



Jesus Will Neither Leave Nor Forsake His Own

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

Acts 22:30-23:11

September 28, 2014

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Last week with Paul in the Book of Acts was a rollercoaster ride that rivals any in any amusement park in the world. We saw Paul go through amazing highs and astonishing lows in a very short period of time. Let's just recap what we saw last week in the story. You remember that Paul came to Jerusalem, confident and excited, bearing with him a sacrificial gift for the relief of the Jerusalem church, gathered from among the Gentile churches in Asia and in Macedonia. He was thrilled in the hope that presenting this gift to the Jewish church would solidify the relationship between the Jewish and Gentile believers, extinguishing any remaining suspicion and tension between them, and establishing a firm foundation of mutual love and trust. He was also excited about the possibility of teaching and preaching and witnessing to the gospel of the grace of Jesus Christ, to both encourage the Jewish church and to win his unbelieving Jewish kinsmen to faith in Christ.

Filled with excitement and flush with possibilities, however, Paul was immediately brought low. Paul joyfully came to Jerusalem with his entourage only to be met with coldness and suspicion. The sacrificial gift was disregarded and Paul was informed that the professing Jewish converts, who James indicated were zealous for the Law and Jewish customs but not for Christ, thought Paul untrustworthy. A whispering campaign was being waged against him in the church and James and the other elders had done nothing about it. In fact, as I mentioned, if we would believe Derek Thomas and I do, James and the other elders had fallen into this suspicion about Paul as well. Despite his faithfulness to Christ, his evident love for the Jerusalem church, and his blameless character, Paul was simply not trusted. He wasn't Jewish enough for their tastes, having been falsely accused of speaking against the Law of Moses and denouncing Jewish customs. It just wasn't true. He taught the gospel truth – that all of the sacrifices of the OT, all the pictures the sacrificial offerings represented had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, that Jesus Christ was the final, the supreme sacrifice for sin and the only way of atonement and peace with God, that sin was fully and finally dealt with only in Christ for all who would repent of their sins and trust in Christ for salvation and not by works of the law. But, and this is big, Paul did

not set aside the moral law of God any more than Christ did. Nor did he have anything to say about Jewish customs.

Stunned by the Jewish church's lack of gratitude, taken aback by the lack of love and grace expressed to him by the Jewish church, Paul sank even further, agreeing to take part in some cockamamie scheme, cooked up by James and the elders, to demonstrate his Jewish loyalty by taking part in a ritual of purification and paying for the sacrifices of completion for some guys who had taken a Nazarite vow in the church. And in agreeing to do that, the Apostle of Christ, the Apostle of grace, compromised and confused crucial gospel truth, in essence calling into question the sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ to thoroughly cleanse all repentant sinners and make them acceptable to God, able to approach Him in worship because of the justification found in Christ alone.

Paul made a grave mistake, but one that God the Father would not allow him to continue in. The greatest proof that Paul was wrong was that God, who is sovereign over the details of our lives, intervened before Paul was able to offer his purification sacrifice in the temple. He ordained a riot in Jerusalem, using the sin of unbelieving men to accomplish his purpose of bringing Paul to his senses. Through this uprising and a beating at the hands of sinful men, Paul got some sense knocked back into him and he confused and clouded the gospel no longer.

From the lowest of lows, Paul was then raised by the grace of God to the highest of highs, to give unequivocal testimony to this truth: It was not the law that saves sinners, not Jewishness that saves, not any human attempts at righteousness and goodness that saves, no rituals or vows that save, no offering of bulls and goats that save, but the blood of Jesus Christ shed for the forgiveness of sins and believed in for salvation. Paul never stands taller than he does in this moment. In the face of scorn and hatred, we saw Paul faithfully testifying to the worth of Christ. Again, Paul is at his spiritual best, but what happens?

The crowd goes nuts, and not in a good way. They rise up to beat Paul again, desiring to put him to death. The Roman tribune and the men under his authority had to intervene and carry Paul away to the Roman barracks at the Fortress Antonia in Jerusalem to save his life. Still in the dark and trying to figure out the best way to get the truth from Paul about why the Jews were wanting to spill his blood, the Roman tribune decided to spill some of Paul's blood too,

ordering him to be flogged. It is then that Paul appeals to his Roman citizenship and in essence requests a trial and that brings us to the text today. Pick it up with me in chapter 22 and verse 30.

“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.” (Acts 22:30, ESV) The tribune, a guy that we learn is named Claudius Lysias, wants to get to the bottom of this. He is in charge of enforcing the peace of Jerusalem and he has no idea what is going on. Remember that Paul had spoken all that he said from the steps of the Fortress in Hebrew, probably the Aramaic dialect. The Romans didn’t know that language. Moreover, remember that when the Roman soldiers came to quell the disturbance, the Jews were all shouting one thing or another about Paul -- there was no clear charge. This is a big mess. So in order to understand all that Paul was being charged with, it is Claudius, not the Sanhedrin, but Claudius who calls for the council to meet and fully explain the charges and to examine Paul.

What Luke gives to us in the verses that follow is sort of a compressed narrative, a summary of what took place, but he is very purposeful with his words in order to convey the atmosphere and sense of what is going on. Let’s look at it.

“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.” (Acts 23:1–2, ESV) We don’t know if any of the Sanhedrin spoke or if any charges were read against Paul, Luke doesn’t tell us. But he does tell us about the demeanor and bearing of Paul. What does it mean that he was “looking intently at the council?” The idea is that he looked at them “eyeball to eyeball,” with a strong sense of conviction, with confidence in his integrity before God, with confidence that God was with him, and with the determination not to be frightened or intimidated by these men.

He addresses them as peers and not in the customary way that they were used to being addressed – as “rulers and elders of the people” – Paul makes this bold assertion, “I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.” Now there are two ways to look at this statement. It’s a statement with a couple of layers to it. First, Paul is clearly stating that he

is guiltless regarding the charge that he had disregarded or disrespected the law of Moses or spoken against Jewish customs. But there is more to what he saying than that and it is that deeper meaning that provokes the high priest, Ananias, to such a visceral and violent response.

Paul was claiming what none of these men could claim – a clean conscience before God. Now, look, Paul was not claiming to be sinless. This was a man that was under no misconceptions regarding his sinfulness or regarding his past failures as one who persecuted the church. His past sins were indefensible, despite the fact that he did them zealously believing that he was right. No, the essence of what Paul was saying here was this. “I can stand before you as a man whose conscience is clear before the Lord, despite my sins.” “I live in the light of eternity with a blameless conscience.”

Now listen, the Sanhedrin could not say that, not even the most devout of them. The sacrificial system, the continual sacrifices, the rituals, the aspects of worship in the Temple always reminded the worshippers of their guilt before the Lord. There was no avoiding it. Everywhere one looked was the reminder of their sinfulness. No good Jew could ever be good enough to claim a clean conscience before God -- especially so for Ananias, who was anything but devout. By all accounts, the man was wicked and an embarrassment to the Jews. He used his position as High Priest only to enrich himself, stealing from the Temple, and employing assassins to keep people in line. So hated was he, even by the Jews, that he was violently killed by his own countrymen in the Jewish uprising in Jerusalem a number of years later.

How was it, then, that Paul could claim a clear conscience before God? Only through Christ, only through the gospel, the reason for which he had been so violently attacked. Paul could possess a clear conscience because of His faith in Christ’s life, death, burial and resurrection to pay the penalty of His sins and to remove his guilt forever. Paul’s clear conscience before the Lord was not based upon any goodness in him, not because of any law-keeping –no one can keep the law perfectly, not because of any ceremonial washing or any sacrifices that he had performed, but because of Christ. As he wrote to Titus: “He (God) saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3:5–7, ESV)

Paul had a clear conscience because of what Christ had done for him in saving him and in doing in fullness that to which the OT Law only looked forward. Like the writer of Hebrews said: “By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation. But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” (Hebrews 9:8–14, ESV)

This is what God offers in the gospel -- a clear conscience, the assurance that the guilt of our sins has been washed away, so that God can accept us through Christ, and so that we can live our lives free from the guilt and self-condemnation of a defiled conscience. This is what Paul had received. It was what he offered in the preaching of the gospel and it was the reason he was facing persecution.

Well, Ananias, a man with a seriously guilty conscience, flips out. He’s just like people today who have a filthy conscience but who will not humble themselves before Christ, the people who get enraged when Christians talk about being forgiven in Christ. He flips out and orders Paul to be struck on the mouth – but the idea is not a slap on the face but full-fisted shot in the jaw. And Paul’s response is strong.

“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?”” (Acts 23:3, ESV) Paul calls down a curse upon Ananias, a curse that will be visited upon him in a few years, as I said, when his own countrymen would rise up and kill him. In calling down this curse, he calls Ananias what he is – a hypocrite, a white washed wall, full of corruption, unsound, unstable, a fine exterior, but at the core wicked and sinful.

Whatever we may think of Paul's response, and some commentators are truly bothered by it – seeing it as a sinful and angry response and unworthy of a servant of Christ – while others see this as case of proper rebuke and righteous correction to a man who as a member of the Sanhedrin was supposed to uphold the law but had no problem breaking it – whatever we think of this, there is no denying the prophetic and heart-revealing nature, the character exposing nature of what Paul says here. Luke then says:

“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.’ ”” (Acts 23:4–5, ESV) Now how do we understand this? There have been a lot of suggestions offered by a lot of men. Some suggest that the Sanhedrin was gathered hastily and they weren't wearing their formal robes, so the high priest wouldn't have been immediately recognizable. Some say that in all the confusion perhaps Paul didn't know whom it was who had ordered that he be struck. John Stott thinks it has to do with Paul's bad eyesight. Some say that Paul had been away from Jerusalem for many years. He didn't know the man, had never seen him, never spoken to him, never set eyes on him before. John Calvin sees this as sarcasm from Paul because Ananias doesn't act like the high priest and he doesn't deserve to be called the high priest. All of these are possibilities. To be honest, I'm not sure. But if pressed, I would say that this is a continuation of Paul's rebuke of Ananias. I'm not sure he is being sarcastic, but I do think the message is much the same – that if he is in the office of high priest, he ought to act like it. A further thought could be that in essence there is no high priest any more, Paul doesn't recognize Ananias as high priest because the true High Priest has come in Christ, so this guy is taking to himself an office that is not rightly his. I don't know for sure, but that is what I suspect. In fact, when you examine it, Paul doesn't really apologize here. At any rate, he goes on to testify to Christ even more.

“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.” (Acts 23:6–7, ESV) Now some people see this as Paul manipulating the crowd for his own gain, to get his release, but I have to say that I don't think that is his main goal. Now it's true that what Paul says here does divide the Council, no two ways about it, but I don't think that is Paul's purpose, not primarily. I think it was a secondary result.

Look, Paul already knew that the Sanhedrin was composed of Sadducees and Pharisees – that hadn't changed since the days that he served as their enforcer. I don't think that his appeal to the fact that he was a Pharisee was an attempt to curry favor with them. I think the point that Paul is making is that he is Pharisee, a man who values highly the Word of God, a man who values highly the Law of God, that he is a Pharisee who is the kind of Pharisee that all Pharisees should be – a man who sees in Christ the fulfillment of all that the Word of God teaches. The problem with the Pharisees was not that they did not value God's Word, it was that they refused to see Christ in it. That is why Jesus said to them: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life." (John 5:39–40, ESV) Paul was the kind of Pharisee, by God's grace, that all the Pharisees should be – one who searched the Scriptures and found in them abundant witness to Jesus Christ as Lord and God. Then he says that it is because of the resurrection of the dead, primarily because of the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and therefore the resurrection of all men whether to life or to judgment, that he is on trial and he is right about that. The effect of what he says fractures the Council and Luke explains why.

"For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all." (Acts 23:8, ESV) The Sadducees were flat out theological liberals who did not believe the Word of God at all and the Pharisees were the exact opposite. They were fundamental opposites in their beliefs.

"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?" (Acts 23:9, ESV) This is an amazing concession on the part of the scribes. The vision they are referring to is the one that Paul had recounted in Acts 22: "When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.' And he said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" (Acts 22:17–21, ESV) They cannot find any reason that Paul should be charged. Perhaps they are acting in the spirit of the Pharisee Gamaliel who said during the uproar of Acts 5: "If this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" (Acts 5:38–39, ESV)

Whatever the case, the proceedings come to a grinding halt and Paul is in extreme danger of being killed. “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.” (Acts 23:10, ESV) Paul, once again, has to be rescued from harm because of his preaching.

Who can imagine what is going on in the heart of Paul at this point? He has been through the wringer. And yet when Paul has got to be at his lowest, here is the sweetest verse in this passage, a balm for his soul, cleansing water for his physical and spiritual wounds, a sweet, soul nourishing encouragement for Paul’s aching heart.

Luke writes: “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.”” (Acts 23:11, ESV) Here is the real climax of this passage and where we need to find the greatest encouragement to our souls. As Paul is languishing in the barracks, struggling to make sense of this rollercoaster ride he is on, Jesus comes to him. And notice what it says here. Luke doesn’t say Paul saw a vision or fell into a trance. The words are specific and concrete. The Lord Jesus stood by him. That’s awesome. It is at the times that His faithful servants are most in need that He is most near. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” (Psalm 23:4, ESV)

“Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” (Psalm 73:23–26, ESV)

There is no word of rebuke from Jesus, but instead only a command to “Take courage.” And that is what it is, a command, a gentle, gracious, hopeful word, but it is an imperative. But it isn’t an impossible one. It isn’t a command that Paul cannot obey. Instead, this command for Paul to be brave, to stand tall and fast, is in itself encouraging and soul-strengthening. It brings with it encouragement and the power to obey. The command was to “Take courage,” itself brought courage.

Notice too that the Lord basically tells Paul that He has had his eye on him the whole way; he has never been out of the Lord's care or sight. Why do I say that? Because He commends him for his past faithfulness. Do you see it? The Lord had seen his faithfulness in Jerusalem, and he encourages Paul that just as he had been faithful in Jerusalem, so by God's grace he would be faithful in Rome. Paul could easily have become discouraged, despondent, could have thrown in the towel in the face of the mounting difficulties that were before him, but he didn't. Christ would not let him. He would never leave him, nor forsake him. Those words – leaving and forsaking -- are not in God's vocabulary when it comes to His people whom He has purchased with the blood of His Son. Let these words be an encouragement to your own soul.

The Lord stands with you to say to you, "Take courage." Look I don't know what you may be facing. You may be in the midst of the most difficult circumstances imaginable, a situation that makes you feel as if no one knows what you're going through – a hard, difficult situation where you must stand firm for Christ, give faithful testimony to the Gospel, do what is right and good and holy even if you are alone. You may feel like no one understands or gets all that you are facing, but Christ does. Even if no one else knows, Jesus knows and He loves you and if you trust Him, He will see you through even the hardest of challenges.

Oh in all likelihood, none of us will ever see a physical manifestation of Jesus in this life, but the Lord is present with us spiritually, and saying that is not a cop out, not an linguistic gymnastics. The Lord "has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" (Hebrews 13:5–6, ESV) Christ promises to be with us. Sometimes He manifests Himself in a special way through His Word. Sometimes it comes through a word of encouragement from another believer. Sometimes it is a Spirit-given sense of peace and comfort, a real sense of his presence. I can testify to you that in this season of real testing and false accusations that I have gone through recently that I have found this to be absolutely true. Christ has revealed Himself more greatly, has encouraged my soul more deeply through His word and through you than at any time in my life and by the ministry of the Holy Spirit than at any time in my life ever.

Whatever you're going through, if you are a blood bought child of God, His promise stands. Take courage. He is with you. He will not forsake you. He will not forget you. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth

gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah” (Psalm 46:1–3, ESV) There is no refuge for the soul of man other than the Lord Christ and He is refuge enough. It’s like Habakkuk wrote:

“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places.” (Habakkuk 3:17–19, ESV) That’s the promise here in this text for my brothers and sisters in Christ.

But for you here who are still burdened by a guilty conscience, by the condemning voice of sin in your soul, I ask do you want a clear conscience before the Lord? Do you want to know the forgiveness of your sins, the certainty of God’s acceptance of you, the sure hope of heaven? Are you tired of that which is falsely called life? Do you want a clear conscience? You can have it, just as Paul did, by forsaking your sin and personally trusting in Christ as God’s rescue, as the Savior from your penalty of sin, from the accusing guilt of your conscience and from the wrath of God that awaits the unrepentant. Come to Christ, have your soul cleansed and know the joy of conscience that is clear before the Lord, all your sins laid upon Christ, the friend of sinners.

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