

Sunday 20 November 2016

Otumoetai Baptist Church

Acts - The Church on a Mission: Who has God Placed in Your Life?

**(BLACK) Acts 23:23 – 26:32**

Heroes! We all love them don't we? There's something satisfying in hearing or seeing someone overcome their enemy, rescue the damsel or the dude in distress, or save the world from an alien invasion.

Heroes often arise out of war and adversity. You may be aware of the story of Desmond Doss.

**(SLIDE 1)**

It's just been released as a major motion picture called 'Hacksaw Ridge'.

Desmond was a young American soldier who became a conscientious objector to carrying or firing any weapon during World War 2. He decided that violence wasn't the answer, and in a world that seemed to be tearing itself apart, someone trying to put a little of it back together can't be a bad thing. I like that!

Desmond was what we would call a Seventh Day Adventist and he took the commandment from God "Thou Shalt Not Kill" to heart and it became his mantra, guiding his life.

Desmond joined the army to become a Medic, and rather than killing people he would be saving them, and he began his training. Most of his squad discounted him as small, weak, insignificant, and believed he wouldn't amount to much.

They beat him, mocked him, and did everything they could to get him to quit. But he never gave them anything. He kept his focus, he didn't give up and he didn't retaliate.

**(SLIDE 2)**

Desmond went onto serve as a Medic at Okinawa Bay, where he and his squad were in a gruesome, bloody battle against the Japanese soldiers – one of the major battles of World War 2.

Throughout the battle Desmond never carried a weapon, he never fired a gun, and he never took a life. Desmond saved lives. 75 lives in fact. See, while most of the men retreated down the Hacksaw ridge (which was a cliff), Desmond kept going back into the war zone to save those in his squad that were injured.

**(SLIDE 3)**

He would drag them to safety or carry them on his back. And over just one day he would carefully lower them with ropes down the ridge, until those down the bottom would get the men and take them to the medical tents. This was gruelling back-breaking work!

It must have been quite a sight to see men being lowered over the ridge, and they just kept on coming. Desmond would rescue one and then pray, “One more, Lord. Give me one more.” And then he’d go back into enemy lines and find the next one. Until he’d rescued 75 men. Including some Japanese soldiers. The enemy in the American’s eyes. Incredible story.

Desmond made it home to America, to his sweetheart, and he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honour, the highest military honour in the U.S. And he was the first conscientious objector to receive such recognition.

Desmond is and was a hero. Against all opposition, he never retaliated, he never went back on his beliefs. He saved lives rather than take them. And yet amazing as his physical achievements were and what he accomplished during World War 2, I believe it was his spiritual achievements and perseverance that truly set him apart.

See, people around him noticed a difference in the way he lived. His faith encouraged and gave voice and meaning to those people around him.

And Desmond, in true humility, when asked if he was a hero, removed himself from the spotlight and said the real heroes

were those that are still out there, those that are left behind.

God used Desmond in such a way that the people around him were not the same. They got to experience something of what we as Christians call “the grace of God.” God’s kindness shown to those who are not deserving of it. And that’s all of us. We are all in the same boat.

Let me quickly say this. Rather than there being certain sinners or sin which is responsible for earthquakes and natural disasters, as one misinformed and damaging bishop has said to have preached last week in a now infamous sermon, we are all sinners and we all need God’s grace. Yes, sin has consequences. But it does for all of us, not just certain sinners or sin.

But that’s a whole different kettle of fish that we’re not going to waste any more time going into this morning. God’s grace is there for others to experience his truth and love in their lives.

#### **(SLIDE 4)**

Let me ask you, who has God placed in your life to hear His truth and experience his love?

Well, we’ve been on a mission, church. For the past six months we’ve been making our way through the book of Acts.

We've seen heroes rise; villains become heroes. We've seen the message of God's love and salvation through Jesus Christ impact thousands upon thousands of people. We've seen the early church flourish against persecution and adversity. We've charted the story of Paul – who went from the hunter of Christians to being the hunted for being a Christian.

If Paul were alive today he'd be a bit like Desmond I reckon, and tell you that the true hero of his life was Jesus. See, Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus and Jesus “**flipped**” his life upside down. Paul changed his mission from burning the church to building the church.

Paul was called to suffer for the name of Christ, and if you were here last Sunday we saw this happening in his life. He was violently seized by the Jewish people – his own people – and beaten within an inch of his life. A commander comes onto the scene and breaks up the commotion. Then Paul speaks to the crowd and tells them of his story and change in beliefs after meeting Jesus face to face. Paul finishes by saying that God has sent him to the Gentiles – the unbelievers.

This was the final straw, the nail in the coffin for them. Paul had basically just told them, “Because of your unbelief, the blessing of God is being passed from you to the Gentiles.” Their response:

“Rid the earth of him. He's not fit to live.” (Acts 22:22)

Paul is then going to be violently flogged, but all that stops when he protests he is a Roman Citizen and under law a Roman citizen cannot be punished before a trial. So Paul is put in chains instead.

The next day he faces the Sanhedrin, which was the supreme court of Israel, made up of around 70 men and the high priest, and again they don't take kindly to Paul's words of his hope in the resurrection from the dead, as Jesus taught. The commander is afraid Paul will be torn into pieces by them, so he takes him away and puts him into barracks (quarters).

Where we finished last week, the commander then hears about a plot by the Jews to kill Paul so he orders a company to take Paul to Caesarea to face trial before Governor Felix.

And that brings us up to where we are now. Paul in Caesarea on trial for his life.

And we've focused on Paul quite a lot recently. I think Paul is the type of man that wouldn't want that. He would instead want us to focus on Jesus. And I think Jesus would want us to focus on his people, all his people – especially those who don't know Him.

So that's what we're going to do this morning. We know that this is Paul's trial, God's mission – but God's mission is so much more than the life of Paul. God loved Paul – without a doubt – but He also loves all people and desires them to have a relationship with Him.

So let's focus on some of the people that God placed **around** Paul for them to hear his truth and experience his love. Firstly, we'll look at Governor Felix; secondly, his replacement Festus; and finally, King Agrippa and his wife Bernice.

#### **(SLIDE 5)**

Starting with Felix, we meet him in Acts chapter 23. Let's read from verse 33 to 35:

*When the cavalry arrived in Caesarea, they delivered the letter to the governor (Felix) and handed Paul over to him. The governor read the letter and asked what province he was from. Learning that he was from Cilicia, he said, "I will hear your case when your accusers get here." Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod's palace.*

I imagine that Felix sees this as a slam dunk trial. He might be thinking: the people will present their evidence against Paul, Paul will admit his guilt, the punishment will be swift, and I'll go back to my normal life. Win for me.

But one can't help reading this and coming away with the impression that Felix is interested. He's intrigued. Who's this man that's been stirring up such emotions amongst the Jewish people? What's he done? Why do they hate him so much?

If we keep reading, we see that Ananias the high priest, along with his defence counsel, bring their charges against Paul. After some flattery to boost Felix's ego, Tertullus the lawyer says in chapter 24, verses 5 to 9:

#### **(SLIDE 6)**

*We have found this man (Paul) to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world (Really?? All over the world?). He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him. By examining him yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him." The Jews joined in the accusation, asserting that these things were true.*

We're not sure how Felix responded, but this probably wasn't new information for him, as he already received a letter from the commander saying all this stuff. There was no new evidence. Great work Tertullus, you really earned your legal fees here!

What it does say is Felix motions for Paul to speak. You might say Felix is starting to feel sympathy towards Paul at this point.

So Paul speaks. He says his accusers have no evidence of proof against him and admits he is a Christian and believes everything written in the Law and the Prophets – the Old Testament, as we know it – and also his hope in the resurrection from the dead for both the righteous and the wicked. He says because of this,

**(SLIDE 7)**

“I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.” (24:16)

Paul then challenges Felix and his accusers about what exactly it is he’s on trial for. And the only thing in his mind it can be is because of his statement concerning the “resurrection of the dead”. That hit a nerve with the Jews.

The Bible says that Felix is well acquainted with the Way. In other words, he knew what Paul was talking about. He didn’t follow the Way or Jesus. But he knew all about it, and Him.

Felix adjourns the proceedings and orders Paul to be kept under guard but given some freedom and allowed his friends to visit.

So Felix is very sympathetic towards Paul. And he’s further intrigued. So too is his wife, Drusilla. They both come and listen to Paul as he speaks about faith in Christ Jesus. And this goes on not for a week, a month or even a year, but two whole years.

Now, we can look at this in two ways:

Firstly, Paul has to spend two years in prison. Think of all the good stuff he could be doing for the Kingdom of God. All the Gentiles he could be converting to the faith, all the people he could be connecting with. What a lost opportunity!

Or secondly, Paul gets to spend two years sharing his faith with Felix and Drusilla. He gets to proclaim the name of Christ in this socio-political climate and tell them about who Jesus is and what He has done for them. What a great opportunity!

The Bible doesn’t say that Felix or Drusilla became believers. It says that Felix became afraid. The message of the gospel was hitting home. It was getting under his skin.

I actually feel sorry for Felix. He had one of the greatest living missionaries ever as a captive audience and he heard first hand of Paul’s dramatic conversion to following Christ. If that’s not God showing someone his grace then what is?

So we don’t know what happened to Felix and Drusilla and if they came to believe in Christ, the last thing we read is in acts 24 verse 27:

**(SLIDE 8)**

*When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius*

*Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favour to the Jews, he left Paul in prison.*

Who was the one really in prison? Paul or Felix?

I'll let you decide.

**(SLIDE 9)**

Before we move on from Felix to his replacement, Festus, again let me ask you: who has God placed in your life to hear His truth and experience His love?

Festus travels from Caesarea to Jerusalem and the Jewish leaders try to trick Festus into transferring Paul back to Jerusalem so they can kill him, but Festus answers them in chapter 25 verse 4:

**(SLIDE 10)**

*“Paul is being held at Caesarea, and I myself am going there soon. Let some of your leaders come with me and press charges against the man there, if he has done anything wrong.”*

Festus seems like he's the kind of person that when he talks, things get done. He commands obedience.

Festus is not convinced of Paul's guilt. He says to them, **“IF** he has done anything wrong.” Paul seems to have found another sympathetic ear in Festus.

Festus and some of the Jewish leaders come back to Caesarea and he orders Paul be brought before him. The leaders bring many charges against Paul, but they can't prove anything.

Paul then makes his defence by saying:

**(SLIDE 11)**

“I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the Temple or against Caesar.”

Festus now has a choice. Basically, he can side with Paul or side with the Jews. You would think it comes down to what he believes, but it seems like from the next part of the passage that beliefs don't come into it. It says that, Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favour, said to Paul, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?”

Festus sides with the Jewish people. It could be a bid for further power, greater alliance with the Jews. Whatever the case, Festus wants to do a favour for them and not Paul.

If you remember earlier, his predecessor Felix wanted to do a favour the Jews as well by keeping Paul in prison when he was succeeded by Festus. So basically both Festus and Felix have been using Paul as a pawn in their power game.

**(SLIDE 12)**

Paul responds to Festus' question about going to Jerusalem to stand trial, in Acts 25:10-11:

*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.*

This throws Festus, Paul appealing to Caesar, the Top Dog. Roman citizens accused of crimes had the right to have their cases heard by Caesar. But if found guilty, the punishment was swift as Caesar was both judge and jury.

Festus isn't sure how to respond, so he confers with his council.

“What do we do about this fella? On the one hand it seems like he's innocent here and done nothing deserving death. On the other, we don't want to start a commotion between the Jews by releasing him. And now he's appealed to Caesar – that could be suicide on his head! I think to keep everyone happy here, we need to send him to Caesar.”

So Festus tells Paul, “Very well, you have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go.”

If we stop here for a little while, I actually think this is Festus washing his hands clean of Paul. Similar to Pontius Pilate, when he washed his hands clean of the blood of Jesus. Festus is not willing to fight for Paul's case. He knows that Paul has done nothing wrong to the Jews, he knows of his innocence, he knows what will likely happen when Paul appeals to Caesar. Yet, against his better judgment, and against his belief – Festus wipes his hands clean and decides that Paul will go to Caesar.

### **(SLIDE 13)**

Have you ever made a decision that you regret? Ever decided to go for the easier option, instead of digging your feet in and working for the harder choice?

I think this was happening with Festus.

Maybe there is a decision you regret. Going for the easier out of the two choices. I'm sure we have all done this in our lives.

I don't know if Festus regretted his decision regarding Paul, but we know he was affected by it because in the next part of the story we see him discussing the case with our next two visitors, King Agrippa and Bernice.

### **(SLIDE 14)**

Before we meet them, who has God placed in your life to hear His truth and experience His love?

In Acts chapter 25 verses 13 to 21 we see that Festus presents Paul's case before Agrippa and Bernice, concluding that he (Festus) was at a loss of how to investigate the matter and would Paul be willing to go stand trial in Jerusalem. Paul – as we've heard – is not, and Festus then orders him to be sent to Caesar.

King Agrippa says he would like to hear Paul himself and Festus replies, "Tomorrow you will hear him."

**(SLIDE 15)**

Let's read chapter 25, verses 23 to 25 verse 1:

*The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high ranking officers and the leading men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. Festus said: "King Agrippa, and all who are present with us, you see this man! The whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer.*

**(SLIDE 16)**

*I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome. But I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. For I think it is unreasonable to send on a prisoner without specifying the charges against him.*

*Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself."*

Have a read of Paul's defence in your own time, but I'll quickly summarise it now:

Paul pays a true compliment to King Agrippa to make sure he gets a favourable hearing; he gives an account of his youth up; he shows that the Jews are persecuting him because of his hope in the resurrection; he tells of his persecution of Christians before his dramatic encounter with Christ and his call to ministry; he states his obedience to the call and his mission to preach Christ's suffering, crucifixion and being the first to rise from the dead. And that this is for the Jews and Gentiles.

At this point, good old Festus jumps in and interrupts Paul, "You're out of your mind! All this great learning is driving you insane!"

Paul answers him, "I am not insane, most excellent Festus. What I'm saying is true and reasonable – and guess what? The King here is familiar with these things and I can speak freely to him. What do you think, King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? Do you believe in what I am saying? In what I am in prison for? The hope of the resurrection from the dead.

This is THE moment for King Agrippa. The moment of truth. It's the moment before someone takes a leap of faith. The moment before someone admits to believing in Jesus. The moment before they become a Christian.

**(SLIDE 17)**

Do you believe?

That's a question that all of us have faced, are facing, or will face. The question that never goes away. The question we wrestle with every day. The question that changes your life forever. Either way you answer.

King Agrippa was ready to answer.

He says, "Do you think in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"

The literal translation of this is: "In a little you are persuading me to make a Christian."

In other words, I'm close Paul. Real close. I just can't make the jump yet. I need more time.

Paul replies,

**(SLIDE 18)**

"Short time or long – I pray God that not only you but all who are

listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."

Paul respects where the king is at. But he's not content for Agrippa to stay there. Nor anyone else. See, Paul has met Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul has experienced the life-giving gift of salvation that God offers to all who believe in His Son. Paul has no question of doubt that the law and the prophets in the Old Testament are 100% the truth.

The Messiah would come and be rejected and suffer and be crucified. But He would not stay dead. He would rise again.

Paul knew this and he lived this truth. And I suggest that those who knew Paul or came into contact with him saw something different in him. Just like those who were around Desmond Doss saw something too. And hopefully those who are around us see something different in the way we live too.

**(SLIDE 19)**

Who has God placed in your life to hear His truth and experience His love?

As we close this morning, we don't read about what happens to Felix, Drusilla, Festus, King Agrippa or Bernice.

We don't know what happened to each of them in their journey of faith. God placed himself through Paul in their lives and gave them every opportunity to hear His truth, experience His love and gave them every opportunity to respond.

Similarly, God has placed himself through us in people's lives to give them every opportunity to hear His truth, experience His love and give them every opportunity to respond.

In our parents' lives. In our children's lives. In our grand-parents lives. Our grand-children's lives. Our aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews' lives. In the lives of our friends from the school our children go to. In those we play sport with or go to the pub with. The person who sits in the cubicle down from you at work. In our community. The person who lives next door. The person we try to avoid but somehow always run into. You know who.

Just like God placed Paul in the lives of Felix, Drusilla, Festus, Agrippa and Bernice, God has placed each of us in these people's lives to hear the truth and experience His love.

So, who has God placed in your life?

*Song – My own little world.*