



Paul – Taking His Stand

Acts 21-28

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When we think of taking a stand, we may think of biblical characters like David versus Goliath or Esther versus Haman. We may think of the political courage of Wilberforce standing against slavery in Britain or Mandela standing against apartheid in South Africa. For us, however, taking a stand may never be as dramatic. But you might be the only Christian at work or the only Christian on your street or the only Christian in your family or the only Christian at a dinner party. So at some point, all of us are going to face a moment requiring us to take a stand for our faith.¹ The question is, will we?

The book of Acts records the birth of the Church and the thirty-year period following the resurrection of Jesus. The book is filled with dramatic events and incredible stories of faith. One of those stories is about Paul taking his stand, telling his story, and declaring his faith in Jesus Christ.

At the end of his third missionary journey, Paul was determined to return to Jerusalem and report all the Lord had done. His friends realized they would never see him again. It was a somber goodbye.² They begged him not to go because it was too dangerous.³ Paul knew what awaited him in Jerusalem. “The Holy Spirit tells me that jail and suffering lie ahead” (Acts 20:23, NLT). And then he said, “My life is worth nothing to me unless I finish the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus – the work of telling others the good news about the wonderful grace of God” (Acts 20:24, NLT). They knelt and prayed with Paul. They embraced him and wept for him. Then Paul said, “Why all this weeping? You are breaking my heart! I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13, NLT).

Knowing what awaited him, Paul went anyway. Why? Because of Jesus. Because of the Gospel. He was convinced it was true. He was compelled to talk about it. And he was courageous to take a stand. And his life is a challenge and an inspiration to us. ***So when the moment comes, may we step up, speak up, and take a stand for Jesus Christ.***

TAKING HIS STAND BEFORE A JEWISH MOB

Word quickly spread of Paul’s arrival in Jerusalem. He was known as the famous Pharisee who once persecuted Christians and now had become one. To the Jewish mob, Paul had committed religious treason.

Some Jews saw him in the temple and stirred up a mob to attack him. They grabbed Paul and began yelling, “Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who preaches against our people everywhere and tells everybody to disobey the Jewish laws. He speaks against the Temple – and even defiles this holy place by bringing in Gentiles” (Acts 21:27-28, NLT).

“The whole city was rocked by these accusations, and a great riot followed. Paul was grabbed and dragged out of the Temple, and immediately the gates were closed behind him. As they were trying to kill him, word reached the commander of the Roman regiment that all

Jerusalem was in an uproar. He immediately called his soldiers and officers and ran down among the crowd. When the mob saw the commander and the troops coming, they stopped beating Paul. Then the commander arrested him and ordered him bound with two chains. He asked the crowd who he was and what he had done ... but he could not find the truth in all the uproar and confusion” (Acts 21:30-34, NLT).

The commander thought Paul was the Egyptian rebel who had recently led an uprising with 4,000 men. But Paul explained he was a Jew, and a Roman citizen, and asked to speak to the crowd. So the Roman commander arrested Paul to protect him from the mob.⁴ But the crowd kept shouting, “Kill him, kill him!” (Acts 21:36, NLT).

Acts 22 was Paul’s first defense.⁵ Paul proudly declared his Jewish heritage. He admitted his zeal in persecuting and killing Christians. But then, in a divine encounter, he met Jesus!⁶

And the response of the mob? They shouted for the soldiers to kill him. But the commander was afraid because Paul was a Roman citizen and it was against the law to harm him without a trial.⁷ So the commander ordered the Jewish council to deal with Paul.

TAKING HIS STAND BEFORE THE JEWISH COUNCIL

When Paul stood before the council, he faced the high priest Ananias.⁸ Ananias was the powerful leader of the Sanhedrin. It consisted of 70 men and was the highest court in the land dealing with both legal and religious issues. Comparing it to our American system, the Sanhedrin was the executive, legislative, and judicial branches all wrapped into one.

When Paul claimed he had a clear conscience, Ananias ordered someone to slap Paul in the mouth.⁹ To which Paul dared to say, “God will slap you, you corrupt hypocrite” (Acts 23:3, NLT). Paul was not intimidated by the stern faces of the council.

Then realizing some members of the high council were Sadducees and some were Pharisees, Paul declared, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, as were my ancestors! And I am on trial because my hope is in the resurrection of the dead!” (Acts 23:6, NLT). This divided the council, because the Pharisees believed in the resurrection, but the Sadducees did not. So, the council began arguing about theology, and the Pharisees defended Paul, saying he had done nothing wrong.¹⁰

Paul not only defended himself, he defended the Gospel, declaring his faith in the resurrection of Jesus.

The response of the Jewish council was dissension. The response of the crowd outside was a conspiracy of 40 men plotting to ambush and kill him.

But that night, the Lord appeared to Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome” (Acts 23:11, NIV). The Lord assured Paul that no matter what the accusations or the circumstances, he would make it to Rome.

TAKING HIS STAND BEFORE FELIX

The commander heard about the plot, so he surrounded Paul with 200 soldiers, 200 spearmen, and 70 mounted troops to make sure Paul arrived safely to face the Roman governor, Felix.¹¹

Felix was one of the most brutal and oppressive Roman governors who ruled Judea. He employed the Sicarii assassins to terrorize and subdue the Jewish population. He allowed them to burn villages, plunder, and murder. His tyranny later provoked the Jewish uprising in 66 AD.¹²

But the Romans were strict about following the law. So Felix summoned the high priest Ananias and his lawyer Tertullus to formally make their case against Paul. Tertullus accused Paul of being a troublemaker, stirring up riots, leading a cult, and desecrating the temple.¹³

Then Felix allowed Paul to defend himself. “I gladly present my defense before you. I arrived in Jerusalem twelve days ago to worship. My accusers never found me arguing with anyone in the Temple, nor stirring up a riot in any synagogue or on the streets of the city. These men cannot prove the things they accuse me of doing” (Acts 24:10-13, NLT). As Paul said before the Sanhedrin, he said to Felix, “I am on trial before you today because I believe in the resurrection of the dead!” (Acts 24:21, NLT).

Again, Paul not only defended himself against their false charges, he defended his faith in the resurrection of Jesus.

“A few days later Felix came back with his wife, Drusilla, who was Jewish. Sending for Paul, they listened as he told them about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the coming day of judgment, Felix became frightened” (Acts 24:24-25, NLT). Felix and his wife listened as Paul explained faith in Jesus. Yet when he talked about facing God’s judgment, Felix was afraid. Yet, Acts 24 goes on to say that Felix often sent for Paul and talked to him.¹⁴

TAKING HIS STAND BEFORE FESTUS

Two years went by with Paul in prison. Accused by the Jews, yet a Roman citizen, Felix didn’t know what to do with Paul. So Paul’s fate was left to the next Roman governor, Festus.¹⁵ Festus was more lenient with the Jewish population and sought to restore peace after the harsh, tumultuous years of Felix. But Paul was still an issue.

When Festus allowed Paul to defend himself, he insisted he was innocent and had not broken any Jewish law or Roman law.¹⁶ Then surprising Festus and the court, Paul appealed to Caesar.¹⁷ When facing the charge of a capital offense and facing the death penalty, a Roman citizen had the right to appeal to Caesar. Paul did so, knowing it would allow him to go to Rome.

TAKING HIS STAND BEFORE AGRIPPA

The first step in Paul’s appeal was to face King Agrippa, known as Herod Agrippa II.¹⁸

The dynasty of Herod had been brutal to Judea.¹⁹ When Jesus was born and rumor spread that a new king had been born, it was Herod the Great who ordered all the male babies in Bethlehem to be killed.²⁰ It was his son, Herod Antipas, who beheaded John the Baptist to please his daughter.²¹ And it was Herod's grandson, Herod Agrippa I, who ordered the execution of James.²² And now Paul faced the fourth generation of the wicked Herods, Herod Agrippa II.

"So the next day Agrippa and Bernice (his sister with whom he had an incestuous relationship) arrived at the auditorium with great pomp, accompanied by military officers and prominent men of the city. Festus ordered that Paul be brought in. Then Festus said, 'King Agrippa and all who are here, this is the man whose death is demanded by all the Jews, both here and in Jerusalem. But in my opinion he has done nothing deserving death. However, since he appealed his case to the emperor, I have decided to send him to Rome'" (Acts 25:23-25, NLT).

So Agrippa allowed Paul to speak.²³

He began by defending his Jewish heritage. From his childhood, he learned the Jewish teachings. As an adult, he became a Pharisee, a member of the most elite religious sect. Paul claimed his commitment to the Jewish law was without question.²⁴

Paul also admitted his zealous persecution of Christians.²⁵ "I used to do everything I could to oppose the very name of Jesus ... I sent many to prison ... I condemned them to death ... I had them punished in the synagogues to get them to curse Jesus. I violently opposed them and chased them down in foreign cities" (Acts 26:9-11, NLT). Paul admitted his zealous persecution of the Christians.

But then, Paul explained to Agrippa, he experienced a divine encounter and met Jesus!²⁶ "Your Majesty, as I was on the road (to Damascus), a light from heaven brighter than the sun shone down on me and my companions. We all fell down, and I heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is useless for you to fight against my will.' Then I asked, 'Who are you?' And the voice replied, 'I am Jesus!'" (Acts 26:13-15, NLT).

Then Paul explained how Jesus sent him to proclaim the message to both Jews and Gentiles. Then he explained the Gospel to Agrippa.²⁷ "All must repent of their sins and turn to God ... So I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen – that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles" (Acts 26:20-23, NIV).

Agrippa heard the Gospel. That God requires repentance from sin. That Jesus suffered and sacrificed His life to pay the penalty for that sin. And that the resurrection proves the Jesus is the Son of God. Repentance, crucifixion, resurrection.²⁸ Paul explained it all to King Agrippa.

But Agrippa said, "Do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian so quickly?" (Acts 26:28, NLT). To which Paul said, "Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am, except for these chains" (Acts 26:29, NLT).

Again, Paul not only defended himself, he defended his faith in Jesus Christ.

Then Agrippa discussed the matter with his counselors, and concluded, “This man has not done anything to deserve death or imprisonment ... He could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar” (Acts 26:31-32, NLT). So Agrippa had no choice but to send Paul to Rome.

TAKING HIS STAND BEFORE CAESAR

Acts 27-28 record Paul’s journey to Rome. The 2,000-mile voyage was perilous, and Paul was shipwrecked on the island of Malta. After many months, Paul finally reached Rome, fabulous Rome, the center of the world.²⁹

When some Jews wanted to meet him and find out why he had been accused, Paul said, “I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel,” hope found in Jesus, the risen Messiah (Acts 28:20, NAS).³⁰

Then Luke writes, “A large number of people came to Paul’s lodging. He explained and testified about the kingdom of God and tried to persuade them about Jesus from the Scriptures. Using the law of Moses and the books of the prophets, he spoke to them from morning until evening. Some were persuaded ... but others were not” (Acts 28:23-24, NLT).³¹ Some believed, and some did not.³² And a great dispute arose in the city over the Gospel Paul preached.

Then Luke ends the book of Acts, and the story of Paul, by writing, “For the next two years, Paul lived in Rome at his own expense. He welcomed all who visited him, boldly proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. And no one tried to stop him” (Acts 28:30-31, NLT).

Over a seven-year period, Paul took his stand. Before a Jewish mob and the Jewish council. Before Felix and Festus. He took his stand before King Agrippa, and in Rome, he stood before the emperor Nero.

Although the book of Acts does not record Paul standing before Nero, British theologian John Stott writes, “We are permitted to imagine that as Paul stood before Felix and Festus and Agrippa, he stood before Nero as well. In the world’s most prestigious court, to the world’s most prestigious person, he faithfully proclaimed Christ. Yes, Nero himself, heard the Gospel from the lips of the apostle Paul.”³³

Neither does the book of Acts record the execution and death of Paul, but history does.³⁴ Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Eusebius, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, were early historians who recorded the execution of Paul.

In 64 AD, the great fire in Rome destroyed 75% of the city. Nero falsely blamed Christians, and as punishment, Paul was beheaded.

Chuck Swindoll imagines that brutal moment. “His earthly end came swiftly and abruptly. Alone and without fear, Paul stared into the eyes of his executioners. Several held rods with which to beat him. One held a sharp ax that would soon end his life. Yet as Paul had said, to live was Christ, and to die was gain. No ax would rob him of his triumphant destiny. The soldiers stripped

him and tied him to a wooden pillar, bending over with his head on the chopping block. They beat him with rods for the last time. He groaned with pain as blood flowed down his back. And then, without hesitation, the executioner raised the ax, the blade gleaming in the sun, then swiftly it came down. The head of Paul rolled in the dust. In that brutal moment, the soul of the great apostle was immediately set free. His spirit soared into heaven. At last, at home with the Lord.”³⁵

TAKING YOUR STAND

This is not just a history lesson. This is the true story of great conviction and great courage.

Numerous times in his 13 New Testament letters, Paul expressed his conviction. He was convinced Jesus was the Son of God. He was compelled to talk about Him. And he was courageous to take a stand.

- “My life is worth nothing to me unless I finish the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus – the work of telling others the good news about the wonderful grace of God” (Acts 20:24, NLT).
- “I am obligated ... I am eager ... and I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation for everyone who believes” (Romans 1:14-16, NIV).
- “I do all things for the sake of the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:23, NAS).
- “I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced” (2 Timothy 1:12, NAS).
- “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21, NIV). For Paul, life was about faithfully serving Jesus and death was about finally seeing Jesus. So whether he lived or died, it was all about Jesus.
- “The time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith, and in the future there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day” (2 Timothy 4:6-8, NAS).

Like Paul, so many in the book of Acts were *convinced* that Jesus was the only hope for salvation. Paul was convinced, as were Peter and John, when they said, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name by which we can be saved” (Acts 4:12, NAS).

Like Paul, so many in the book of Acts were *compelled* to tell people about Jesus. Paul was compelled, as were Peter and John, when they said, “We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20, NAS).

Like Paul, so many in the book of Acts were *courageous* to take a stand. With a clear conscience, Paul said, “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27, ESV). “I did not shrink.”

Again, this is not just a history lesson. This is the true story of great conviction and great courage. It’s meant to be an inspiration. To inspire us to take our stand as well.³⁶

The book of Acts records the first martyrs of the faith – John the Baptist, Stephen, and James. Later on, Peter and Paul, and each of the apostles except John, would die for their faith. And from the 1st century to today, millions have died taking a stand for Jesus Christ.

But the issue for us today is not if we're willing to die for Jesus. Our circumstances are different. We worship in freedom and comfort. We don't live under threat. ***The issue for us is not if we are willing to die for Jesus, but if we are willing to live for Jesus.*** The challenge from our study of the book of Acts is, are we willing to live for Jesus?

To take a stand for Jesus Christ, you must be convinced the Gospel is true. You must be compelled to talk about it. And you must be courageous to take a stand. But again, most of us will never be forced to defend our faith in a courtroom. Doubtful any of us will be forced to defend our faith before a firing squad. For most of us, taking a stand will be in the cul-de-sac talking to a neighbor or on the golf course with a friend or with a loved one at a family gathering. Yet the question remains. When the moment comes, will you take your stand for Jesus Christ? Will you speak up or will you shrink back?

As the Lord said to Paul, He is saying to us. "Don't be afraid! Speak up! Don't be silent! For I am with you" (Acts 18:9-10, NLT).

The mission continues ... and it's still about Jesus. The mission continues ... and Jesus is calling each of us to be a part of the mission.

NOTES

¹ In 2008, Joe Kennedy began coaching football at Bremerton High School in Washington state. As an expression of his faith, Coach Kennedy would briefly kneel in prayer on the football field after each game. Athletes and students would often join him in prayer. Coach Kennedy did this for seven years without complaint. But in 2015, someone complained. The school district investigated the matter and concluded that the coach's actions were a "demonstrative religious activity" and violated school policy. Coach Kennedy was first suspended and later fired. His highly publicized case went from District Court to Circuit Court and eventually to the United States Supreme Court. Which in 2022, concluded that religious freedom allowed Coach Kennedy to pray, and he was reinstated by the school district. In 2012, the owner of a Colorado bakery declined to bake a wedding cake for a same-sex wedding. Jack Phillips was promptly sued. He also refused to bake a cake celebrating gender transition. Again, Phillips was sued. The suits charged him with violating Colorado's anti-discrimination laws. The case went from District Court to Circuit Court and eventually to the United States Supreme Court. Which in 2018, sided with Phillips, supporting his right to decline service if it violated his personal religious beliefs.

In 2019, Finnish physician and politician Paivi Rasanen was charged with hate speech for her religious stand on abortion, same-sex marriage, and other family issues. Rasanen was a conservative Christian and member of the Finnish Christian political party. Even though the charges were dismissed by a District Court, government prosecutors pressed the case through the Court of Appeals and to the Finnish Supreme Court. In 2016, Rasanen was found guilty.

These are just three examples of people who were forced to take a stand for their faith. And there are many more just like them. A pastor arrested for sharing the Gospel on the street. A teacher fired for refusing to use gender-preferred pronouns. And around the world, under much more serious circumstances, Christians are being persecuted for their faith.

² After his ministry in Ephesus, "Paul resolved in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, 'After I have been there, I must also see Rome'" (Acts 19:21, NAS).

³ See Acts 21:10-14. The prophet Agabus even took Paul's belt and wrapped it around his hands and feet, saying this is what would happen to him if he returned to Jerusalem.

⁴ See John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts*, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), pages 345, 349-350.

⁵ Luke uses the word "defense" four times in telling Paul's story. The Greek word is ἀπολογία (*apologia*). In this story, yes, Paul is defending himself as he faces five trials and inquiries. But in his heart, Paul is defending the Gospel. As he said in Philippians 1:16, "I am appointed for the defense of the gospel" (Philippians 1:16, NAS).

⁶ See Acts 22:3-8.

⁷ See Acts 22:24-29.

⁸ Ananias was the high priest from 48-59 AD. He ruled under the reigns of Claudius and Nero. He was greedy, wealthy, and cruel. Because he collaborated with the Romans, Ananias was killed in 66 AD during the Jewish revolt.

⁹ See Acts 23:1.

¹⁰ See Acts 23:6-9.

¹¹ See Acts 23:23-24.

¹² The role of a Roman governor was to keep peace. Because of his ruthless tyranny, Felix was both feared and hated by the Jews. His tyranny led to the Jewish uprising in 66 AD. Felix was recalled by Rome due the conflict and his lack of control over Judea.

¹³ See Acts 24:5-6.

¹⁴ See Acts 24:26.

¹⁵ See Acts 24:27.

¹⁶ Paul not only defended himself, he defended the Gospel. And when he talked the resurrection from the dead, Festus shouted, "Paul, you are insane!" But Paul replied, "I am not insane, Most Excellent Festus. What I am saying is the sober truth" (Acts 26:24-25, NLT).

¹⁷ See Acts 25:11.

¹⁸ Herod Agrippa II was born and raised in the royal court. The great-grandson of Herod the Great. He found favor with the Jews by learning their laws and the teaching. He observed some of their traditions to appease the Jews. Agrippa also engaged in an incestuous relationship with his sister Bernice, who was also married to two other men. In 66 AD, Agrippa sided with the Romans during the Jewish uprising. Although he found Paul innocent of all charges, he was obliged to send Paul to Rome since he appealed to Caesar.

¹⁹ See Stott, page 370.

²⁰ See Matthew 2:16.

²¹ See Matthew 14:3-11.

²² See Acts 12:1-2.

²³ See summary of Paul's defense in Stott, pages 371-376.

²⁴ See Acts 26:2-8.

²⁵ See Acts 26:9-11.

²⁶ See Acts 26:12-17.

²⁷ See Acts 26:18-23.

²⁸ Festus shouted, "You are out of your mind!" (Acts 26:24, NIV).

²⁹ See Stott's description of Rome, pages 383-384. Also see Stott, pages 401-402, as he writes, "What, then, is the major lesson we are intended to learn from Acts 27 and 28? It concerns the providence of God, who 'works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will' (Ephesians 1:11)."

³⁰ Paul mentioned his chains in Ephesians 6:20, Philippians 1:7, 1:13, Colossians 4:18.

³¹ To which Paul said of those Jews who would not believe, "The Holy Spirit was right when he said to your ancestors through Isaiah the prophet, 'Go and say to this people, When you hear what I say, you will not understand. When you see what I do, you will not comprehend. For the hearts of these people are hardened, and their ears cannot hear, and they have closed their eyes – so their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and let me heal them'" (Acts 28:25-27, NLT). The Lord's rebuke in Isaiah's day applied to those who refused to believe in Paul's day.

³² As in Athens, "some laughed ... and some believed" (Acts 17:32, 34).

³³ Stott, page 403.

³⁴ Clement (*1 Clement* 5:5-7, c. AD 95-96) describes Paul suffering for his faith and then being "set free from this world and transported up to the holy place, having become the greatest example of endurance." Other historical references to the martyrdom of Paul include – Ignatius (*Letter to the Ephesians* 12:2), Polycarp (*Letter to the Philippians* 9:1-2), Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.25.4), Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1), and Tertullian (*Scorpiace* 15:5-6).

³⁵ Paraphrase of pages 328-329. Charles R. Swindoll, *Paul – A Man of Grace and Grit* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2002).

³⁶ Stott, page 357, writes about Paul as "a model of Christian valour," and that "the source of his courage was his serene confidence in the truth ... Above all he knew that his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was with him and would keep his promise that he would bear witness, some day, somehow, in Rome."