

Take Courage

Acts 22:22–23:11

May 5, 2002

“Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome.” Paul testified about God at Jerusalem in chains, under arrest, and before a hostile audience which sought to kill him. What was it going to be like in Rome? Would Paul bear witness about God there in chains, under arrest, and before a hostile audience seeking to kill him? Where is the encouragement in that? Where is the good news? Where is the hope? Where is the gospel? Moreover, how was Paul supposed to keep on going? How are we supposed to keep on going? Where can we find courage for ministry, for testimony, and for the living of our lives?

“Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome.” In the providence of God, the past is not only prelude to the present and the future but is also preparation for the present and the future. Tough times prepare us for tougher times. Hard duty prepares us for harder duty. Faithful witness prepares us for more faithful witness. So it is that God calls us into service. We are never told that it will be easy. We are not told that we will be successful. But we are called to bear witness. It is significant that the Lord did *not* say to Paul, “Take comfort.” He did not suggest that life would be easy. He did not suggest that his duty would be decreasing. He did not suggest that Paul would get out of prison. He did not suggest that Paul could avoid execution. None of that would have been true. What the Lord did say to Paul was, “Take courage.” “Take courage” not from the violent crowd but despite them. “Take courage” not from the difficult circumstances but despite them. “Take courage” not from the chains of bondage but despite them. “Take courage” not from anything on earth but from God alone, Lord of heaven and earth, God and Father of Jesus Christ. “Take courage,” for God will see you through.

The Lord stood by Paul and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome.” Where is the good news in that? There are at least three levels of good news here. The first is that, at least here, God gives what he commands. For the Lord to say to Paul, “Take courage,” was not a hollow or empty command, as if he suggested something that were impossible. Instead, for the Lord to command courage of Paul was, in fact, for the Lord to give courage to Paul. The commandment itself is encouraging. The commandment itself makes one brave. If the Lord thinks there is good reason to take courage, nothing can count against that. If the Lord says, “Take courage,” it is time to stand tall again. So, the very first level of good news is the immediate encouragement which the word of God gives. There need be no other reason for courage than this, that God says for us to have it. Any other reasons would pale beside this. All objections are swept away.

There is a second level of good news here. When the Lord says to Paul, “. . . as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome,” it clearly means that God will see him through. The lynch mob at Jerusalem will not have the last word about Paul. The Sadducees and Pharisees will not have the last word about Paul. The tribune and his soldiers will not have the last word about Paul. God will carry him safe to bear witness another day in another place. So it is for us that God will see us through what God has in store for us. It may not be what we would have picked for ourselves. It may not be to our immediate liking. It might not

even make sense to us. That does not matter. God will see us through what God has in store for us. That is good news and good reason for courage.

On a larger scale, there is a third level of good news here. It is not only the case that God sees individuals through life. It is also the case that God has a larger plan, a purpose, a direction, a meaning, and a goal for the whole thing, all of our lives, the universe. Paul went to Jerusalem to retrace the steps of Jesus Christ. Paul went to Rome to tell the world about Jesus Christ. From Rome the good news has spread around the world and through the centuries reaching most recently all the way to us. We are gathered here today partly as a result of the Lord's encouragement of Paul within his larger plan for the salvation of the world. We go forth from here, not only as recipients of this good grace, but also as agents of the ongoing mercy of God in the world. God will not allow his Christ to be without a witness in the world. God will not allow his church to perish. Individual congregations, or whole denominations, may from time to time pass out of existence. But God will preserve his church as an instrument of his gospel for the salvation of the world.

It is also the case that the word of God to Paul includes a commendation of his witness. The word was not to change what he was doing but to keep doing what he was doing. What was he doing? Paul was preaching Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected. So far as we know, Paul never said a word about the birth of Jesus Christ. He never said a word about the miracles of Jesus Christ. He never said a word about the parables. But he did preach Christ crucified and resurrected. His whole witness was concentrated upon that good news. By telling Paul that his witness would be continued in Rome, God was commending the content of Paul's message. What has our witness been? Have we spoken clearly, faithfully, and convincingly of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Or have we dealt with politics, economics, social problems and concerns, inclusivity, diversity, and pluralism? There is a danger that the church will become distracted from its main mission by any number of lesser causes which may or may not be good in themselves but which are not what the church is supposed to be all about.

We live in hard times. It would seem that the world that we have known has changed forever. Reasons for courage may be in short supply. And yet, we have this word from God, spoken to Paul, preserved in Acts, and brought down to us today: "Take courage." Now more than ever, we need to hear this word and to receive this message. Now more than ever, in the church and in the world, we need to hear and to believe this, to act upon it and to live it.

The Lord said to Paul, "Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome." What is the Lord saying to us? How have we testified about God so far? What shall our next witness be?

*To God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be all praise, honor, and glory
now and forever! Amen.*

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