

Afflicted But Not Abandoned

Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 22:22-23:11 / August 23, 2026

Introduction:

One thing is for sure about the book of Acts, Luke doesn't gloss over suffering in the early church. Though writing to increase the faith of Theophilus, likely as someone with prominent social standing, Luke doesn't sugarcoat the true realities of following Jesus. He presents the suffering and challenges alongside the hope of Christ so all who trust in Jesus will put their hand to the plow and never look back. Last week, we saw Paul seize the opportunity to bear witness to Jesus rather than defending himself when accused of profaning the temple. Over the next several weeks, we'll see reactions to that witness and Paul remaining in Roman custody though often pronounced innocent. Each story is filled with suspense as Paul moves from difficulty to deliverance. Our passage today holds two similar vignettes that build to a central truth for these final chapters. Consider the first story and how,

Paul is Delivered through Inherited Citizenship

Recount Paul's steps to this point. In Miletus, he informed the Ephesian elders of the Spirit compelling him to go to Jerusalem. On the way, he continued forward after two, or possibly three predictions of persecution to happen there. Once in Jerusalem, he is encouraged to help men complete their Nazarite vow, and his own purification to appease the concerns of scrupulous Jewish Christians. Yet, while completing the vow, Paul is met immediately with persecution. Then, rather than defending himself, Paul shares of Christ's mercy towards him in hopes of drawing his accusers to salvation. Think on the lengths Paul has gone to save these people. Now, look at verses 22-24, "Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, 'Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.' And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the tribune ordered him 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." Upon mention of his commission to the Gentiles, the crowd is thrown into a tizzy, responding with words and actions that suggests Paul was blasphemous. What causes this level of response? Paul was placing Gentiles on equal footing with the Jews for receiving God's promised salvation, and pride in their heritage kept them from valuing the worship of God. God told their forefathers they would be a light to the Gentiles, and, through Abraham, the nations would be blessed. Yet, their pride kept them from appreciating what that meant in God's economy of grace. Wouldn't the extension of God's grace to Gentiles magnify His steadfast love and mercy? Pride kept them from seeing that, leading to consistent responses like this.

Family, see a warning for us. Is pride in our own heritage causing us to treat others with contempt, rather than extending God's mercy and grace to all people? For we are the light of the world. Note how the story progresses. Seeing their disdain, the tribune orders Paul to be examined by flogging to uncover the reason for it. Flogging was a Roman interrogation technique used against slaves and foreigners that often left the person crippled or dead. It's the punishment Jesus endured, and our story indicates Paul is experiencing a similar injustice. Though Paul does not stay silent. Continue in verses 25-29, "But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, 'Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?' When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, 'What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen.' So the tribune came and said to him, 'Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?' And he said, 'Yes.' The tribune answered, 'I bought this citizenship for a large sum.' Paul said, 'But I am a citizen by birth.' So those who were about 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." Paul's simple question about the treatment of an innocent Roman citizen and the exchange between about how they acquired citizenship highlights how prized it was. Paul's coming from birth, likely as a gift to Paul's relatives for valuable services rendered to Rome, emphasizes its importance. The Roman statesman and lawyer, Cicero, once said, "To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him an abomination, to slay him almost an act of murder" (Marcus Tullius Cicero, In Verrem 2.5.66). So, fear rightly overwhelms

everyone and the torture ceases because Roman citizens were not allowed to be examined under torture. This simple question and Paul's inherited citizenship delivered him from profound afflictions, but his troubles aren't over. Consider the next story and how,

Paul is Delivered through Intellectual Pride

The next vignette mirrors the previous story in several ways. Look at verse 30-23:5, "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. And looking intently at the council, Paul said, 'Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.' And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Then 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?' Those who stood by said, 'Would you revile God's high priest?' And Paul said, '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."'" Paul is once again under examination, now declaring his innocence before Jewish authorities, but the outcome is different as he is immediately struck for this. This scene can bring questions. First, was Paul's response appropriate? He appears to lash out, violating his own call in 1 Corinthians 4:12 to bless when reviled, and endure when persecuted. Yet, Ananias broke Jewish law in his unjust treatment of Paul and was well known for his poor character. Paul's words may even be prophetic as Ananias is later killed by Jewish zealots for his false dealings. Second, did Paul really not know Ananias was the high priest? In quoting Exodus 22:28, is he acknowledging an error? Or showing respect for the true God ordained role and suggesting if Ananias was acting accordingly, he wouldn't have spoken against him? We could try to answer these questions, but I think that distracts from the main point. Notice the flow of this exchange. Paul's statement is loaded. John Polhill comments, "Such a remark was itself something of a provocation. If Paul's life as a Christian left him in complete innocence before God, then the Sanhedrin members who did not share his commitment to Christ were the guilty parties" (John B Polhill, Acts, p. 468). Ananias, commanding Paul to be struck reveals his unjust character and guilt. And consider the contrast with the previous story. Paul signals his Jewish heritage, and they immediately treat him unjustly. However, the Gentiles immediately stopped their injustice when Paul indicated his Roman citizenship. The pride and guilt of the council is the focal point. Though possibly even lashing out at first, Paul shows restraint after it, something that cannot be said of the council. Continue in verses 6-10, "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.' And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. 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?' 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." Certainly, Paul shows wisdom in his comment, but let's not think he was only trying to cause this debate. One commentary says this the "shortest but centrally important speech of Paul" because it focuses on the central issue of the gospel (Paul Schubert, The Final Cycle of Speeches in the Book of Acts, p. 6). Paul's hope in the resurrection will be the primary focus of his trials before Roman authorities, repeating it in various veiled forms before his declaration in Acts 26:23, "that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles." Church, it is Paul's belief in Jesus' resurrection that separates him from his accusers. And the resurrection is the central claim the Sanhedrin must wrestle with. Because if Christ was raised, then the claims He made were true. And Paul's vision and commission were true.

Jesus' resurrection shows His claim to be the Messiah, providing atonement and salvation for all people through the cross was God's plan of salvation. This is an important declaration, not just a ruse before this council. And it is the declaration we all must wrestle with. Yet, it does distract from their disdain for Paul, as it stirs the Sadducees and Pharisees into a heated debate, because the Sadducees, occupying the majority in the council, did not believe in the resurrection. And note how the debate ended. The intellectual pride of the Pharisees moves them to actually declare Paul innocent and even acknowledge the possible validity of Paul's experience. Following this unlikely confession, a riot ensues and Paul is delivered by the tribune again. So, twice Paul is delivered by seemingly natural causes, his Roman citizenship and the councils heated theological debate. Yet we soon discover there is more than meets the eye. Consider the truth disclosed in verse 11,

Paul was Really Delivered through Jesus' Abiding Presence

How would Paul have felt, narrowly escaping significant harm twice after having hopes of being an effective witness in Jerusalem? Notice what happens in verse 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.'" At the end of all of this, Christ stands with him and says, "Take courage." This phrase sometimes translated "Take Heart," is used almost exclusively by Jesus in the New Testament to comfort those who believe and follow Him. Family, Paul is not miraculously freed from prison like Peter. Rather, he is comforted and told that as he bore witness to Christ in Jerusalem, he must also bear witness in Rome. Consider all this communicated. First, Paul fulfilled his calling in Jerusalem. Second, nothing will keep him from testifying in Rome. Paul had a similar experience in Acts 18:9-10, whereby vision, Jesus said, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people." This time, Christ stood beside him communicating the same thing. This reminds us Christ's presence had been with Paul through all of this, and His presence would bring Paul to testify in Rome. Next week, we'll see more confirmation of this. For today, think on the comfort Paul received from this. In each moment of these final chapters, Paul will become bolder in his witness, more confirmed in God's providence to get him to Rome and more resolved to bear witness to Jesus. Paul could have been demoralized when his witness in Jerusalem failed to be successful. He could have been trouble by his afflictions. But Christ, in that dark prison, stood beside him, reminding Paul of His abiding presence to give him strength and deliver him to fulfill his commission. What should we learn from these stories? First,

1) God Works through Wisdom and Providence

Paul is delivered by appealing to his citizenship and the contested theology of the resurrection. Both moments show incredible wisdom, but I don't want to pretend this was simply Paul's cleverness. In Luke 12:11-12, Jesus tells the disciples, "And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say." I am persuaded we are meant to see the Spirit guiding Paul in these stories. Beyond that, do you think it's a coincidence Paul was born with Roman citizenship? No. In God's providence, Paul was granted Roman citizenship because he would be appointed by Christ to bear witness in Rome. Paul's citizenship will carry the narrative forward. Family, sometimes we may not think God is at work, but as we follow Jesus, we can rest assured that God is at work, guiding us through His wisdom and providence. Second,

2) We May be Afflicted but We are Never Abandoned

Do you think Christ is absent in your afflictions? Never. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." Note his language. He was "afflicted in every way...perplexed...persecuted...struck down." "But not crushed." "But not driven to despair." "But not forsaken." "But not destroyed." Paul knew sorrows and affliction like few others. What carried him through? Christ always stood beside him.

I love Kent Hughes comment, “God’s servants are immortal until their work is done.” (Kent Hughes, Acts—The Church Afire, p. 307). This is the fuel for a life of service to our king. Christ Jesus doesn’t promise ease and comfort and following him often brings affliction and trouble. But, through it all, Christ stands with you and His presence will carry you to everlasting rewards. This is why Paul went on to say in 2 Corinthians 4:16–18, “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

Conclusion:

As the worship team comes for our time of response, consider abiding presence of Christ together with His wisdom and providence. If you are in a season of affliction, look beyond your circumstances to see how Christ has not abandoned you. If you need wisdom, trust the Spirits to guide you as you bear witness to Christ through your words and deeds. If you are wondering if following Christ is worth it, consider Paul’s example and look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. Set your hope on the resurrection from the dead. Know that Christ’s resurrection means His atoning work is complete and promises are real. Dwell on 1 Peter 1:3–9, “According to [God’s] great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” Don’t lose heart. Press on in faith to follow Jesus. Let’s pray as we prepare to respond.