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 Series: *The Cure Goes Viral*
 Title: *Imprisoned*
 Text: Acts 23:1-35
 Preacher: Mark Adams

Last weekend Kenn O. led us in the first of two Upward Basketball Coach Training sessions. The second is this afternoon. As part of his training Kenn let us know that Julia C. will be our Upward Referee Commissioner this year!

I'm so happy to hear that, because I know that not only does Julia know her stuff---she will be absolutely impartial in all her calls. For example: If she refs one of my team's games, Julia won't go easy on my team just because I visited her in the hospital the day after she was born or because we have been neighbors for oh, 20 years or so. I know that because Julia knows refs have to be impartial!

Sadly, this week I read something that says apparently Julia is the exception to the rule. According to a recent study, some refs---specifically football officials---are partial. Michael Lopez, a researcher and statistician at Skidmore College in New York, led a study that found referees are much more likely to make calls that favor the team whose coaches and players are on the sideline closest to the potential penalty.

Lopez analyzed five years of NFL games, including 1,400 penalty calls that happened close to a team's sideline. He studied those times when referees call a late hit on a player. A late hit happens when the tackle takes place out of bounds. I mean, you're allowed to tackle IN bound but if it happens over the line, that's a definite no-no.

In the game of football, players are frequently flying into one another near a sideline and often near the bench where the players sit and the coaches pace. This is called a bang-bang play and refers to those times when things happen close to the line so quickly a ref has to make a judgment call.

Well, Lopez looked at a bunch of these plays and he found referees are much more likely to make calls that favor the player whose team is on that sideline. Let's say the Ravens are playing the yet to be named Washington Football team; if a Raven were to tackle a player on the Washington team near the Washington sideline, the Washington coaches and players would demand the play go in their favor. Lopez's study says that in times like this many refs would do that. They would yield to this pressure. They favor what people nearest to them are demanding. In short, intimidation works. Yell at the refs, get in their face, and they are more likely to cave to social pressure. Of course, don't try that on Julia because she would never do this---but some football refs would.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, *"Where are you going with this Mark?"* In fact, go ahead and say it: *"WHERE ARE YOU GOING WITH THIS MARK?"*

I'm glad you asked.

In my mind this shows that social pressure is a powerful force, and it takes either a special kind of person or a special kind of power to stand up to it. This lesson is something we must understand because as Christians living in a "two kingdom world" --- the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan---we often face pressure.

You see, the plain truth is many people in this fallen world are offended by the Gospel message. To those in power who love power, to those who think this world is all there is, to those who think all truth is relative, to those who think themselves righteous---the Gospel of Jesus Christ is offensive---so when we share it, we face pushback.

Well, how are we to stand up against that kind of pressure? Where does our courage come from? Where do we get the power required? Paul's experience in Acts 23 help give us answers to these questions.

Let's get the setting in mind.

As Pastor Kevin reminded us last week, Paul finally made it to Jerusalem. He presented the leaders of the church in Jerusalem with the offering collected from the Gentile churches in Asia and Europe and reported about all the ways the Gospel had spread. But, while at the Temple, Paul was recognized, and a riot of sorts broke out. The Roman soldiers stationed there broke it up and were about to flog Paul when they learned he was a Roman citizen. Then in an attempt to get to the bottom of the matter, the Tribune in charge called a hasty meeting of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews. This officer was trying to decide if Paul should be charged with a crime. These religious rulers gathered in the common area of the temple, that outer courtyard where even Gentiles like these Romans were welcomed. The Tribune's plan was to let the Sanhedrin examine Paul and if the situation did not warrant Roman intervention, he'd leave the matter in Jewish hands.

I'm sure Paul was happy about this plan at first because he hoped to convince some of his hearers of the truth of Gospel. Remember, as a former famous Pharisee, he was known by some of these Jews. I'm sure there was a spark of recognition on the faces of many of Paul's hearers that day. This is probably why, as you'll see, Paul addressed them so informally, **"My BROTHERS."**

Okay, take your Bibles and turn to Acts 23. If able, stand as I read in respect for God's infallible Word.

Acts 23:1-24

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."

2 - At this the high priest, Ananias, ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth.

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!"

4 - Those who were standing near Paul said, "How dare you insult God's high priest!"

5 - Paul replied, "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.'"

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."

7 - When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.

8 - (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things.)

9 - There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. "We find nothing wrong with this man," they said. "What if a spirit or an angel HAS spoken to him?"

10 - 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.

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."

12 - The next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul.

13 - More than forty men were involved in this plot.

14 - 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.

15 - 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."

16 - But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul.

17 - Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him."

18 - So he took him to the commander. The centurion said, "Paul, the prisoner, sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you."

19 - The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, "What is it you want to tell me?"

20 - He said: "Some Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him.

21 - Don't give in to them, because more than forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request."

22 - The commander dismissed the young man with this warning: "Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me."

23 - Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, "Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight.

24 - Provide horses for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix."

Okay, let's review what has happened. Paul's brotherly statement to the Sanhedrin brought a very UN-brotherly response. When he said, **"I have fulfilled my duty to God IN ALL GOOD CONSCIENCE to this day,"** the high priest, Ananias, ordered those standing near Paul to hit him in the mouth, which was an illegal act according to Jewish law. Their oral tradition clearly said, **"He who strikes the cheek of one Israelite strikes, as it were, the glory of God."**

This face slap upset Paul, as it would any Jew, of course it would upset any Gentile as well! I mean, if I'm at an Upward game and the coach of the other team orders one of his players to hit me in the mouth, I'd say, **"Julia! FOUL!!!!"**

All kidding aside, Paul angrily replied, **"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!"** (vs 3)

That **"white-washed wall"** comment came from the Jewish practice of painting their tombs white as a warning. You see to touch a tomb brought defilement. Paul was saying that Ananias, though he looked okay on the outside, was like a tomb, full of decaying filth. And I don't think Paul's anger led him to slip into sin here because a few years later, God did indeed strike Ananias. When the Jews revolted against Rome in the year 66A.D. Ananias had to flee for his life because of his known sympathies with Rome. His house was burned, and Jewish guerrillas found him hiding in an aqueduct at Herod's palace where they killed him for being pro-Roman.

Okay, look at verses 4-5: **Those who were standing near Paul said, "How dare you insult God's high priest!" Paul replied, "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.'"**

Now, some say Paul really did NOT recognize Ananias and they give various reasons.

- They say Ananias was not wearing his robes because this meeting was called at the last minute.
- Some say Paul's vision was bad.
- Some say this meeting was held in the early morning hours and there wasn't enough light to see.

But I agree with several commentators who say Paul DID recognize him and that his statement was a sarcastic rebuke. Paul was saying, **"I didn't realize he was the high priest because he didn't act like one---since a true high priest would know and obey the oral law."**

This is a good time for us to stop and remember that with our behavior---our attitudes---we are to reflect Christ. People should be able to RECOGNIZE us as Christians. As Paul puts it in Philippians, **"We are to stand out like stars in the universe---children of God without fault in this warped and crooked generation."** (Philippians 2:15)

I'm reminded of the old story that says one night Alexander the Great couldn't sleep so he left his tent to walk around the encampment. He came across a soldier asleep on guard duty, a serious offense. The penalty for falling asleep on guard duty was, in some cases, instant death. In fact, the commanding officer sometimes poured kerosene on the sleeping soldier and lit it.

Well, this soldier began to wake up as Alexander approached him. He quickly came to attention and Alexander asked

him, *“Do you know what the penalty is for falling asleep on guard duty?”*

“Yes, sir,” the soldier responded in a quivering voice.

“Soldier, what’s your name?” Alexander demanded.

The soldier replied, *“Alexander, sir.”*

The famous general asked him to repeat his answer and when the soldier did, he said, *“Either change your name---or change your conduct.”*

It’s easy for us to be critical of Ananias, but we often make the same mistake. We are CHRISTians---and our behavior must match our conduct such that people recognize us followers of Jesus---priests in a KINGDOM of priests, as Peter put it.

Back to the text.

At this point, realizing he would not get justice from this Jewish “court” Paul resorted to a theological tactic. Paul knew that since the Pharisees and Sadducees disagreed about the resurrection of the dead, he could divide the council, create a “hung jury” so to speak. So, in verse 6 he said, ***“My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead.”*** In essence he looked at the Pharisee majority and said, *“Brothers---I’m not on trial for denigrating the Law. I’m a Pharisee. I’m on trial because the Sadducees don’t like our beliefs!”* And Luke tells us that, ***“When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.”***

But it backfired. The Jews became so angry at that the Tribune became afraid they would tear Paul to pieces. In fact, the word for “torn” is the same one used to describe the Gaderene demoniac who “TORE” his chains. So, something had to be done.

I’m thinking this poor tribune, Claudius Lysius, had to be frustrated at this point. I mean, just a few days earlier, he had rescued Paul from mob violence in the temple. When he allowed Paul to speak, the riot flared up again. Then when he was about to beat the truth out of Paul he learned he was a Roman citizen. And now as Paul stands before the Sanhedrin there’s another riot.

Well, to do his duty---save Paul, a Roman citizen---and to restore order, Tribune Claudius motioned to the Antonia Fortress and troops came pouring out to protect Paul and return him to the garrison in protective custody. But while Paul was safe in the fortress the devil was at work. A group of more than 40 men, Jewish extremists, came to the High Priest with a plan. They asked Ananias to suggest to the Tribune that they be allowed to call another meeting of the Sanhedrin on the pretext of giving Paul a fair hearing, but the moment he left the fortress these men would kill Paul. They even made a vow not to eat or drink until the job was done.

And at this point we learn something new about Paul. He had a sister, who had a son. This young man, Paul’s nephew, heard about this plot and told Paul. Now up until this point, we know nothing of Paul’s family. Many assume that when Paul said, ***“I have lost all things for the sake of Christ”*** in Philippians 3:8 that included his family, who had disowned him when he became a Christian. But apparently Paul had one family member who had not written him off---this nephew. Paul told him to share what he had heard with the Tribune and like a sheriff in the old west outwitting an unruly mob of townsfolk trying to bust a prisoner out of jail so they could hang him, Claudius ***“...called two of his centurions and ordered them, ‘Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. Provide horses for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix.’”***

Think of it. Paul left town more like a king than a criminal, on horseback surrounded by 470 soldiers. Meanwhile his assassins were stuck in Jerusalem fighting constant hunger pains.

Now, it was sixty miles to Caesarea. They covered the first forty miles with a rapid forced nighttime march. I’m sure those four-hundred foot-soldiers were thankful it was downhill almost all the way. You see, Jerusalem sits on the top of a series of hills or mountains. This is why when we read the Bible no matter from where you are going to Jerusalem if

you're coming from the north or the east or whatever, the Bible always says you GO UP. When they got down to the Fortress of Antipatris the foot soldiers rested and then returned to Jerusalem, while Paul proceeded with the seventy horsemen the remaining twenty miles to the governor's palace in Caesarea.

So, not only did Paul TRAVEL like a king, he was kept---not in a prison---but in the PALACE of a king. King Herod had built this sea-side palace and that's where Paul was held. By the way, I've been there--I've stood in the ruins of that Palace. Has anyone else been to Caesarea Maritima? Here's some pics from our visit there seven years ago.

Okay, what can we learn from Paul's experience here? What can his example teach us that will help us deal with our own times of "pressure," "pushback," from our fallen culture as we seek to further God's kingdom?

The answer to these questions is in verse 11 of our text where it says:

"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.'"

I see two things in this text that gave Paul courage and will do the same for us. The first is:

1.) The PRESENCE of Christ

We get courage to deal with the trials of social pressure from the knowledge that we are not alone. Jesus is with us. As Paul sat in that Antonia Fortress---no doubt deeply discouraged by the way his former colleagues had treated him, wondering if he had misunderstood the leading of the Holy Spirit---at that dark moment, Jesus appeared to him. And the presence of our Lord pushed away that darkness and encourage Paul.

- You know if Serena Williams teamed up with me, I think I could win a tennis doubles match. Of course, she would hit the ball most of the time.
- Let's say I get up a touch football game. Well, if Lamar Jackson showed up and agreed to be the quarterback for my team, I could score some touchdowns--assuming I could actually catch the ball.
- If Stephen Strasburg were the pitcher on my baseball team, we'd win some games.
- If Steph Curry were the coach of my Upward team, we might not go undefeated--but you can be sure we'd set some Upward game attendance records!

You get my point, knowing our all mighty, all knowing, completely loving JESUS is with us in difficult times, well, it makes all the difference. Understand, that night in the Antonia Fortress---the same Fortress where Jesus was held before His crucifixion---our Lord was physically with Paul. The Greek here tells us it wasn't a vision. It wasn't some trance, Jesus was physically there. This was a palpable revelation of what is true for all of us as Christians in a spiritual sense. Jesus is always with us and we experience it best in those times when we face pressure for doing His will.

Now, look at the verse again. What did Jesus say to Paul? Right! He said, ***"Take courage!"***

In the New Testament only Jesus uses these particular words. We find them five times in the Gospels and every time they bring the hearer comfort and COURAGE. Here they are.

- Jesus called to the bedridden paralytic, ***"Take courage son; your sins are forgiven."*** (Matthew 9:2)
- To the woman with the 12-year hemorrhage, our Lord said, ***"Take courage, daughter, your faith has healed you."*** (Matthew 9:22)
- To His frightened disciples as Jesus walked to them across the water He said. ***"Take courage! It is I. Do not be afraid."*** (Matthew 14:27)
- In the Upper Room on the night of His betrayal, He said, ***"Take courage, for I have overcome the world."*** (John 16:33).

Jesus' presence gave all these people courage and it did Paul as well. In fact, it gave him a courage he exhibited the rest of his life. When he finally got to Rome he wrote the Christians in Philippi and said, ***"In the Lord I have been encouraged to speak the Word of God for courageously and fearlessly."*** (Philippians 1:14)

Remember, believer, when you face pressure for sharing the Gospel, you are not ever alone. Jesus is with you!

This week I came across a story about a kid who was bullied at school because he pretended that the talk show host, Jay Leno, was his uncle. When Leno learned this, he tracked the kid down and drove him to school in his Lamborghini. Jay Leno said:

"I got a letter one day from a kid saying he was in trouble because he had told his friends that I was his uncle and that we would go driving around in my Lamborghini. And his friends all called him a big liar. He wanted to know if I could give him a ride to school one day in my Lamborghini Countach. It so intrigued me that I called the kid, of course speaking to his mother first, and said, why don't we do this next week? So, I drove out to where the kid lived and picked him up. Then we waited until the opportune time, when most of the buses are in front of the school and all the kids are hanging out and we pull up in front, the doors go up into the sky, the kid goes, 'Bye Uncle Jay!' And I go, 'OK, Billy, take care, I'll pick you up next week and we'll go driving.' And of course, all his friends' mouths are hanging open. It was hysterical."

I'm sure Leno's presence in that amazing car encouraged that boy. But it's nothing to the knowledge that Jesus is with us every step of our journey. As the old hymn puts it, *"Just when I need Him Jesus is near---just when I falter, just when I fear. Ready to help me. Ready to cheer---just when I need Him most."*

Say this to yourself:

"Jesus cares about MY problems."

"Jesus is WITH me."

Doesn't that feel good?! Doesn't that encourage you?! By the way, Jesus doesn't pretend to be our uncle. He actually IS our big brother.

Here's the second way Jesus' statement in verse 11 encouraged Paul and encourages us. It reminds us of:

2.) The PURPOSE of Christ

Our Lord said, ***"Take courage! As you have testified about Me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."***

We get courage from knowing Christ has a plan---that our pain is part of that plan---that good will come from it. And we see our Lord's plan in the way he took an unidentified nephew and placed him in just the right place at just the right time to learn about this plot. I mean, this nephew showing up was no coincidence. God was obviously in control, working out His purposes for Paul and that night Jesus reminded Paul of his part in those purposes of God. He said, ***"As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must ALSO testify in Rome."*** In other words, He was saying, *"Paul, this pressure you are experiencing is going to PUSH you to Rome itself---where you will share the Gospel. There's a reason for all this. It's pushing you where I've been leading you to go! Your ministry is not over Paul! This is just part of the plan."*

God uses us in the same way. He had a plan---a purpose---even in our pain. Tough times, pressure from this fallen world, NOTHING can stop the ministry God has call us to. There is always a PURPOSE in our pain. Isn't that encouraging?!

Ken Wales, is a TV and film producer originally from Salem, Indiana. He started his Hollywood career as an actor, but early in his career, Wales chose to turn down a significant role because it conflicted with his faith in Christ. While he was under contract with MGM, he was cast for a film starring Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, and Shirley MaClaine. At one point in the script, his character enticed a young woman to get drunk so he could take advantage of her.

Wales described his decision to decline the role:

"I had been speaking to a lot of church groups and conventions around the country on the subject of making right choices. So, when I read the script, I had to meet with the director, Vincente Minnelli, to tell him I couldn't do it. He told me, 'You'll do it, or you'll be out of your contract, you'll go on suspension, you'll have no salary for a year, and I'll see that you never work in this town again.' I told him he'd have to find someone else, and he literally threw me out of his office. I

was put on suspension. When the film came out the following year, I was speaking at a youth convention in Denver, to about 600 kids. We took a break at dinnertime, and everybody piled out to see a movie and to get pizza. As we started to walk across the street, there was a huge marquee with a sign for the movie I'd turned down. And I thought that was interesting. 'What if I'd done that film and the kids had gone in and seen it?'"

Wales went on to say that declining that role propelled him into his current role as a film and TV producer. Since then, he has produced a number of award-winning TV series and films.

When we go through trials, like Ken Wales, we can look back and see how God used them for His eternal purposes. The Lord's words greatly encouraged Paul, so much so that he would never again waver, in spite of all the perils yet to come in his life. The Lord's promise that he had more ministry yet to do helped Paul to keep on faithfully serving him and testifying about him confidently until the day God called Him home. Paul knew NOTHING could stop him from doing the good work that God had prepared in advance for him to do.

In June 1926, a young missionary in his mid-twenties, Raymond Edman fell ill from typhus fever in a mountain village in Ecuador. He was so sick that they put him on a stretcher and carried him to meet a train that would take him to Guayaquil, the port city of Ecuador. The doctor told Mrs. Edman that her husband's feet were already cold, that he would soon die. A fellow missionary ordered a black, cloth-covered coffin for the missionary's burial. Mrs. Edman had no black dress, so she dyed her wedding dress black. They even set the time and date for the funeral, July 4 at 3PM.

But Edmund survived.

Many years later in 1967 when he was serving as the fourth president of Wheaton College, Edman was addressing the student body in chapel when he suddenly collapsed and passed into the presence of Jesus. Dr. Edman had known 41 more years of fruitful service since the day he lay in that hospital in Guayaquil.

Listen, we are immortal until our work here is done. No servant of God dies a premature death. And we don't REALLY die, we just pass into the glory of Heaven where, as Paul reminds us in Romans 8:18, ***"Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."***

Let's pray.