

TAKE COURAGE! YOU MUST TESTIFY IN ROME

Acts 22:30-23:35

Key Verse: 23:11

“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.’”

In the last passage Paul shared his personal testimony with the Jews of Jerusalem. Jesus chose Paul, a terrible sinner, as the object of his grace. Jesus forgave his sins unconditionally and immediately. Jesus gave him a mission to be his witness to all men, including the Gentiles. Paul accepted this grace boldly and began his life of mission. In this way, Paul entered the mainstream of God’s history. God wanted to spread the gospel to the whole world, using Paul as a key member. Enlightened by this revelation, Paul’s testimony had dynamic power to reveal God’s will to his people. In sharing testimonies, we must not only list a record of our sins. We must accept the grace of Jesus and discover ourselves in God’s history. We must realize that God chose each of us as a “priest” to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

In today’s passage Paul is brought before the Sanhedrin at the summons of the Roman commander. Though Paul appears to be on trial, he emerges as a spiritual victor. Paul testifies powerfully to the work of God and to the Risen Christ. On the other hand, the Sanhedrin members reveal their lawlessness, hypocrisy and powerlessness. After the battle, the Risen Christ appears to Paul to strengthen him. This was the true source of Paul’s spiritual victory. We want to learn the secret to Paul’s courageous witness and victorious life. May God bless our study today.

First, Paul fulfilled his duty to God in all good conscience (22:30-23:5).

The Roman commander wanted to find out why Paul was being accused by the Jews. So he ordered the chief priests and the Sanhedrin to assemble and brought Paul to stand before them. It was a kind of trial. Was Paul scared? Hardly. Look at verse 1. “Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, ‘My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.’” Paul was bold and fearless. He took the initiative and spoke first. His words are indeed meaningful. He said, “I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.” Paul was saying that he was right with God, that he had completed the mission God gave him, and that his conscience was clear before God.

When God made man, he gave him a conscience. The conscience helps us discern and choose what is good. As long as one does good, his conscience is at peace and he is happy. But when one does evil, his conscience is burdened with guilt. His thoughts vacillate. Sometimes his thoughts accuse him; sometimes his thoughts defend him (Ro 2:15). These days some young people engage in debauchery and promiscuity hoping to have fun. They think they can forget about it afterward. But soon, terrible guilt settles upon them. No one can live a happy life in this condition. So people try in many ways to drown the voice of their conscience. Some abandon themselves to a hedonistic lifestyle. Some become workaholics. Some become mentally ill, or even commit suicide, like Anna Karenina in Tolstoy’s novel. Some harden their hearts and become tools of the devil. The most dangerous person in a society or family is the one who no longer hears the voice of his conscience.

Paul had confessed that he was a terrible sinner (1Ti 1:15). Then how could Paul say he had fulfilled his duty to God in all good conscience? It was by the grace of Jesus. Jesus is the Lamb of God who shed his blood on the cross for sinners. God made Jesus the sacrifice of atonement for our sins (Ro 3:25). Hebrews 9:14 says, “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ...cleanse our consciences from acts

that lead to death so that we may serve the living God!" There is power in the blood of Jesus. The blood of Jesus satisfies God's demand for justice. The blood of Jesus cleanses our consciences from acts that lead to death. The blood of Jesus enables us to stand before the holy God. The blood of Jesus enables us to serve the living God. This is what we really want to do. This makes us happy. Paul claimed the blood of Jesus as his righteousness. Paul's conscience was cleansed. From that moment, Paul served God wholeheartedly. He discovered his priestly duty to God to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Ro 15:16). For this, Paul had made three long and dangerous mission journeys. For this, Paul had gone through many hardships and suffered much. In this way, he had fulfilled his duty to God. Now, Paul could stand before God with a good conscience. When he could stand before God, he had no problem to stand before the corrupted religious leaders.

Paul deeply understood the agony of the Jewish religious leaders. They wore fancy gowns and had positions of honor before people. They made a tremendous effort to obtain legalistic righteousness. But without Christ, they could only condemn others while living as hypocrites. They were fake people. They did not know God. They did not really know themselves. Their hypocrisy made them miserable. They had no joy of serving God. They had no satisfaction of finishing their mission before God. To them, religious duty was a heavy burden. But they dared not put it down for the sake of their pride and position.

Paul's opening statement touched a nerve. The high priest, Ananias, ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth (2). Ananias seems like a gang leader. He was a tool of the devil who wanted to suppress the truth of God. He was supposed to be in charge. But after hearing that Paul served God faithfully, with a good conscience, Ananias lost his composure, and became like a brute beast.

How did Paul respond? Look at verse 3. "Then Paul said to him, 'God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!'" Paul does not seem to be on trial. Paul saw God. Paul knew that before God they were all on trial. Paul was sure that Ananias would be judged by God. According to the historian Josephus, when the Roman army invaded Jerusalem, Ananias was killed by his own people. In this part we learn that one man who has fulfilled his duty to God in all good conscience is more powerful than the religious establishment. We can be people of good conscience when we accept the blood of Christ and give our lives to fulfill God's holy mission.

Second, Paul's hope in the resurrection of the dead (6-10).

Look at verse 6. "Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, 'My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead.'" Paul knew the Sanhedrin well. It was made up of two major parties: Sadducees and Pharisees. They seemed united in their attack on Paul, but they disagreed strongly on issues of spiritual substance. The Sadducees said that there was no resurrection and that there are neither angels nor spirits. But the Pharisees acknowledged them all. When Paul identified himself clearly as a Pharisee and declared his hope in the resurrection of the dead it caused a dispute to break out that threw the Sanhedrin into chaos. Some Pharisees began to side with Paul, saying, "What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" The dispute was so violent that the commander had Paul removed by force. In this way the trial ended.

At first glance, it may seem that Paul was playing politics with the Sanhedrin. However, Paul meant what he said. He was on trial because of his hope in the resurrection of the dead. There was no legal charge

against Paul. There was no reason for him to be on trial. In fact, he was on trial because enemies of the gospel had conspired against him. Paul was eager to make the hope of resurrection the topic of discussion.

Paul believed that Christ rose from the dead on the third day, according to the Scriptures. He believed that Christ's resurrection was the first fruits, and that all who believed in him would also be raised from the dead. Paul believed that he himself would be raised from the dead and transformed into the glorious image of Christ. Paul believed that Christ's resurrection proved God's power to destroy all unrighteousness and restore the kingdom of God. Paul looked forward to a new heaven and a new earth and eternal life in the glorious kingdom of God. Because he had this hope, Paul freely committed his life to God's mission. Because he had this hope, Paul was willing to suffer to preach the gospel. Because he had this hope, Paul was bold and courageous even in the face of death.

St. Peter also had this hope. He said in 1 Peter 1:3,4, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you..." Those who believe the resurrection of Christ can see the kingdom of God. They have a living hope in the kingdom of God. Before having resurrection hope, most people cling to their lives in this world as though they are everything. They become very stingy with their time and money. They do everything to have a better life in the world before death. But the resurrection of Christ gives us a living hope. We have eternal life in the kingdom of God. So we can be generous with our time and money. We can love others from our hearts without worrying about ourselves. We can serve God with no reservation. It was because Paul had hope in the resurrection that he could boldly enter Jerusalem, ready to be bound and ready to die for the name of Jesus. If there was no resurrection, Paul's attitude would have been different. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:32b, "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'" Even Paul would have been a hedonist if there were no resurrection of the dead.

We Christians serve Christ sacrificially because of our hope in the resurrection. However, sometimes we expect tangible blessings from God. Surely, God blesses our lives on earth abundantly. But this cannot be our ultimate hope. Our ultimate hope is resurrection from the dead and eternal life in the kingdom of God. This hope makes us courageous and strong. With this hope, both Peter and Paul gave their lives to pioneer Rome. With this hope, we can give our lives to pioneer the USA.

Third, "Take courage! You must testify in Rome" (11).

Paul's one-two gospel punch knocked the Sanhedrin members off balance. Now they were on trial before the gospel. Surely, Paul was a victorious four-star general in spiritual warfare. Yet look at verse 11. "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.'" According to the Risen Christ, Paul needed to take courage. Why? Paul must have been drained spiritually and emotionally. Paul had risked his life to serve God in Jerusalem without seeing the desired result. He may have felt a sense of failure. Jewish and Gentile Christians were not any closer together. The unconverted Jews did not repent; they became more anti-Christian. Paul was a prisoner in a Roman barracks, not knowing what would happen next. The stubborn and vicious religious leaders would never give up. The power of their hatred was deadly. Already, their pressure was being felt around Jerusalem. Moreover, Satan was always looking for the chance to accuse Paul. This is the very moment that God's servant can fall into fear and sorrow. This

happened to Abraham after he rescued Lot. This happened to Elijah after he defeated the false prophets on Mount Carmel.

When Paul was vulnerable, the Risen Christ visited him to impute new spiritual courage in his heart. At the right time, the Risen Christ stood near Paul. Paul was not alone. The Risen Christ, the King of kings, his Savior and Lord was with him. The Lord spoke to him, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome." At the words of Christ, "Take courage!" the swelling tides of darkness that threatened Paul's heart were completely repelled, and dissipated like a mist. Bright heavenly sunshine came into Paul's heart. The word of Christ assured him of God's love and made him strong, strong enough to face the challenge ahead.

Then the Risen Christ said, "As you have testified about me in Jerusalem...." As we know, Paul had been burdened with the problem of his own people, the Jews. He knew his trip to Jerusalem would be dangerous. Yet he made it for the sake of helping his people see the work of God. Although his purpose was great, his action in Jerusalem did not seem to be much. But the Risen Christ accepted it. The Risen Christ said that Paul testified about him in Jerusalem. It was as though the Risen Christ said, "You did it! Your mission is accomplished. Now leave the result up to me." Paul would continue to bear a burden of prayer for his own people, the Jews. But he could have peace in his heart, knowing that he did everything he could for them and that it was accepted by the Risen Christ, small as it may seem.

The Risen Christ concluded, "...so you must also testify in Rome." When Paul started for Jerusalem, he had really wanted to go to Rome (19:21). In Romans 1:13a he said, "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now)...." Though Paul was eager to go to Rome, he was always prevented from doing so. Now the Risen Christ gave him clear direction and a promise that he would testify in Rome. It was the desire of Paul's heart. It was time for Paul to pray for Rome, go to Rome, and testify about Jesus in Rome. Paul's passion to preach the gospel in Rome ignited once more. New vision gave him new strength. He was fully restored in spirit to serve God's purpose. Here we learn that gospel workers need the encouragement and direction of the Risen Christ. When we are weak or vulnerable, we must depend absolutely on the Risen Christ. When we need clear direction, we must pray until we hear the Risen Christ, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

Fourth, God sends Paul to Caesarea under Roman protection (12-35).

The next day, forty very zealous Jews formed a conspiracy and made a plot to kill Paul. They were the incarnation of Satan. However, God uncovered their plot through Paul's nephew. The Roman commander was made aware of it. Then he arranged for Paul to leave for Caesarea with an escort of 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen. In all, 470 well-trained Roman soldiers ensured Paul's safe passage to Caesarea. In Caesarea Paul was handed over to Governor Felix. The letter from the Roman commander explained that there was no charge against Paul, but his case was too controversial to be settled in Jerusalem. Paul was kept under guard in Herod's palace to await the arrival of his accusers and a trial by Roman officials. Here we learn that God protects his servant with ten soldiers for every one enemy that is against him. Sovereign God leads his servant where he wants him to be.

Today we learn how to be Jesus' witnesses. We must have a clear conscience through Jesus' blood. We must have resurrection faith. We must depend on Jesus for courage, direction and protection.