

Take Courage Acts 22:22–30

The fog that night should have caused us to turn around. JoJo and I didn't do that, thinking that our judgment was completely the right move. We'd been on earth almost 17 years at that point! Surely, we could do little wrong! But as I went ahead of my friend, I didn't realize until I pulled into the nearest township gas station that he was no longer behind me. I waited and waited. No JoJo. As I backtracked into the hills of Obion County, TN, my heart sought escape from my throat as I came to a screeching halt near the upside-down hatch wagon that Jo had driven all through our teenage years. Though the full weight of the car had his arm pinned to the ground, I pestered him with questions of his condition, and we joked until the ambulance arrived. The fog that night should have deterred us. We couldn't see our way forward.

The ministry of the apostle Paul has hit some foggy patches. We're in the thicket of a string of trials in the life of the apostle to the nations. And it's this very calling to other ethnicities, disclosed at the close of last week's text, that places Paul in the hot water we'll feel steaming from our text today. And the temperatures won't abate amid the hostility. If our rebel-world could have its absolute way with Christ and the gospel, the voices that bear both would have been muted long ago. But contrary to its opinion of itself, the power of this world has always packaged more than it can deliver. The hymn states it right. The world abounds with thrones, but there is one higher than them all.

Speaking of thrones, the authorities and Paul have more encounters ahead in the providence of God. By now we've learned from Acts that God is not into indulging His people with ease. Paul persuades the Jerusalem tribune, commander of the military cohort in that region, to let him testify. And Paul doesn't waste words—he neither dishonors his hearers (Christian or not) nor does he dishonor Christ. In fact, with winsomeness Paul connects himself to his hearers and seeks to connect his hearers to the knowledge of the Righteous One. Of course, the chips will fall where they may, but Paul, a model for every age, is careful and determined to speak the truth in love—not to speak it with self-righteous disgust.

I think one of the key sentences last week from Matt's sermon was that everything Paul's done is explained by this pursuit of knowing Christ. Compared to that, all other pursuits are worthless waste heaps. Today, from our text, we'll hear a different note that harmonizes with Paul's pursuit of knowing Christ—Christ has not stopped pursuing Paul's good. Even when circumstances are stifled by pain and disappointment, God's work in His people isn't deterred. When others seek harm against Christ's followers, those same followers find His sweet, lingering presence out-flavoring the momentary bitterness.

I. The response to Paul's testimony

[22] Up to this word they listened to him. Again, the gasoline on the fire was not only that Paul declared the carpenter's son from Nazareth the resurrected Lord. The blaze exploded with intensity at the insinuation that divine revelation was calling Paul away from God's fruitful, sweet, Jew-laden vineyard and calling him towards the Gentile dogs. The hatred was so intense that the Jews **raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live."** An echo of the not-too-distant past, "**he should not be allowed to live**" and "*Crucify him!*" are identical twins unjustly belting out the same cry for blood. This last taste of his speech made this Jewish crowd gag.

Sometimes, we can say do the right things for spread of the truth of Christ and His gospel—21:26, “*Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple...*” Sometimes we can say all the right things in the way that connects the clearest, 22:2, “*And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet...*” Sometimes we can say all the right things in a way that might further endear others to what we’re saying, 22:1, 3, “*Brothers and fathers...zealous for God as all of you are this day.*”

And yet sometimes, no matter what we say and how we say it, we’re met with a wall of resistance. Moses, Hezekiah, and Stephen in Acts 7 called those that responded like this “*stiff-necked.*” The idea is one of a horse or a donkey that refuses to move, so their necks of pure muscle become almost immovable. Stubborn disobedience gets at the heart.¹ Instead of being awestruck by Paul’s 180-degree turnaround—a man once zealous with deadly aggression now seeking the good of others—they hunker down into their own Jewish-centric convictions to the point that they lay aside the weightier matters of the law—justice and mercy—and they do so to the point of bloodthirst.

The act of ***shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air*** in verse 23 speaks to an utter disgust over Paul’s words. One commentator suggests that these actions go beyond a fit of anger to a horror due to blasphemy.² For his careful efforts at winning sympathy, gaining trust, and making a positive mark for the gospel, this was the payoff for the apostle.

Some weeks back, at Shelby Farms, Mike Hodgetts and I had an interesting encounter. Among the throngs of people from multiple nations that are at Shelby Farms on any given weekend, we met Ana from Spain. Here’s what I journaled about that encounter, “Met Ana from Spain, quite resistant to the good news, said her faith was in science. Mike’s eyes grew larger than the soccer balls being kicked near us. Mike began to speak sensibly and biblically to her in this area of his expertise. As she kept pushing back, she finally stated that she had absolutely no trust or belief in the God of the Bible—even referencing scandals within the Catholic church. We challenged her hardness from John 5 by telling her that God’s wrath remained on all who reject Jesus but that His mercy is presently sufficient to forgive her of her sin. Her agitated voice responded—“I don’t want to talk anymore about this!” May God awaken her to His Word spoken over her today.”

We didn’t take half the pains that Paul took in our passage to win her over, but it started cordial. Yes, we should pray for people to respond in faith to the gospel, but we should also pray that when they don’t, that we’ll not be stunned. And we’ll not be stunned because we’ve studied long sections in Acts where God is saving here, and not here; where some repent, and some rebel; where some are filled with the Spirit, and some filled with indignation. Part of growing as disciples of Jesus is building a mindset where we don’t recoil at being rejected. Even with all the courage He can give, even having a golden mouth that speaks God’s richest glories with excellence, rejection, in some form, will probably be more normal than reception. The image of a narrow road, not a broad one, is informative here.

Paul’s efforts at displaying his Jewish-ness to win the Jews over, according to Luke, fall flat. But, to shuffle the metaphor, notice how Paul is thrown out of the fire and into the frying pan in verse 24, ***...the tribune ordered [Paul] to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this.*** The crowd wants him dead, but the tribune wants to get his head around the situation. To do that, precedent would direct him to interrogate Paul by flogging him.

¹ Cleon Rogers Jr. & Cleon Roger III, *Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*, 277.

² H.J. Cadbury as referenced by John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 349.

II. The response of Paul to the civil authorities—verse 25-26

The tribune wants immediate peace, and to have his desired end it was within Roman law to torture to silence or to death.³ Instead of engaging Paul properly concerning his identity, he meets Paul with aggression. A torturing without a trial probably persuaded many loud mouths to end their causes and silence their speeches. Flexing and politics have always gone hand in hand.

But Paul shrewdly makes a move before the whip snaps—he makes a half-baked appeal to his citizenship. I say half-baked because of how Paul mentions it to the centurion on guard. The question is akin to a hypothetical question in our own syntactical structures.⁴ In other words, “Are you really supposed to be doing this, centurion? Don’t you know the rules of engagement, sir?”

Why this approach? His prior resolve expressed to Agabus and the other disciples comes to mind from Acts 21:13, “*For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.*” An outright appeal might give the appearance of a departure from such resolve. But again, why insinuate at all? Maybe the words written a few years after to the church at Corinth were reflections of this soft appeal, “*And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.*” His desire to live and not lay down here was tied to his desire to see healthy, gospel-drenched churches. He would write that very thing to the church at Philippi 1-2 years prior, “*If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. [23] I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. [24] But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.*” What we can gather from Paul throughout is that he loves Christ, and he loves Christ’s people. Through his writings and through what we see in Acts, Paul gives us solid reasons to doubt that he’s trying to save his own neck.

For Paul, the heat is on. Yet, Paul’s has a Sun that’s guiding, and a Shield that’s protecting.⁵ Shouldn’t we trust, that when the heat is turned up because of our faith, when we’re in danger simply because of our priceless association with Jesus, that He will grant us what is needed in those moments? I think it’s sometimes difficult to believe that the same Spirit in Paul, in these brothers and sisters in Acts, lives inside each of us. I wouldn’t knock your hermeneutics if you tell me that the *one who sticks closer than a brother* in Proverbs 18:24 is none other than the Holy Spirit.⁶

You can imagine the whiplash of the centurion as he heard Paul intimate his Roman status. As the centurion conveys this to the tribune, the tribune needs to hear it for himself. Verse 27, ***So the tribune came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” And he said, “Yes.” [28] The tribune answered, “I bought this citizenship for a large sum.”*** If you think this is a political figure flexing once again, then you are right once again. You can almost hear the snobbery and distrust of Paul through the text. “You, wanted by these trouble-making Jews, a Roman citizen? Can’t be! You couldn’t possibly have the resources to buy what I’ve got.”

But the arrogance and posturing backfire as they sometimes do. Paul inadvertently serves up a surprising slice of humble pie when he stated, “***But I am a citizen by birth.***” Apparently Paul’s father possessed Roman citizenship, which afforded Paul the same status. The commander, whose name we learn from chapter 23, Claudius Lysius—he fears the news. Look at verse 29, ***So those who were about***

³ David Gooding, *True to Faith: The Acts of the Apostles*, 450.

⁴ Eckhard Schnabel, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts*, 922.

⁵ Psalm 84:11, “For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.”

⁶ Proverbs 18:24, “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.

Normally, during this time a status by birth was higher than an one acquired by wealth.⁷ Further, since judicial outcomes was more often than not contingent on one's station in life, word of Paul's citizenship raised the stakes for Claudius. Paul has higher citizenship status than this commander—and when the commander realizes it, he ***was afraid***. Fear can come in many forms. This fear was likely springing from the potential of losing his own elevated status in the empire. Botching Paul's case could potentially butcher Claudius' career.

The shrewdness of Paul's hypothetical question was heard loud and clear, but Paul's continued testimony will be met with rancor among the religious ranks. The question, whether intended or not, preserved Paul's health and perhaps his very life. And a voice louder and clearer than anyone else's would soon confirm the course of action Paul took.

III. The response of Paul's religious enemies

Look at verse 30 and following, ***But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them.*** Fearful to flog Paul, but not contented yet to let him off the legal hook, Claudius wants to hear from the actual accusers before he takes further action. He gives Paul the floor.

[1] And looking intently at the council, Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day." [2] And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. It's not hard to conclude that the high priest is offended by Paul after one sentence. Loving the praise of men, this high priest is accustomed to being addressed with more pageantry than Paul offers. ***Brothers*** probably offended his holy hubris, and the assertion that a good conscience before God was sufficient for Paul instead of this council of clout brought about this unnecessary strike. Paul then counters in verse 3 with a warning and a word picture, ***Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?"*** Paul issues a rebuke informed by the very Law that every high priest should have followed and guarded with utmost carefulness.⁸ The peanut section then joins the interactions in verse 4, ***Those who stood by said, "Would you revile God's high priest?"*** The "noble" religious guild pipes in to pile on. Then Paul answers in verse 5, ***"I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest..."*** David Garland asserts that this is not an admission of ignorance, but Paul is doubling down with an accusation.⁹ He's justly indignant. Why? Because a high priest should never conduct himself with such dishonor and blatant hypocrisy. If this is an exercise in sarcasm, Paul is sticking the landing, ***"I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"*** The unjust, undignified, first-grade reaction by the high priest rendered him unrecognizable as such, and Paul pulls no verbal punch. He turns this strike on his mouth as an occasion to pronounce judgment on Ananias, ***"God will strike you..."*** And in fact, an early church historian tells us that this same Ananias was the deadly target of rogue nationalists years later.¹⁰ But Ananias is not finished with Paul yet. Standing for the truth may

⁷ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 683.

⁸ Deuteronomy 1:17, Leviticus 19:15

⁹ David Garland, *Acts: Teach the Text*, 242.

¹⁰ Josephus, *War*, 441-42.

create a few friendships along the way, but it needs to be settled in us that it will at times secure an enemy or two, no matter how hot our devotion is to Christ or how clear our conscience is before God.¹¹

The testimony of Paul—rejected. The authority’s management of Paul’s case—mishandled. The high priest and the Jews opinion of Paul—distorted.

Now it’s time for the professional league of theologians to engage, but Paul engages them first. Verse 6, *Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.”* It may look like it on the surface, but this cry by Paul wasn’t based on some strategy to create division by a diversion.¹² Paul is bringing the central issue to the forefront—the resurrection—showing the Roman authorities that he’s not offended Roman law, but that this dispute between him and the Jews is simply in-house.¹³ There’s no treason here. If Paul can convince the presiding Roman authorities that these are nothing more than Jewish matters, perhaps he could be cleared for ministry takeoff, with Rome and Spain squarely back on his itinerary.

Would this centralizing of the issue work for the apostle? Not really. Look at verse 7, *And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. [8] For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.* A huge surprise to us all. Hotly contested theological debates are as old as the hills. *Verse 9, Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees’ party stood up and contended sharply, “We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?”* What a classic case of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”? *[10] And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.*

It's playoff hockey season. I know we're all riveted by hockey in Memphis, a place where 9 months out of the year ice can't exist outside for more than 10 minutes. But one appeal that hockey has to those who love it—fighting. We can't help ourselves—the basest parts of us love a fight.

And nothing less than this breaks out in our text—a theological tug-of-war ensues which turns dangerously physical for Paul.¹⁴ In fact, the worst falling out at a hockey game is probably tame compared to the description of verse 9 and 10. It was so serious that Claudius feared for Paul’s life. Once again, God rescues Paul from “godly” leaders by the hands of godless ones.

What a scene this is! Mismanagement, malice, mistreatment, and total mayhem. Paul sought to do the right things, say the right words, say those words seasoned with grace, and Paul never hears the gavel land with a thunder of exonerating justice. But what he does hear the next night after being ushered away from the pandemonium are words with balm in them. He hears words for an ever-needy people.

IV. The response of Paul’s Lord

¹¹ Acts 24:1

¹² Witherington III, 685.

¹³ I’m using “in-house” loosely!

¹⁴ Witherington III, 693.

[11] The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”

Post pandemonium, God meets Paul with the salve of grace. He draws near in reassurance that Paul’s desire to be used by Him in Rome would come to pass. He draws near because Paul doesn’t know the future. **Take courage** is a present imperative command which means have courage now and keep expressing courage habitually. Life is a thick fog; we’re never exactly sure what’s coming straight for us. We need courage, and with the command to have it, Jesus sent His Spirit to provide it. But Christ also draws near because He loves to compose His children when life’s currents reach threatening speeds. It’s worth considering that at many crisis points in Paul’s life, Luke records Jesus appearing on the scene.¹⁵ Though the method has changed because we have the Spirit, His compassion to meet us in our time of need will never change. They never fail.¹⁶

John Stott helpfully states the fruit of such a visitation to Paul in the barracks, “It would be hard to exaggerate the calm courage which this assurance must have brought to Paul during his remaining three trials, his two years’ imprisonment, and his hazardous voyage to Rome.”¹⁷ The reassurance by a Lord who drew near propelled Paul onward. The ministry of Christ’s nearness ensured that Paul could face the now in Jerusalem and be assured of the then in Rome.

In the end, the verdict of the Lord Jesus is the one that counts the most. Jesus doesn’t promise more deliverances. In fact, this is indeed the last of them for Paul. Jesus isn’t promising freedom from his oppressors. He stays in cuffs on the journey out of town. But God creating ease for His people is not His greatest priority. Cultivating the kind of dependence that sings in cuffs, that praises in prisons, that quiets the heart in life’s never-ending sounds, that does what is right no matter what wrong might meet loving obedience head on, that, when almost being torn to pieces, you keep seeking to know Him who has done all in Christ to make us whole.

Conclusion

It’s no stretch to connect some of Paul’s experiences with our own...mismanagement, malice, mistreatment, mayhem. And like him, in some ways, we’ve done all we know to do amid these situations. We’ve done the right things. We’ve said the right things. We’ve bathed our cheeks with tears of prayer. We’ve sought good counsel, desiring it to stick. You’ve done all and things have not worked out as you’ve expected. Why are life’s seas so rough at times?

And sometimes, we must admit, we fail to take the very medicine which we’re quick to administer to others. Is God truly at the helm, or are we? Do the words “God is sovereign” slide easily off the tongue but stumble to be seen in our lives?

We get caught in moments where this is how we see the details of life that are less than pleasant—as a dismantled watch scattered on the floor. But our God sees the fully functioning time piece—ticking in proper intervals and never outside of His good purposes for His people.

Let us hear the encouragement from Christ in verse 11. Paul couldn’t see the next thing. The big hand was here. The little hand was there. The numbers were jumbled. He could have despaired. He’s been

¹⁵ Acts 16:9, 18:9, 22:17, 27:23-24.

¹⁶ Lamentations 3:21–22, “*But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end.*”

¹⁷ Stott, 353.

threatened, accused, detained, and almost torn to pieces. His conclusion apart from verse 11 could have easily been, “There’s no way I’m leaving Jerusalem alive.”

In all that’s jumbled, busy, difficult to swallow; with unmet expectations and unexpected trials, hear the Lord Jesus through the Word today, “Courage, South Woods.” By the Spirit, He can cause us to stand in perseverance because He is standing by us as One who persevered the worst. Together we hear Him this morning, and the words “*Take courage.*” are meant to take us to a place of dependence and trust, no matter how thick the fog.