

## Finding Courage

### [Acts 23:1-11](#)

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Twenty-five percent of the book of Acts is devoted to the imprisonment of the Apostle Paul. Why? This is supposed to be the story of the Spirit-filled followers of Jesus Christ. So why does Luke, the author, devote so much attention to Paul's imprisonment? Because at least twenty-five percent of the time the church is led by the Spirit to places it would rather not go. These are places of conflict where we are made anxious and frightened. Thus, they are places where we have to find courage to survive.

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You will remember from two weeks ago that when a mob was about to tear Paul apart at the temple, a Roman tribune rushed into the fray and arrested Paul in order to save his life. Last week, Dr. Evans spoke about Paul's defense before the crowd, but that defense only led to the start of another riot. The Roman tribune still had not figured out what Paul did to make the people so upset. So he started to have Paul flogged in order to make him talk, but when he discovered Paul was a Roman citizen, the tribune knew he couldn't do that. So his next plan was to call a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council, and order them to conduct a trial of Paul while he watched.

When Paul faced the Sanhedrin, he was in a lot of trouble here. He knew it. The tribune and the council knew it. And for a few minutes, he seemed to forget that God knew it as well. So when he was in trouble, caught in an overwhelming conflict, he responded the way we often do. First with his heart, which had been hurt. Then with his head, which developed a scheme that backfired.

Verses one to five depict what happens when we respond to conflict with hurt hearts. The Apostle began by defending himself, "Brothers, up to this day I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God." The high priest ordered those who are near Paul to slap him on the mouth. After they do that, Paul strikes out verbally at the high priest, "God will strike you, you white washed wall!" And then he angrily denounced the priest for violating his rights. Those standing nearby pointed out that he had just insulted God's high priest. It was then that Paul realized his mistake, and apologized by quoting a scripture that forbids us to speak against our leaders.

When Jesus was slapped in his trial, he responded much more graciously by turning the other cheek. But the Apostles responded more like we would, by lashing out. When you are hurt in a conflict, the first reaction is always to hurt the person who hurt you. But has that ever helped? Has that ever resolved the conflict? No, usually, it only results in discovering, as Paul did, that you are committing the same offenses as the person who hurt you. When someone comes at you in business, or in politics, or even in your family, it doesn't take a lot of courage to go after them as well. That may seem natural. But as Ted Koppel said in a recent commencement address, part of what is expected of human beings is to rise above nature.

If we've learned anything from the 2,000 years the church has been persecuted, it is that Jesus' counsel to turn the other cheek is very powerful. In fact, historically it has proven to be the best way to bring oppressors to their knees. Turning the other cheek is not a mark of being a victim. It is a mark of quiet strength that will not be deterred from our convictions, even we are bullied. If you do not have that inner strength, the bully will always win by turning you into a bully also. But it takes a lot of courage to turn the other cheek.

How do you find that kind of courage? Not by trusting your heart. It's too hurt. Not by trusting your head, either. It's too cunning. When we are cunning, we always get trapped in the snares we lay. But using his head was Paul's next idea. And it doesn't work out any better than when he used his heart.

When Paul noticed that some on the council were Sadducees and others were Pharisees, he appealed to an old debate that had long divided these two religious parties. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, but the Pharisees did. So Paul said, "I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead." This would be like strolling into congress and starting a discussion on tax cuts. It has a way of dividing the house in a hurry.

When the Pharisees and the Sadducees started arguing with each other, at first it seemed like Paul had made a pretty slick maneuver. He had divided his enemies. The Pharisees said, "Well, there's nothing wrong with this guy." The Sadducees became even more enraged. Whenever we scheme in the midst of the conflict, it always results in making the circle of conflict and hurt even larger. Now the two parties of religious leaders were at each other's throats.

Have you ever watched the British Parliament on C-Span when the two parties are really going at each other? One party is on one side facing the other party on the other side. When a speaker from one side rises to the podium, he or she is hooted and ridiculed by the people sitting on the other side. That is how I envision this scene, with the apostle being in the middle of it all. Only in verse ten we are told that the dissension became violent, which is worse than even Parliament usually gets. The benches cleared as the Sadducees and Pharisees went after each other. But who was in the middle of this brawl getting torn apart? Paul and his great idea, which suddenly wasn't seeming so great. We are told that the tribune, again, had to rescue Paul because he's afraid they would tear Paul to pieces.

One of our favorite schemes when we are in conflict is to appeal to those who are on our side, to line up our allies, or to make sure we have the votes of the stockholders, politicians, colleagues, or other members of the family. But according to this text, even those who are on your side will pull at you. They will start to demand something for their loyalty. Namely, they will demand that you define yourself by the side you are on. That demand will eventually pull at your soul, which belongs to God and not to your side of a debate.

You are not just a Pharisee or Sadducee, a manager or an employee, Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal. You are most of all a citizen of the Kingdom of God. And God's kingdom does not easily reduce to the demands of our competing allegiances.

Heroes in history have always been those who have risen above conflicts to show us another way. In the midst of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln never allowed himself to be only the champion of the North, but kept talking about a union of the states. In the midst of the great civil rights marches, Martin Luther King, Jr. never allowed himself to be the champion of Negroes, but kept talking about his dream of a color blind society. And, in the midst of your conflicts, if you are going to be true to your identity as a citizen of God's kingdom, a kingdom which transcends factions, you will have to avoid defining yourself by one of those dividing factions. That takes a lot of courage. It will mean that, like Paul, you'll be criticized even by those who agree with you on the issues, because you are now trying to make room for the enemy. How do we find the courage to do something heroic, to rise above the fray, and to take the lonely stand of one who can envision another way?

Well, the answer to this question came later that evening when Paul was returned to his cell in the Roman barracks. We are told, "That night the Lord stood near to him, and said, 'Keep up your courage. For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome.'" The way we find courage is to first pay attention to the Lord who is standing near us. Nearer than we realize. So you are not alone. And this conflict is not about you. If Paul was put in jail for talking about Jesus, that means that this conflict belongs to the Lord and not Paul. The primary reason why we get beaten down by the conflicts of life is we try to own them. But if you are going to give everything to Jesus, you have to give him even the slimy things of life like conflict. Since he is near, he is ready to take it. But the first thing you have to do is prayerfully place the conflict in his hands.

Then, secondly, since we are no longer distracted by the conflict, we can hear the Lord's promise to give us a future filled with hope. "Paul, I'm not done with you," the Lord essentially said. "There is a long way to go, all the way to Rome." This became an enormous source of encouragement to Paul for the next two years. Through more trials, shipwrecks, and a lot more conflict, Paul kept drawing courage from this promise. The Lord was standing near, and he had a future for this servant.

So does the Lord have a future for you. He has a future for your family. He has a future for your business. He has a future for this nation, and for this world, which at times appears to be torn apart by conflict. How do I know that? Because the risen Lord is standing near. If you can see that, then you will also see another way through the conflict beyond winning and losing. And you will have the courage to lead those around you to the one kingdom of God in Jerusalem, Rome, and to the ends of the earth. Even your own little corner of the earth.

The way we lead others to that Kingdom is not by triumphing over our enemies, but by finding the courage to confess our common need for the Savior, who is standing near.

O God, give us the courage of your Holy Spirit to live by our one great commitment to follow Jesus, when he leads us into conflict, and to follow him when he leads us out of it into your own kingdom. Amen.