messiah. To help clear up the confusion and put an end to the controversy, James comes up with a plan, saying to Paul:

“Do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.” (Acts 21:23-24)

James wants Paul to go to the Temple and take part in a Jewish ritual to prove his loyalty to Judaism. Paul goes along with the plan, which totally backfires. At the Temple, an angry mob forms, leveling false allegations based on fabricated eye-witness testimony against Paul. Then,

“Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, ‘Get rid of him!’” (Acts 21:30-36)

As the Commander drags Paul away, Agabus' prediction seems to be coming true. Bound and well on his way to being executed, Paul persuades the Commander to let him speak to the crowd. And in Acts 22, Paul *retells* the story we read in chapter 9, his personal *testimony* of how, as a highly educated and deeply devoted follower of Judaism who'd initially violently opposed Christianity, his whole life changed when he met Jesus for himself, and joined the movement.

“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, as the

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 and 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." (Acts 22:4-8)

Notice, Paul doesn't try to sway the court of public opinion with theological arguments, but simply shares his *testimony*, his story, how his life was completely upended because of a personal encounter with Jesus. But as he speaks, the mob becomes unhinged, shouting, ***"Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"*** (22:22) So Paul is dragged off and, after a night in prison, the Commander arranges for Paul's case to be brought before the *Sanhedrin*, the Jerusalem Supreme Court. This, Paul's *first* trial, reads like a classic Grisham novel, with wild allegations, heated arguments, illegal judicial orders, physical altercations, and grand speeches. Frankly, it actually reads almost like a *sequel*, because it's the very same courtroom where only a few years earlier, with similarly made-up testimony from similar false witnesses, these same judges had secured a wrongful conviction in the case of a Jewish carpenter-rabbi from Nazareth named Jesus, handing him over to the Romans to be executed. And while these same corrupt judges had thrown the book at Jesus, his punishment, *crucifixion*, hadn't seemed to stick. Which is why it must have stung more than a little when Paul stood up in the middle of the proceedings to say, ***"I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead."*** (Acts 23:6)

This sends the Sanhedrin into a fit of rage. Luke says that, ***"The dispute became so violent that The Commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks."*** (23:10) But then, *something truly amazing happened*. Just as Jesus had appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus years earlier, the risen Jesus appears to Paul once again, right there in his cell.

“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.’”

The Acts of the Apostles 23:11

Imagine, with all he was going through – condemned by his community, rejected by the religion he’d devoted his life to, beaten half-to-death, put on trial for his life, and now thrown in prison – but then, in this dark moment, *Jesus stands near*. Ever been there? Imprisoned in your pain and suffering, languishing in hopelessness, and then the sudden sense of divine presence, the nearness of one so foreign to your experience, yet the closest thing you’ve ever felt to home in your life. Imagine the care, comfort and courage Paul felt, seeing Jesus face-to-face, being in his non-anxious presence, hearing his affirming voice, receiving assurance that he wouldn’t die *here*, but that God had a plan for him, a mission, to *testify*, just as he’d done in the *Jerusalem* court, and now as Jesus’ witness in *Rome*. And he’d need every bit of courage Jesus could offer:

“The next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. More than forty men were involved in this plot. They went to the chief priests and the elders and said, ‘We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul. Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here.’” (Acts 23:12-15)

Learning of the secret assassination plot, Paul sends for the Commander who’d already *twice* saved his neck, once from *the mob* and once from *the Sanhedrin*. At nightfall, he sneaks Paul out of his cell and orders a secret prisoner transport, guarded by ***“a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen”*** (23:23), placing him in protective custody while he awaits a new trial, this time before the Roman Governor, *Felix*.

Acts 24 details Paul’s *second* trial, as the Jerusalem High Priest and elders hire a fancy, high-priced Grisham-style lawyer named *Tertullus*, who charges Paul as a trouble-maker, a ringleader of rioters and temple desecrators. In his defense, Paul once again simply tells his

story, claiming the only thing he's guilty of is being a loyal worshipper of the God of Israel and a follower of the risen Messiah, Jesus; claiming again, ***"It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today."*** (24:21) Perplexed by the strange charges and even stranger defense, Felix empties the courtroom, declaring a mistrial, and he throws Paul back into his cell where, for the next 2 years, he and his wife regularly meet with Paul to hear more about Jesus. Eventually though, Felix, who'd secretly been hoping for a bribe from Paul, gets transferred, leaving Paul in the hands of his replacement, a guy named Porcius Festus.

In Acts 25 Paul gets a *third* trial, now before Festus, who's mostly interested in ridding himself of the *Paul* problem and appeasing the Jewish people. At their request, he tries to send Paul back to Jerusalem, knowing they'll certainly kill him, *on or before arrival*. But Paul, armed with Jesus' instructions to go forward to Rome, *not backward to Jerusalem*, objects, saying:

"I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!" (25:10-11)

This appeal process was the birthright of every Roman citizen, to have your case heard by Caesar himself. By appealing to Caesar, Paul guarantees himself an audience with *Emperor Nero*, a chance to share his story and *testify* about Jesus to the most powerful person on earth. The problem was, Festus didn't want to risk looking incompetent by sending Paul to Nero with no clear charge. So, he orders *another* trial, this time with his brother-in-law, Herod Agrippa II presiding as judge. He explains to Agrippa that the legal issue seems to be regarding ***"some points of dispute about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive."*** (that's like saying 'The Lord of the Rings' is about returning lost jewelry.) But Agrippa wants to hear from Paul directly. So, in Acts 26, Paul stands trial a fourth time and, once

again, repeats his story in great length and detail. While we won't take time to read the full court transcript, what's clear is that Paul isn't interested in arguing to prove his innocence and be set free. Jesus' instructions were clear: *testify about me in Rome*. And he's now firmly on that path. In the meantime, his only interest is sharing Jesus and the hope of resurrection, wherever, whenever, and with whomever he has the chance. And here on the witness stand, as he testifies again to meeting the risen Jesus, Festus accuses him of being out of his mind. *This is crazy talk!*

"I am not insane... What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do." Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?' Paul replied, "Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains." (Acts 26:25-29)

Paul knows that Jesus' crucifixion and the well-documented accounts of his resurrection had happened publicly, not in some dark corner, but widely reported by many eye-witnesses. He knows that Agrippa, a Judean himself, was well-acquainted with the Messianic promises of global renewal through resurrection. Perhaps sensing openness, not wanting to waste his shot, Paul presses Agrippa to render a personal verdict on *Jesus*. And while it seems the jury was still out for him, at least for the moment, he does however render a verdict in the case against *Paul*.

"The king rose, and with him the governor... and those sitting with them. After they left the room, they began saying to one another, 'This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment.' Agrippa said to Festus, 'This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.'" (Acts 26:30-32)

The thing about this story is how every time good people make a wise plan, it fails and leads to disaster. *And yet*, in the midst of often heartbreaking circumstances, the message and mission of Jesus continue to advance, often in the unlikeliest of ways. For example, when Paul came to Jerusalem, James' plan to stop the rumours about Paul seemed to make good sense,

but the plan failed and nearly got him killed. *And yet*, it gave Paul the opportunity to share his story of meeting Jesus with almost the entire city of Jerusalem. When the Roman Commander tried to give Paul the chance to clear his name with the Sanhedrin, which seemed like a great idea, it blew up in Paul's face and he was once again beaten and thrown into prison. *And yet*, in that very prison cell, Paul is visited by Jesus who offers comfort, courage, and clear plan. And when Paul and the Commander devise a plan to get safely out of Jerusalem, it results in Paul spending the next several years languishing in a Roman prison. *And yet*, while there, he is able to spend years sharing Jesus with people. And when Paul tries to save himself from being sent back to Jerusalem (and certain death) by appealing to Caesar, it seemed like a smart plan, but ends up costing him his freedom, as Agrippa declares that he could've been released, had he *not* appealed to Caesar. *And yet*, as we'll see in the final chapter of Acts, this appeal that sealed his fate, leads to Paul living under house arrest in Rome, courageously testifying about Jesus to people who would take that message from Rome to the ends of the earth, which was exactly what Jesus told him to do, and what the whole book of Acts was about from the beginning.

And it begs the question, what if the continuing mission of Jesus (called *the church*) isn't designed to spread in the ways the world measures winning and success, but rather through faithful perseverance and submission to God in the midst of difficulty and suffering? What if following Jesus means, when on trial like Jesus, we don't defend ourselves, but lay down our lives in sacrifice? What if life's *trials* invite us to *testify*, to bear *witnesses* to the resurrection reality? After all, wasn't that what Jesus wanted in the first place? Remember how Acts began, by Jesus calling the church to be His *witnesses*, first at home, and then throughout the earth? Remember how Jesus met with Paul in that prison cell and told him to build a big-box church

with comfy seats, a killer band, and a wicked youth pastor? No, he told him to courageously *testify* about him. And where else do you find witnesses testifying, if not at a trial? And not just any trial but, for Paul, a trial in the most hostile, godless, dangerous place, the belly of the beast: Rome. The Bible shows that Paul spent most of his life, either on trial or in prison. But rather than complaining or trying to change his situation, he *reframed* adversity as opportunity to share the hope of resurrection, by testifying to his personal encounter with the risen Jesus. In the same way, life's *trials* give us the chance to testify, to be good *witnesses* where we live, first by encountering Jesus in them, and then by authentically sharing our experience with others.

Now, you might think, "*Easy for you to say; you don't know what I'm going through!*"

and it's true. I don't want to minimize your pain and suffering. But consider Paul, who wrote:

"I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked." (1 Corinthians 11:23-27)

Paul leveraged all these trials as opportunities to *testify* about Jesus. Maybe you want to share Jesus too, but you're scared, intimidated, worried you won't have all the right words. The good news is, just as Jesus was with Paul in his cell, he's with you too. And you don't need all the answers or right words. All you need... is *you*. *Your* story. *Your* experience of Jesus. A witness isn't an *expert*; a witness just shares their *experience*. And it's not how dramatic or impressive your story is; it's about simply sharing the reality of how Jesus has met you in the trials of your run-of-the-mill, ordinary, everyday life. That's how we share the hope of resurrection.

It's facing setbacks and failure honestly and humbly, because our hope isn't in success and achievement, but in the power of resurrection. It's loving and forgiving our enemies – *the friends who betray us, spouses who divorce us, bosses who fire us, coworkers who gossip about us* – because our hope isn't in always being treated well, but in the power of resurrection. It's cultivating hope and joy despite physical or mental illness, because our hope isn't in the myth of a pain-free life, but in the power of resurrection. It's slowing down, pressing pause on my busy life to see my neighbours' need as my own, because our hope isn't in every-one-for-themselves individualism, but in the power of resurrection. It's continuing to be generous when money's tight, because our hope isn't in wealth, but in the power of resurrection. And in life's darkest moments of grief and loss, it's grieving not as those who have no hope, because our hope is the power of resurrection. Life's trials give us the chance to testify of the hope we have in Jesus.

John Grisham's, *Framed* was co-written by Jim McClosky, the founder of *Centurion*, the first organization in the world devoted to freeing the wrongly convicted. McClosky is also a Jesus-follower and, at the end of the book, he shares a quote from the Apostle Paul, who during the story of Acts wrote in a letter to the Jesus-community in Rome, reflecting on the beatings, trials, and imprisonments he'd suffered, saying, ***"Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint."*** (Romans 5:3-5) Because our hope is not in a pain-less, trial-free life, but in the resurrection of Jesus, who himself endured trials, suffering, and even death to offer the power of resurrection to all of us.

The invitation of Acts 21-26 isn't to simply be impressed by all that Paul went through, but to consider our own lives which, though fairly safe and easy by comparison, are filled with all kinds of everyday trials and challenges. And frankly, the more we follow Jesus fully, the more

trials we should expect to face. And when we do, the invitation is to *reframe* the opposition as opportunity to be a witness, leveraging life's *trials* to *testify* to the reality of the risen Jesus. And like Paul, we do this not through persuasive arguments and debates, but by trusting that a *dead* man named *Jesus* is actually *alive*. And because of this strange fact, we follow his lead, setting aside comfort for courage and success for sacrifice, humbly laying down our lives to proclaim resurrection hope, encountering Jesus in our pain and suffering, and sharing our experience in a way that invites those around us to come to their own verdict about Jesus. So, go ahead, make your plans, watch them fail miserably and then, in the trials that come, take advantage of the adversity, and take courage from Jesus who is standing with you, asking, *Can I get a witness?*