

Testifying in the midst of Suffering

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[0 : 00] You have your Bibles opened to where Ruth finished reading, and we'll go back to chapter 22, verse 30. Well, one of the early church fathers coined the phrase, and some of you might know, that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

And, you know, throughout history, we've seen this bear out as Christians pay with their own lives in witness to the Lord Jesus. So, a couple of examples. Ridley College, one of the gospel partners that we have, is named after Nicholas Ridley, who, together with Hugh Latimer, was burned at the stake in 1555 in Oxford for sticking to their Reformed faith in England, when, at the time, it was being ruled by Mary, Queen of Scots, who was a Catholic.

And so it was Latimer who famously said, on the next slide, as they both stood at the stake, Play the man, Master Ridley. We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England, as I trust shall never be put out.

And so it has turned out. And we pray, in God's mercy, that it might continue, not just in England, but across the world. More recently, of course, we've heard of pastors and Christian leaders, and even just Christian church members in China and Iran and other countries like that, suffering for their faith, being imprisoned for the preaching of the gospel, and for converting people to Christianity.

And again, we pray that their witness will continue, by God's grace, to fuel the growth of God's kingdom. And so as Christians, it's important to understand that suffering is very much part of the DNA of the church.

[2 : 00] Now, you may not have realised this when you became a Christian, but this is your heritage. Suffering is very much part of what it means to be God's people in this world.

And so when Jesus called Paul to suffer as his apostle, it wasn't a calling just for him, or special ones like him. It was a calling for every follower of Jesus.

Some will suffer to the point of death, while others face severe hardship and trial. But as faithful witnesses to him, all of us should expect to suffer for our faith.

Now, you may wonder then why this is, because after all, the gospel is good news. All we're trying to do is share this great blessing with others. Why? Why are so many people opposed to it?

Well, we'll gain some further insights today as we look at the passage. But I want you to recall that, from last week, that Paul now has come to Jerusalem, where he's been met with great opposition, and he's suffered greatly already.

[3 : 13] And we pick up the story again in verses 30 of chapter 22. Now, remember at this point that the crowd were vehemently opposed to Paul's words. He had spoken in Aramaic.

The Roman commander, although not understanding what was going on, when he saw the commotion, came to his rescue. And then he was minded to flog him, because he thought that he was a troublemaker.

Paul, however, appeals to his Roman citizenship, and then that gives him pause. So here in verse 13, the commander now wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews.

So the next day, he released him, and all the chief priests, and all the members of the Sanhedrin, that's the Jewish council, to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them. So you have to give credit to this Roman commander, right, because he's trying to do the right thing. Having now worked out that Paul was a Jew, not an Egyptian terrorist, he thinks then that the Sanhedrin, with its Jewish leaders, is the right forum to settle the dispute between Paul and the Jews.

[4 : 24] This now then gives Paul yet another opportunity to witness. But this time, it is before the Jewish authorities. And it's similar, isn't it, to what Peter himself, the apostle Peter himself, did

earlier in the book of Acts.

And so Paul begins in chapter 23, verse 1. Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.

And this, the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, God will strike you, you whitewashed wall. You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck.

Those who were standing near Paul said, How dare you insult God's high priest? Paul replied, Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest, for it is written, Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.

Thus we see now that Paul's division with the crowd outside, over the gospel now extends to the leaders inside the Sanhedrin. Paul was a Jew, just like them.

[5 : 35] But the gospel has divided him with the people. And no doubt, I think the leaders knew this Jesus that Paul was talking about. But before hearing Paul, they had already prejudged who Jesus was, and therefore Paul as well.

Still, Paul is hoping that he might get a fair hearing, and so he testifies yet again. But when he was struck, he has this instinctive reaction, almost against this injustice and hypocrisy.

But then, strangely, when he learns that it was the high priest that had ordered the instruction, Paul apologizes for his words. And I think what this shows here is that Paul has a tender conscience.

Paul apologizes, not because what he says about Ananias is wrong, it's actually right, but he's acutely aware that if he's just criticized the high priest for violating the law, then Paul himself, by speaking out against the people's ruler, also disobeyed the law.

And so he too would have been guilty of breaking the law. And so Paul's conscience was freaked, and he sort of withdraws his statement.

[6 : 55] But Paul then is allowed to continue, and so he returns to preaching the gospel. And this time we see that the gospel brings not just division between Paul and the others, but he actually brings division among the Jewish leaders themselves.

Verse 6, Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead.

And when he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. The Sadducees saw that there is no resurrection, say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits.

But the Pharisees believed all these things. And so we see it's a bit ironic, isn't it? Because even within Judaism, the people did not agree, did they?

The Sadducees and the Pharisees were two different sects. They had different views about the faith. And even though both the Pharisees and the Sadducees opposed Paul and the gospel, they couldn't quite agree the basis for it, the real reason.

[8 : 07] And I think Paul knew these fault lines, a theological debate between the Sadducees and the Pharisees. And so he intentionally uses a key aspect of the gospel to bring this out.

He's not doing this cynically, that is, he's not using some obscure point about the gospel and then trying to divide the Sanhedrin on it. Rather, the hope of the resurrection of the dead is a key truth of the gospel.

Paul is simply preaching the gospel itself. But he's hoped that the Pharisees, if they were like him and believed the same things about the resurrection, might at least believe what he had to say.

Well, there's no surprises then that just as it was in Jesus' time, the gospel divided the Pharisees and the Sadducees. And so there was a great uproar and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously.

We find nothing wrong with this man, they said, supporting Paul. Whatever spirit or an angel has spoken to him. The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them, like a bit of a ragdoll between the two of them.

[9 : 18] He ordered the troops to come down, go down, and take him away from there by force and bring him into the barracks. And so sadly, you see that the Pharisees actually agreed with Paul, but they were so interested in point scoring with the Sadducees that they actually did not do what was more important, which is actually to repent and believe the gospel.

And so this poor Roman commander is none the wiser. He ends up breaking up yet another fight, having to pull Paul back into the barracks for his safety. But we are really back at square one, aren't we?

And so for Paul, he now wonders what's going to happen next. His future is uncertain. But this is when the following night, the Lord, the Lord Jesus, comes to his comfort.

For it says there in verse 11, he stood near Paul and said, take courage, as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.

This is actually our key verse for tonight. So I want to come back again and look at it a bit more closely. But first, let us just finish the rest of the events. And so if you move on to the next point on the outline, we now see that the good news, the gospel, is not just divisive, but threatening as well. [10:45] And it may be that that's why it's divisive in the first place because those who are threatened by the gospel will respond by attacking it, attacking those who preach it rather than leave it alone.

But what we see here now is that while Paul is holed up in the barracks and this Roman commander is wondering what to do next, a conspiracy brews among the Jews. Verse 12, the next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with that oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul.

More than 40 men were involved in this plot. They went to the chief priests and elders and said, we have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul. Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more information.

We are ready to kill him before he gets here. But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul. Now we don't know how Paul's nephew hears about this plot, but it proves to be one of a number of providential things that occurs for the Lord to make good his promises to Paul.

But you realize here that the Jews are really threatened by Paul, aren't they? So much so they vow not to eat or drink until they've killed him. More than 40 of them commit to this.

[12:13] These are fanatics, aren't they? The 40 fanatics. But I think it just proves, doesn't it, that Paul must be innocent. Because if it's actually possible to prove Paul guilty in a court of law in front of the Sanhedrin, why do they need to go to such extremes to rid of him?

Sure, kill him, one thing, but to not eat or drink, I mean, I'm never going to sign up to that. So, it shows, doesn't it, in a roundabout way that really, Paul is innocent because otherwise they would have just brought him to court and find him guilty there.

Well, the Roman commander is informed of the plot, that's verses 16 to 22, we won't go into it, and again, we're not quite sure where the Roman commander could have gone, right?

There was no guarantee that he would do the right thing by Paul. But under God's providence, we see that the Roman commander again reacts favorably. Now, it may be that it's because Paul was now a Roman citizen and he needed to do something about that, but what he decides in the end is to arrange safe passage for Paul to Caesarea.

And so, the next verses, then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, get ready a detachment of 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen to go down to Caesarea at nine tonight.

[13:42] Provide horses for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix. And so, if you count that up, that's how many? 470 men, Roman soldiers to guard one man.

It's a big show of force, isn't it? And Paul himself is provided with horses because, you know, that would allow him to escape quickly should there be an ambush.

A letter is also written by this commander to the governor to explain the situation and we have a transcript of it. So it reads, Claudius Lysias, that's his name now, we finally find out, to his excellency Governor Felix.

Greetings. This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him but I came with my troops and rescued him for I learned that he is a Roman citizen. I think he's trying to score a few brownie points here but he goes on, I wanted to know why they were accusing him so I brought him to their Sanhedrin.

I find that the accusation had to do with questions about their law but that there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment. When I was informed of a plot to be carried out against the man I sent him to you at once I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case

against him.

[15 : 03] And so what we see here then is Paul's journey from Jerusalem to Rome as the Lord testified in verse 11 has now begun. And if you look on the slide you can see that what happened was that the foot soldiers took Paul all the way up to Antipatrus which is that first arrowhead there so about halfway and then the cavalry takes Paul the rest of the way.

That would probably have been quicker than getting the foot soldiers to keep walking all to Caesarea. The governor then reads the letter and he determines that yes he will hear Paul's case in Caesarea and so that's where we'll stop for today in terms of the account but if you come back in the next two Sundays two Sundays from now we'll keep going to hear the rest of the story.

Now the question to ask then is what is Luke's purpose for giving us all these details? Certainly it provides a record of how Paul ends up in Rome but this is more than just a historical record of what happened.

Instead we need to see this as a demonstration of the Lord's faithfulness to his promises to Paul not just in verse 11 but throughout the book of Acts.

If you recall and I'll put it on the slide next in Acts chapter 9 when the Lord first appeared to Ananias this is the good Ananias by the way not the high priest Ananias he had told him that Paul would be my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.

[16 : 46] And the Lord also said that I will show him how much he must suffer for my name. And so as we look at these events we can see that this is being fulfilled right now isn't it?

In what Luke recounts to us. And as we read it we are reminded that the good news of Jesus is now being spread afar under God's sovereign hand as he foretold would be fulfilled.

But more than that the plan specifically did say didn't it? That Paul would not just preach to common people but to kings. And so we have that. The Sanhedrin are rulers and then we have Governor Phoenix next who is also a ruler a king.

And God did say not just to Gentiles but to the people of Israel. And so there we have again in front of the Jewish Sanhedrin people of Israel and then to Gentiles before Governor Felix.

And of course the second sentence there that he would do it to suffer for the name of Jesus well we can see Paul suffering and hungry being torn in two each time he speaks for the gospel.

[17 : 58] But we also see in verse 11 that even though Paul is asked to suffer he does not do it without the Lord's comfort either. Because just at the right moment we read that the Lord appears and stood near to Paul.

And those words would have conveyed words of comfort and assurance to the readers wouldn't it? Jesus himself will stand by Paul in his time of need and suffering.

And we have to remember that the one who stands near Paul isn't just any human being but the Messiah himself. that is he is God's suffering servant as we heard Brendan read in Isaiah the one who has actually suffered himself gone through the same suffering that Paul has gone through but more.

And Paul's testimony of this good news as he's testifying about the hope of the resurrection that is only possible because Jesus himself having suffered rose again.

Jesus is the hope of the resurrection. So Jesus words for Paul to take courage you know these are not empty or patronizing words are they?

[19 : 18] I know sometimes you know children say of their parents when you know parents go oh dad dad don't worry like you know we say in a fashion that we don't really understand what they're going through. But this is not the case with Jesus is it?

Because Jesus words to take courage comes from Jesus' own deep empathy having gone through exactly what Paul has gone through himself and when anyone else suffers for the gospel they do so for a saviour and lord who has done the same for them.

And Jesus is not only able to comfort but because he's also the sovereign lord he's able to fulfill what he promises. And so Paul is assured that he will make it to Rome alive to testify to the lord.

There's not just the promise but the certainty that it will happen because the lord is sovereign. The words that you must testify in Rome that Jesus says to Paul is not like a command that says you better testify in Rome but rather it's a statement of divine necessity that says the lord will see that it will come to pass so that you will testify in Rome.

So we see in this story don't we from the discovery of the plot by Paul's nephew to the unlikely protection of the Roman commander we've seen God's providential and sovereign hand at work and you know we think even with the Roman commander particularly often we think oh God will fulfill his plans we think God uses those who fear him to do but in his example we are reminded today that God can use even the pagans those people who don't answer to him those people who don't even know that they're being used by God to do God's will and so as God's witnesses in the world we can expect the same for ourselves today Christians across the world will continue to suffer for the sake of our witness to the Lord Jesus that is a given even those of us who live in a liberal democracy like

[21 : 38] Australia we should not expect to be exceptions to this now I know here in this country you know there are supposedly universal human rights that guarantee freedom of religion there is an open commitment to tolerance but only I think until those in power or those living in the status quo find themselves threatened and the gospel unfortunately or fortunately is something that people will find threatening why because the gospel declares that Jesus is Lord he is the universal ruler of this world that lays claim over every life and every regime in this world and so there is no way the gospel cannot but threaten the competing worldviews in this world it's only when people humble themselves and repent are they saved but to do that requires them really to renounce all that they have relied on up to now for their hopes and dreams and security and prosperity the only way to make it less threatening for us and to avoid suffering is really to dilute the message to make it more acceptable to the years of the world but friends if we do that then we are no longer being faithful to the gospel we're not preaching the gospel anymore now as I said we in the west we may not face death but we suffer in other ways don't we and I'm sure many of you may have experienced this already in your places of work or school we face being excluded from power and influence being sidelined for promotion being disowned by our families being ridiculed for our faith being bullied for standing firm in our convictions and I know that some of you have shared experiences where you know at work or whatever you have to watch your words carefully so as not to accidentally trip up and suffer the ramifications we risk being misunderstood or worse having our words twisted and used against us friends we can expect these things to happen and more as part of following

Jesus faithfully but can I assure you this that when suffering happens as a result whether now or in the future please don't take it as a sign that God is punishing us or that we've lost favor in God's sight because both Jesus and Paul experienced the same thing instead just like Paul know that the Lord is still standing near to provide us assurance of his ongoing presence and protection now I have to say that we're not to read this verse in verse 11 and say oh Paul was promised that he will get to Rome so therefore we too will be spared death and personal sacrifice now that's not a promise for us that's a promise for Paul but if we read through the whole of Acts I think that the promise is given to the whole church as a whole that collectively we will prevail because we will see the ultimate victory when

Jesus comes again in Acts chapter 1 the spirit has been poured down from on high and because of that the Lord Jesus will ensure that God's people will remain witnesses to him until the end of the age and until the ends of the world so friends we don't need to be fearful of dictators or ideologies and you know we hear all the time the media and the world telling us the death of the church is nigh they can say that all they want but if we believe the promises of God's word then I can assure you that will never happen God's church the church of Jesus Christ will continue and will not die because Jesus himself has bought his church with his own blood Jesus himself is ensuring that the gospel will continue to be proclaimed among us and Jesus himself will continue to work to see his kingdom grow through our witness he will prevail die his body will die as well now some of us live in parts of the world like our brothers and sisters abroad where the church is under threat of severe persecution right there are clampdowns on the ability to meet and freely worship the Lord in other parts of the world like us here the church is actually being undermined from within at times and so we saw a few weeks ago warnings about wolves in sheep clothing eating away at the church like a cancer from within but in either case whether it's external or internal we need to remain faithful to the gospel to not be afraid but take courage as Jesus said because the Lord will protect and preserve his church and so next week we're going to take a pause to just do just that be do our little small part in becoming witnesses to Jesus in our Meet Jesus Sunday so please pray take courage and then invite your friends to come along and if you're here today and you're still checking out who Jesus is whether he is truly the Lord or not then can I encourage you not to be

threatened by the gospel because it is actually good news and you need to find out more please come and talk to me or come back next

Sunday to find out that Jesus really is the hope of the resurrection of the dead let's pray Father thank you for sending your son and the servant who suffered for us thank you that he is near us in our own suffering and trials as witnesses to the gospel help your church to remain strong in the face of such adversity give us the courage not to turn away or run away but to embrace suffering as part of the Christian life that will eventually give way to eternal glory in the name of our mighty Saviour and Lord we pray Amen