YOU WILL BE HIS WITNESS

Acts 21:37-22:29

Key Verse: 22:15 “You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard.”

 The Coronavirus looks to have slowed down, and the state and the city are going to reopen soon. Still we must keep the order of social distance and be vigilant for our safety. During this social distancing and the stay at home order, we give thanks to God every day for his protection and provision. We also appreciate all healthcare workers who work on the frontlines to care for many patients. Each day we live by God’s grace. Without God’s grace we can’t live even one day. Last week we studied Paul’s arrest and trial in Jerusalem. His arrest and trial reminded us of Jesus’ arrest and trial. Paul wanted to follow the footstep of Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

 Today’s passage continues Paul’s trial before the commander. Paul shares his biographical testimony before the crowd to defend himself. In his testimony we learn the irresistible grace of Jesus and his calling for Paul. Let us share the irresistible grace of Jesus and renew his call for each of us today while we hear this message. Amen!

First, Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me? (21:37-22:11) Paul was brought up before the commander, who asked who Paul was and what he had done. (21:33) Paul asked the commander for an opportunity to defend himself before the crowd. The commander asked if Paul was the Egyptian terrorist who had started a revolt by leading four thousand into the desert. (38) How did Paul defend himself? Look at verse 21:39. “***Paul answered, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people.***” According to the historians, Paul’s parents used to live in Galilee, but immigrated to Tarsus in Cilicia, the city which had been honored by the Greeks. In Paul’s day Rome ruled the world. But Greek culture and language were prevailing over the Roman world. Paul began his defense in Aramaic, “***Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense.***” (1) This is the typical Jewish greeting pattern. Aramaic was the most common language among the Jews. When the crowd heard Paul speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet. (2) In verses 3-5 Paul introduced himself as who he used to be before he met the Christ. “***I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.***” (3-5) To summarize Paul’s profile, he was a Jew of Jews, who was very zealous for Moses’ law and a notorious prosecutor against Christians. Paul meant that he was not a foreigner, but a well educated Jewish Pharisee who was well known among the Jewish ruling council. He was the man who gave the approval to the crowd when Stephen was stoned to death. (Ac 7:60, 22:20) He was even on the way to Damascus to eliminate Christians from this earth. Paul emphasized that he was more Jewish, zealous, and active than any of them there. What happened to Paul while he was on the way to Damascus?

Look at verses 6-11. “***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?’ “Who are you, Lord?” I asked. “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. “What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked. “Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me***.” On the way Paul met the Risen Jesus who appeared as a bright light. Because of the brilliance of the light Paul became blind. Paul heard the voice of Jesus who identified himself as Jesus of Nazareth whom Paul was persecuting. Jesus didn’t ask why Paul was persecuting him and how terrible of a sinner he was, but told him what he had to do next. Paul had to go to Damascus where his assignment awaited him.

Here we learn that Jesus didn’t ask Paul’s past sins or wrongdoings, but asked him what to do in the future. In the Bible when God called his people, he didn’t ask about their past wrong record or see their present situation, but asked them to do something great in the future. God did the same with Abraham, Moses, Gideon, David, Jesus’ twelve disciples, and Paul (Ge 12:1-3, Ex 3:4, Jdg 6;12, 1 Sa 16:12, Mk 3:13, Ac 9:15). He did the same with us, too, and he is doing the same now. John Calvin called this ‘God’s *unconditional election’*. God chooses his people regardless of their human condition or situation, or even their will. God did not judge Paul about his past wrongdoings or mistakes, but forgave him and called him. Jesus said in John 15:14, “*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.*” When God chooses each of us and calls us, God does not ask our past sins and see wrong records. He only covers our past sins with the blood of Jesus and calls us. This is God’s one-sided grace for sinners. John Calvin called this, “God’s *irresistible grace.*” We call this God’s wonderful grace. When God visits us, he comes as the God of the future and the God of hope. Jesus of Nazareth, whom Paul was persecuting, appeared to him, not as his prosecutor, but his Savior.

Jesus visited me when I was a sophomore in Art College with his word, John 15:21, “Do you love me? Feed my sheep”. Even though I was not a persecutor like Paul, I was wandering in the darkness of sin. I was selfish, proud, and immoral. But Jesus didn’t ask me about all my past sins, but loved me and called me to be a shepherd for his sheep. This was the turning point of my life from darkness to light and from death to life. I believe that many of us have the same testimony like mine.

Second, you will be his witness (12-21) Paul’s testimony continues. “***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.***” (12-13) God provided a prominent Jew Ananias in Damascus to open Paul’s eyes. In the past Paul was blind spiritually because he didn’t know who Jesus was. Because of his blindness he killed Stephen, who testified about Jesus. On the way to Damascus Paul became blind physically because of the strong light of Jesus, but his spiritual eyes were opened. Now Jesus opened his physical eyes through Ananias. Here we learn that those who don’t know Jesus are spiritually blind. They cannot see God or the kingdom of God, because God gave the knowledge of Him through Jesus Christ. 2 Co 4:6 says, “*For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness, “ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ*.” John 1:18 says, “*No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known*.” Paul studied the Scripture diligently under Gamaliel until he became a zealous Pharisee. But he did not know God. He did not know that all the Scriptures were written about Jesus and for Jesus. Jesus said in John 5:39-40, “*You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life*.” It does not matter how long you have been in church. It does not matter how many times you read the Bible. If you don’t know Jesus Christ personally, you know nothing. You are spiritually blind. When we know Jesus and meet him personally we know who God is. Our spiritual eyes will be opened to see heaven and to experience the spiritual world. Jesus said in John 14:7, “*If you really know me, you will know my Father as well*.” I pray that Jesus may open our eyes so that we may know him and see him. Amen.

Ananias continued to say to Paul. Look at verses 14-16. “***The God of our ancestors 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 people of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name***.” (14-6) Jesus’ assignment for Paul was to be his witness. The God of Abraham and David chose Paul and let him meet Jesus on the way and hear his voice. This must be a wonderful grace of Jesus for Paul, who was a terrible persecutor of the church. People in the world love their friends and hate their enemies. They desire to remove their enemies as soon as possible. Paul was an enemy to Jesus and his church. But Jesus didn’t punish Paul or remove him, but forgave him, loved him, and called him to be his witness. Jesus accepted his worst enemy as his closest friend. This is Jesus’ wonderful grace. Paul confessed Jesus’ grace in this, “*For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am…*” (1 Cor 15:9,10a) As Paul testified before the elders of the Ephesus Church, his aim was to complete his task, the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace. (20:24) Who is a witness? A witness is one who testifies what he saw and what he heard. Jesus called Paul to testify what he saw and what he heard about him. We all received God’s grace and Jesus’ love. God wants us to be his witness in our generation. Let us share what we have seen and heard with those who are perishing and wandering. Amen!

After being baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, Paul returned to Jerusalem. According to chapter 9, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. (9:26) But with the help of Barnabas Paul was accepted by the apostles. Now Paul devoted himself to prayer in the temple. He had quiet time to recall his encounter with Jesus on the way to Damascus and to restore his relationship with the Lord. One day while he was praying at the temple, he fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking to him. “***Quick! he said, ‘Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.”*** (17,18) The Lord Jesus knew that the Jews in Jerusalem would not accept Paul’s testimony. Paul replied that the people in Jerusalem might listen to him because he was the person who was with them when Stephen was killed. Paul was confident of his career and acquaintance to persuade the Jews in Jerusalem. But the Lord Jesus said to Paul. “***Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.***” (21) God was going to send Paul to the Gentiles, not to the Jews. God set apart Paul for the light for the gentiles. (9:15, 13:46)

Third, a Roman Citizenship (22-29) The crowd listened to Paul until he said this***. Then they raised their voices and shouted, “Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live.***” (22) The crowd must have been upset, thinking that Paul equalized the Jews with the gentiles when he mentioned the gentiles. They must have thought that Paul was a renegade who deserted his Judaism and converted into a gentile. Also, their conscience must have been convicted by the crucifixion of Jesus and the martyrdom of Stephen. As Jesus foretold Paul in his vision, the Jews would not listen to Paul’s testimony. They were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air as an expression of their anger. The commander ordered Paul to be taken into the barracks and flogged. But when the soldiers stretched out Paul to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there. “***Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t been found guilty?”*** (25) Paul was well aware of the Roman law about the rights of a Roman citizen. According to the Roman law, Roman citizens were to be protected from all illegal prosecutions and punishments. In order to punish a Roman citizen, a legally documented formation was required first, and after that a hearing before a Roman magistrate, and then a sentence for punishment. It requires a certain legal process for punishing a Roman citizen. So, Paul claimed his right as a Roman citizen to receive proper and legal defensive processes before he was being punished. The commander was surprised to know that Paul was a born Roman citizen because he bought a Roman citizenship after paying a lot of money. (28,29) The commander knew that it was illegal for him to punish Paul, a Roman citizen, without giving any opportunity to Paul to defend himself. As long as you carry your US passport, you receive legal protections as a US citizen when you are traveling. No foreign countries can punish you before they complete the legal process based on the international law. We have citizenships in God’s kingdom. We received this citizenship not by paying a lot of money, but by the grace of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, who paid the price of our sins by his blood. We didn’t do anything except believe in Jesus to gain this citizenship. Now as citizens of the kingdom of God and as the ambassadors of Jesus Christ, we are protected from all kinds of accusation and condemnation from our enemy Satan. This is a wonderful grace of Jesus to share with others.

 A Roman citizenship was not very important and necessary for Paul’s ministry until then. During his third missionary journeys, Paul never mentioned his citizenship or bragged about it. Rather he boasted about his identity as a Jew. But God used his Roman citizenship to protect Paul from his enemies. Later God used his citizenship to send him to Rome to Caesar for his appeal. (Ac 25:11) Your citizenship as an American or Korean seems comparatively unnecessary or important for our daily life. Indeed we don’t see as much a difference between the life of citizens and that of foreigners. But, God will use our citizenship for his glory someday. So we must give thanks to God for all his provisions. Our degree, license, skill, and experience may not be necessary for world mission at present. But who knows whether God will use them preciously for his good purpose in the future? God used Dr. Albert Schweitzer’s medical license to heal many sick people in Africa and to preach the gospel to them. In 1980-90 Korea UBF sent hundreds of missionaries as government workers to many other countries. God used a Korean diplomat to hire many Bible teachers for other countries. If you have any license-even driver’s license, any skill-even computer skill, and any experience-even handyman experience, be ready to offer them for God. Who knows whether God may use them for his good purpose, especially for world mission?

 Today we learned Paul’s testimony about his dramatic conversion after seeing the Risen Jesus. Paul met the Risen Jesus who appeared as the great light. I pray that we all may meet Jesus personally as the great light so that our spiritual eyes may be opened to see God and his kingdom. I also pray that we all may become the witnesses of God’s wonderful grace through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen!