

“TAKE COURAGE”

Acts 22:30–23:35

Key Verse: 23:11

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

What are you most afraid of losing? Many have a general FOMO, “fear of missing out.” Some fear losing control, or their identity, or a reputation they worked hard to build. Some fear for their children’s future. In today’s passage Paul faces the most basic human fear, loss of life. But for him it’s not just personal; his death could mean weakening the churches and stopping the spread of the gospel. There’s drama and danger swirling around him. But in it we learn more from him about what it means to be a witness of Jesus. A witness mainly needs courage. What is “courage”? What’s the purpose of it? And where does it come from? May God speak to us through his word.

Part 1: A witness lives before God in all good conscience (22:30–23:5)

Paul has just narrowly escaped flogging; now his story continues. The next day the Roman tribune unbinds him and summons the chief priests and all the council to hear Paul, to find the real reason why he’s being accused (22:30). What does he say first? Read verse 1. Paul mentions his conscience in the next chapter as well (24:16). In fact, in all his letters, Paul uses the word “conscience” 19 more times.¹ Why does he mention it so much? It’s because all human beings have a conscience. Our conscience helps us know right from wrong. When God made us, he built into us this moral monitor (Rom.2:14). As humans we’re all accountable to both God and others. Accountability requires honesty, not pretense. What keeps us honest? It’s our conscience. As Christians, we have the clear teachings of the Bible and of the Holy Spirit. But our conscience is key to maintaining honesty; in fact, all three work together. Paul explains elsewhere that our conscience alone can be weak, defiled, or even “seared.” Sometimes it makes us conflicted with inner accusations (Rom.2:15). We need the Bible and the Holy Spirit to educate and cleanse our conscience. And Hebrews 9:14 adds: “...how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” Accepting his blood shed for my sin is the only way my conscience can be purified from guilt and legalism so that I can serve God. This way of living, “before God in all good conscience,” is more important than we realize. It’s easy to focus on what people think, but ignore God. It seems

¹ Rom.2:15; 9:1; 13:5; 1 Cor.8:7,10,12; 10:25,27–29; 2 Cor.1:12; 4:2; 5:11; 1 Tim.1:5,19; 3:9; 4:2; 2 Tim.1:3; Titus 1:15.

harmless, but this is how hypocrisy starts. Paul is keenly aware that God is the one looking at his motives—even his private words, thoughts and actions. So he's most concerned with not how people see him, but how God does. As a servant of Christ, he's seeking God's approval, not people's (Gal.1:10). Like Paul, living before God in all good conscience gives our witness integrity. It also gives us the inner peace and strength to share our faith. Paul's good conscience also gives him boldness. In verse 2, his words convict the high priest, who, instead of repenting, attempts to silence him by having him struck. Verse 3 shows how Paul's good conscience empowered him to rebuke the one who ordered the strike. In this, Paul has the image of Jesus, who rebuked the Pharisees for the same hypocrisy (Matt.23:27). Paul's conscience continues to guide him. In verses 4–5, when he hears the teaching of Scripture, he submits. Yet, in good conscience, it's hard for him to see Ananias, in his corruption, as the high priest.

Part 2: A witness focuses on the good news of the resurrection (6–9)

Once again, the Holy Spirit inspires Paul with wisdom (Luke 21:15). After looking intently at these men (1a), he remembers how divided they are. So he cries out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial" (6b). This is profound wisdom, for several reasons. Firstly, Paul is not breaking with those who held hope in God's words in the Law and the Prophets. He believes the gospel of Jesus is the true fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets (Luke 24:44). Also, with these words Paul is saying God sent his Messiah to give all people hope. It's not a political, cultural, or racist hope; it's the good news of living hope in the kingdom of God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Pet.1:3). It's exactly what even these Sanhedrin members need most.

Throughout the Book of Acts, the resurrection of Jesus is central. In chapter 2, Peter first proclaims it to the crowds, and they're cut to the heart, repent, and join the community of believers. In chapters 4–5, when Peter and John proclaim the resurrection of Jesus to the Sanhedrin, they are greatly annoyed, then arrest and eventually beat them. In chapter 7, when Stephen testifies that he sees the risen and ascended Jesus, they rush at him and stone him to death. In chapter 13, on his first missionary journey Paul preaches the resurrection of Jesus, and many Jews and devout converts accept it. In chapter 17, when Paul speaks about the resurrection of Jesus in Athens, some mock him. Now he shares the hope and the resurrection of the dead through Jesus with the Sanhedrin, and there's violent dissension in this ruling body (23:7–9).

The resurrection of Jesus is not intended to incite anger; it's good news for all people, of all places, at all times. Yet people often resist it. Why? Because it just doesn't seem practical. And if we really believe it, people may think we're out

of our minds. But if we try to take the resurrection out of the gospel of Jesus, it's no longer the gospel. Why is the resurrection of Jesus such good news? It's not only because it truly happened, but also because, as we've already said, it gives all people living hope. And this hope is amazing. Earlier, Peter, quoting David, described this hope: "I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence."² Our hope comes alive when we see the Risen Jesus always before us. With him at our right hand, we are not shaken; he himself restores, confirms, strengthens and establishes us (1 Pet.5:10). He makes us like living stones in the spiritual house of God's people (1 Pet.2:4–5). His presence makes our hearts glad, and our tongues rejoice. Through faith in the Risen Jesus our flesh dwells in hope. In him, we're not afraid of being abandoned to death or of the corruption of our bodies. We're sure we're on the paths of life, and filled with the hope of gladness in his eternal presence.

Without an awareness of the Risen Jesus, we're estranged from God. We easily get ensnared by sin, and no amount of effort, good works, or sincerity can get us out. But through the death and resurrection of Jesus we all can be reconciled to God.³ The good news of the resurrection of Jesus gives us sure hope, confident hope, living hope. If we think about it, life without hope is empty, and in the end, miserable. But his resurrection gives us peace, hope, and joy to endure any and all sufferings, and deep assurance of God's love (Rom.5:1–5).

Part 3: A witness draws courage from the presence of the Lord Jesus (10–11)

Verse 10 tells us once again that Roman soldiers rescue Paul from violently hostile people. He's back in the army barracks, similar to what happened so often before. In almost every city in Galatia, Paul was beaten and chased away. In Philippi, he was beaten, imprisoned, and delivered by God, then chased away from Thessalonica and Berea. In Corinth, he was so despised by people, he just wanted to leave. In Ephesus, despite his wholehearted, diligent ministry, even with tears, they plotted against him there, too. Now in Jerusalem, the fury against Paul is at its peak. He's protected for now, but he's still in danger.

The following night the Lord Jesus stands by Paul (11a). It may seem unusual, but this too has happened before. First it was outside Damascus, when Jesus ended Paul's rebellion as his enemy. Then, in the Jerusalem temple, Jesus told him he was sending him far away to the Gentiles (22:21). Years later, in Corinth, Jesus spoke to him in a vision at night, saying, "Do not be afraid, but go

² Acts 2:25–28; Psalm 16:8–11.

³ Rom.5:10; 2 Cor.5:18.

on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people (18:9–10). Now in Jerusalem, he stands by him again. In fact, in his last letter, Paul says Jesus stood by him one last time in his life (2 Tim.4:17–18). Without the constant presence of Jesus, Paul could not have continued serving him.

Read verse 11. What exactly is this “courage”? In Greek, the words “Take courage” are a single term; it means to be firm or resolute in the face of danger or difficulty. It also can mean, “Cheer up.” It’s often translated in the English Bible as, “Take heart.” “Take courage” is personal encouragement directly from the Lord Jesus. Throughout his ministry, when he encountered suffering or troubled individuals, including his disciples, he would say, “Take heart” or, “Take courage.” He’s still giving us this word. Living among sinful people, life can be incredibly difficult, and often discouraging (Heb.12:3). How can we have a new heart, and new courage? It comes not from within ourselves, but from the presence of the Risen, Living Lord Jesus with us. Sometimes we feel overwhelmed, crushed, and utterly alone. We need to hear his words personally, “Take courage.”

During the early centuries, Christians were tortured, burned at the stake, or fed to the lions. Yet in the face of such hardships, many heard the voice of Jesus, which empowered them not to shrink back but to finish their race with living hope. He still gives his people this word today. In May of 2022, a 19-year-old Christian student in Nigeria named Deborah Samuel was accused of blasphemy by a mob of Muslim classmates and others, simply due to her faith in Jesus. Just before they stoned her to death, her final reported words to them were, “What do you hope to achieve through this?” She displayed the ultimate courage, standing firm in Christ as she laid down her life for her faith.

How do we know that Jesus is with us? His final words to his disciples were, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt.28:20b). We may not see him or feel him, but we have his promise: “I am with you always.” We walk by faith in his promise, not by sight (2 Cor.5:7). His presence with us gives us real courage. For what do we need courage today? First, we all need courage to let go of our old sins and lifestyle and to commit our life practically to Jesus. We need courage to stand on his side and to live with a Christian identity. We need courage to speak up about our faith even to mocking or hostile people. We need courage to go forward in faith. We need courage in the face of all kinds of mind games and criticism. We need courage to keep on loving, as our Lord Jesus commanded us.

And one last comment about verse 11: Clearly, Jesus was not done with Paul yet. As he’s been telling him, his plan, his will, is to eventually bring him to Rome. And as we’ll see in the rest of Acts, it would not be easy to get there. So

why is getting Paul to this destination so important? Through Paul, God wants the world to know that the Caesars of this world are not Savior and Lord; Jesus is Savior and Lord. Caesar's kingdom is not our hope; God's kingdom is our hope. And through Paul being in Rome, God wants to bring the good news of his salvation in Jesus to all peoples.

Part 4: Our Sovereign God protects his witness (12–35)

In this last section, the Lord protects Paul in two ways. In verses 12–22, it's through Paul's nephew, who hears of a plot against Paul. The plot is so severe that over 40 men swear an oath not to eat or drink until Paul is dead. They instruct the chief priests and the elders to request the tribune to send for Paul under the guise of learning more about him, intending to ambush him along the way. The nephew secretly informs Paul, Paul tells a centurion, the centurion takes the nephew to the tribune, and the tribune, aware of Paul's Roman citizenship, protects the nephew and Paul. Next, in verses 23–35, the Lord employs even the mighty Roman army to protect Paul. At the third hour of the night, 9:00 PM, the tribune orders two centurions with two hundred soldiers with seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen, to transport Paul from Jerusalem to Governor Felix at Caesarea. He also sends a letter with Paul, portraying himself favorably and explaining the reason for the transfer—he could find no charges against Paul warranting imprisonment or death. The soldiers escort Paul by night as far as Antipatris (map); the next day, they return to the barracks, allowing the horsemen to take Paul the rest of the way to Caesarea. Because Paul is from Cilicia, a province under Felix's jurisdiction, the governor agrees to hear him when his accusers arrive. Paul is then guarded in Herod's Praetorium, another palace of Herod the Great. In this unexpected place, Paul receives much-needed rest. The Lord Jesus is ruling and over-ruling even the Roman governor. The Lord Jesus is still "the one who works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph.1:11).

So, what are you most afraid of losing? Do we believe the Risen Lord Jesus is standing by us? Are we aware of his presence? Are we striving to live in all good conscience before him? Are we focused on the good news of his resurrection? Can we hear his words personally, "Take courage"? Do we believe his sovereign hand of protection? Let's read our key verse, 23:11. May God give us renewed faith in our Risen Lord Jesus, and the courage to be his witnesses wherever he leads us.