

February 27, 2005

“His Control and Our Courage” Acts 22:23-23:11

FCF: Anxious for what’s to come because of what we’ve seen thus far
PROPOSITION: (magnet) Because Jesus is in control of all things,
(anchor) we can take courage.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

A couple of weeks ago, we spoke briefly about a few “reality-based” TV shows – “The Bachelor” and “The Bachelorette.” There are others – “Fear Factor,” for example. I haven’t seen much of it but the premise is pretty straight forward. Contestants are basically called on to outperform, outlast, out-endure the competition through a series of seemingly threatening and perhaps even grotesque tasks. I say “seemingly” because none of the tension is really as real as we are led to believe. These folks all volunteered and can walk away at any time. Which sort of takes the reality out of its “reality-base.”

After all, what about the “fear factor” we face with the real things we are called to and the struggles, the hurts they often bring? The things we didn’t volunteer for and cannot simply just walk away from? Or, if we do, not without great cost to ourselves or others? We need more than these artificial realities. We need something really real.

SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 22:23-23:11

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Profiles in Courage – some of you may remember it. It was a book written by John F. Kennedy when he was a senator from Massachusetts. He was recuperating from back surgery and during that time he wrote a collection of essays on American politicians who risked their careers fighting for just but unpopular causes. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 1957 and caused many in the nation to take notice of the young senator – both for his literary skill and his understanding of the great issues of American history.

There is a profile in courage we need to consider this morning – the Apostle Paul. In the text before us, what form of courage do we see? Why was it needed? What was its source? And what can we learn? Let me remind you as to where we are in our study. Paul has returned from his third missionary journey to visit the church in Jerusalem and to deliver an offering collected for them. He has been informed of a rift in that church over a misunderstanding of his ministry and urged to go to the Temple so as to allay their concerns. While there, he is accosted by some Jews hostile to his message and accused of ceremonial violations. A riot ensues, the Romans get involved and the tribune allows Paul to speak to the crowd. That solving nothing in terms of getting an answer, the tribune orders Paul to be flogged, scourged. But it’s discovered he is a Roman citizen. So torture is out. Finally, the tribune orders a trial and, since this was a matter concerning Jewish law and traditions, the Sanhedrin (the highest religious court in Jewish Palestine) is called to appear. There a conflict takes place between Paul and the high priest and then a dispute between two parties within the Sanhedrin. Still the tribune has no answers. And so Paul is put back under guard. It’s been a long two days.

Everything Paul had said was going to happen has happened (**READ Acts 20:22-23**). That evening something extraordinary occurs (**READ Acts 23:11**). The Lord Jesus comes to minister to His servant. Why? It’s interesting to think back to the last time something like this occurred. It was in Corinth at the beginning of Paul’s time there. Things had been hard. And they were going to get harder (**READ Acts 18:9-11**). Paul was afraid. Jesus came and said, “*I have things under control. Do not be afraid.*” And

so he stayed. Here in Acts 23, Paul was feeling afraid again. And even dejected. And Jesus comes yet again and says, “*I have things under control. Take courage.*” Take courage. Do not lose heart. Do not give up. Do not give in. Take courage.

He is with us. And He is in control. So take courage. That’s something we need to hear as well. For there are times our courage begins to slip. We lose sight of the reality that His hand is on the wheel, that things really aren’t spinning out of control – ours yes, but not His. Look with me at how we see this showing itself there in Jerusalem.

I. HIS CONTROL WHEN NO ONE IS SUPPORTING US

Despite the fact no one is supporting us, Jesus is always in control and we can have courage. Think with me as to who is never mentioned in this account – the church.

A) The Situation in the Jerusalem Church

We talked about this a few weeks ago with what Paul faced when he arrived.

1. The cultural context

This was, as you could imagine at that time and place, a predominantly Jewish group of Christians – folks who had come to recognize that, in a sense, to be truly Jewish was to believe the gospel for it was the saving message of the long-awaited Messiah.

2. The church’s struggle

But they still maintained a certain level of affection for the traditions and ceremonies of the past. Which was fine. There was a richness to it, a beauty. And so long as they weren’t foisting it on others, forcing them to tow the line, it was fine. There was a balance there. You could imagine the leadership really had their work cut out for them.

B) The Effect upon Paul

It affected the things they had to give their attention to, the conflicts that arose and the things that had to be addressed. And, it would seem, the shape and extent to which they were able to stand by Paul in this series of trials. In that place, at that time, it had to.

1. Lacking in support

Where were they? No mention is made. No support is given – at least not in a visible sense. Now, I realize this is an argument from silence but the silence was deafening.

2. Appearance of isolation

Perhaps they were praying for Paul. Perhaps someone was checking on him through their contacts. Perhaps. We don’t know. But the point is that, locked away in the barracks, Paul was likely unable to perceive that. And that had to be hard – to feel so alone.

Illustration:

Many of us know something of long distance relationships. Perhaps they’re off somewhere at another school. Or perhaps they’ve been deployed to another country. And you know they’re thinking of you, missing you, and sending letters as best they can. But sometimes the letters don’t get here very fast. And the waiting can be hard. You can feel isolated. Which is just it – you *feel* isolated or forgotten. You’re not – not really – but because of circumstances, because you’re cut off one from another, it *feels* that way.

Application:

Appearances, though, can be deceiving. In those barracks, as the sun began to fade on another day of what appeared to be a hopeless situation, Paul’s hopes were fading with it. “*How did this happen? Where is everyone? Is anyone with me? Lord, where are you? Are you with me?*” And there, that night, we read the Lord came and stood there, right by Paul, and said, “*Take courage. I’m here. I’m in control. Take courage.*”

II. HIS CONTROL WHEN EVERYONE IS AGAINST US

He is in control even when it seems no one is supporting us. That's the first thing. But the second thing is this: He is in control even when it seems everyone is against us. We see this too – especially in the exchange between Paul and the high priest, Ananias.

A) Ananias' Response to Paul

Now what do we know of Ananias? Historians describe him as a Roman vassal known for his greed and for stealing tithes belonging to the poorer priests. For this, Zealot revolutionaries killed him just a few years after the events we see here.

1. What he ordered

So he's not the most savory character. And here, just as these proceedings get underway, we see him ordering that Paul be struck in the mouth. Why?

2. Why he ordered it

Most likely the charges had been read. Paul, in beginning his defense, stated that his conscience was clear. That is, that he was blameless, that the charges were untrue, that he was – despite his becoming a Christian (we could even say because of his becoming a Christian) still a good Jew. In Ananias' eyes, this was blasphemous, an affront to God. For this “apostle to the Gentiles” to say everything was fine was to say there were no differences between Jew and Gentile, that they could have equal standing before God.

Ananias' security has been identified. It's in what he thinks himself to be and how good he thinks he is. *“I am good and they are not.”* And Paul is violating that security. He is saying, *“No, you're not good. You can never be good enough. That is why Jesus came.”*

Application:

Ananias feels offended and threatened by this. And so he wants Paul to be slapped, to be silenced. And, if we're honest, there's a part of us that wants that too. It's hard to take. The gospel rips at our pride. It cuts the legs out from underneath all our pretense, all our delusions, all our dearly held notions of our being good.

Illustration:

That's why there's so much fuss over one of the movies to be nominated for an Academy Award this year, *“The Downfall: Hitler and the End of the Third Reich.”* It's a dramatic portrayal of Hitler's last days taken from historical accounts. And it's unsettling to many critics. It's unsettling to know that this man we consider to be such a monster could love his dog, could be kind to his mistress. It's unsettling to think he could somehow have been human. Because then he's not so different from us. Or us from him.

It's not safe to think in such terms. And neither is the gospel. It forces us to look in the mirror and see what's there. And what isn't. And how needy we really are.

B) Paul's Response to Ananias

That's Ananias' response to Paul. But then there's Paul's response to Ananias. And obviously it's a strong one. What's going on? Why does Paul respond this way?

1. Possible theories

Jewish law protected the rights of the accused – innocent until proven guilty. And Ananias – the leader of the high council – was in violation of that basic tenet. So Paul calls him a “whitewashed wall” – one covered with a veneer, hiding the real ugliness within. But then Ananias' followers speak up and challenge Paul for his strong words (**READ Acts 23:4-5**). Now there are a lot of theories as to what Paul means here.

Some commentators say he was offering an apology. That is, he really didn't know Ananias was the high priest. There are some indications Paul had poor eyesight. And certainly he'd been “out of the loop” for awhile. And perhaps Ananias wasn't wearing

his priestly robes that day. But that hardly seems likely for the occasion. One would think he would have gone in dressed for the part. And as far as Paul's eyesight or knowledge is concerned (**READ Acts 23:1**). That doesn't seem to fit these theories.

2. Likely reason

It's more likely that Paul isn't apologizing at all. This is how such men as Augustine and Calvin read it. The idea is that Paul knew exactly who Ananias was. And what he was as well. And he spoke to it. Just as Jesus did at His trial before the high priest of His day.

And so later that evening, as Paul is alone in his cell, he is not ashamed of an outburst, of letting his temper get the best of him. Nor is he fretting with embarrassment over such a social faux pas. But he is afraid, asking "*What have I gotten myself into? No one is with me. Or hardly anyone. And everyone's against me. Or nearly everyone. I'll be doing well to get out Jerusalem alive – much less to Rome.*" And (**READ Acts 23:11**).

Jesus comes, stands by him, and reassures him. Notice there is no rebuke, just reassurance as to who is with him, who is in control, and a need for him to have courage.

Application:

Listen, as dark, as foreboding, as ugly, as uncertain as things may seem to be we must remember who is in control. We must, in a sense, listen to this same Jesus even now as He comes and stands beside us – really and truly by His Spirit through His Word.

CONCLUSION:

I alluded to Kennedy's Profiles in Courage. Let me come back at that but with some updates. (**READ EXCERPTS Gordon Smith, Courage and Calling, pp115-116**). It took courage for Clarence Jordan, in the late 1950's, to set up the Koinonia Farm, a community of racial reconciliation in southwest Georgia. It took courage for him to persevere in the face of threats by the Ku Klux Klan, to persist even when one of the facilities at the farm was torched and the grounds strafed with machine gun fire. It took courage for Nelson Mandela to refuse to be victimized by his oppressors, to refuse to take revenge. His was a resolve that did not waver, even after being imprisoned for twenty years for his support of civil rights for all South Africans. It took courage then and then again in 1995, after he became president of South Africa, during the World Cup rugby match – when so many of his fellow black South Africans refused to support their all white team – it took courage for him to go to the stadium and to put on the team jersey for all to see. It took courage to say they were all one.

How is such courage possible? By believing, by knowing in the depth of your heart that God is real and at work and calling us to carry out certain tasks and committed to working through us. And I see such courage, such profiles, represented here even this morning. Despite the problems, despite the hardship and the pain, despite the fact it seems no one is noticing, I see marriages holding together even in brokenness. I see parents, despite all that they see, not giving up on their children. I see "all together" people with problems so deep that they cannot even articulate them – yet not giving up.

But I also see – even in the eyes of those very same people – the pain of the struggle, the scars of the journey, the tears of even this week. Look, I need to hear this. You need to hear this. And we need to remind each other. We really can take courage in whatever it is we're facing, whatever it is He's called us to. Because He is in control. He's standing by us and He is in control. We don't have to give up. We don't have to lose heart. We can take courage. For He is with us. And He is in control.

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