

YOU MUST ALSO 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 today's passage, Paul is brought before the Sanhedrin for a trial. He was not intimidated. He testified powerfully that he served God with good conscience. I believe that his courage became an inspiration to many other believers in history. In 1521, Martin Luther stood before the Imperial Diet of Worms. Both the Emperor and the Church wanted him to recant his teachings of what we call today the Reformation. There in front of the political and religious authorities, he said, "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason--I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other--my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen." May God help us to learn the secret to Paul's courage!

I. IN ALL GOOD CONSCIENCE (22:30-23:10)

Why was Paul brought before the Jewish supreme authorities? As we learned in chapter 22, the Roman commander wanted to find out why the Jewish mob was shouting at Paul and trying to kill him. He decided that the Jewish Ruling Council was a proper venue for that. So he ordered the chief priests and the Sanhedrin to assemble. Paul had to stand before them. It was like a Senate hearing today, with many cameras pointed at him. It was an intimidating situation. Was he scared? No. 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 looked straight at the 72 members of the Sanhedrin. He was not intimidated. First, he called them "My brothers." This compares with what he called the crowd earlier--"Brothers and fathers" (22:1). This tells us that he stood before the Sanhedrin as a servant of God; he considered them equal with himself. Then he made a bold opening statement. He said, "I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day." Paul declared that he was right with God. He fulfilled his duty to God. And his conscience was clear before God. What a remarkable statement!

What does it mean to serve the Lord in good conscience? Paul mentioned conscience several times in his letters (1Ti 1:19; Ro 9:1). He said to his spiritual son Timothy, "I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers" (2Ti 1:3). Does this mean Paul was without sin? No. He said many times that he was the worst of sinners. So what does it mean to have a clear conscience? We know that God gave each of us conscience. When we do something wrong, our conscience makes us feel guilty about it. Our conscience is a voice from within. People do some things to clear their consciences, such as charity work or self-torture. They try to drown out the inner voice that accuses them. Some drink alcohol and use mind-altering substances. If your conscience is pricked, you cannot have peace in your heart.

However, we should also know that our conscience is not a perfect moral compass. The Bible says some people's conscience has been "seared as with a hot iron" (1Ti 4:2). It means that their conscience has become like scar tissue. It is hardened. Some criminals do not even feel remorse after committing a gruesome murder.

So how can we have a good conscience? The short answer is that the answer must come from God who gave us conscience in the first place. When we are saved by the grace of God, we become the new creation (2Co 5:17). The blood of Jesus washes away all our sins. God creates a new heart in us. Hebrews 9:14 says, "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, 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 cleanses our consciences from acts that lead to death. The blood of Jesus enables us to serve the living God. That is what happened to Paul. The blood of Jesus cleansed his conscience. From that moment, he served God wholeheartedly. He fulfilled his duty to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Ro 15:16). He had gone through many hardships and suffered much. Now, he could stand before God with a good conscience. It was not that he was morally and spiritual perfect. It was the grace of the Lord Jesus. He said, "... by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1Co 15:10).

How did the Jewish leaders react to Paul's opening statement? They became angry. The high priest, Ananias, ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth (2). He lost his composure. What made him become so furious? I think his conscience was stricken. He knew that he could not claim to have served God with clear conscience. The religious leaders looked dignified in their purple robes. They kept the laws meticulously. But they did not know the grace of forgiveness through the blood of Jesus. They did not love God. They did not love his people. They only condemned them for violating minute details of the law. Their hypocrisy made them miserable. They had no joy of serving God. Paul understood their inner agony, because he used to be one of them. In a letter to Timothy, Paul said, "The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1Ti 1:5). He connected the words--love, pure heart, good conscience and sincere faith-- together. Paul wanted his Jewish brothers to love the Lord and serve him with good conscience. Sadly, all they wanted was to condemn him to death.

Punching the accused in the mouth for defending himself was illegal in the court procedure. How did Paul respond to the illegal order? 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 was a prisoner on trial. Ananias was the chief justice of the Jewish Supreme Court. So how could he say things like this to him? It was because Paul was standing before the presence of God. In his eyes, the religious leaders, not him, were on trial before God. Paul declared that God would judge him for being a whitewashed all, that is his hypocrisy. He was sitting in the judgment seat, but violated the law by commanding that

Paul be punched in the mouth. It was equivalent for the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court today punishing a defendant without due process. Paul the prisoner was fearless before the supreme authorities.

One question we may want to ask here is, “How can we be bold and courageous like Paul when we stand before the powers of this world?” We should remember that Paul served the Lord with good conscience. We don’t have to be afraid of anyone in this world when we are with the Lord. Jesus is on our side. The Holy Spirit is our Advocate. Jesus said in Matthew 10:18-20: “On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” Above all, we know that ultimately all human beings must stand the judgment seat of God. The hope of resurrection was on Paul’s mind as we will see in verse 6.

Those who were standing near Paul said, “How dare you insult God’s high priest!” (4) Paul said, “Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: ‘Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people’” (5). Paul apologized, even though Ananias was not really a servant of God. He was one of the worst high priests in Israel’s history. The Jews despised him for his corruption. He made a lot of money using his office. Josephus, the Jewish historian, said that Ananias was killed by his own people for his pro-Roman position.

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, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead.”* Paul grew up as a Pharisee. He knew the Sanhedrin well. Some of the members were probably his old friends. The Council was made up of two major parties: Sadducees and Pharisees. They seemed united in their attack on Paul, but they disagreed on several 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 (8). When Paul identified himself as a Pharisee and declared his hope in the resurrection of the dead, a dispute broke out that threw the Sanhedrin into chaos. The dispute was so violent that the commander had Paul removed by force. The trial ended abruptly.

At first glance, one might say that Paul had a brilliant legal strategy. The two parties argued like Republicans and Democrats in our Congress. Some Pharisees stood up and said, “We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” (9) However, Paul meant what he said. It was not a legal strategy. He was on trial because of his hope in resurrection. Paul would declare this hope in the three other trials following this one. He had done anything illegal. In fact, he was on trial simply because he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ—the good news of his death and resurrection. Paul made the gospel of Jesus the focus of the trial.

What does it mean to have hope in resurrection? What difference does it make in our lives? When we have hope in resurrection, we have a different perspective on life.

We know that our life will not end in cemetery. Our destination is the kingdom of God. We have a living hope in the kingdom of God. And this hope makes a difference in how we live in this world. Without this hope, people cannot but cling to what they have in this world. 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. We can serve God with no reservation. It was because this hope, Paul came to Jerusalem, ready to die for the name of Jesus. Because of this hope, Paul was willing to suffer for Christ and the gospel. And because of this hope, Paul had the courage to speak with conviction before the Sanhedrin.

We are also willing to serve Christ sacrificially because of our hope in the kingdom of God. Of course, God blesses our lives abundantly even on earth. But we know that our life on earth is temporary. Our ultimate hope is eternal life in the kingdom of God. This hope makes us courageous and strong. With this hope, we can follow the footsteps of St. Paul in serving young people of our generation.

II. TAKE COURAGE! YOU MUST TESTIFY IN ROME (11)

Paul showed exceptional courage before the Sanhedrin. But the trial ended in stalemate. He was taken to the military barracks again. His future seemed ominous and uncertain. How did Jesus help him in this situation? 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."* Why did Jesus tell him to take courage? Paul must have been discouraged by what happened in Jerusalem. Paul had risked his life to come to Jerusalem. But Jewish and Gentile Christians were not any closer. The hostile Jews did not repent; they became more anti-Christian. Paul was in a prison, not knowing what would happen next. The Jewish leaders would never give up. They had intense hatred toward him. He had a pretty good day in court, but he knew that Satan would not give up. After victory, a servant of God could fall into despair. This happened to Abraham after he rescued Lot. This also happened to Elijah after he defeated the false prophets on Mount Carmel.

The Risen Christ did not leave him alone. He visited Paul to encourage him. The Lord stood by him. 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."* The word of Christ assured him of God's love and made him strong to face the challenges ahead. Jesus said, "As you have testified about me in Jerusalem...." Paul was discouraged by his Jewish brothers and sisters. He risked his life to come and share his testimony, but his effort in Jerusalem did not seem to produce any fruit. Now Jesus told him it was not the case. The Lord said that Paul testified about him in Jerusalem. The Lord accepted his testimony. It was as though the Lord said, "You did it! Your mission is accomplished. Now leave the result to me." Paul would continue to bear a burden of prayer for his own people. 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.

Then Jesus said to him, "... so you must also testify in Rome." Paul really wanted to go to Rome (19:21). In Romans 1:13 he said, "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now)" It had been his desire to go to Rome and preach the gospel there. Now the Lord confirmed that it was his will as well. Jesus promised that he would testify in Rome. This promise gave Paul the assurance that he would be in Rome by God's will. He did not know exactly how he would get to Rome. His enemies were trying to kill him. But Jesus' promise was enough for him. There was no doubt in his mind that he would testify in Rome. With the words from Jesus, Paul was fully restored in spirit to serve God's purpose. We learn that we need the encouragement from the Lord when we feel discouraged. We must pray until we hear from the Lord, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

III. GOD PROTECTS PAUL (12-35)

The next morning, a group of more than 40 Jews formed a conspiracy to kill Paul. The death squad pledged not to eat or drink until they killed him. They were evil men. But God uncovered their plot through Paul's young 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 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 basis 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. God protected his servant Paul when he faithfully served his mission. God was working quietly, step by step, to lead him to Rome.

In conclusion, Paul's testimony before the Sanhedrin was powerful and courageous. May God help us to serve him with a clear conscience! May God help us to live each day in the hope of resurrection!