

Courageous Witness

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- [0 : 00] We're going to come to the scriptures now. Paul is going to be preaching this evening from Acts chapters 21 to 23. So, there's quite a lot to read this evening. We're going to have it in two parts. And first of all, reading from Acts chapter 21 at verse 17.
- And I'll read a chunk just now. We will have the offering time and then we'll come back and read some more. So, remember last week we were listening to Paul speaking to the Ephesian elders as he was on his way journeying to Jerusalem.
- And you can read later on verses 1 to 16. But I'm picking up the story at verse 17. When we'd come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day, Paul went in with us to James and all the elders were present.
- But after greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God. But they said to him, you see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed.
- They're all zealous for the law. And they've been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses. Telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.
- [1 : 22] What then is to be done? They'll certainly hear that you've come. Do therefore what we tell you with four men who are under a vow. Take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads.
- And thus all will know that there's nothing in what they've been told about you. But that you yourself also live in observation of the law. But as for the Gentiles who believe, we've sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality.
- And Paul took the men and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled. And the offering presented for each one of them.
- When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands upon him. Crying out, men of Israel, help!
- This is the man who's teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.
- [2 : 30] For they'd previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. Then all the city was stirred up and the people ran together.
- They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple and at once the gates were shut. And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.

He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. When they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. The tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains.

He inquired who he was and what he'd done. Some of the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he couldn't learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks.

When he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd. For the mob of the people followed, crying out, away with him.

[3 : 34] As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, May I say something to you? And he said, Do you know Greek? He's obviously speaking to him in Greek.

Are you not the Egyptian then who recently stirred up a revolt and led the 4,000 men of the assassins out into the wilderness? Paul replied, I'm a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city.

I beg you, permit me to speak to the people. When he'd given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. When there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language.

Paul was quite a linguist, saying, Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you. When they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet.

And he said, I'm a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel, according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God, as all of you are this day.

[4 : 44] I persecuted this way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear we witness.

From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed towards Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished. As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me.

And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And I answered, Who are you, Lord?

And he said to me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting. Now those who were with me saw the light, but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me.

And I said, What shall I do, Lord? And the Lord said to me, Rise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.

[5 : 51] And since I couldn't see because of the brightness of the light, I was led by the hand and those who were with me, and came to Damascus. And one Ananias, a devout man, according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, he came to me and standing by me said to me, Brother Saul, receive your sight.

And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. And he said, The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the righteous one, and to hear a voice from his mouth, for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.

And now, why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name. 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.

But he said to me, Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles. Up to this word, they listened to him.

[7 : 22] Then they raised their voices and said, Away with such a fellow from the earth! He shouldn't be allowed to live. And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust in the air, the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying he should be examined by flogging to find out why they were shouting against him like this.

When they'd stretched him out for the whips, Jesus said to the centurion who was standing by, Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?

When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, What are you about to do? For this man's a Roman citizen. So the tribune came and said to him, Tell me, Are you a Roman citizen?

And he said, Yes. The tribune answered, I bought this citizenship for a large sum. Paul said, But I am a citizen by birth.

So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately. And the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him. 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.

[8 : 41] And he brought Paul down and sat him before them. 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. And 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 your law, you order me to be struck. Those who stood by said, Will you revile God's high priest?

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. Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out to the council, Brothers, I am a Pharisee, son of Pharisees.

It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial. And when he said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the assembly was divided for the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit.

[9 : 53] But the Pharisees acknowledged them all. Then a great clamor arose. And some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, We find nothing wrong in this man.

What if a spirit or an angel did speak to him? 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.

The following night, the Lord stood by him and he said, Take courage, for as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.

Amen. And may God bless us his word. Well, please do have those chapters from Acts, chapters 21, 22, 23, open in front of you.

You'll be moving swiftly at various points, if you can gather here. But do have those chapters open in front of you, please. Now, these chapters that we've had read ought to come as no surprise to us, given what we read in Luke's first volume.

[11 : 13] Listen to Jesus' words from Luke's gospel in chapter 21. Here's what Jesus said. Speaking to his disciples, he said, Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.

There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences, and there will be great terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake.

This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Now, those are the words recorded by Luke in his first volume, in his gospel.

And these events we just read about here in Acts, Luke's second volume, they are the lived reality of those words we just read from Jesus. These final chapters and Acts are all about that reality that Jesus warned about.

The reality of witnessing to him in the midst of great opposition and in front of kings and governors. That is exactly what we see happening through these latter chapters in Acts.

[12 : 31] It's the reality of the ever-present antagonism to the gospel and the ever-needed courage to keep witnessing to the Lord Jesus. That's the reality.

And alongside that reality is the reality that the gospel is going to the very ends of the earth, just as Jesus said it would. Both those things are happening at the same time here in this last few chapters of Acts, just as Jesus promised.

Great opposition being dragged before the courts, but at the same time the gospel going to the very ends of the earth unhindered. The forward march of the gospel continues even though there's great opposition.

That's what we're seeing here in these chapters. And this final section of the book that we're entering into tonight, it really begins in the middle of chapter 19. Just flick back there a second to chapter 19 and in geographic terms, this is about Paul's journey to Jerusalem and then on to Rome.

Look at chapter 19 verse 31. Now after these events, Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem saying, after I've been there, I must also see Rome.

[13 : 55] That's the plan for these last chapters of Acts and that's what we see happening. This is Luke's account of what the gospel advance to the ends of the world would look like.

How it was that Paul would take the gospel to the Gentiles. Up to this point, it's been free moving around what we now know as Europe. But things get a lot tougher here.

But still, in the midst of all of that, even though he's before courts and governors, the gospel still advances just as Jesus said it would.

Paul's journey continues. But this would not prove to be a straightforward journey. This isn't the easy watching of a travel documentary, is it? We've been enjoying watching some of the reruns of Michael Palin's great journeys around the world in 80 days, pole to pole.

Great things, aren't they, to watch? And Palin has his own fair share of mishaps and difficulties, doesn't he? But nothing like this, nothing comes close. In all those journeys he makes around the world, nothing comes close to what we're just reading here.

[15 : 02] In these last chapters, Paul is arrested, he's almost killed, he has to make five defences before various courts and governors and kings. He's shipwrecked, he's bitten by a viper.

This is quite the journey, and the first leg of the journey to Jerusalem is in front of us here this evening, and as we've seen, full of drama.

It is not straightforward. And we read these chapters, we might well wonder as we read these chapters, has Paul's ministry come to an end?

We've seen in the middle chapter of the book of Acts, great progress for the gospel, Paul's traveling all around Europe, great numbers are hearing him proclaim the gospel, but now, he's arrested and brought before courts.

Has Paul's ministry come to a stuttering end? It's almost a bit embarrassing, isn't it, to have him there arrested, brought before these courts. And we might want to, as many did, want to distance ourselves a bit from Paul.

[16 : 11] We don't really want to be associated with him, this prisoner, this man before the courts. And although that might be our temptation, given what happens to Paul here, that is not why Luke has included this section in his account.

He goes into quite some detail, doesn't he, in these latter chapters with Paul and have to make all these defenses chapter after chapter after chapter. You might wonder, why is a third of his acts given over to what happens to Paul here?

Why has Luke included it? Well, he's done it to give us real clarity on what witnessing to Jesus really involves. Paul hasn't gone off the boil here.

He hasn't lost the plot. He hasn't made mistakes. No, not at all. Look at the very last verse of our section, a very important verse. Chapter 23, verse 11. It says, the following night, the Lord stood by Paul and said, take courage.

For as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome. That is the Lord's assessment on what's going on here in these chapters.

[17 : 35] The Lord was in control. He was using all these events to enable Paul to continue to witness to Jesus. Jesus. This wasn't unplanned.

This wasn't things going out of control. Not at all. The Lord was sovereign. He was reigning even over what we might consider to be a total disaster. Luke is giving us the complete picture of what it means to testify to Jesus.

Two things we'll look at this evening. First, Paul's arrest and then Paul's defense. First, Paul's arrest and we see here the ever-present antagonism to the gospel.

This is the section that Willie read for us first. Chapter 21, 27 to 36, the ever-present antagonism to the gospel.

Luke is showing us here that wherever the gospel goes, hostility will inevitably bubble up. It's always going to come. Now, in this instance here, the source of opposition in Jerusalem is not secular, as it was in Ephesus.

[18 : 48] We saw that in chapter 19. It was the secular forces that were opposed to Paul, that great riot. It's not secular opposition here, it's religious. More specifically, it's Jewish hostility that is the driver behind what happens here.

Look at verse 27 there of chapter 21. It is Jews from Asia, seeing Paul in the temple, and they stir up the whole city.

Very striking echoes to what happens in Ephesus here. Perhaps these are Asian Jews from Ephesus itself. They follow Paul on his journey, and they track him down here to Jerusalem, and they stir things up.

See, Paul was the one who had taken the gospel to the Gentiles, and many Jews did not like that one bit. And Paul knew that the gospel, whoever it's proclaimed, whoever it's proclaimed to, would, as well as draw people in, it would be met with antagonism, hatred.

And Jerusalem would be no different. He knew it. Remember last week, if you were here, in chapter 20, Paul addressing the Ephesian elders, he said that whatever city he went to, wherever he went, imprisonment and afflictions awaited him.

[20 : 11] Paul knew what was coming. And at earlier stages in his journey there, from Miletus, where he was with the Ephesian elders, on to Jerusalem, along the way, he is warned about what awaits him in Jerusalem.

Just look down there at verse 13 of chapter 21, Paul's response, when he's told that opposition awaits him, he says, I am ready not only to be imprisoned, but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.

Paul knew it was coming. He knew there was great opposition coming to him in Jerusalem, but he was resolved to go, even if it meant his death. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. But even amongst the Christians in Jerusalem, Paul gets a less than wholehearted reception.

The response he gets from the Christians, formerly Jewish believers, now Christians, is almost embarrassment. Just notice there, chapter 21, verse 19, and following.

after greeting the Christians there in Jerusalem, he related one by one the things that had happened, the things that God had done amongst the Gentiles through his ministry.

[21 : 35] And when they heard it, they glorified God, and they said to him, you see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who believed. They are all zealous for the law, but they've been told by you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.

What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you've come. You see, in their eyes, Paul was a slightly embarrassing radical.

They wanted deep down to keep the peace in Jerusalem. They knew that Paul would stir things up, and so they're urging and pleading with him just to tone things down a bit.

Well, Paul submits to their request, but he does so for the sake of the gospel, but even the steps that he takes to try and fit in a bit aren't enough. The opposition erupts.

Notice the nature of the opposition here. As we've noted, it's Jews, particularly those from Asia who have come, and they take aim at Paul, and their accusations are malicious, unfounded, simply untrue.

[22 : 54] Look at verse 28. Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. He's anti-Semitic, he's anti-law, he's anti-temple.

Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple. He's defiled this holy place. Look at the next verse, it's an interesting aside from Luke.

He says, for they had previously seen Trophimus, the Ephesian, with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. It was a serious offense to bring a non-Jew into the temple in Jerusalem.

And by making this accusation, they are making a very, very serious allegation. But the thing is, they make some pretty big assumptions, don't they, about what Paul has actually done.

There's no actual evidence he brought this chap into the temple. They've just seen him in the city. They suppose he's done it. They've made qualms about putting two and two together to make ten. Why such hostility?

[24 : 05] Why the bending of truth? Well, fundamentally, it's a hatred of the gospel of grace, which is offered to all, Jew, Gentile, anyone.

These Jews who bring this accusation against Paul feel that their way of life, their Jewish culture, is under threat. And so they attack the messenger of the gospel, Paul himself.

And they get a man, they drag him out to the temple, and they seek, verse 31, they seek to kill him. But in steps, a very unlikely source of help.

The Roman Tribune, verse 32, he hears what's going on, and rushes down to the temple, sends in the troops, calms the situation, and Paul is arrested.

And such is the noise going on around them, such is the clamor. the troops can't even hear what Paul's saying, and so the soldiers literally have to carry him away, because of the threat posed by the crowd.

[25 : 19] Luke is showing us here, the ever present antagonism, that there will always be to the gospel, and towards those who proclaim it. It threatens ways of life, ways of doing things, it exposes sin.

And sinful man, whatever the background, religious, as it is here, or secular, as it was in Ephesus, will respond by lashing out, opposing.

And the opposition will at times be utterly unjust and unfounded, as it was here. The opposition will be loud, confusing. The riot here in Jerusalem is chaos, like the one in Ephesus, total confusion, it's messy, it's unordered.

And it takes the might of Roman justice there in Jerusalem to bring some sort of order and protection for Paul. But this hostility, this antagonism that Paul is experiencing here, it would, in God's plan and providence, serve to give Paul opportunities to witness to the gospel.

It's just as the Lord Jesus promised, isn't it? Those words you read from Luke's gospel, Jesus said it would happen. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. They will lay their hands on you.

[26 : 52] They will persecute you, said Jesus, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you'll be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness, says Jesus.

That is just what happens to Paul. Now, we may fear a hostile culture.

We may fear malicious and unjust legal action, like the sort of thing that Paul experiences here. There's no real grounds for it at all. But in Acts, this is a very significant aspect of how the risen and ascended Lord Jesus makes himself known in the world.

It is through just this sort of thing that the Lord Jesus will use to advance his kingdom, to advance his gospel message. It seems utterly counterintuitive to us, doesn't it?

This seems like things are out of control. This seems like Paul is on the downer, but not at all. In Acts, Luke is showing us this is one of the ways in which the Lord Jesus will see his name proclaimed to the ends of the earth.

[28 : 10] You see, a rest does not equal disaster. In God's plans, a rest is not the end of the story. In fact, it was the way of Jesus himself, wasn't it?

And it's to be the way of his followers. It was the way for Paul. Arrest for Paul led to witness, as we see in the rest of our passage in a moment.

But moments like this, as they were for Paul, will be our moments to bear witness. Whether it's a rest that lands us in court or other legal actions, the courts are not something to be feared in God's plans and his purposes.

It's really quite striking, isn't it? The opportunities that have been afforded to Christian leaders in Scotland following the judicial review some months ago, which found the government had acted unlawfully, preventing Christians from worshipping together.

There have been opportunities to witness, not just in the courtroom, but subsequently. now the situation wasn't quite the same as it was here for Paul, was it?

[29 : 28] But the Lord promises, doesn't he, that those moments, they will be your opportunity to bear witness. It's just what Jesus promised, isn't it?

Jesus. So, arrests may come, but that will be your opportunity to bear witness, says Jesus. Well, let's look on to Paul's defences.

We've seen his arrest, the ever-present antagonism to the gospel, but secondly, Paul's defences. And we see here the ever-needed courage to keep witnessing to the Lord Jesus.

So, this is from verse 37 of chapter 21 through to the end of our section. Now, in both cases, in both defences, first to the mob outside the temple, and then to the council, Paul testifies to truths about Jesus Christ.

That is how the Lord himself, in verse 11 of chapter 23, summarizes Paul's witnessing. He says, you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem.

[30 : 43] So, what we see here in these two defences is Paul testifying to the facts about Jesus. This was the opportunity the Lord promised would come, but it still had to be taken, didn't it?

Paul still had to open his mouth and speak, and he took those opportunities with courage, didn't he? Paul took the opportunity to witness to Jesus.

Look at his first defence. This is to the mob outside the temple. Paul. Now, Paul at this point is being brought into the relative safety of the Roman barracks, and as they're about to enter, Paul turns to the tribune, and after clearing up a case of mistaken identity, he asks if he can address the crowd, which he does from the start of chapter 22.

Now, first, Paul establishes his Jewish credentials. Not only is he speaking in Hebrew, but he starts off saying, I'm a Jew, educated at the feet of Gamaliel.

He goes on to give an account of his training in the Jewish faith, his persecution of Christians, but then of his remarkable conversion on the road to Damascus, his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus.

[32 : 00] Paul recounts there in verse 7 how the risen Lord Jesus confronted him for his persecution. Look at what he said, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

And I answered, who are you Lord? And he said, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting. It's the moment that changed his life around, isn't it?

And from there, Paul goes to Damascus, has his encounter with Ananias, verse 14, who tells Paul that the God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the righteous one, and to hear a voice from his mouth, for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.

And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name. You see, Paul is given his mission there by Ananias. He is to be a witness to the risen Lord Jesus, and he's to be a witness to everybody, to everyone.

And Paul further elaborates as he recounts that vision he's given in Jerusalem, in the temple. Look at verse 17 and following. Paul said, when I returned to Jerusalem, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, make haste, get out of Jerusalem quickly because they will not accept your testimony about me.

[33 : 34] 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. It is to that, that last word that the crowd reacts.

Look at verse 22. They go berserk. Up to all that word they are with him. But as soon as Paul mentioned his task to go to the Gentiles, that was the last straw.

It is the message of salvation to all that reviles, that riles the Jewish crowd. But you see, that is at the very heart of the gospel, that it should go to the Gentiles.

From the very beginning, the gospel was to go to the nations. From the very first page of the Bible, the whole world was always in view. From the promises given to Abraham, the whole purpose of what would become the Jewish nation was that through the nations, the world would be blessed.

- [34 : 52] From the very first verses of Acts, Jesus directs his witnesses not only to Jerusalem, there in chapter 1, verse 8, they weren't to stop there, were they? But rather they were to witness in Jerusalem and outwards to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Jesus is the savior of all, not just the Jewish people. people. And Paul testifies to Jesus and the crowd, well they hate him for it.

Look at verse 22, away with such a fellow from the earth. He should not be allowed to live. Kill him. He cannot live. It's not looking good for Paul, is it?

He's made this plea to the crowd, but they just want to kill him. But again, the Roman tribune comes to his aid.

He brings him back into the barracks, and despite his initial attempts to have him flogged, Paul wisely plays the Roman citizen card, which has the intended effect.

- [36 : 03] Look at verse 29, those who are about to examine him, i.e. flog him, withdrew immediately. The tribune was afraid because he was about to flog a Roman citizen, which is illegal.

He could not do that. Paul asserts his rights and does so for the sake of his gospel witness.

Don't be afraid to assert your legal rights. It's not wrong, is it, to make use of legal protections, as Paul does here. So there's his first defense.

Let's look on to his second. This time it's in front of the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin. And it's pretty clear from the off that Paul is not going to be given a fair hearing, is it?

He barely gets one sentence out of his mouth. Look at the start there in chapter 23, verse 1 and 2. Paul barely gets a sentence out before the chief priest commands him to hit Paul on the mouth.

- [37 : 07] Verse 2. The whole thing, as with the previous defense with the Jews, is marked by chaos, total lack of concern for truth and justice.

And Paul, aware that within the council itself there were significant divisions on the whole question of the resurrection, Paul unpinning a grenade and allows it to explode in the middle of the Sanhedrin.

Look at verse 6. Brothers, I'm a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope of the resurrection of the dead that I'm on trial. See, Paul, his whole ministry is defined by his witnessing to the death and resurrection of Jesus and the implications of that, namely, repentance and faith.

And Paul says it's because of the resurrection that I'm here on trial today. And that brief word from Paul was all that was needed. to spit the Sanhedrin in two and by verse 10 the situation has become violent.

And again, the Roman tribune whisks Paul away to the safety of the barracks. Now, this marks the conclusion of a pretty tough few days of Paul, doesn't it?

- [38 : 29] Fierce opposition from those he once called friends, people he once knew. They now want him dead. Paul's perhaps wondering what on earth is going on.

Perhaps what we think as we read these chapters, what on earth is going on? But listen to the Lord's assessment. Listen to the Lord's gracious and comforting word to Paul here.

Verse 11 of chapter 23. The following night, the Lord stood by Paul and said, take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.

What wonderful words they must have been for Paul that night. Paul feared for his life at various points in the previous days.

The Lord's assurance to him surely came at a time when he was clouded with doubts and discouragements. What's going on? Have I done the right thing? Understandable that he should feel that way.

[39 : 48] Such a hard thing, isn't it, to step out as Paul has done in going to Jerusalem, stepping out in faith, convince us the right thing to do, and then to encounter all manner of opposition and difficulty, almost feeling as if he was wrong all along.

But, in what must have been one of the darkest hours of his life, the Lord brings this wonderful assurance, wonderful reassurance about his faithful witness there in Jerusalem, and the faithful witness yet to be in Rome.

Paul's plans we read about there in chapter 19 where he determined to go to Jerusalem and from there to Rome, the Lord says you are still going to Rome, you will be my witness there. Despite all that's happened the last few days, despite the crowd wanting to kill you, despite being under arrest, you will go to Rome, you will be my witness, you have been faithful to testifying about me and to what I've done.

What words of reassurance they would have been for Paul, don't you think? To have the Lord come there standing by him, saying take courage.

you see the gospel is unstoppable as the Lord promised it would be right back in chapter 1 verse 8.

[41 : 17] Nothing was going to stop the gospel going to the ends of the earth. It will go just as Jesus promised. And so we are to remember, you and I, are to remember to be reassured that in our everyday opportunities to speak the gospel, even if we find ourselves before rulers and authorities as Paul does here, we can be assured that God does stand with us in our witness.

And so we don't need to fear. He's there all the time with us, standing by us. Now that reality, that truth, is a truth to lock away.

we may not be arrested today or tomorrow, but there may come a day when we are. And we need this reality locked in our minds and in our hearts to know that the Lord does not leave us.

He will be there with us in that moment, and he will enable us and equip us to be his witnesses, just as he promised to, just as he did for Paul. So lock that truth away.

You may need it one day. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. And listen to the apostle Paul himself as he reflects on these events in his second letter to Timothy.

[42 : 40] Here's what Paul said, reflecting back on these events we've read about. He said, at my first offense, no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me.

All those people he was chatting to there in chapter 21, all those people who were urging him to fit in, they deserted him. None were there. But Paul writes, may it not be charged against them, but the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and that all the Gentiles might hear it.

So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever.

Amen. That was Paul's reflection as he looked back on these events in our chapters tonight. And you see the Lord stands by us as he did Paul.

As we seek to witness to him and to his resurrection, he stands by us. Everyone else may abandon you, but he won't. He will not abandon you.

[43 : 57] He is with you always. us and we witness to him. He will give us the words to say. He is the one who saves.

So take courage. Take courage from Paul's example, but take courage from these words that the Lord will not leave you. He'll be with you, standing with you, even if you're standing before the courts and the authorities.

That will be your opportunity to bear witness. Let me pray before we sing our closing hymn. Father, we thank you for these words of sober reality, these events which surely would have struck fear into Paul's heart.

The Lord help us to know that you always promise to be with us. You'll never leave or forsake us. And so help us, Lord, to be courageous witnesses to you, to the ends of the earth, until you call us home.

Lord, please help us to do that before we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen.