

33. The Way of Witness

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[0 : 00] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to our passage, Acts chapter 21, page 930, if you have one of our visitor's Bibles. A long passage, all about the way of true witness.

One of the things that you still hear today is the assertion that Paul was not a true witness to Jesus and his gospel.

Let's leave Paul out of the way and let's get back to the real Jesus, people say. A minister at the Church of Scotland said exactly that to me just a couple of days ago when we were discussing something.

Paul perverted true Christianity, is what people say. He's the root, isn't he, of so much trouble. He was anti-Jewish, he was anti-women, and he was all sorts of other things, it's claimed.

Paul certainly has quite a bad image among many in the church today. But, you know, there's nothing new in that. Paul faced that right from the very start.

[1 : 07] And one of Luke's purposes in writing Acts is to defend both Paul and his gospel against all these kinds of slanderous accusations. And it's these defences that take up a large proportion of these later chapters of Acts.

Actually, it's nearly a third of the whole book. In many ways, these later chapters are a tale of two cities, Jerusalem and Rome, both of which Paul was resolved in the Holy Spirit that he must visit.

Remember chapter 19, verse 21. And he's set out now on that great last journey. And Luke records the events in very great detail to show his Roman Gentile readers, like Theophilus, to show them the truth about Paul and his life and his ministry as the way of true witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And Luke shows us clearly how Roman justice, at its fairest and best, find no fault in any of the accusations against Paul and his Christianity.

Just as in Luke's gospels, remember, he showed us just as clearly that Rome find no fault against the Lord Jesus Christ and the charges brought against him by the Jews. Three times in Luke's gospel, Jesus is pronounced innocent by the power of Rome.

[2 : 24] And three times here in Acts, Paul is similarly pronounced innocent by Roman justice. No accident. In fact, we'll see that Luke shows us that far from accusing him, Rome, in fact, helps and protects the apostle at every stage.

But at the same time, he shows how injustice and untruth constantly attends the Jews' opposition to the gospel.

So much so, that the church of Jesus Christ, which ought to have been embraced greatly by the Jewish people, well, it becomes dominated by, not Jews, but Gentiles.

And it's driven away from Jerusalem by violence and by force. So our passage today has a lot to tell us about the way of real witness to Jesus.

Very long story. The story of Paul getting to Jerusalem and defending himself and the gospel there. But we really do need to take it as one because it is one long narrative.

[3 : 34] And actually, that helps us. It helps us because actually what we see as we take the story as one is the big picture. We see that in any one individual episode, when it might seem as though everything is going haywire, in fact, the opposite is true.

Everything is in hand. The sovereign presence of the risen Lord is directing everything. And it's the tension and the trials and the riots. Everything is going exactly according to God's plan.

And we're left in no doubt of that at all in that last verse that we read together, verse 11 of chapter 23, when the Lord appears and speaks to Paul. What a reassurance to Paul that was.

And what a reassurance to us that although our witness might at times, to Jesus, seem to be in all kinds of trouble, nevertheless, these kind of things can be and nearly always will be not signs of God departing from us, but signs of our thoroughgoing involvement in real witness to Jesus that God calls us to.

So, as we take a bird's eye view then of this story, let's see what Luke wants to teach us, his readers, about the way of true witness to Jesus. First of all, in verses 1 to 26 of chapter 21, which we didn't read, we see that these verses seem to be all about conflicting priorities.

[5 : 04] The conflicting priorities that can hinder true gospel witness. The first section, verses 1 to 16, give us a glimpse of the wonderfully deep ties within the church, the bonds of love between Paul and the believers in Christ.

And the second section, verse 19 to 26, 17 to 26 rather, give us a glimpse also of the tensions within the church. Tensions due to the realities about these different cultures between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

And both of these things, these deep ties and these deep tensions, can potentially cause hindrance to the advance of the gospel. The ties of love are very prominent in verses 1 to 16, I'm sure you'll see.

Verse 1 actually reads better if you've got an NIV. It says, after we tore ourselves away from them. It was an agonizing parting from the Ephesian believers at Miletus with hugs and tears.

We saw that last time. And verse 5 tells us that was repeated again at Tyre. There was an emotional farewell with all the believers on the beach, families and all. And you'll see through these verses that at every stage these deep ties are in evidence.

[6 : 18] At Ptolemaeus, verse 7. Then at Caesarea, verse 8. Then as they near Jerusalem, in verse 16. Everywhere homes are open to the apostle and his band. A sign of the hearts that were opened and bonded with these believers in Christ.

Now these are deeply spiritual people who were welcoming Paul. They're people attuned to God's words through the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit had repeatedly said to them the things that were going to happen to Paul as he went to Jerusalem.

Verse 11. Most dramatically of all, Agabus even acted all out with his own belt. And so of course their natural reaction of these people who loved Paul was to say, you can't go.

You mustn't go. Now this is not as some people have said, a case of Paul refusing to listen to the Holy Spirit and these warnings.

Now of course not. It was the Spirit who had told Paul that he must go to Jerusalem. Even as at the same time in chapter 20 he told them very plainly what going to Jerusalem was going to mean. Afflictions and imprisonment all along the way.

[7 : 29] But rather what this is is a case of believers who are motivated by their natural love for Paul. Whereas Paul was motivated by a deeper love.

A love for Christ whatever the cost. Verse 13. I'm ready not only to be imprisoned he says but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. Someone put it this way.

The greatest temptations come not from the low affections but from the high that are not high enough. And we need to realize don't we that sometimes our natural desires for the protection and for the comfort of Christian people that we love can hinder the advance of the gospel of Christ.

You're breaking my heart says Paul. You're making this much harder for me than it has to be by pleading with me not to go. We know that don't we?

We can understand that. Sometimes missionaries face exactly that kind of heart-rending pain. They face pressure from families even Christian families whose natural love for them is so deep that what they want to do is preserve their health preserve their comfort.

[8 : 47] They plead with them don't go don't go to that country which is so dangerous. Can't you go somewhere else that's safer that's easier it's less hard that's not quite so far away.

It makes them break their hearts so difficult. You see that's that's the bittersweet sorrowful joy and joyful sorrow of real Christian love isn't it?

But you see if our desire for the comfort of God's servants eclipses our desire for the cause of the Saviour then we can hinder gospel witness.

And of course these deeply spiritual believers saw that ultimately verse 14. They saw that it was God's will for Paul to go on.

And so they said let the will of the Lord be done. And you'll notice in verse 16 some of them go with him to accompany him to encourage him to give him support.

[9 : 58] And so Paul came to Jerusalem and here verses 17 to 26 it's something different it's the deep tensions within the church that meet his fearless witness to Jesus. And the danger here seems to be not so much inordinate concern for Paul but an inordinate concern for peace.

They give Paul a warm welcome certainly in verse 17 and they welcome verse 19 all his reports of his Gentile ministry. They glorified God says verse 20 they genuinely were glad but they were also very nervous.

Don't you think verse 20 is very revealing? That's great they say all those Gentile Christians but look Paul we've got all these Jewish Christians here and the thing is they're all very zealous for the law and so you see Paul you're quite a problem to them.

They've heard all sorts of things about you that you're zealously anti-Jewish that you're against Moses you're against the law you're against all our customs and so Paul we don't want to fuss we don't want you to come here and rock the boat among all these Jewish Christians.

You see Paul was a bit radical for them he was a bit dangerous to have around in your church and so the great concern was to make sure that Paul was seen to publicly embrace the Jewish customs zealously so that at all costs the Jewish Christians would avoid a rumpus.

[11 : 28] By the way it's interesting we're not told are we whether James and the other apostles vigorously resisted all these false accusations that were made against Paul. Now there's no suggestion here that Paul and James and the others differed on the heart of the gospel that people were saved by faith alone whether you're a Jew or a Gentile.

Verse 25 actually makes that very clear it refers back to the Jerusalem council of Acts chapter 15 where it finally resolved that issue Gentiles do not have to become Jews or live like Jews.

Now this tension was rather an issue about how big a place Jewish customs still must play for Jewish Christians. But one has to notice all the same just how important these things seem to be to the church at Jerusalem.

It's striking that what we're told about these Jews who have believed in Jesus is that they're zealous for the law that they're zealous for our customs not that they're zealous for evangelizing about Jesus Christ not that they're willing to die for his name rather seems that the church in Jerusalem was very keen not to stick out too much from the rest of Jewish society round about.

Didn't seem as though the Jerusalem church before Paul came were causing riots of opposition in the same way that Paul seemed to be causing wherever he went. And it rather does seem as though a great love for peace a desire for conformity a focus on being conventional was in danger of being a real hindrance to the radical witness to a gospel that says there is no Jew and Gentile there is no slave or free all are one in Christ Jesus.

[13 : 28] And we mustn't push supposition too far but David Cook in his book does ask the question well where were James and the apostles and all these thousands of Jewish believers when the crowd turned against Paul and tried to lynch him?

Certainly no mention of them it seems that Paul was all alone. There's rather an echo of Luke chapter 23 where we're told that when Jesus was arrested and crucified his acquaintance stood at a distance watching.

Some have thought that Paul was wrong to exceed at all to the request of the Jerusalem leaders to purify himself in this way. That's to misunderstand. Paul knew that he was a free man in Christ but he tells us himself in 1 Corinthians 9 he was willing to become all things to all men so as by all means to win some.

And here he became as a Jew such was his love for the Jews. He was bending over backwards so as to serve all Christ's people and he was willing to accommodate these weaker brethren so taken up as they were with their customs.

His priority was absolutely clear. The gospel witness must be served at all costs even if the personal cost to me and my freedom is very great.

[14 : 49] Paul was clear. But the church in Jerusalem didn't seem to be quite so clear. It seemed like a love for peace a desire for convention, for conformity was uppermost in their mind.

And these can and they still do blunt the witness to Christ that a church can have. Certainly after this it is a fact that the Jerusalem church just fades out of view.

There's nothing more to be said about it. We never hear about it again. All the centre of mission of the church moves elsewhere. So there are lessons for us there, aren't there?

Less love for the comfort of beloved Christians or love for the customs of a beloved church should hinder the real, vital, growing, groundbreaking witness that the gospel requires.

That's something for us to think about. Conflicting priorities will always conspire to hinder the true gospel witness. Well, second then, verses 27 to 36 show us a consistent pattern.

[16 : 07] A consistent pattern of hostility to true gospel witness. Once again, you can't read this second volume of Luke's books without recalling volume one, Luke's gospel and the story of Jesus.

And we see, again, so many parallels with the story of Jesus' own experience in Jerusalem. Verse 27 tells us it wasn't long before the whole crowd was baying for Paul's blood.

It seemed that no matter how many concessions Paul was willing to make to the predominantly Jewish church, his very presence was always going to be incendiary to the non-Christian Jews.

Just because his gospel was a fire that threatened their whole identity, their whole way of life. And, of course, the gospel, the true gospel, will always face hostility for exactly that reason.

It confronts the world because it confronts sin. Take that offense away and the world will love and fit the church. But Paul's was the true gospel of the real Jesus.

[17 : 13] And so, of course, he was met with the same hostility as the real Jesus was met with. Luke records for us, doesn't he, in his own gospel how Jesus did no harm, how he did only good, how he served not himself but others.

But when Jesus came to Jerusalem, the crowd turned on him. And he was beaten and bound and spat upon and abused and arrested and tried and then killed.

And so it is exactly the same when his messenger comes, Paul. Although his death wasn't to be quite yet. But it's a striking parallel. Even the words that the crowds use are exactly the same words as they used of Jesus.

Verse 36, away with him, they cried, away with this man. Very striking. But not at all surprising. It's the consistent pattern of real witness to Jesus that we should expect.

Jesus said that himself. If they have hated me, so also they will hate you. And friends, that means that real gospel messengers will always be met with the same reaction as the real Messiah.

[18 : 18] It's a hallmark of authenticity. It's not just a parallel of the reaction to the Savior and his gospel. It's a parallel also here of the loving intention of the Savior.

Jesus, remember in Luke chapter 19, came to Jerusalem with a heart full of love. He wept over the city. He wept over the corruption of the temple that had been turned to idolatry.

And as he wept, the priests plotted his death. And then remember Jesus told the parable of the vineyard about the man sending all the servants to his people and them being turned away.

And at last he sends his own son whom they kill. And then immediately after that Jesus comes to his last great confrontation with the Sadducees.

All about the issue of the resurrection. Then we read in Luke's gospel that they dared question him no longer, but they determined to kill him. Well, here's Paul coming as the last messenger to the temple.

[19 : 24] And likewise they reject him. Verse 30, they slam the gate shut as though to say, never shall this gospel penetrate our temple, our religion.

And then another very striking parallel. Again, Paul faces up to the crowd with exactly the same issue at heart. the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now you see, none of this is by accident.

Luke's drawing attention to it for us. And it's for a very particular reason. Back in Luke chapter 29 when Jesus spoke and predicted the destruction of the temple very clearly because of the Jews' rejection of him, he also spoke about God's mercy.

allowing time for Israel still to repent, even after they crucified the Messiah. Before that time of the end, Jesus said, he would send witnesses.

He would send his apostles who would be hated and abused and arrested and tried for his sake. But through their suffering, he said, you will bear witness to the amazing mercy of God.

[20 : 32] This will be your opportunity for testimony, he said. testimony to the amazing mercy of God that would give yet another opportunity for the people of Israel to repent and to accept the Messiah through the gospel message.

Remember how Jesus speaks those extraordinary words in Luke chapter 12 when he says, even those who speak a word against the Son of Man, against Jesus in the flesh, could be forgiven through their later ministry.

If they believe the testimony of the apostles through the Holy Spirit who came to give them power for witness. But reject that message, said Jesus.

Blaspheme the Holy Spirit who holds out the mercy of God in the gospel of Christ. Reject that and there can be no forgiveness, only judgment, final and just.

Well, Peter and the apostles came first and preached that message. They were abused and arrested. Stephen came and preached that message.

[21 : 44] He was abused and martyred. And now Paul has come to be dragged before the synagogues, the rulers, the authorities to testify, to bring even to these violent and hateful men yet another chance to repent and to hear the mercy of God in Christ and to find that.

So just as Jesus endured dreadful opposition and suffering in order to win the salvation of his people, that they might be saved, so Paul endured exactly that same pattern of hostility and hatred in order that he might proclaim that message of salvation through the grace of God.

But verse 27 says, some Asian Jews saw him, probably from Ephesus, and they started a riot here, just as the pagans had started a riot in Ephesus.

And their cry is exactly the same as the pagans was in Ephesus. Our temple is under threat. He's defiling our temple. This must stop. It was all false, of course.

He hadn't taken any Gentiles at all into the temple. They'd just seen Trophimus, verse 29, and assumed that he had, or else they just made it up. And there was a death penalty for any Gentile who went into the inner courts of the temple where Jews only could go, or for anyone who took a Gentile there.

[23 : 13] So they set on him, and Paul would have been lynched, but for the Roman tribune who acted with such speed. And yet again, none of this is by accident. Paul knew that this was what would face him in Jerusalem.

The Spirit had told him specifically. He'd driven him there clearly for this purpose. Like his master, he had set his face towards Jerusalem, knowing all that awaited him, and knowing that great suffering was the price of a great salvation being offered to others.

I'm ready, not only to be imprisoned, but also to die in Jerusalem for the sake of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. See, there's a consistent pattern in real gospel witness.

Both in the hostility that always it faces from the world, but also in the heart that will gladly face it for the sake of the world that needs to hear the message of grace in the Lord Jesus.

And we need to think about that too, don't we? As we think about real witness, our own, and that of others. Third, verses 37 of chapter 21 through to the end of the section there, verse 10 of chapter 23, majors on courageous proclamation.

[24 : 35] Proclamation. The courageous proclamation that is the heart of real gospel witness. God had sent Paul to testify for witness. Indeed, it was all these trials and abuses and imprisonments that gave him the very opportunity for that witness to come.

Just as Jesus said, these will be your opportunity for witness. You see, God is in total control. Being arrested isn't necessarily a disaster for the oppressed believer.

Just you read the magazines of missionary societies working in countries where there is great public hostility and you'll see that God still uses those tactics today.

Every detail here is providentially arranged by God. Paul's made safe and on the way to the barracks he speaks to the tribune in Greek. That takes the tribune aback because he'd assumed that he was an Egyptian terrorist.

I've heard somebody say, by the way, that that's a good reason for all students for the ministry to study Greek. Not quite sure that's a valid application of the text unless you look like a terrorist from Egypt or something.

[25 : 45] Anyway, it's a good thing to do to study Greek but that's not really the point here. But Paul wins himself a hearing through this. God has ordained it so. Paul's not slow, by the way, is he, to use all available means to help his cause.

I'm a man of Tarsus, he says. No mean city. He's rather asserting his educated class there. Not for his sake but for the gospel. And his polite approach to the tribune wins him a hearing.

And Luke records for us Paul's defence in two parts. First of all before the crowd and then before the council. He summarised it for us. But it's very clear that what Paul courageously proclaimed in these two emphases were the two things at the heart of all apostolic witness.

He proclaimed the person of the saviour and he proclaimed the promise of the scriptures. So to the crowd in verses 1 to 21. He clearly testifies to the person of the saviour.

It's all about the Lord Jesus and what he's done. He doesn't seek to justify himself. But he declares the reality of the Lord Jesus who apprehended him from heaven and who spoke and who commissioned him and commanded him to have this task.

[27 : 03] Notice his efforts to persuade his hearers. Do you see? Verse 2, he emphasises, doesn't he, his identity as a Jew. He was zealous for God just like them, he says. But then he discovered he was wrong.

He wasn't being a true Jew because he was resisting the God of his fathers. Verse 14, the God of our fathers showed him he was all wrong.

Through another devout Jew, Ananias. Jesus was the righteous one, the Messiah. And then verse 17, Paul says it was right here in this very temple that he laid hold on me and told me the mission that I had to have.

In other words, he's saying to them, none of this is my doing, none of this is my invention, it's the risen Jesus who turned my world upside down. It's he who commanded me to preach this message to all people.

Not just Jews, verse 21, but also Gentiles. In other words, what he is saying to them is this. It's not me that your issue is with here.

[28 : 12] It's the risen Lord Jesus Christ. It's the righteous one of God. And therefore, it's God himself. That's very important, isn't it?

Because our witness to other people is not about us and what we think. We're not asking people to argue with us and our view. It's Jesus that we present.

It's his commands. It's his testimony about himself that people have to be brought to engage with. We need to say that to people.

Look, it's not me you're engaging with. It's not me you're disagreeing with. It's Jesus who claims to be the God of heaven and earth. And that's what Paul's saying to the crowd here.

And they listen quietly to him, it says in verse 22, until he said that one word, Gentiles. And then again, there's uproar. Away with him. He shouldn't be allowed to live.

[29 : 11] One writer, I think, captures it exactly when he says this. As soon as he touched upon the one thing that made the gospel a gospel, they rebelled against it. They could not accept a message that so obviously called in question their whole position.

And that's the point at which the bitterest and most entrenched opposition to the gospel always comes. People find it intolerable to admit that they're wrong.

Well, of course, nothing has changed, has it, in 2,000 years? We see exactly that same response today when there is true witness to the person of Jesus as the unique Lord of all, both Jew and Gentile, Arab or Asian, white or black, religious or secular.

It's offensive to people to be told all your ideas about religion or about morals or about truth or whatever, however zealous it is, it's all wrong.

It hurts religious pride to be told that you're no better, you're no worthy than some immoral pagan, that God's salvation is the same for everybody, high or low, only through repentance towards Jesus.

[30 : 32] It hurts all secular pride as well, just the same, to be confronted that you need a saviour, that you need a liberator, that you're not free and in charge of your own life in the way you long to think you are.

True witness to the person of the saviour will always offend people, just like that. Paul's second address in verses 1-10 of chapter 23 is to the council, and here his focus is particularly on the promise of the scriptures, which is, he says, the true hope of resurrection, the true hope of Israel.

And again, see God's providential care in perfectly organising everything here. The Romans rescue him, verse 24 of chapter 22, and they would have had him flogged and interrogated, but Paul pulls out his trump card.

I'm a Roman citizen, he says, just in the nick of time. Well, it was absolutely illegal to mistreat a Roman citizen like that, so the tribune is quaking. He's also amazed.

I had to pay a lot of money to get my citizenship, he said. Ha ha, says Paul. But I was born one. God had arranged that birth, even, of Paul as a Roman citizen for just such times as these.

[31 : 50] And notice again, Paul's not slow to use his natural advantages for Christ's sake. He was willing to die, but he wasn't trying to die. Some Christians can be so falsely pious.

They think it's sinful to make use of any kind of human means, any wisdom or learning or facilities or advantages you might have, because that's unspiritual. Well, not so with Paul. He recognised God's providence, and he used it with alacrity.

And as a result, he gains this testimony before the council the next day. This will be your opportunity to testify, Jesus had said. And he took it.

And again, he emphasises that he's speaking only about the true faith of Israel as a loyal servant of the God of Israel. As soon as he starts, the beginning of chapter 23, the high priest has him struck in the mouth.

And Paul utters what was really a prophetic rebuke to Ananias. A man who was a totally corrupt and evil leader. Paul had known anything about him.

[32 : 58] A whitewashed wall, says Paul. A hypocrite. Looks resplendent in your robes on the outside, but inside just rotten. People like to argue over Paul's response.

Did he do wrong? Did he lose his temper? Was he apologising? In verse 5. Look, he was. He wasn't apologising for his prophecy. He was apologising only for ignorance of speaking ill of a high official.

Personally, I'm not sure he was apologising. I think he was being ironic there. Sarcastic even. How could somebody who acts like this in a court of law and has somebody hit, how could somebody like this possibly be the high priest of God?

And certainly Ananias was, the historians tell us, struck down a few years later and murdered. At any rate, Paul's point is to say that he is the one who is obviously concerned to do and to say things in line with God's law, in line with the promise of the Scriptures.

And he goes on in verse 6 to say exactly that. It's all because of the promise of the Scriptures that I'm on trial. The hope, which is a promise to the fathers of the resurrection of the dead.

[34 : 14] And once again, uproar breaks out. He can't even finish his speech. And this time, the rumpus ends up with scenes of violence between the Pharisees and the Sadducees at each other's throats.

Remember how Jesus had said to his apostles, I'm sending you out as sheep amidst wolves. You must be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. Remember, he promised them also that in just such times the Spirit would give exactly the right words for their defense.

Well, was there ever a time when just exactly the right words were more chosen than here? The rationalistic Sadducees, you see, believed nothing supernatural, whereas the Pharisees, at least in theory, had fairly orthodox views about the supernatural and the resurrection of the dead.

And that reveals an important truth, doesn't it? That there are very strange alliances that come together against the true gospel of Jesus. Here are the Sadducees who are utterly heterodox.

They're rather like radical liberals today who deny any supernatural, deny the resurrection, deny anything apart from this world. And there's the Pharisees who are rather orthodox in one sense, but actually what really interested them was not the promise, but all the accretions and additions of religion, their traditions, their comforts, their customs.

[35 : 38] And real gospel witness will always arouse the ire and the opposition of both of these things. Because both are an appeal to merely this world and its things, to earth-based religion, the things that are important are the things now, the things in the world of men.

But the true gospel speaks the true promise of the scriptures about a resurrection to a whole new world, that the kingdom of God is not of this world, that the glory is yet to come. And that is what Paul courageously proclaimed here.

The true person of the Savior, the reality of the risen Lord, and the true promise of the scripture, the reality of a resurrection life, which is the heart of the gospel, comes to us through Jesus alone.

Again, there's uproar, violent protest, and Paul has to be dragged away. But God's providence was still in total control.

As the assembly tore each other apart, Paul was taken away to the safety of the barracks. And whatever else you might think or anybody else might think of Paul and his performance, whatever the Jerusalem church might have thought, and we're not told, which is perhaps just as well, because I think they might have rather disapproved, whatever anybody else might say, Luke leaves us in absolutely no doubt about God's verdict.

[37 : 10] Look at verse 11. He records for us explicitly a comforting presence, a comforting presence of the Lord to honour a true gospel witness.

The Lord himself stood by him and said, take courage. Some would criticise Paul, and many have criticised Paul for his method and for his message. It was too brash, it was too extreme, it was foolish to ignore all these warnings, all kinds of other things.

But Jesus didn't say any of that, did he? Jesus said, you have testified about me in Jerusalem now, Paul. You have done exactly what I asked you to do.

You did okay. Very hard, isn't it, when you've been through something you know is very important, a very important experience and you just don't know how you've done. Maybe it's an exam, it's a job interview, it's maybe a Christian gospel enterprise.

You wonder to yourself, did I do okay? Did I do that alright? Especially hard, isn't it, when things seem to have gone really badly. And it could hardly have gone worse, could it, than it must have seemed for Paul here.

[38 : 28] He tries to please the Jerusalem church for the sake of peace, but all that happens is there's a riot and he's arrested. He's beaten up, he gets into prison. When he testifies both times, he can't even finish his message because a riot breaks out and he has to be taken away.

I'm not sure if somebody said to Paul, did you have a good Sunday, Paul? He would have said, yes, it was great, it all went according to plan. I wouldn't think that. But Jesus stood by him.

Isn't that a great word? And he encouraged them and Jesus said to Paul, yes, you did okay. And I want you to do more of the same in Rome, he says.

In other words, he's saying, my presence and my protection will be with you, Paul, until your work is done. My father often used to quote a phrase that says, a man is immortal until his work is done.

And that's what Paul is being told here by the lips of the Lord Jesus himself. I'm with you until your work is done. And friends, that is what God is reminding us in our life of witness too.

[39 : 46] That's one reason why he has had this scripture preserved for us in the 21st century long after it had done its work in the first century of defending Paul and his gospel witness. You see, if we, if you and I are to walk together in the way of true witness to Jesus, it will not always look so certain in the midst of the turmoil of our Christian lives that we are doing okay.

We'll be torn by conflicting priorities. Love for people may make us want to seek their comfort instead of the gospel. Love for peace may make us want to acquiesce in conformity and convention.

Will we, will we say with Paul that loyalty to the name of Jesus and to his gospel is worth all of these things whatever the cost?

Will we? Even if we do, friends, we too will find a consistent pattern of hostility in all that we say and do and it will be very unnerving at times.

And yet, we too are called to go on courageously proclaiming the heart of all real gospel witness which is the unique sovereignty of Jesus and the universal summons to repentance before Jesus to receive that great life that is to come in a resurrected world.

[41 : 08] And that message will find united opposition at every angle from the religious and from the secular always. But as we walk that way, the way of true witness, we too shall find that we are walking in the presence of the Lord himself.

And he will be there always to encourage us and to protect us until we also have testified wherever he has determined that our path shall end.

That's what the Lord said to Paul at the end of all that great drama. That's what he's saying to you and to me today as we walk in the way of true witness.

Whatever the drama, the turmoil and the trouble that we might find. A long passage. I don't know about you but I'm very, very glad it's in my Bible.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your sovereign love and care that surrounds us and goes before us and hems us in behind. Help us, we pray like Paul, to put the concern for your name and zeal for your true gospel the heart of our lives now and always doing so in the knowledge that you are with us to give us courage to testify all the way to the end of our days.

[42 : 58] For Jesus' sake, Amen.