

Acts 23:11

The Lord stood near Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.”

It is tempting for us to think that it was much easier to be a Christian in New Testament times

- And not to realise that the Apostles sometimes became weary and discouraged
- Because of his testimony to Jesus and the power of his resurrection
- Paul has needed to be rescued from the hands of those who would kill him
- First from the crowd, and then from the Sanhedrin
- Although he was in the relative safety of the Roman barracks
- he was also arrested, and Paul did not know what the outcome would be
- He might have escaped death at the hands of the mob and of the Sanhedrin
- But that did not mean that he had escaped execution at the hands of the Romans
- In our reading, we might now pause to wonder how Paul was feeling
- Perhaps he wondered what would become of him
- Or how his present troubles might be turned to answer some good purpose
- The great commentator Matthew Henry observes:
- We do not find that any of the apostles or elders at Jerusalem came to him
- Perhaps they were too afraid; perhaps they were simply not permitted to come
- To be fair, the scriptures do not say that Paul was at rock bottom
- But I have a hunch that he was not far from it – *then Jesus came*

It reminded me of the old gospel song by Oswald Smith

- As a young woman, my Mother would sometimes sing a solo in my Dad’s services
- And often sang Christian songs around the house
- One song, has an opening verse about a blind beggar and runs like this:

One sat alone beside the highway begging,
His eyes were blind, the light he could not see.
He clutched his rags and shivered in the shadows
Then Jesus came and bade his darkness flee.

*When Jesus comes, the tempter's power is broken;
When Jesus comes, the tears are wiped away,
He takes the gloom and fills the life with glory,
For all is changed when Jesus comes to stay.*

It also reminds me of my own Father’s testimony

- Which he wrote when he was about my age and was published in a magazine
- To make sense of the story I have to read you quite a long passage
- Which is quite demanding for me, as I am sure you will understand

When I was 20 years old things changed for me in a dramatic way. I went for what was thought to be a routine x-ray examination, but I was recalled to see the specialist. I had tuberculosis in both lungs, one being affected very badly. The words of the specialist were ringing in my ears, ‘You have tuberculosis, you are very infectious, you are very sick and all the hospital beds are full.’ As

I lay there in all my misery, it came to me. ‘What about God? You’ve got to meet God, you’re sick, you’re dying, you’ve no hope, only the grave. What about your sins? What about meeting God, Creator of all things?’ I had said habitual prayers all my life, but somehow in that evening light I believe I prayed for the first time: it was a cry from a broken man. I said something like this, ‘God, if you’re there, I need you, I’m scared. I’m afraid to die.’ Later, I knelt down and prayed again:

Just as I am, without one plea
But that thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou bidd'st me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am, thou wilt receive,
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
Because thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am—thy love unknown
Has broken every barrier down—
Now to be thine, yea, thine alone,
O Lamb of God, I come!

I believe that night God saved me – took me just as I was.

Despite the prayers of countless people and medical effort my condition continued to deteriorate. After three years confined to bed I left the hospital at Plymouth for a third visit to Hawkmoor Thoracic Surgery Unit. It was decided to make me completely immobile by putting me into plaster for six months. This did not worry me too much, as I’d been through similar experiences before. One night in August, with the harvest moon hanging low in the sky, I had a haemorrhage, quite the worst I’d ever had and to make matters worse my bed was raised at the foot and the vomit covered my face and hair as I was unable to move. A nurse in much sympathy cleaned me up and asked if there was anything she could do. I asked her to pass me a Bible and just open it. I was glad of the moonlight because the man in the next bed, being an agnostic, was bitter towards me, and the electric light may have disturbed him. The Bible was opened to the passage of the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea. This passage seemed most irrelevant to my needs and as if the nurse sensed this she asked how reading that portion could help me. I didn’t know what to say, my morale was gone, my faith in shreds, my body strength the lowest I ever knew it, my throat ached, my eyes were stinging. I was broken in every way. *Then Jesus came.* My heart burned and, with joy in my soul and tears of gladness, I replied, that the God who delivered the Israelites would provide a way for me.

Luke records:

The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks. The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

(Acts 23:10-11)

Here we see the coming of Jesus:

- I GIVING COURAGE
- II GIVING COMMENDATION
- III GIVING CONFIDENCE

- I GIVING COURAGE

Take courage!

Wasn't this just the word that Paul needed to hear?

- Everything that he once had stood for was set against him
- The mob had tried to lynch him for preaching Jesus to the Gentiles
- And he had to be rescued from the Sanhedrin
- When he had begun his defence before the Sanhedrin, with the words
- 'I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day'
- Meaning that his preaching Jesus to the Gentiles was God's work
- The high priest ordered those near Paul to strike him on the mouth

Paul was justifiably angry at such a violation of the law

- Which presumed defendants innocent until they were proved guilty
- Nevertheless, Paul's angry response does not seem much in the spirit of Jesus
- who "when they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate
- when he suffered, he made no threats" (1 Peter 2:23)
- We realise that sometimes Peter and the other disciples said and did the wrong thing
- This seems to be one of the occasions when Paul, losing his composure, did the same
- Yet he was quick to acknowledge his wrong – more than many of us are willing to do

It's difficult to know exactly why Paul did not recognise the high priest

- Perhaps, in the hastily convened Sanhedrin, he was not in usual place
- Perhaps he was not wearing his robes of office
- In any event, it is unlikely that Paul, who had not been much in Jerusalem for years
- Would have recognised the high priest by sight

Despite the wrongful actions of the high priest, Paul is ready to withdraw his remark

- It is a reminder that, even if we do not always respect the individual
- It is important for Christians to respect the office
- Which is why to me it sounds so inappropriate to speak disrespectfully
- Of national leaders, such as the Queen, the Prime Minister and others
- Or of church leaders, not only those we have not met, but also those we have

Despite such hostility, Paul is to ‘Take courage!’ and further, we see the coming of Jesus

II GIVING COMMENDATION

As you have testified about me in Jerusalem

Paul had anticipated that things in Jerusalem would be difficult for him

- He knew that prison and hardships awaited him in every city (Acts 20:23)
- He had to tear himself away from the Ephesian elders (Acts 21:1)
- At Tyre the believers urged Paul not to go up to Jerusalem (Acts 21:4)
- At Caesarea, Agabus had warned Paul what awaited him in Jerusalem (Acts 21:11)
- Again, the people pleaded with Paul not to go on to Jerusalem (Acts 21:12)

Things did not exactly go well when Paul arrived in the city

- He was accused of speaking against the Jews, the Law and the temple (21:28)
- He was accused of defiling the temple by taking a Gentile into the inner court (21:29)
- (even though he had not done so)
- When the crowd began to riot he was arrested (21:33)
- When Paul tried to give account of himself before the crowd
- Their response was, ‘Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!’ (22:22)
- The Roman commander proposed to have him interrogated and tortured
- And it was only his appeal to his Roman citizenship that saved him from flogging
- The commander therefore brought Paul to stand before the Sanhedrin
- Here, as he began his defence, he was first struck on the mouth
- And then the centre of an argument from which he had to be rescued
- For fear that he would be torn to pieces

This hardly seems like a successful mission – in fact, everything seemed to be going wrong

- and yet Jesus commends him for his faithfulness in the work
- although not an excuse for burying our heads in the sand, or ploughing on regardless
- it does show that sometimes we need the courage of our own convictions

The courage of Paul’s convictions are centred on his hope in the risen Lord Jesus

- a constant theme of Paul’s preaching was the resurrection
- the Sadducees and Pharisees could not agree about this
- for the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection

“My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead.”

Some have seen this statement of Paul as a tactical ploy to divide and conquer the Sanhedrin

- others have suggested that Paul is making a rather extravagant claim
- that he is on trial because of his hope in the resurrection of the dead
- when the resurrection scarcely seems to have been mentioned
- but Paul is neither being tactical or extravagant
- the truth of the matter is that it is the divine revelation of the risen Lord Jesus
- that changed him from what he was, to what he is

We cannot know what was going through Paul's mind that night

- an educated guess suggests he replayed in his mind what happened at the Sanhedrin
- had he given good account of his faith in Jesus Christ his risen Lord and Saviour?
- As he reviewed the events of the last few days and was probably at a low point
- Jesus came, to give him courage and commendation

Paul had been serving Christ in what he had to endure

- It was through no fault of his own that he was facing these trials
- It was because of his faithfulness that he was being persecuted
- It was not his former persecution of the church that the Lord Jesus remembered
- Though Paul often brought that up in self-accusation
- It was his persecution for the Lord Jesus that was remembered now
- And his testimony was not finished – this was not the end of the road for Paul
- But just a stepping stone to further and more glorious service

We see the coming of Jesus

I GIVING COURAGE

II GIVING COMMENDATION

III GIVING CONFIDENCE

now you shall testify in Rome

The promise that Paul would testify in Rome needed to give him renewed confidence

- Because the next morning forty men were part of a plot to kill Paul
- Taking a solemn oath not to eat until they had killed him

Their plot was simple enough

- They would go to the commander and ask for him to bring Paul out
- So that the Sanhedrin could get more accurate information about his case
- And then in the narrow streets they could take him and kill him

Paul's nephew told Paul about this plot and Paul sent him to the Roman commander

- Secretly, the commander arranged for Paul to be taken to Caesarea
- Under the jurisdiction of Governor Felix

The letter that the commander, Claudius Lysias, wrote to Felix is interesting

- Both in what it says and in what it does not say
- It is true that the Jews had seized Paul and were about to kill him
- And it is true that the Roman troops rescued him
- It tactfully omits that the commander had Paul in chains
- And was about to have him interrogated and flogged
- The commander explains that it is a religious dispute
- And that there was no charge against Paul deserving death or imprisonment
- We have often seen that Luke's account of Paul parallels his account of Jesus
- And this to-ing and fro-ing between Jewish and Roman authorities continues that

Paul had wanted to preach the gospel in Rome for some time (Acts 19:21)

- The gospel had already reached Rome and a church had been established there
- And yet, perhaps because he was a Roman citizen, Paul wanted to go there
- He had already written to the Romans that he longed to see them (Romans 1:11)

The journey from Jerusalem to Caesarea turns out to be the first step

- In Paul's long journey to Rome, the centre of the Empire
- It is the place to which he had longed to go
- But circumstances beyond his control had prevented him from going
- Now circumstances beyond his control were enabling him to go
- He was on his way to Rome, his travel arrangements sorted out by the Romans
- It is a lesson that if God has a plan – he will find a way
- All he asks for us is that we take courage and are faithful as his plan unfolds