Take Courage! You Must Testify in Rome

Acts 22:30-23:35

Key Verse: 23:11 “The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.”

 Last week we studied Paul’s biographical testimony while he defended himself before the commander. In his testimony we learned God’s irresistible grace and unconditional calling for Paul to become a witness of the Risen Christ. In his loving and calling God does not look at our human condition or situations, but he demonstrates his divine grace and sovereignty for his redemptive purpose. You and I, we all received God’s grace and calling in our generation. This is our blessing and privilege that we must remember and appreciate throughout our lifetime.

 In today’s passage Paul is tried before Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. Paul’s suffering seemed to be endless. But Jesus made a promise for those who would suffer for him in the last days by saying, “*But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict*.” (Lk 21:14-15) Let’s study how Jesus provided words and wisdom to Paul in his trial, how he encouraged Paul, and how God worked for his good purpose in the midst of Paul’s trial. Through this we learn how to have words and wisdom, courage and hope, to overcome this pandemic crisis. Amen!

First, because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead (22:30-23:10) When the commander heard that Paul was a Roman citizen, he was perplexed because he knew he should not punish a Roman citizen before being found guilty. So he wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews. The next day he released Paul and ordered the chief priests and all the members of the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them. (1-2) How did Paul begin his defense? Look at 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.***” Staring straight at the Sanhedrin’ displayed Paul’s unyielding confidence and fighting spirit against the power of darkness. Paul started his address with the typical Jewish greeting. Paul claimed that he did his duty before God with good conscience. **At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth**. (2) Being struck on the mouth or cheek humiliates people and infuriates them. How did Paul deal with this situation? In verse 3 Paul said, “***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!***” Paul was not dejected after being struck. Rather, he rebuked the high priest calling him, ‘a whitewashed wall’, which meant a hypocrite. Paul claimed that the high priest had violated the law because he asked his men to strike Paul before being found guilty. It was unlawful for the high priest to order punishment towards anyone before being found guilty. **Those who were standing near Paul said, “How dare you insult God’s high priest!**” (4) Paul defended himself in verse 5. “***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.***” Paul might have not realized the seat of the high priest because it was not a regular meeting, but a temporary meeting summoned by the commander. Paul might have not recognized Ananias because of his chronic eye disease. Paul also might have recognized Ananias and rebuked him and then apologized. In any case, Paul was bold and confident in his defense.

 Look at verses 6-8. “***Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others 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.” When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things.)***” The Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, was composed of the two leading groups of Paul’s day: the Sadducees which was a political group, and the Pharisees, a religious group. The Sadducees did not believe resurrection, angels, or any other spiritual beings, but the Pharisees believed them all. Paul was well aware of the structure of the Sanhedrin because he was a Pharisee. He did not intend to divide the council into two, but told the truth to defend himself. He said that he was tried because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead. He meant that he was on trial because he believed that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again from the dead for our eternal life. His charge was ‘the hope of the resurrection of the dead.’ This charge reminds us of the charge of Jesus when he was tried and crucified on the cross with the written notice, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews’. (Jn 19:19) The charge of Jesus was “the King of the Jews”. The Jews accused Jesus of being the king of the Jews. But Jesus was indeed the King of the Jews, which means the Promised Messiah. In the same way Paul was charged because of his hope and faith in the resurrection of the dead. Indeed there is the resurrection of the dead, the resurrection of Christ Jesus, and the resurrection of believers. What’s wrong with Paul who had the hope of the resurrection? His hope did not provide any basis for his charge that deserved arrest.

There was great dispute between the Pharisees and the Sadducees because of Paul’s defense based on the hope of the resurrection of the dead. Look at verse 9. “***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. “What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?***” Now all the Pharisees stood on the side of Paul and began to defend him. **The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.** (10) Their dispute and division reminds us of Jesus’ words in Luke 11:18, “*If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?*” What Jesus said was true. When the Pharisees and the Sadducees stood against each other, the council was broken and Paul was released.

 Here we learn something important from Paul’s defense. When we stand for Jesus, God will give us words and wisdom through the Holy Spirit. In Luke 21:5-19 Jesus predicted what would happen in the end of the age. At that time the believers will be arrested and tried before the evil. But Jesus promised us not to worry or be afraid, but told us to become bold and wise like Paul. “*But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict*.” (Lk 21:14,15) The Lord Jesus gave Paul words and wisdom through the Holy Spirit when he was tried before the Sanhedrin. Where did such wisdom and courage come from? They came from the Lord through the Holy Spirit. So, let us pray that the Lord Jesus may give us words and wisdom through the Holy Spirit when we stand for Jesus. Amen! In fact whatever we do and wherever we are, we need words and wisdom for our victory and security. As for us, we need words and wisdom not only in serving the Lord, but also working with others, studying at school, and educating our children. God is generous and willing to provide his words and wisdom to his children when we are in need and when we ask. Amen!

Second, take courage! You must also testify in Rome. (11) When Paul was in Ephesus during his third mission, he had a vision of visiting Rome. He said in Ephesians 19:21, “*After I have been there* (Jerusalem), *I must visit Rome also*.” Paul saw the vision of world salvation through the successful ministry of Ephesus. In Ephesus Paul devoted himself to teaching his disciples in the lecture hall of Tyrannus for two years, and as a result the word of God spread to all provinces of Asia, and it grew in power. (Ac 19:9,10,20) There was the great work of the Holy Spirit in Ephesus through Paul’s ministry. Paul had a vision of spreading the good news of Jesus Christ to the whole world through Rome. He had a vision of world evangelization through the Roman roads. At that time Rome ruled the world and all nations were connected to the Roman roads like America these days. Paul saw the whole world through Rome.

This reminds us of Jesus who asked his disciples to see the Samaritan townspeople as ripe for harvest in John 4. Jesus saw a vision through a Samaritan woman’s conversion. She was changed and began to live a new life. She left her water jar and ran back to her town and invited her townspeople to Jesus, saying, “*Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?”* (Jn 4:29) When Jesus saw the townspeople coming towards him, he told his disciples, “*Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.*” (Jn 4:35) Jesus saw the vision of harvesting all townspeople, and he wanted to share his vision with his disciples. In the same way Paul also saw a vision to evangelize the whole world through his several missionary journeys.

 But reality was cold and tough. He was rejected by the Jews and tried before the Sanhedrin. He was beaten and dragged here and there without knowing what would happen to him tomorrow. He must have been discouraged and tired. He was uncertain about his visit Rome. His shepherd Jesus knew Paul and visited him and encouraged him saying. “***Take courage! As you testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.***” (11) Jesus encouraged Paul to hold his vision. This means that Jesus would be with Paul and protect him until Paul arrived at Rome safely. This was the same promise which Jesus gave to his disciples before he went to heaven. “*And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* (Mt 28:20) This is the same promise which Jesus gave his church in Revelation, “*Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.*” (Rev 2:10b) If you have a vision of God and want to see the vision being fulfilled, don’t give up, but keep praying with the vision until God will realize your vision. As long as you keep the vision, God will be with you and protect you through the vision. I want to share God’s vision for this nation with you. May God make America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation! May God use this country once again as a shepherd nation for the world as it was before! May God raise 12 disciples of Jesus Christ from among students at Wash U, UMSL, SLU, and other main campuses in St. Louis! Amen.

Third, God is working quietly behind the scene. (12-35) Danger towards Paul continues. The next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy to take Paul’s life. They even made a solemn oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. Their plan was to kill Paul while he was on the way to the Sanhedrin to have his second trial before them. The forty man murder squad went to the chief priests and got their permission for their mission. But, their evil conspiracy was completely foiled because of Paul’s nephew who had overheard their conversation and reported it to the centurion.(16-21) The centurion reported it to the commander, who increased Paul’s guard all the more. Then the commander called two hundreds soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to protect Paul from the Jews and sent them with his personal letter to the governor Felix. The content of the commander’s letter was as follows: ‘Here is a Jew who was accused by his own people. They tried to kill him, but I didn’t find any charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment. He is also a Roman citizen. When I was informed of a plot to kill this man by the Jews, I sent this Roman citizen to you at once for the right judgment. (23-30) The Roman troops escorted Paul until he arrived at Caesarea safely. Paul was handed over to the governor Felix, and the letter of the commander was read. The governor ordered Paul to be kept under guard in Herod’s palace instead of a prison. Paul had been escorted like a general or a war hero with many Roman soldiers around him. Now he was placed in the royal palace like an ambassador. Indeed Paul was an ambassador of Christ Jesus. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:20, “*We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us*…” Paul was an ambassador of Christ who reconciled between God and sinners. Since he was an ambassador of Christ, he was qualified to be escorted and protected in honor. In this way God foiled the evil scheme and protected his servant from them. In this way Jesus kept his promise that he would be with Paul.

 What can we learn here about the way of God’s working? No matter how Satan tries to destroy the work of God, God is working quietly and diligently behind the scene for his good purpose, even in the time of trial. No matter how the Jews tried to kill Paul in Jerusalem, in Asia, in Macedonia through the Jews and the gentiles, God had protected Paul and used him for his good purpose. Even though the Jews conspired to remove Paul secretly, God exposed their secrets and sent Paul with many soldiers and put him in Herod’s palace. God was working a little by little, step by step, in order to send Paul to Rome safely and securely. God is always working for his redemptive purpose behind human history. When Jesus was born, Satan tried to kill Jesus through King Herod. But God foiled his plan through the Magi, who came to worship Jesus. God sent Jesus to Egypt and let him stay for two years until Herod died. Satan shouted for joy when Jesus was crucified. But, the crucifixion of Christ had been planned long ago by God’s set purpose and his foreknowledge, and his death fulfilled God’s promise for salvation of the world. Finally God raised Jesus from the dead and gave us the final victory over Satan, our enemy. Amen!

 We are suffering from the unprecedented pandemic in one way or another. We wonder why this is happening to this world. But remember that God is working quietly for his good purpose even during this pandemic crisis. In all things God works for good and for his good purpose. Instead of wondering, we must restore God’s vision for each of us and pray for this vision. Instead of despairing, we must repent of our unbelief and believe in God’s promise. Find out what you can do for God and for your neighbor. Expect how God uses you for his good purpose and divine plan. Remember that our God is the almighty sovereign ruler of human history and destiny. He is working quietly and mightily for his good purpose in our human history through you and me. Amen!