

PAUL'S TESTIMONY TO HIS FELLOW JEWS

Acts 21:40-22:29

Key Verse: 22:14,15

“Then he said: ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.’”

In the last passage Paul was surrounded by coworkers who wept and pleaded with him not to go to Jerusalem. Paul said to them, “Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” Paul was not speaking empty words. When he was arrested and beaten in Jerusalem, he was not afraid; he was not trying to save himself. He was ready to give his life for Jesus and the gospel. He was courageous and wise in that hostile situation. Jesus said, “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mk 8:35). May God help us to live by this truth.

In today's passage St. Paul shares his personal testimony with the Jews in Jerusalem. He did so to help them accept Jesus as the Messiah and to accept their mission as a shepherd nation for the Gentiles. Paul spoke in a way that would be credible and convincing to Jews. So this account differs from the one in chapter 9, where Paul is first introduced as the apostle to the Gentiles. Through Paul's testimony we learn the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to save sinners and use us in his work. May God help us to humbly accept this grace in our hearts.

First, Jesus saved Paul by his grace (21:40-22:9).

After getting the attention of the crowd through the wise use of language, Paul shared his personal testimony with them. Look at verse 3. “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today.” Paul's religious training and zeal were matchless. The problem was that it did not lead him to know Jesus personally. He was self-righteous, proud and vicious. He arrested both men and women and threw them into prison. He was so passionate for Judaism and so adamant to stop Christianity that he did not hesitate to put Christians to death. In fact, he wanted to destroy all Christians in the whole world. When he finished in Jerusalem, he went to Damascus to persecute Christians there. In this way, he became an enemy of Christ and of God. Religious training that does not lead to Christ only makes people self-righteous, proud and destructive. Staunch churchgoing people who do not know Christ, as well as Muslim brothers and sisters, have the same problem. Jesus warned the Pharisees, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (Jn 5:39-40).

What happened to this self-righteous and dangerous man? Look at verses 6-7. “About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?’” The Risen Christ visited Paul personally. At that time, his name was Saul. The Risen Christ revealed himself to Saul as a bright light from heaven flashing around him. It was so powerful that Saul was knocked to the ground. The Risen Christ gave this most glorious revelation of himself to Saul, the chief enemy of the early Christians. Later Paul understood why. It was to reveal the depth of Jesus' grace. So Paul said in 1 Timothy 1:15-16. “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners,

Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.”

The immediate effect of Christ’s appearance to Saul was profound. Look at verse 8. “‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked. ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied.” Jesus emphasized that Saul was persecuting him. Saul’s intense effort to destroy Christians was the same as persecuting the Risen Christ. Saul realized that he was wrong, totally and completely wrong. His life direction and purpose were against God. His actions were those of God’s enemy. Saul had to admit that he was wrong. This realization did not come through Saul’s intellect, but through revelation from Christ. Before meeting the Risen Christ, most people are blindly self-righteous as a matter of life and death. When Saul met the Risen Christ he realized that he was a sinner.

Saul also realized who Jesus is. Jesus is the Lord. Jesus is the Risen Christ. Jesus is God Almighty. Jesus could have crushed Saul long before this. But he did not. Instead, Jesus bore all of Saul’s mistreatment. Each time Saul humiliated a Christian, Jesus bore the shame. Each time Saul beat a Christian, Jesus bore the pain. Jesus did this, not because he was weak, but because he was willing to suffer to save people from their sins. He was willing to suffer to save Saul from his sins. Jesus did not come to condemn people, but to save people from their sins. To do so, Jesus suffered on the cross and died. Jesus continues to suffer together with his servants who are persecuted for his name’s sake. In this way, Jesus reveals God’s love to sinners. Romans 5:8 says, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Paul’s testimony is not really about himself. It is about the grace of Christ and the love of God. Paul’s testimony is given to us so that we may believe in Jesus and be saved.

Second, Jesus chose Paul as his witness to all men (10-16).

When Saul realized his own sinfulness and the divine grace of the Risen Christ, he could not but surrender to Jesus, saying, “What shall I do, Lord?” From this moment, Saul is no longer himself, but he was a servant of Jesus Christ. His life and future belonged to Christ. The Risen Christ told him, “Get up and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do” (10). The Risen Christ had a definite assignment for Saul. But he did not tell him directly what it was. Instead, he sent Ananias to Saul. Look at verses 12-13. “A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him.” Here Paul emphasizes the Jewishness of Ananias. It was to establish the credibility of his testimony. Jewish people believed that if two Jewish witnesses agreed on something, their testimony was valid (Jn 8:17,18). Paul was a Jew. Ananias was a Jew. Their testimony agreed. Furthermore, it was accompanied by a miracle: the restoration of Paul’s sight. Jews believed that only the Messiah could open the eyes of the blind. Paul’s testimony clearly met the Jewish standard for credibility.

God’s assignment for Paul is stated in verses 14-15. Ananias said to him, “The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.” “The God of our fathers” refers to the God of the Jewish people. God had chosen Paul to know his will. This refers to a divine mystery hidden in God—his plan to send the Messiah through the Jews and then spread the gospel to all nations for world salvation. God’s plan was mentioned in the Old Testament and taught by Jesus himself. But few understood it. By God’s revelation, Paul deeply understood God’s plan for world salvation.

God also chose Paul to see the Righteous One. "The Righteous One" was a Jewish expression for the Messiah (Ac 3:14; 7:52). "To see the Righteous One" means to see the Risen Christ in glory. After seeing him, Paul understood Christ in light of the entire Bible's teaching. He found in Christ the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. He found Christ to be God's Righteousness for all who believe. On that basis he wrote Romans, explaining the righteousness that comes by faith.

God also chose Paul to hear words from his mouth. The Jews believed that God chose certain men and spoke to them. Then these men spoke to their people with divine authority. They were to be respected, listened to, and obeyed. Such were the Old Testament prophets. Paul was claiming similar authority. He heard the words of God through Jesus. He was not sharing human ideas with them, but the very word of God through Jesus. Paul wrote most of the New Testament. The New Testament is not merely Paul's thoughts, but the word of God.

Why did God give Paul special revelation? It was nothing but God's grace to him. And it was to use him as his witness. Through Paul God wanted to reveal Jesus to all men so that those who believed the word of God through him would be saved from their sins, receive eternal life, and be members of God's kingdom. Of course, Paul's calling was unique. However, all Christians are called to share the task of being Jesus' witnesses. Paul said in Romans 1:5, "Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith."

Ananias concluded in verse 16. "And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name." All Paul had to do was to call on Jesus' name for the forgiveness of his sins. Paul's sins were many and the Risen Christ knew them in detail. The Risen Christ knew each person he had punched, each person he had spit on, and each person he had kicked in the buttocks. But he did not ask Paul to write a detailed account of his sins and meditate on his own wickedness. He challenged Paul to accept the grace of forgiveness and begin his life of mission right away. Paul had to be baptized. This required a clear decision. He would be misunderstood and persecuted. But Paul got up, accepted Christ's forgiveness and began his life of mission. Many people psychoanalyze their inner persons endlessly, wallow in guilt and self-pity, and do nothing for Christ. Like Paul, we must accept the grace of forgiveness of sins with a clear decision of faith and get on with the life of mission that God has called us to.

Third, God sends Paul to the Gentiles (17-29).

After spending some time in Damascus, Paul returned to Jerusalem as a Christian. While praying in the temple, he fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking, "Quick! Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me." Paul was sure that the Jews in Jerusalem would accept his testimony. He knew them very well and they knew him. Paul had been the chief persecutor of the early Christians. But now he had become a Christian. What could possibly explain his conversion except that Christ was living? Paul was so sure about this that he almost argued with the Lord. But the Lord spoke to him forcefully. "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles" (21). God's plan was different than Paul's plan. God's plan was to use Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles. God works in his own way. We may have strong ideas about how God should work or about how God should use us. But God is not bound by our ideas and plans. God does his own work. God sent Paul to the Gentiles and used him greatly as we have seen through his mission journeys. Sometimes we have fixed ideas about how God should work. But we must submit to God's will in doing his work.

Paul knew that mentioning the Gentile ministry was putting his finger right on the sore spot of the Jewish people. But he did so boldly and clearly, like Dr. Ben Toh does in one-to-one Bible study. The crowd reacted strongly. They became irrational and violent. They were like sports fanatics who blindly express their team pride, cheering wildly when a player from the opposing team gets injured or dies.

The commander again stepped into the situation and ordered Paul to be taken into the barracks. He wanted to flog Paul as a way to get at the truth this event. He needed to understand that the Jews were angry at Paul simply because Paul helped the Gentiles receive God's blessing. The Roman commander was one of the Gentiles. The Jews despised him and wanted to dissociate from him. Paul, on the other hand, was a shepherd for Gentiles, including Roman people. In the senselessness of the violent demonstration the Roman commander almost flogged Paul. It would have been foolish and totally unnecessary. Paul stopped him by revealing that he was a Roman citizen. This ended the effort to flog Paul. Here we learn that although Paul was ready to be bound and to die in Jerusalem, he did not suffer senselessly when it was not necessary. He was not a masochist who enjoyed suffering. He was a man of mission who was willing to give his life to fulfill God's purpose for him.

In this passage, through Paul's testimony, we learned the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ suffered and died for our sins. He is ready to forgive our sins. He wants to give us a glorious mission. May God help each of us to humbly and boldly accept God's grace and mission.