



Courage and Commitment Born of Godly Conviction

Series: Acts -- Worldwide Witness to the Worth of Jesus Christ

Acts 21:1-16

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The day was April 14, 1521. Martin Luther, having been summoned by the Roman Catholic Church was on his way to the Diet of Worms where he was to be tried for religious crimes against the Roman Catholic Church. All of the books and pamphlets he had written, in which had defended the true gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and had also exposed the unbiblical nature and ungodliness of the pope and the Roman Catholic councils, had been forbidden to be sold and been seized to be burned. Now Luther was on his way to face the wrath of the Roman Catholic Church face to face, in the person of a Catholic Archbishop named Johann Eck and to be given the choice of recanting all that he had taught in his books and pamphlets or face death.

Fearful for his safety, one of Luther's friends and confidants named George Spalatin had sent to Luther a message telling him not to come to Worms lest he meet with the same fate of John Hus who had been burned at the stake because of the gospel some 100 years earlier. Spalatin was not alone in his urgings for Luther to flee this meeting in Worms and to hide himself. Luther, though was undeterred and he responded to the concerns of his friends by saying: "Though Hus was burned, the truth was not burned, and Christ still lives." To Spalatin specifically, Luther exclaimed, "I shall go to Worms, though there were as many devils as tiles on the roofs."

On April 17th, Luther's trial began before the four Catholic monarchs of the Holy Roman Empire and the representatives of the Catholic church. He was being asked to disavow and deny all that he had written regarding the gospel or face the possibility of a verdict of death. The seriousness of the situation gripped Luther's heart and he requested that he be given the night to pray and to meditate. It was granted and Luther prayed. "Almighty, eternal God, what a contemptible thing this world is! Yet how it causes men to gape and stare at it! How small and slight is the trust of men in God. How frail and sensitive is the flesh of men, and the devil so

powerful and active through his apostles and the 'wise' of the world! How soon men become disheartened and hurry on, running the common cause, the broad way to hell, where the godless belong! Their gazes fixed on what is splendid and powerful, great, and mighty! If I too were to turn my eyes to such things, I would be undone! The verdict would already have been passed against me, and the bell that is to toll my doom would already have been cast. O God, O God, O Thou my God, my God, help me against the reason and wisdom of all the world! Do this! Thou must do it, Thou alone, for this cause is not mine, but Thine! For myself, I have no business here with these great lords of the world! Indeed, I too desire to enjoy days of peace and quiet and to be undisturbed. But Thine, O Lord, is this cause, and it is righteous and of eternal importance! Stand by me, Thou faithful eternal God. I rely on no man! Futile and vain is all; lame and halting all that is carnal and smacks of the flesh. God, O God, dost Thou not hear me, my God? Art Thou dead? Nay, Thou canst not die! Thou art merely hiding Thyself. Hast Thou chosen me for this task? I ask Thee!

I am sure Thou hast. Were so, let it be, then. Thy will be done. For never in my life did I intend to oppose such great lords. Never had I resolved to do this! O God, stand by me in the Name of Thy dear Son, Jesus Christ, Who shall be my protector and defender, yea, my mighty fortress, through the might and the strengthening of Thy Holy Spirit. Lord, where tarriest Thou? O Thou my God, where art Thou? Come, O come! I am ready to lay down my life for this cause, meek as a lamb, for the cause is righteous and it is Thine. I will not separate myself from Thee forever. Be that decision made, in Thy Name! The world must leave my conscience unconquered even though it were full of devils and though my body, the work and creation of Thy hands, should be utterly ruined! But Thy Word and Spirit are a good compensation to me, and after all, only the body is concerned. The soul is Thine, and belongs to Thee, and willingly it will remain eternally. Amen. God help me. Amen."

On the following day, April 18, 1521, Martin Luther stood before the power of the Catholic Church in the person of Johann Eck, chosen by the Pope to ensnare Luther once and for all. He spoke to Luther saying, "Martin, how can you assume that you are the only one to understand the sense of Scripture? Would you put your judgment above that of so many famous men and claim that you know more than they all?

You have no right to call into question the most holy orthodox faith, instituted by Christ the perfect law-giver, proclaimed throughout the world by the apostles, sealed by the red blood of the martyrs, confirmed by the sacred councils, defined by the Church in which all our fathers believed until death and gave to us as an inheritance, and which now we are forbidden by the pope and the emperor to discuss lest there be no end of debate. I ask you, Martin—answer

candidly and without horns—do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors which they contain?”

In response, in the face of a verdict of heresy punishable by death, Luther gave his famous reply, “Since then Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God.

I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us. On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me.

Amen.”

With that, he left the assembly (a "safe conduct" pass had previously been arranged), to ride back to Wittenberg. The Diet of Worms, meanwhile, convicted Luther, and put him and his followers under a ban--which meant they should be arrested and handed over to Roman Catholic authorities as heretics to be burned at the stake.

How did Martin Luther do something like this, standing alone, risking his life for the sake of God’s truth? There is only one answer – courage. Courage and commitment to Christ born of godly conviction. Martin Luther was willing to suffer, willing to die even, for the sake of Jesus Christ, for the sake of His gospel, for the sake of godly conviction.

Let me ask you, for whom or for what would you be willing to suffer, even to die? If we take it seriously, this is an extremely sobering question. And here is why that is. What you are willing to die for will define how you live. For whom or for what would I be willing to suffer, maybe even die. What would you answer to that? I, mean, really? If we are truly honest, not cavalier with our words, not boastful, not giving the “right” answer, but deeply within our souls honest, I would say that for most of us that list would be extremely short. For some, that list would be empty. Is there anyone or anything that you truly love more than your own life?

Paul gives his answer in the text that we are looking at this morning. He says: “For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” (Acts 21:13, ESV) This was not empty boasting or grandstanding by Paul. He meant it. His actions bore out the truth of his words. His was courage and commitment born of godly conviction. Paul was a man of courage because he was gripped by the godly conviction that he must go to Jerusalem, despite the warnings, despite the danger and no matter the cost.

Back in Acts 20:22-25, as Paul was admonishing and then taking his leave of the Ephesian elders, he said to them: “And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again.” (Acts 20:22–25, ESV) Paul was well aware of what awaited him in his quest to go to Jerusalem. He didn’t know all of the specific details, but he knew what the Holy Spirit had revealed to his heart – that imprisonment and hardship because of Christ and because of the gospel would be his lot. Paul was not concerned for himself, not chiefly. His only concern was to finish the course and the ministry, the calling and commands that he had received from the Lord Jesus Christ and to go on testifying to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is important for us to remember the context for Paul’s travelling to Jerusalem that frames this text. Paul was on a mission, a mission to deliver relief funds from the Gentile churches to the church in Jerusalem that was suffering greatly due to the great persecution that church was enduring for its faithfulness to Christ in the capital of dead Judaism. Not only did the Jerusalem church need relief funds from the Gentile churches to survive, but Paul also know that this offering was a perfect way to solidify the unity and the bond of love between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. But that is not all. Paul was also constrained by the driving desire to refresh and renew the Jerusalem church by ministering the grace of God to them by preaching and teaching the Word of God and he had the Spirit-driven desire to preach the gospel to his lost Jewish kinsmen during Pentecost.

The question, of course, is where did this deeply held conviction and commitment come from? It was not -- and let me say this again -- it was not simply a “gut feeling” or some empty conviction minus a foundation of truth that motivated Paul. Paul did not have a habit of just

following his whims. Paul was surrendered to the leading of the Holy Spirit. We see that clearly in the way that he subjects his own desires to the leadership of the Holy Spirit in Acts 16. Like we read a moment ago from chapter 20 and verse 22, Paul was constrained by the Spirit of God to go to Jerusalem. Paul did not follow his own wisdom. And that is important for us to establish.

How is it that Paul came to the conviction and commitment that this was the will of God and just as important, how is it that we come to a conviction and commitment as to what is the will of God for us? How do we discern what is God's will in things that are not explicitly defined in Scripture? Let me give you some guidelines to consider –some things that characterized Paul. First, immerse yourself in the Word of God and do nothing that is explicitly contrary to its teaching, its context, or its spirit. The psalmist writes “With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. Blessed are you, O Lord; teach me your statutes! With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.” (Psalm 119:10–16, ESV) Second, spend much time with communion with God in prayer. Again in Psalm 143 we read, “Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love, for in you I trust. Make me know the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.” (Psalm 143:8, ESV) Third, conform your life to the clear teaching of Scripture. The Psalmist writes in Psalm 86: “Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name.” (Psalm 86:11, ESV) Fourth, put remaining sin in you to death. “Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.” (Psalm 19:13, ESV) Fifth, check the motives of your heart. “Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain! Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways.” (Psalm 119:36–37, ESV) Sixth, be willing to die to yourself and to your own desires. The psalmist writes in Psalm 40: “I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.” (Psalm 40:8, ESV) Seventh, be sure that what you do you can honestly say is all to the glory of God. That's how true convictions and true commitment regarding the will of God are formed. We all know people that will claim the “leading of the Spirit” or that “God told them to do something” as a way of validating what is really only their own desire of their sinful heart without meeting these criteria at all. But this is the stuff of true biblical conviction.

All these things were the practice of the Apostle Paul. That is the testimony of the book of Acts and of his epistles. He read Scripture, prayed and sought to live his life, moment by moment, in

the light of God's commandments. That is the only way to live for the glory of God. He knew in his soul that God was calling him to go to Jerusalem to testify to the gospel of the grace of God, both in action and in word. And the conviction that drove Paul to be courageous in the face of suffering and even of death is the foundation of what we are looking at this morning. That's a long introduction this morning, but the exposition of this text won't be nearly as long. Let's look at it.

"And when we had parted from them and set sail, – when they had parted, and the word used here is a word used to describe a tearing of themselves away, it was hard to leave, they got on a smaller ship to make their way to Patara-- we came by a straight course to Cos, -- Cos was home to the most prestigious medical school in ancient world, founded by none other than Hippocrates from whom we get the Hippocratic Oath that doctors take -- and the next day to Rhodes, -- home of the one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Colossus of Rhodes, a 98 foot statue of the Greek titan-god of the sun Helios, by Paul's time made ruins by an earthquake-- and from there to Patara.

And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, – a larger ocean going ship capable of crossing the Mediterranean Sea -- we went aboard and set sail. When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo. And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem." (Acts 21:1–4, ESV) Coming to Tyre, Paul and his group of merry men sought out the company and fellowship of believers who lived there as they waited for their ship to be unloaded and then loaded again with goods for the final leg of the trip to Caesarea.

As they were waiting there in Tyre, something interesting happened. Among those who were in the Tyrian Church were some with the gift of prophecy and "through the Spirit" or to put it another way, as a result of the revelation by Holy Spirit to them of the imprisonment and afflictions that awaited Paul in Jerusalem, they counseled him not to go there. Now some commentators will immediately say that Paul was being disobedient to the Holy Spirit in not listening to the overtures of the Christians in Tyre to not go to Jerusalem, but that is not what is being said here. The text does not say that they were commanding Paul to stay by the unction and direction of the Holy Spirit, only that by the illumination of the Holy Spirit these folks were telling him not to go. As I said before, Paul was not in the habit of ignoring the leading of the Holy Spirit. In fact, as Acts 19:21 tells us, "Paul resolved in the Spirit" to go to Jerusalem. It was,

as we saw in Acts 20:22, he was “constrained by the Spirit” to go to Jerusalem and in verse 24 that this was part of the “course and the ministry that (he had) received from the Lord Jesus.” So something else is going on here. What is it?

I think it is as simple as this. These well-meaning brothers and sisters had the Holy Spirit given knowledge of what would happen to Paul if he went to Jerusalem, but they lacked the wisdom to see God’s purpose in it all. They lacked the bigger picture, lacked the divine view that Paul had. You can understand their concern and trepidation, right? Paul, to their way of thinking, was far too valuable to the early church to risk his life going to Jerusalem. There was so much more that Paul could do. There was northern Europe, Persia, Africa to be conquered with the gospel. The churches that Paul already established surely needed him to remain, needed his strong and steady hand to guide them. The church, they thought, could not survive or, at least, could not thrive without Paul and so their desire to spare him from suffering or even death came from a well-meaning heart and love for him. He should let someone else go.

But here’s the thing. No one could be faithful to Paul’s calling for him. No one could walk Paul’s walk with Christ in his place. He had to do this. This was his divine destiny and not even the well-meaning and loving concerns of his friends could dissuade him from doing what he knew in his heart was right. In fact, rather than diminish Paul’s ministry, his going to Jerusalem and then eventually to Rome would result in his writing the letters to the Ephesians, the Colossians, the Philippians, both of his letters to Timothy and in his preaching before the Sanhedrin, Felix, and Festus. These beloved brothers made the mistake of thinking that they knew God’s will for Paul better than Paul himself.

Despite their pleading, Luke tells us: “When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.” (Acts 21:5–6, ESV) Though we have no record of Paul ever having been to Tyre previously, after only seven days, the hearts of the disciples there were so knit to Paul’s, they loved him so dearly, that they all – women and children too – went with him from the city to beach to see him off. There they prayed and beseeched the Lord together, Paul for the church and the church for Paul, before Paul and his companions boarded the ship bound for the port of Jerusalem, Caesarea.

“When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea.” (Acts 21:7–10, ESV) When they came to Caesarea, they had some time before they needed to go up to Jerusalem for Pentecost and so they spent the time with Phillip. You remember Phillip. He was one of the first group of deacons chosen to serve the tables in Acts 6. He was also an evangelist – the man who took the gospel first to the Samaritans, the same man who preached the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch and then was taken by the Holy Spirit to Azotus where he preached the gospel some more before coming to Caesarea. That was some 20 years before. In the meantime, he had settled down and gotten married and started a family.

Luke mentions that, among Philip’s children, he had four daughters, all of them unmarried, who had been given the gift of prophecy. Nothing else is mentioned of their ministry, just that they prophesied. Interestingly enough, however, they are not the source of the prophecy that was to be made about Paul here in Caesarea. Instead, we see another familiar face, that of Agabus who in Acts 11 had foretold the great famine that would occur in the time of Claudius Caesar. He comes this time with another prophecy, this time about Paul.

“And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’ ” When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.” (Acts 21:11–12, ESV) In much the same vein as the prophets in the OT – like Ahijah the Shilonite tore his new cloak to show the way that Solomon’s kingdom would be divided in 1 Kings 11, or like Isaiah who went around naked and barefoot to show how the Egyptians would be led into captivity by the Assyrians in Isaiah 20, or like Ezekiel who mimicked the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem by laying siege himself to a replica he created of the city in Ezekiel 4 – Agabus acted out and illustrated the prophecy that he had been given by the Holy Spirit of what awaited Paul in Jerusalem, binding himself with Paul’s own belt.

It was shocking and it hit Paul’s friends in the heart. They pled with him not to go to Jerusalem, fearing the worst. Of course their love for Paul motivates them to try to convince him to avoid

going to Jerusalem. But, just as in Tyre, there is something more behind their pleas and that something more is made evident by the way that Paul responds to their urgings.

“Then Paul answered, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”” (Acts 21:13, ESV) Their pleading with Paul, their weeping and crying, was taking a toll on his heart. It was hard for him to hear. They were sincere in their love for Paul, oh so sincere, but they were missing the divine perspective.

Their concerns and grief are rooted in the misconception that suffering, hardship, trial, and death are to be avoided at all costs and can never be God’s will for one of His children. Based on that line of reasoning, Jesus should never have gone to Jerusalem because only trial, suffering and death awaited Him there and if Jesus followed that logic, we would never be saved. In fact, that is what Peter said to Christ in Matthew 16. Remember it? Immediately after his great confession regarding Jesus, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” we read this: “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”” (Matthew 16:21–23, ESV) Christ was filled with courage and commitment to the mission of the cross, born of His conviction that this was the will of His Father for the redemption of sinners and it was the fallen mind, the sinful mind, the mind set only on the things of man – comfort, ease, security, self-protection that thought otherwise.

It’s true, beloved, it would be nice to go through life without any suffering, without any trials, without any testing of our faithfulness to Christ. But that is not how God does things. That does not mean that God is defeated or that suffering has the last word. Instead, it means that God is able to use even our suffering, just as He used the suffering and death of Christ for our eternal good, to carry out and fulfill his purposes in the world. The world is a hard place. It does not receive the gospel gladly. It does not like being told that Jesus is Lord. Sometimes, the most convincing witness we can bear to Jesus is our own willingness to follow him, even to the cross. If we were to run away from our convictions and commitment to Christ in the face of hardship, we would betray our Lord and reveal our faithlessness.

Paul knew he would suffer in Jerusalem. God revealed this to him so that he would be prepared for what lay ahead, not so that he could avoid it. Paul understood this and was willing not only to suffer in Jerusalem, but if need be, to die for the name of the Lord Jesus, who died for him. Paul was not suicidal. What he was saying was that he existed for Christ – to glorify Him – and if he should live, he would do everything he could to make Jesus and His Gospel known. But, if he should die – for the sake of Jesus and His Gospel – he was not only ready, he was joyful to do so because it would bring him into glory with Jesus – Who was his life and hope and future. For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.

“And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, “Let the will of the Lord be done.”” (Acts 21:14, ESV) What else could the disciples say? What else could they do? Paul was both courageous and committed to this course of action, knowing with certainty that it was the will of God for him to bear witness to Christ regardless of the cost, and knowing in his soul that for Christ, he was willing to suffer and to die.

How could Paul do this? Because of his deep convictions, rooted in the truth and reality of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was convinced in His soul that without salvation in Jesus Alone, his lot was eternal suffering and spiritual death in hell. He was convinced of what Jesus had done for Him to save Him from the wrath of God against his sin. Jesus laid aside His rights as God and left His eternal throne, becoming a man, living righteously according to God’s Law. He gave Himself to suffer horrifically and to die at the hands of sinful men, suffering the infinite punishment that Paul rightfully deserved – but not only for Paul but for each one of us who would believe in Him, and then rose from dead for Paul’s forgiveness and justification ascending back to His Throne, giving to Paul His very own righteousness. Convinced of all that Christ had done for Him, Paul was a grateful man – eternally grateful for Christ and for God rescuing him from the mire of his sin and giving to him salvation. Like he wrote to Timothy near the end of his life saying: “and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.” (1 Timothy 1:14–16, ESV)

Paul was convinced of the worthlessness of his days of self-righteousness and arrogance as a Pharisee and a persecutor of the Church. And he was convinced of the amazing love that changed him. Paul was committed to Christ – no matter what he had to endure for the Gospel. So, if God would be glorified, if the Gospel would be advanced, if people would believe in Jesus through Paul's going to Jerusalem, then Paul was ready to suffer and even to die.

And here is what we must ask ourselves in light of this -- Are you so convinced as Paul? Am I? One thing is certain, this kind of courage and commitment is rare in our day, just as it was in Paul's or in Luther's. I know the fickleness of my own heart, as I am sure you do your own. One day I am ready to take on the world for Christ, to suffer whatever may come that the name of my Lord be exalted and magnified, that the gospel be shouted from the rooftops and the glory of the Lord fill the earth. And the next, I'm longing for ease, for rest, for a moment of peace even if I have to trade my conviction in Christ to get it. That is the way that it is too often in our lives and that is why we need the grace of God, the sweet truth of His word, the constant reminder that we are not our own but that we have been bought with a price, the constant reminder that Jesus is forever faithful and always with us, that He has gone before us, that we can do all things and endure all things with joy secure in the love of Him who strengthens us, knowing that the way of Christ is the way of the cross, the blessed ministry of the Holy Spirit to overcome our fleshly fickleness and fill our souls with courage and commitment born of conviction that Christ is Lord and we are His people and must be faithful to Him.

And so I end this morning with the question I asked at the first: for whom or for what would you be willing to suffer, even to die? Not just in one great blaze of glory, but every day. For whom or for what would I be willing to lay down my life, my rights, my desires, my plans, my self-preservation, my ease, my comfort, my life? May God grant us all the grace to be able to say with Paul: For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die... for the name of the Lord Jesus.

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